

11. Head Coverings

INTRO: Many churches simply dismiss this passage on head coverings as a cultural issue that is irrelevant today. Among those churches that do take it seriously, historically most have concluded that a woman should wear a garment on her head during worship. Others, however, understand the covering to be long hair (not a garment).

Preliminary Observations:

1. Whatever it means, the teachings about head coverings (for both men and women) are still relevant today due since it is based on Trinity, creation, and the activity of the angels. It is not cultural.
2. The word “covering” is a generic term. A man hole cover is a cover. A bed spread is a cover. Clouds can be a type of cover. Artillery can provide cover. The actual item that constitutes the covering is not specified until near the end of the passage. It could be long hair, it could be a garment.
3. The angel argument suggests the intended application is broader than just a church meeting. Indeed, we would argue that it has no reference to a church meeting at all.
4. The arguments in the first half of the passage are counterbalanced in the second half. Why is this? Why did Paul present the material in this way?
5. The implications of the Greek word “as” (*anti*) must be considered in 11:15 (“long hair is given to her as a covering”).
6. The Greek word “covering” in 11:15 is different from all other uses of “covering” and must be explained (“long hair is given to her as a covering”).
7. There is a big difference in meaning between “such” and “other” in 11:16 (“we have no such custom”).
8. The contentions of the contentious people was the occasion for Paul writing about head coverings, and this must be factored in.
9. Four different hair conditions are mentioned: long, short (“uncovered”), shorn (“cut off”) and shaved.

******Why, in 1 Corinthians 11:2, did Paul praise the Corinthians?** See 11:16. Because they had held onto Paul’s way of doing things exactly as He had told them. Remember that Paul had started the church in Corinth, and spent a year and a half there before writing this letter. Thus, the Corinthian church already knew exactly how Paul wanted things done with regard to head coverings. Though Paul did not specify what type of covering he meant, they already knew what he meant.

1. **Comparing 1 Corinthians 11:2 to 11:16, what situation might have prompted Paul to praise the Corinthian’s devotion to Paul’s way of doing things?** Evidently there were some “contentious” (11:16) people who were pressuring the Corinthians to adopt a custom that was different from what Paul

had instructed. The Corinthians resisted this new custom, held to Paul's original tradition, and wrote to Paul asking him about it. 1 Corinthians 11:2ff is Paul's response (much of the letter of Corinthians consists of Paul's response to a letter of inquiry the Corinthians had written to him).

Insight: Paul did not randomly decide to write to the church about head coverings. Rather, after he left Corinth some "contentious" persons began advocating something other than Paul had established when he was there with them. Had this not been a problem, we may never have known Paul's thoughts about head coverings.

2. *****What is the overall application of 1 Corinthians 11:3-10?** Simply stated, it is that a woman should pray or prophesy only when she is in submission to her husband's authority, as reflected in her "covered" head (whatever that means).

IMPORTANT OBSERVATION: Exactly what it is that is supposed to "cover" her head has not yet been identified. Don't assume anything!

3. **What basic order did Paul confirm in 1 Corinthians 11:3?** See also Ephesians 5:22-33, Colossians 3:18-19, 1 Peter 3:1-7. The order is God, Christ, man, woman.

ESV Ephesians 5:23-24 . . . the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Based on 1 Corinthians 11a, are we to conclude that women in general are to be submissive to men in general? No. Women are specifically to be submissive to their own husbands. However, there is a general sense in which women are to express their belief in the men's duty to lead by not teaching men, by not serving as elders, by not speaking in church or (as seen in this passage) by covering their heads during prayer and prophecy.

4. **In 1 Corinthians 11:3, what does "head" mean?** (Do a word study). From *kepalé* (2776), which can refer to a literal head (the upper division of the body that contains the brain) or metaphorically it can refer to a director or leader (Thayer). In 11:3, *kepalé* refers to a leader, and in 11:4 it refers to a part of the human body.

Note: Feminists declare that "head" as used here merely means source. While it may mean source, it also points to leadership and a line of authority. This leadership aspect of being the head is made abundantly clear in such passages as Ephesians 5, Colossians 3 and 1 Peter 3.

According to 1 Corinthians 11:4, how can a man dishonor his head? By praying with his head covered. This is probably why men traditionally have removed their hats when praying. If the covering is long hair, then it is a disgrace for a man with long hair to pray.

Review: Who is the head of man? Christ.

How does it dishonor Christ for a man to pray with his head covered (11:3)? It is not explained in 11:3 (this will come in 11:7).

