**Head Covering**

The doctrine of head covering is one of those doctrines that is ignored, despised, distorted and rejected in the Church. Some follow it, some don’t. Some say it means this and others say it means that. Some simply say it is not important and ignore it.

One of the issues affecting this doctrine is the question of what covering for the head Paul had in mind—hair on the head or something else?” Whatever Paul meant, however, what counts in the end is if we will obey it or not. Certainly, for some, the confusion is genuine, however, for many, the real problem is that they are not willing to accept the conclusion—understanding requires a willingness to accept the truth [Mat 11:14].

We will be examining 1Corinthians 11:2-6 where this doctrine is taught, however, before doing this, can you say, “Whatever the Scripture says, I believe. Whatever it commands me, I will do”? Can you say that whatever the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles teach and command, you will obey?

If the answer is “No", then there is no reason to go on reading because, in the end, the issue is really not what the passage says but whether you will obey it. If, however, your answer is “Yes", you may please proceed.

**1Co 11:2-16 Flow of Thought**

First, let us lay out the flow of thought in this passage.

**First, Paul establishes the basis for this doctrine--the HIERARCHY between God, Christ, Man and Woman**

[1Co 11:3] Paul lays out a hierarchy: God is the head of Christ; Christ is the head of man; man is the head of the woman. This hierarchy is the basis for the doctrine in view.

Though Paul did not state it as a separate point, he apparently expected his readers to know that we are all to honor our respective heads. The hierarchy he laid out shows who each group is to honor—man must honor Christ his head, and woman must honor man her head.

**Next, he shows how we are to honor our respective heads with regard to head covering**

He here states the doctrine

[1Co 11:4] When praying or prophesying, the man is to honor Christ as head by not covering his head. If he covers his head, he dishonors Christ.

[1Co 11:5a] On the other hand, when praying or prophesying, the woman is to honor man who is her head by covering her head. If her head is uncovered, she dishonors her head.

**Paul then describes the impropriety of a woman uncovering her head while praying and prophesying by comparing the woman’s uncovered head to her head being shaved**

[1Co 11:5-6] Paul compares a woman’s uncovered head when praying or prophesying to her having a shaved head. He makes this comparison to show how unthinkable and unacceptable it is for a woman’s head to be uncovered while praying or prophesying. We may not share the same sentiment concerning a woman having her head shaved, but for the Corinthians, it was apparently a very terrible thing.

The repulsiveness of a woman’s shaved head to them was, however, not the basis for the doctrine. Rather, Paul was only sighting it as an example. He was trying to show them how repulsive it was for their women not to cover their heads while praying or prophesying.

**Paul then gives two reasons why we must honor our respective heads as laid out here**

[1Co 11:7-9] The first reason he gives is the fact that the hierarchy of man as head of the woman was established at creation by God. Paul points out the scriptural basis for the positions of man and woman in the hierarchy he laid out at the start. It is because man is the glory of God [Gen 1:27] and woman is the glory of man [Gen 2:21-23]. That is, the woman was formed from a part of the man. Also, the woman was created for the sake of man, to serve man, to help him [Gen 2:18,20].

When people read things like this in Paul’s writings, they often quickly condemn him as someone who hated women, or looked down on women, or something like that. But they forget, and perhaps, willingly, that it was Paul who wrote that in Christ, there is neither male nor female, that we are all one in him [Gal 3:26-28].

[1Co 11:10a] The second reason Paul gives is, “and because of the angels”.

Paul’s thoughts here are similar to that in Rom 13:5 where he gives us two reasons why we are to submit to the governing authorities.

**Insight from Romans 13:5**

**because of possible punishment**

Possible punishment has to do with the authority itself. We are to obey the governing authority to avoid possible punishment from the authority. God did not appoint them only to bless but also to punish wrong doers.

**and because of conscience.**

Conscience has to do with God himself. Now, since it is God who set up the governing authorities, rejecting them is rejecting God. Therefore, even if one escaped the authorities punishment, one will not escape God’s judgment.To have a clear conscience, one must, therefore, for God sake, honor the authority God has set in place.

