Response to “Corinthian Veils and Gnostic Androgynes”
by Dennis Ronald MacDonald

Dennis MacDonald’s study of 1 Cor. 11:2–16 is both thorough and creative. He employs a dialogical model for understanding the passage. That is, he proposes a reconstruction of the Corinthian situation and reads the passage in the light of that reconstruction. MacDonald’s approach is in line with that of such scholars as Walther Schmithals and Dieter Georgi, who emphasize that one’s understanding of Paul is influenced by one’s understanding in the Corinthian community. I find this approach to be useful, even though no single reconstruction of the opponents’ views has been able to attract a majority of Corinthians’ commentators to its side. In 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul is clearly responding to a particular practice and a particular theology. Refinements in the interpretation of the Corinthian correspondence are therefore most likely to emerge from discussion of such lucid reconstruction of the opponents’ views and praxis as that offered here by MacDonald.

MacDonald proposes that the practical issue addressed is that of the veiling of women. He argues that the conceptual framework for the Corinthian women removing their veils is the myth of the primordial androgyne such as is found in some Christian gnostic texts. He further argues that the androgyne myth in antiquity is a manifestation of androcentrism. This androcentrism is expressed in the Corinthian order of creation based upon their reading of Genesis 1—3: “(1) God; (2) the pneumatic, sexually unified Urmenesch, who, by dint of the image of God, enjoyed hegemony over the spirit world; (3) the psychic, sexually divided human made out of clay according to Gen. 2:7, no longer in God’s image and therefore not sovereign over angels; and (4) Eve,
whose fall women mourn by wearing veils" (p. 287). MacDonald suggests that the Corinthian women, who saw Eve as the lowest rung on the ladder, removed their veils and climbed to level two, that of the sexually unified androgyne, thereby enjoying "authority because of the angels." The Corinthian women thus removed their veils at the price of their identity as women.

MacDonald's reconstruction raises a number of questions. He assumes that the primary issue in 1 Cor. 11:2–16 is the veiling of women. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, however, has convincingly shown that the hair styles of men are as much at stake as the hair styles of women. He cites such parallels as Philo, Pseudo-Phocylides, and Musonius Rufus to demonstrate the ancient view that long hair or dressed hair on men is effeminate. The admonition to the man to be covered is in fact the first admonition of the passage (v. 4). Paul does not focus primarily on women's appearance, adding on men's appearance merely as a supporting argument for his main point. Structurally, both gynē and anēr are woven into the fabric of the text, gynē occurring sixteen times throughout it and anēr fourteen times. Paul is as concerned that a man not dishonor his head (v. 4), that he not relinquish the honor due to him as a man by wearing long hair (v. 14), as he is that a woman not have her head uncovered (v. 5).

MacDonald further assumes that the women are removing their veils only during the worship service, that they otherwise wear them. The text does not bear out the assumption. Paul does speak of the man and the woman praying and prophesying. In fact, the context within 1 Corinthians is a liturgical one. The Lord's supper (1 Cor. 11:17–34) follows immediately upon the appearance of women and men while praying or prophesying. Paul's focus is worship, but the text does not lead one to believe that the women unveiled themselves only during the worship service. When one takes the men into account, a transformation of appearance only during worship becomes even less likely. According to v. 14, "nature itself teaches you that for a man to wear long hair is a dishonor to him." The statement is a general one, not restricted to worship. Physically, of course, hair length cannot be changed and changed back, so that to the extent to which the passage is as much

about the hair length of women and men as it is about veiling—which I hold to be the case—a practice occurring only during worship is excluded.

If my view is correct, that Paul disagrees with certain dress practices of both women and men and that these dress practices occur not only during worship, then MacDonald’s explanation of the Corinthians’ behavior becomes somewhat problematic. While the women might plausibly have removed their veils as an expression of their elevated androgynous state, MacDonald’s reconstructed Corinthian order of creation gives no basis for the men to have something on their heads, either long hair or veils. Further, if the Corinthians were deviating from Paul’s plan for gender differentiation in appearance not only during the worship service but outside it, they may not have had a theological order of creation as the basis for their behavior. Explanations proposed by other scholars for removing the veil, especially that to remove the veil is to remove a mark of servitude, regain their plausibility.

Motivations for men wearing long hair or headdress and for women going without a veil or wearing short hair are very difficult to establish. Transvestism, whether partial or full, is in fact a much misunderstood phenomenon. Cultural explanations on the part of its despisers should not be equated with the motivations of men who dress as women and women who dress as men. For this reason I am hesitant to assume that Corinthian women who removed their veils did so at the loss of their identity as women. In Joseph and Aseneth, Michael tells Aseneth to remove her veil, saying that she is a pure virgin and her head like that of a young man (15:1), but this does not mean that women who removed their veils understood themselves to be like men. Lucian of Samosata, in his Dialogues of the Courtesans 5, describes a woman named Megilla who removes her wig, thereby revealing short hair which had been concealed under the wig. Megilla thereupon announces that her name is Megillus and that the woman Demonassa is her wife. Other ancient male writers also describe women who love men as having become like men. Similarly, Philo and some other ancient authors depict men who love men as effeminate in dress and behavior. We should not assume that those who wrote about transvestism and same-sex love in antiquity held the same views of these phenomena as those who practiced them. I am

not convinced that women who dressed as men or who loved women perceived themselves as masculine or that men who wore long hair or who loved men perceived themselves as being like women.

Scholars who discuss women's veils seldom take into account the physical aspects of the veil. A veil is physically restricting. Removing it gives a woman greater freedom of movement. Perhaps freedom of movement is part of the cultural definition of masculinity within male-centered thinking. Cutting one's hair or wearing male dress can also give a woman freedom of travel in a culture in which women are otherwise potential victims to male aggression. Again, perhaps the freedom to travel alone is defined as masculine in such a culture.

My methodological point here is that one should not identify cultural understandings of behavior with individual or group perceptions of their own behavior. This problem is exacerbated when using male sources to describe women's motivations for their own behavior. I do not mean to deny the influence of male thinkers on women's lives or that women and men who cross-dressed would never have seen themselves as many of the larger culture did. My point is that we should be extremely cautious and hesitant about such identification. Applying this to MacDonald's essay, I am hesitant to assume that a woman who removed her veil saw herself to be a sexually unified androgynous, a being in some way more male than female.

A further, related methodological point is that one should not identify the Corinthian women with the Corinthian men. Since their behavior in the worship service was not the same and their cultural self-understanding was not the same, I do not assume that the Corinthian women who removed their veils and the Corinthian men who wore long hair had the same theological understanding of femaleness and of maleness. Again, I am not implying that we have the historical sources to distinguish between the women and men in the Corinthian community, nor that they could never have agreed upon an order of creation as outlined by MacDonald. I do argue that the tension in the community concerning gender differentiation in appearance, as well as concerning sexual behavior and gender roles (see also 1 Cor. 6:12—7:40) makes it unlikely that the women in Corinth had exactly the same theological anthropology as the men.

First Corinthians 11:2–16 is one of the more opaque Pauline passages. I can hardly imagine any two thinking New Testament scholars coming together to discuss it without a dispute. I wish to thank Dennis MacDonald for having provided the stuff of a good dispute.