According to 1 Corinthians 11:5, how can a woman dishonor her head?

Review: Who is the head of woman? The man.

Is “head” here in 11:4-5 to be understood literally or metaphorically? Yes! It is used both ways in each verse.

REMINDER: Again, exactly what constitutes this covering is not specified yet. “Uncovered” (11:5), is from *akatakalyptos* (177); *a* is a negative prefix and *katakalypto* means “to cover up.” It could be a garment (like a hat or scarf) or it could be short hair (as opposed to long hair).

Based on 1 Corinthians 11:5, if a woman prays or prophesies with her head “uncovered” (no scarf or short hair) what is it just like? 11:5b. It is just as though her head were shaved.

What does “shaved (11:5) mean? A man shaves his face with a razor. Shaved means smooth, without any hair.

What is wrong with a woman having a “shaved” head (11:5)? In 11:6, Paul said it is a disgrace. Most women don’t want the Telly Savalis/Yul Brynner look. In most cultures, a woman’s hair is an integral part of her beauty. Bald women are generally thought to be less than attractive. For instance, women undergoing chemotherapy (wherein their hair falls out) almost always wear wigs (this is not necessarily the case with male chemotherapy patients). Also, at the end of World War II, French women guilty of befriending Nazi soldiers were shaved in order to shame them.

Note: Paul is saying that it is as dishonoring for a woman to pray with her head uncovered as it is for her to have a shaved head.

In 1 Corinthians 11:6a, what should a woman do if she does not cover her head? She should have her hair cut off. The Greek means to shear or to cut really short (like a crew cut).

KJV 1 Corinthians 11:6 For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.

If the intended covering is a garment, then women who pray without a garment on their heads should shear their hair. If the intended covering is long hair, then women with short hair (bobbed hair) should shear their hair even shorter (crew cut).

When Paul wrote that she should have her hair cut off (11:6a, literally “shorn”), do you think he really expected for a woman would do this? No; he goes on to say that such would also be a disgrace. He is saying that praying with uncovered head is just like having her hair off (literally, shorn). Obviously most women don’t want their hair cut off (shorn), so the better alternative is to cover her head. (With what Paul does not here specify. In theory, it could be long hair, it could be a garment).

5. What is the difference between “shaved” (11:5-6) and “cut off” (11:6)? “Shaved” is from *zuario* (3587b) and does indeed mean “shaved”. “Cut off” is from *keiro* (2751), “to shear” (a sheep). When you cut off your hair, you still have stubble at least (as when shearing a sheep). When you shave there is no hair left showing.

REMINDER: “Cover” (11:6) is from *katakalupto* (2619), the same as in 11:5.

What word did Paul use in 11:6 to describe the state of women with their hair cut off? Paul indicated that it is a “disgrace,” from the same Greek word used in 11:4-5 (“dishonors”).

6. Why would it be a “disgrace” for a woman to be shaved (11:6)? This has already been dealt with above.

According to 11:6, if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair either shorn or shaved off, what should she do? 11:6b. She should cover her head, though as before, that with which she should cover it has not yet been specified. He may be that it should be covered with a garment, or he may mean that it should be covered with long hair.

7. In 11:6, what response is Paul ultimately seeking from uncovered women? She should cover her head (though again he does not say with what ~ maybe a garment and maybe long hair).

8. According to 1 Corinthians 11:7-9, why should a man *not* cover his head? A.) 11:7 B.) 11:8 C.) 11:9. Remember, he has not yet specified what the improper covering is: maybe a hat, maybe long hair. Whatever Paul’s intent, this is doubtless why men remove their hats when praying.

A. What does it mean for man to be the “glory” of God and for woman to be the “glory” of man (11:7)? It could mean that God glories in man and that a man correspondingly glories in woman. It seems a rather harsh thing to conclude. Perhaps he means that a man submits to God it glorifies God, and when a woman submits to her husband it glorifies her husband.

B. To what historical event is 11:8 a reference? To the creation event, when Eve was fashioned from Adam’s rib.

C. What does 11:9 tell us about who was helping whom in the Garden? This clearly shows that Adam (man) had/has the priority position.

Three reasons seem to be given in 11:7-9, yet 11:10 says “for this reason” (singular). What one “reason” underlies the three surface reasons of 11:7-9? The strongest reason of the three seems to be found in 11:7a, “since he is the image and glory of God.” However, it may also refer immediately back to the last reason stated in 11:9 (woman was created for man). On the other hand, the reason referenced may be that of divine order originally given back in 11:3.