So, here too he gives two reasons why we are to observe this teaching: first because it was God who, through creation, appointed man as head of the woman, therefore, for conscience sake, the woman must honor man. And second, because dishonoring our respective heads can be punished by the angels.

**About the Angels**

This is what I will here say about the angels. We must note from quite a number of passages, from Christ himself and the apostles, that the angels are very much involved with the church.

Angels are sent to minister to us who are the heirs of salvation [Heb 1:13-14]. Jesus himself told us to be careful not to despise any “little one” (cf. Mat 10:42; 18:6) because their angels are in heaven [Mat 18:10]. if that is so, it won’t be good for the angels to find us dishonoring the order God has established. It won’t be good for them to take a bad report back to heaven concerning us. They not only bless, but also punish.

We can see the importance of angels in the fact that it is an honor for Christ to acknowledge one’s name, not only before the Father, but before his angels as well [Rev 3:5].

For more consideration, please see, 1Ti 5:21; Heb 12:22; Rev 2:1.

[1Co 11:10b] The covering on the head of a woman is a sign that she is under authority, i.e., by covering her head, she is spiritually acknowledging the authority of her head over her.

**Paul then guards against a misapplication of the point he just made from the creation account in Genesis**

[1Co 11:11-12] Paul quickly points out that the scriptural fact that woman is the glory of man, came from man and was made to serve him and man is the glory of God does not mean that they have different hopes in Christ (cf. Gal 3:28; 1Pe 3:7). This point is not part of the argument but was made to guard against misconception and misapplication of what Paul had just said. Paul often tries to guard against people misapplying and misinterpreting his words (e.g., Rom 3:5-8; 3:31; 6:1 etc.).

**Paul returns to the main issue and asks his readers to make a judgment from nature**

[1Co 11:13-15] Paul charges his readers to consider natures example which confirms this doctrine. In nature, long hair, which is equivalent to a head covering, is a shame to a man while it is beauty to a woman.

Please take note, however, that Paul here only cites nature for the purpose of illustration. He is not saying that the covering a woman must have on her head and a man must not have when praying and prophesying is long hair.

Also, he is not saying that nature is the basis for this doctrine.

**Paul ends what he has to say on this doctrine**

[1Co 11:16] Finally, Paul points out that this teaching about head covering was the practice of all the churches of God. To appreciate this last point, consider 1Co 14:36. Unlike in our present days, in the days of the apostles, the churches that followed their teachings, all had the same practices.

The point here is that this doctrine was not peculiar to the Apostle Paul but was in fact the practice of all the churches in the days of the apostles. Let me emphasize, Paul did not make up this doctrine, it was taught by all the apostles.

**Addressing Some Reasons Why Some Do Not Follow This Doctrine**

Now, there should be no confusion about the fact that Paul is saying that when praying or prophesying, a woman should cover her head and a man should not cover his head. The following are some of the reasons why this, somewhat, plain doctrine and command is ignored or modified or altogether rejected by some:

1. What Paul meant by head covering is long hair, anyone who has long hair already has her head covered
2. It is Paul’s personal doctrine or opinion
3. It is legalism and we are not under the Law
4. It is the tradition of the Jews and not God’s word
5. It is not acting in love to a woman in whose culture it is a shame and oppressive for her to cover her head.
6. The man does not mind his wife’s head being covered

So, we will now address these arguments.

**Long Hair is Not the Covering Paul Was Referring To**

This confusion arises from Paul’s statement that “long hair is given her for a covering” [1Co 11:15]. This makes some say and think that what Paul meant all along by head covering was long hair. A proper reading, however, shows that this conclusion is wrong.

* When two or more things are compared,
  + It may mean that they have a similarity, but
  + It certainly means that they are different from each other.

By comparing uncovered head with shaved head, it means that they are two different things.

If covered head is long hair, then uncovered head would be shaved hair. Thus, Paul in 1Co 11:5-6 could very well have written “if she shaves her head then it is just as if she shaved her head” and “if her hair is shaved, she should shave her hair”—this makes no sense because you don’t compare a thing with itself.

