

Covered Glory

1ST CORINTHIANS 11 &
THE CHRISTIAN USE OF HEADCOVERINGS

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Ω PREFACE

The Apostle Paul: “I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head... For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man... Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head.”

1st Corinthians 11

In this passage of Scripture, Paul teaches us about the relationships between people and the Lord, the act of prayer, the glory of God, and... having a covered head?! I remember how odd these instructions seemed when I first read them in my Bible. Like many Christians today, I was not very familiar with this passage and I felt personally unconnected to the practice Paul was describing. While I believed that God's Word is authoritative in directing Christians how to live, I wasn't sure how to respond to *this* direction.

Since the use of headcoverings is not a foundational part of Christianity, for a long time I left the passage alone until I could take a closer look at it. In the meantime, I tentatively concluded that the use of headcoverings was probably just an ancient cultural practice that God was re-enforcing for the church in Corinth. However, if using a headcovering was still required by the Lord for Christian women today, I figured that a lady's long hair probably qualified as an adequate “cover.”

Eventually I devoted some time to study this topic. Since the Lord calls the husband to love and lead his wife (Ephesians 5:23), I felt that a small part of fulfilling my role was to gain some clarity about God's teaching in this passage. I also happened to know a few ladies who wore headcoverings in response to this passage, and my interest was further piqued when I realized that Christian men often follow Paul's instruction to uncover their heads when they pray.

This subject challenged me to study Scripture carefully, learn more about Christian history, look into First Century culture, read from a very wide variety of Bible teachers and theologians, and consider the relevant Scriptural passages in their original languages. Of course, the primary reason believers should devote time to studying Scripture is to be able to learn from God, grow in their relationship with Him, and obediently follow His direction. Towards that end, I hope that this study will help provide a well-grounded understanding of the direction He gives within 1st Corinthians 11:2-16. As you read it, I would be interested in hearing from you ~

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Ω INTRODUCTION

Today, the use of religious headcoverings is often associated with Catholic nuns, Muslim ladies, and women living in Amish communities. Historically, though, headcoverings were regularly used by Christian women before each of these groups came into existence. This was more than just a practice of the ancient Corinthian church. Interestingly, up until just the last century, it had been the *norm* within Christianity for Christian women to wear a headcovering during times of prayer.¹

So what changed? Today, many Christians are not even aware that the use of headcoverings is taught in the New Testament. And when believers in Western culture ponder the Apostle Paul's directions on the matter, they often come up with a wide variety of perspectives about the passage.²

While 1st Corinthians 11:2-16 reads fairly quickly and its meaning was probably quite plain to the Corinthian believers that Paul wrote to, Christians today are often bewildered when reading the passage. Often, a slow and careful look at these 15 verses is needed in order to draw conclusions about what the passage teaches. This study seeks to provide that slow and careful look.

To do so, we will pursue four main topics: **(1)** an overview of the New Testament direction for the use of headcoverings, **(2)** a discussion of First Century cultures in the area of Corinth and their potential impact on the passage, **(3)** a thoughtful consideration for how a Christian should respond to the passage nowadays, and **(4)** a review of the use of headcoverings throughout Christian history.

Covered Glory is designed to be as quick and easy to read as possible. The essential discussion (and conclusions) are contained within the first half of the study. Each section is fairly concise and the reader is occasionally referred to the Appendices for further details and background information.

The first half of 1st Corinthians 11 discusses the use of headcoverings, while the second half focuses on the Lord's Supper. While much has been written about the second half of the chapter, there is a general lack of thorough, well-documented resources that examine the first half. My hope is that this study will introduce readers to an insightful, and often-skipped, section of Holy Scripture.

Additional Notes About This Study

- All Scripture references that do not specify a book or chapter refer to 1st Corinthians 11.
- Those reading the electronic version of this study can access additional information by clicking on any text that appears in [blue](#).

¹ This is well-documented in Church history. An overview of Christianity's use of headcoverings begins on page Error: Reference source not found. It covers various cultures and locations, from the time of the Early Church to the present day.

² Unfortunately, some contemporary Bible "scholars" intentionally ignore the passage, while others say that Paul's message is illogical. A few even state that the passage could not have been inspired by God.

Common Terms and Abbreviations¹

Corinth: At the time that Paul wrote to the Corinthians (around 53-58 AD), Corinth was a major seaport city (population 400,000-600,000) and the capital of its region in southern Greece. It had been destroyed in 146 BC and a century later was rebuilt by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony.² In Acts 18, Paul devoted 1½ years to ministering in Corinth. Later, he wrote a letter (now called “1st Corinthians”) to the church while he was living 180 miles away in Ephesus.³

Gentile: A non-Jewish person. The city of Corinth was populated mostly by Gentiles.

Early Church: Christianity as it existed in the first few centuries after the death of Christ.

Koiné Greek: A dialect of the Greek language that was spoken from about 330BC (after “Ancient Greek”) to about 330AD (before “Medieval Greek”). Because of the conquests of Alexander the Great, it became the universal language of the Greek and Roman Empires. Koiné means “common.” It is the language that the New Testament was originally written in.

Hebrew: The language of Israel, and the original language of most of the Old Testament.

Septuagint: A Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, written 200-300 years before Christ was born. It is often abbreviated “LXX.”⁴ Starting in the 2nd century BC, most Jews in Israel spoke Greek as their primary language, thus the need for a Greek translation of the Old Testament. The New Testament authors and other early Christians used the Septuagint.

Lexicon: A dictionary of foreign words with definitions provided in the reader's native language.

Abbreviations

cf. <i>confer</i> (“cf. John 3:16”)	LXX <i>Septuagint</i> (“Proverbs 1:1 LXX”)
ff <i>and following</i> (“John 3:16ff”)	v. <i>verse</i> (“v.16”)

¹ Apart from the definitions on this page, Appendix B discusses a number of key terms used in this study.