9. Based on 11:10, of what is the woman’s head covering a sign? See 11:3. It is a sign (symbol) that she is in submission to authority.

10. In 1 Corinthians 11:10, what do the angels have to do with all this? Ultimately this is unknown since Paul did not explain himself any further. It may well be linked to 11:3 (divine order). Some of the angels did rebel and follow Satan, abandoning their proper status. Another answer might be found in **1 Peter 1:12**. In as much as angels might visit any place at any time, the head covering Paul has in mind should probably be something the woman wears at all times — not just in public. If a garment is the covering, she would need to wear her head gear 24/7. If long hair is the covering, then she does indeed do that continuously.

IMPORTANT: A woman’s covered head is merely a sign of her submission. It is not the substance of her submission. Though the sign is still important, what ultimately matters is the underlying principle.

11. **According to 1 Corinthians 11:11-16, what natural covering has already been given to a woman?** 11:15b. Her long hair. This is the first time a covering has been specified.

What is the point of 11:11-12? That in the Lord, both men and women are important.

12. What purpose does 11:11-12 serve in relation to 11:7-9? It is a counter balance. “However” (11:11) is from *plen* (4133), “only, nevertheless, but”; it is a strong word of contrast. In 1 Corinthians 11:11, *plen* is used to break off the discussion of 11:7-10 and to emphasize something else that is important (BAGD, p. 669). Thus, 11:11-12 is a direct counterpoint to 11:7-10. 11:7-9 and 11:11-12 do not contradict each other (both are true) but they do compliment each other (balance each other out). Each one without the other would be a half-truth, truth out of balance.

Notice how 11:7 is balanced by 11:12b, 11:8 by 11:12a, and 11:9 by 11:11. This is a stair-step, mirrored image type of counter point, in reverse order. Specifically, v7 says that man has his source in God, and woman in man; v12b balances this by asserting that everything has its source in God. In v8, woman is said to be dependent on man for initial existence; v12a counters that man is dependent on woman for his continued existence. Finally, v9 indicates that woman’s purpose is to benefit man and that she is dependent upon him; v11 shows that man and woman are interdependent.

Thus, it seems reasonable that 11:7-9 constitutes the reasoning of the “contentious” people of 11:16. Although true, 11:7-9 is only half the story. 11:11-12 is the rest of the truth (omitted by the contentious people but supplied by Paul).

13. Follow Paul’s suggestion of 1 Corinthians 11:13 and judge for yourself (1Co 6:3-4): Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? How so? Based on 11:3-12, it clearly would be improper for a woman to pray with her head uncovered. Personally, I would say that a purposely bald woman is an affront, an obvious violation of God’s design. However, it never would have occurred to me that it was wrong for a woman to pray without a garment on her head.

OBSERVATION: In recent Western culture (1960s), men who began to grow their hair long were generally in rebellion against the establishment (the government, the social order, the Vietnam war, traditional moral values, or whatever). Similarly, women in Western culture first began to “bob” or cut their hair short in the roaring 1920s. The “flapper” was a sexually loose woman, a woman in revolt against traditional social and moral roles for women. Thus the comparison in 11:5 between short (“cut off”) hair and a shaved head.

REMINDER: Exactly what type of “cover” Paul had in mind has not yet been specified yet.

14. What answer is expected to the question of 11:14-15a? Yes, nature does seem to teach this. It is a truism, a general fact, a reality in most cultures, that women have longer hair than men and this long hair is to her glory.

What is the logical link between verse 13 and verses 14-15? After writing about an uncovered head, what made Paul think of hair length? This is an awkward juxtaposition unless the covering he has in mind is indeed the amount of hair.

15. In 11:15b, we are told that a woman's long hair is given to her "as" a covering. What is the Greek behind "as"? From *anti* (473), which literally means instead of. Figuratively, it is used in 11:15 to indicate that one thing (long hair) is equivalent to another (a covering). Thus, it means "for, as, in place of" (BAGD, p. 73). In light of what is about to be said about the Greek word for "covering" (11:15b), it would make more sense to translate *anti* here as "instead of." That is, "For long hair is given to her *instead of* a covering."

16. IMPORTANT: What is the Greek word behind "covering" (11:15b)? From *peribolaion* (4018), "covering wrap, cloak, robe." It is an article of clothing; also used in Hebrews 1:12 (BAGD, p. 646). It refers to a hood or hat or some type of garment. *Peri* means "around" and *ballo* means "to throw." It is a wraparound, something thrown around the head.