* Paul refers to the uncovered head of the woman as a dishonor to her head, i.e., man. The short or shaved hair, however, is a shame to her not to her man, i.e., it is not a dishonor to her head for a woman to have short or shaved hair. They don’t have the same consequence; one (short or shaved hair) brings shame to her while the other (uncovered head) brings dishonor to her head (man).

**It is Not Paul’s Personal Doctrine**

Now, if this doctrine was Paul’s opinion, wouldn’t he have indicated that it was, just as he did concerning another matter in 1Co 7:12? On the contrary, however, in his closing words on this subject, Paul points out to the Corinthians that this doctrine about head covering, was the practice of all “the churches of God” [1Co 11:16].

Now, Paul was certainly not the one who founded every church as there were already churches and Christians before Paul’s conversion. Therefore, all “the churches of God” could not have been practicing this doctrine because Paul believed or taught it. Clearly, then, this was an apostolic doctrine. We should, therefore, be careful, for rejecting this doctrine is rejecting the apostles, and rejecting the apostles is rejecting Christ himself [Mat 10:40; John 13:20; 15:20].

**It is Not ‘Legalism’ or Observing the Law**

We have pointed out that this was an apostolic doctrine that predated Paul’s conversion and call. Now, the apostles openly made it very clear that they were not going to impose the Law on the Gentiles and that it would be wrong of them to do so [Act 15:10, 19-20]. If this was of the Law of Moses or legalism, the apostles won’t have taught the whole church, especially the Gentile churches.

On the other hand, and perhaps more significantly, it would be thoroughly inconsistent of Paul, who so vigorously fought against subjecting the Gentiles to the Law, to circumcision, to holy days, etc., who openly spoke and wrote against it [Act 15: 1-2; Gal 2:1-5], to be teaching or passing on to the Gentile churches a Jewish tradition. Does anyone really think that Paul would teach and impose on the Gentile Christians a ‘legalistic’, Law of Moses doctrine? This doctrine is not a command of the Law of Moses.

**It is Not a Jewish Tradition**

According to this doctrine, Christian men are not to cover their heads when praying or prophesying. Yet, historically, in Paul’s generation and time, there were Jewish men who covered their heads in prayer. If it was truly Jewish, then we would expect Jewish men of Paul’s day to have it as a rule to uncover their heads in their synagogues and while praying. Therefore, this doctrine is certainly not Jewish. One can observe that most modern Jewish men pray with their heads covered.

In addition, when people say that this is based on Jewish tradition (or Gentile customs) they, perhaps, willing and deliberately, display ignorance of the character and lifestyle of Jesus and the apostles [Mat 15:2; 1Pe 1:18]. Very clearly, Jesus paid no heed to traditions, and this is what he taught his disciples. It would be strange that the apostles, contrary to Jesus’ teaching and practice would impose Jewish traditions on the church.

If the apostles were not going to impose the Law on the Gentiles, why would they impose Jewish traditions on them? Why would Paul refuse to impose the Law of Moses on the Gentile Christians and yet be willing to impose Jewish traditions, of lesser authority than the Law, on them?

No, this was not a Jewish tradition.

**About Acting in Love**

Once, Peter tried to deter Jesus from dying, even though it was God’s command and will for Christ. Jesus rejected Peter as Satan saying, “...you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” [Mat 16:23]. Though, Peter’s concern were humanly legitimate, and his actions were apparently borne of his love for his master, Jesus rejected it as being against God’s will.

Some say that it is not acting in love to command certain women to cover their heads because in certain cultures and societies, covering the head for women is oppressive or feels oppressive. Such reasoning, as Jesus described Peter’s similar reasoning, is satanic, of the devil. When you encourage disobedience in the name of love, you, in reality, hate that person. Did the serpent love Eve when it advised her to disobey God’s command? It sounded as though it loved the woman and wanted her to be wise like God. Well, look around you, and even within you, and see what mess “acting in the spirit of love” has caused.

The first person we are to love in Scriptures is not our neighbor, a man, but God [Mat 22:37-39], and to love God is to obey his commands [1Jn 5:2-3]. If you don’t obey God’s commands, then you do not love him.