ESV **Hebrews 1:12** like a robe (*peribolaion*) you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end."

17. How is the Greek behind "covering" in 11:15 different from the Greek root behind "uncovered" (11:5) or "cover" (11:6) or "covered" (11:7, 13)? The Greek used in 11:15 (*peribolaion*) is a completely different word from that which was used previous to this. Unlike the previous words for "cover" (*katakalupto*, "to cover, hide, conceal") which simply refer to an unspecified covering of potentially any type, *peribolaion* specifically refers to a garment. A *peribolaion* is a piece of clothing whereas *katakalupto* is a verb that simply means to cover, but does not of itself specify what is doing the covering (it could be wings, as in Isaiah 6:2, LXX).

NAS **Isaiah 6:2** Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

Taking these differences in Greek wording into account, 11:15b would read, "For long hair is given to her *instead of a wrap around*."

What information did Paul have in 11:16 for anyone who wants to be "contentious" about this?

What does "other" (NIV) mean in 11:16? From *toioutos* (5108) a correlative adjective meaning "of such a kind, such as this" (BAGD, p. 821). In 11:16, *toioutos* should be translated as "such". To verify that this is so, check any

Greek-English interlinear. The KJV correctly renders 11:16 with: “We have no *such* custom, neither the churches of God.”

18. What difference in meaning is there between “other” (NIV) and “such” (KJV) if inserted into 11:16? (Do word studies). In English, “other” and “such” are opposite in meaning. The word “other” is related to the word “another” and means “the opposite one of two” (Webster, p. 686). The word “such” means “of that kind” (Webster, p. 998). Suppose someone claimed that I promised to give him \$100. If I responded with, “I said no *such* thing” it would mean that I did not make that promise. Conversely, if I replied, “I said no *other* thing”, it would mean that \$100 is exactly what I promised.

REVIEW: The Greek behind “other” is *toioutos* and clearly means “such,” not “other.”

19. What custom were these “contentious” people in 11:16 advocating? Based on the correct translation of *toioutos* as “such,” the contentious people wanted the women to wear a *peribolaion* when praying or prophesying. Paul agreed that a woman’s head did indeed need to be covered, but that her long hair is given to her “for” (*anti*, that is, “instead of”) a *peribolaion* (11:15b). Thus, the contentious people needed to realize that the churches had no “such” custom of requiring women to wear a *peribolaion*, 11:16.

That long hair is Paul’s intended covering is suggested in the NIV’s marginal translation: “Every man who prays or prophesies with long hair dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with no covering of hair on her head dishonors her head — she is just like one of the ‘shorn women.’ If a woman has no covering, let her be for now with short hair, but since it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair shorn or shaved, she should grow it again. A man ought not to have long hair . . .”

How would you define the word “churches” as it is used in 11:16? From *ekklesia* (1577), which usually refers to a meeting of believers, but can also refer to the totality of Christians living in one place (BAGD, p. 240). In 11:16 it could theoretically refer to either. The Christians of the various cities had no such custom of making women wear head garments during their church meetings, nor did any believers collectively have a custom of requiring women to wear head garments.

NOTE: The question of Paul’s use of *ekklesia* in 11:16 only becomes important later on as one tries to harmonize 1 Corinthians 14:33-34 (women to be silent in church) with 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 (women may pray or prophesy with head covered). It is a fact that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 never explicitly states that the praying and prophesying done by women is to occur in a church meeting. Further, the context leading up to 11:2-16 deals with activities that are outside a church meeting (8:1-11:1, meat sacrificed to idols). And, the material dealt

with after 11:2-16 deals with activities that clearly do occur in a church meeting (11:17-34, the Lord's Supper). In actuality, most people's praying and prophesying goes on apart from the church meeting anyway. Understanding the proper head covering to be long hair argues more naturally for 1 Corinthians 11's prayer and prophecy to occur apart from church meetings, since a woman's long hair is always on display (24 hours a day). The importance of a sign of authority for the angel's sake (11:10) also suggests a context greater than just church meetings since angels presumably could be present anywhere at any time. Conversely, understanding the proper head covering to be a garment argues naturally for 1 Corinthians 11's prophecy and prayer by women to occur in a church meeting where others could see the visible sign of her submission. Incidentally, the angel angle (11:10) would also suggest that a woman should wear this garment whenever she prayed or prophesied, no matter where she was or when she did it (24 hours a day).

Synthesis

20. What is there in 11:2-16 that indicates whether the head covering issue is a cultural idiosyncrasy or a timeless truth? 11:3, 8-9, 10. Just as the order of God, Christ, man (11:3) is timeless and has not changed, neither has the man, woman order changed. Also, the appeal in 11:8-9 back to creation signals that this is a timeless truth that transcends all time and culture. Finally, the mention of the angels also suggests a universal application (angels are presumably not given to fads or cultural changes!).

In *Knowing Scripture* (p. 111), R.C. Sproul wrote: "What if, after careful consideration of a biblical mandate, we remain uncertain as to its character as a principle or custom . . . Would it be better to treat a possible custom as a principle and be guilty of being over-scrupulous in our design to obey God? Or would it be better to treat a possible principle as a custom and be guilty of being unscrupulous in demoting a transcendent requirement of God to the level of a mere human convention? I hope the answer is obvious."

SUMMARY: This passage transcends culture and time. It is completely binding on the church today, as binding as it was in the first century. A woman should pray or prophesy only if her head is covered, as a sign of her submission to authority. Yet the proper head covering taught is not a garment, but rather long hair. Overall then, 1 Corinthians 11 is a very liberating passage. In it, women are freed from the bondage of wearing religious head garb.

NOTE: Many sincere and godly brethren understand 1 Corinthians 11a to refer to an actual garment that is to be worn in addition to long hair. Be sure to remember to respect those who differ on this issue. Historically, the argument has been over what the proper size of the garment should be, not whether it is a garment or hair length. However, the salient points (below) are not usually dealt with by those who hold to the garment interpretation.

Review of Salient Points:

1. Nowhere in 11:2-10 does Paul specify what constitutes the covering that is required. Be careful not to read into it.
2. What is the literary purpose of the strong contrast (“however”) and counterbalancing arguments in 11:11-12, if not to deal with the arguments of the contentious people?
3. 11:12 specifically states that a woman’s long hair is given to her *anti* (instead of) a *peribolaion* (garment).
4. What contentions were the contentious people making (11:16)? We propose they were advocating that women wear a garment as the proper head covering. Paul agreed that women should have a head covering, but denied that a garment was necessary. Rather, God has given women’s long hair as the proper covering.
5. In 11:16, the word “other” is the polar opposite of the actual Greek word (“such”), and changes the meaning completely.

Optional Further Reading: See www.ntrf.org’s on-line article on head coverings.

**** = Ask this question before having someone read the text aloud.

Stephen E. Atkerson
www.NTRF.org
Revised 05/28/09

11. Head Coverings

1. Comparing 1Co 11:2 to 11:16, what situation might have prompted Paul to praise the Corinthian's devotion to Paul's way of doing things?
2. What is the overall application of 1Co 11:3-10?
3. What basic order did Paul confirm in 1Co 11:3? Compare Ep 5:22-33, Col 3:18-19, 1Pe 3:1-7.
4. In 1Co 11:3, what does "head" mean? (Do a word study).
5. What is the difference between "shaved" (1Co 11:5) and "cut off" (1Co 11:6)?
6. Why would it be a "disgrace" for a woman to be shaved (1Co 11:16)?
7. In 1Co 11:6, what ultimate response is Paul really seeking from uncovered women?
8. According to 1Co 11:7-9, why ought a man not to cover his head?

9. Based on 1Co 11:10, of what is the woman's head covering a sign? Compare 1Co 11:3.

10. In 1Co 11:10, what do the angles have to do with all this?

11. According to 1Co 11:11-15, what natural covering has been given to a woman?

12. What purpose does 1Co 11:11-12 serve in relation to 11:7-9?

13. Follow Paul's suggestion of 1Co 11:13 and judge for yourself (1Co 6:3-4): Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? How so?

14. What answer is expected to the question of 1Co 11:14-15a?

15. In 1Co 11:15, we are told that a woman's long hair is given to her "as" a covering. What is the Greek behind "as" and what are its ranges of meaning?

16. IMPORTANT: What is the Greek word behind “covering” (1Co 11:15b) and what does it mean?
17. How is the Greek behind “covering” in 1Co 11:15 different from the Greek root behind “uncovered” (1Co 11:5) or “cover” (1Co 11:6) or “covered” (1Co 11:7, 13)?
18. What difference in meaning is there between “other” (NIV) and “such” (KJV) if inserted into 1Co 11:16? (Do English & Greek word studies).
19. What custom were these “contentious” people in 1Co 11:16 advocating?
20. What is there in 1Co 11:2-16 that indicates whether the head covering issue is a cultural idiosyncrasy or a timeless truth? www.ntrf.org