Since loving God comes first, the command to love our neighbors as ourselves cannot be a license to disobey God or disregard his word in favor of ours or our neighbor’s personal convenience and pleasure. It is a mark of rebellion and sin that we should love pleasure rather than God [2Ti 3:4]. God has never allowed us the freedom to choose what scripture to follow or not to follow.

If anyone truly loves God, his commands won’t be a burden to him [1Jn 5:3] but will, in fact, be a joy.

Love rejoices with the truth [1Co 13:5].

**The Man Does Not Mind His Wife’s Head Being Uncovered**

You may note that the men in the Corinthian church didn’t seem to mind if or not their women’s heads were covered, yet, Paul writes that the women had to cover their heads. Also, Paul did not at any point say that it was up to the men to choose if their women covered their heads. Instead he wrote that no one, man or woman, was to be contentious about the doctrine [1Co 11:16]. Furthermore, the involvement of angels in this matter shows that our opinion does not really matter.

There are certain things a leader can determine for his subjects or followers, and that a man can determine for his wife and family [Rom 7:2 KJV], there are, however, certain things that are not up to us to decide. The woman is to honor her head (man) by covering her head, it is not for the man to decide whether or not his wife should honor him or not. Men did not appoint themselves as heads over women, rather, it was God, even if the men don’t mind, to dishonor them is to dishonor God who appointed them.

In the days of the Lord Jesus on earth, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law taught that there was a condition under which a child did not have to honor his parents. Though they were the religious authorities of the day and were parents themselves, Jesus clearly showed that they had no authority to modify God’s command [Mat 15:4-6].

**The Error and Danger of Rejecting this Doctrine**

Since this was a doctrine of all the churches of God, it is clearly apostolic. Thus, to reject this doctrine would be to reject the doctrine and authority of the apostles which would be rejecting Christ [Deu 18:19; Mat 10:40; Luk 10:16; Joh 13:20; 15:20]. For the men who dishonor Christ by covering their heads when praying or prophesying, do you think that God who appointed Christ, or Christ himself, does not mind the dishonor? [Joh 8:49-50]

Rejecting this doctrine on whatever basis is rebellion. It is to claim to have the freedom to choose when and what scripture to obey. This is contrary to the Spirit of Scripture which has nothing to do with our opinions.

To reject this doctrine is to reject the authority of Scriptures.

**Final Word on Head Covering**

It is a sin to disobey God’s word. The fact that angels have an interest in this matter means that it is serious. Even Jesus, when warning against denying him spoke of him denying men before the elect angels [Luk 12:8-9]. This means that their opinion and assessment matters. It is a sin, when praying or prophesying, for a man to cover his head or a woman not to cover her head.

It is a wrong thing that some men who are leaders in the Church do, who wear all kinds of head coverings while ministering. Skullcaps, hats, veils etc., worn by Christian men when praying or prophesying is breaking this scripture, a great dishonor to Christ and a sin against him and God.

**A Warning!**

Please take note that the man with his head covered and the woman who has her head uncovered can still exercise the gift of prophesy [1Co 11:4-5]. This means that disobedience to this command will not stop the anointing and power of the Holy Spirit from working. The gift and anointing of God’s Spirit will not cease to work through you because you, a woman, left your head uncovered, or, you, a man, covered your head when you shouldn’t have.

The flow of the gift and grace of God through a man or woman who is disobedient to this command should not be taken as proof that God does not mind. The fact is well demonstrated throughout Scripture that the flow of God’s anointing is not necessarily proof that one is living right. We may consider the examples of the prophet Balaam who was evidently walking contrary to God’s will yet could prophesy; Moses when he struck the rock instead of speaking to it yet water came forth; Samson who ate honey from a dead animal contrary to his Nazarite vow yet the Spirt of God made him strong; and Judas who though a thief performed miracles along with the eleven apostles and cast out demons. We may also keep in mind the warning of Jesus which indicate that sins and rebellion don’t stop the anointing of the Holy Spirit from working through a man.

Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ 23Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ [Mat 7:22]

Therefore, we should not think that because God’s grace is still flowing through us, though our heads are uncovered or covered in disobedience and dishonor, that God is pleased with us. What you do is up to you.