² As a result of this, the public buildings were an Italian style (not Greek) and the official language was Latin (though both Greek and Latin were used for business and in public life). The city was settled by retired Roman soldiers, and Roman influence extended to the city's politics, currency, courts, inscriptions, and pictures of the emperor. The Philippian church was similarly located in a Roman colony (Acts 16:12). Cf. page 57ff; David Gill, *In Search Of The Social Elite In The Corinthian Church* (Tyndale Bulletin 44:2, 1993), 327-328; Elizabeth A. McCabe, *Women in the Biblical World, Vol. 2* (University Press of America, 2011), 71; Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Baker Books, 1992), 28; Mark Harding & Alanna Nobbs, *All Things to All Cultures: Paul Among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 78; Edward Adams & David Horrell, *Christianity at Corinth* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 2ff.

³ cf. 1st Corinthians 16:8. Ephesus was a city located in what is now the country of Turkey.

⁴ This is the number “70” using Roman numerals. Tradition states that the LXX was written by 70 or 72 Jewish translators.

Ω HEADCOVERINGS IN SCRIPTURE

Introduction

In both the Old and New Testaments, individuals wore different types of coverings on their heads at various times. In some cases, the use of a covering was commanded by God and at other times it was worn by the person's own initiative. Often, the *kind* of covering was related to the person's unique situation or role. Below is a summary of the use of headcoverings in Scripture.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament provides a variety of *examples* of the use of headcoverings by various individuals. It also provides *commands* regarding the use of headcoverings. These commands were primarily intended for the Jewish priests. Generally, the Old Testament practice was that...¹

- **Men** wore headcoverings to symbolize *humility, mourning, or their priestly service*.
- **Women** wore headcoverings as a sign of *dignity and modesty*.

The New Testament

Several unique practices are presented in the New Testament that are intended to provide a meaningful, symbolic representation of a believer's relationship to God. These include the Lord's Supper and baptism. In the book of First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul devotes half of a chapter to teaching and explaining the symbolic relevance of a person's head to prayer and prophesy. Like other New Testament symbols, headcoverings are discussed as a new teaching for the churches, separate from the Old Testament instructions. As part of his instruction for the use of headcoverings, Paul also teaches about the relationships between men, women, Christ, and God. These relationships – with the associated issues of “authority” and “glory” – are the *primary principles* of 1st Corinthians 11:2-16. The *primary practice* discussed in the passage is the use of headcoverings. This is “a passage that has become a great battlefield of the 20th Century... These issues... are a part of the swirl of controversy that has escalated into the Feminist Movement of our day.”² The next section of this study contains an overview of this passage, as well as discussion of the various questions that the passage raises.

¹ See page 38 (in Appendix B) for more information. Cf. [Alan D. Ingalls](#), “Headcoverings in the Old Testament” in *The Journal of Ministry & Theology*, Vol. 4 No. 2 (Fall 2000), 5.

² [Ray Stedman](#), *What Is Headship?* (December 3, 1978, [sermon transcription](#)).

The Practice of Headcovering In The New Testament: 1st Corinthians 11:2-16 (NASB)

- 2 Now I praise you¹ because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.
- 3 But² I want you to understand that Christ is the head³ of every man, and the man is the head of a woman,⁴ and God is the head of Christ.
- 4 Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying⁵ disgraces his head.
- 5 But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.
- 6 For⁶ if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head.⁷
- 7 For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.⁸
- 8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man;
- 9 for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.⁹
- 10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of¹⁰ authority on her head, because of the angels.
- 11 However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.
- 12 For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.
- 13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?¹¹
- 14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him,
- 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.
- 16 But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

¹ This praise contrasts with Paul's later disapproval of how the Corinthians practiced the Lord's Supper (v. 17, 22).

² Here, the Greek word for "but" can also be translated as "now" (cf. v.2) or "and."

³ Page 40 contains more information about the meaning of the word "head" in this passage.

⁴ A few Bibles read "husband" & "wife" but most follow the Greek by using the generic terms "man" & "woman."

⁵ *propheteuo* / προφητεύω (Strong's 4395), meaning "to speak forth." In Scripture, the word refers to not only fore-telling the future, but also "forth-telling" God's already-revealed truth. This passage includes both directions of communication: *prayer* (from man to God) and *prophesy* (from God to man).

⁶ v.6-9 each begin with the word "for" (though some English translations omit this word) as each verse is adding another point to Paul's line of reasoning. This pattern continues with the word "therefore" in v.10.

⁷ v.5-6 can be classified as a technique called *reductio ad absurdum* (Latin for "reduction to the absurd"). [This type of argument](#) serves to discard a proposition (often to validate an opposing one) by showing that continuing the proposition forward leads to an absurd or undesired conclusion. Paul speaks similarly in Galatians 5:11-12.

⁸ Cf. Proverbs 11:16 LXX, Proverbs 12:4, [1st Esdras](#) 4:17. Both genders are equally in God's *image* (Genesis 1:26-27).

⁹ Cf. Genesis 2:18. Genesis 2:22, [1st Timothy](#) 2:13.

¹⁰ The phrase "a symbol of" is not in the original Greek text (the KJV is one of the few English translations that reflect this). However, since "authority" is not something tangible that can be worn on a person's head, it becomes evident that Paul is using symbolism or [metonymy](#), and thus most English translations indicate this.

¹¹ In nearby context, Paul similarly uses rhetorical questions & an appeal to "judge for yourself" (10:15, 11:22).

Ω WHAT IS THE “HEADCOVERING”?

As Paul explained why the Corinthian women should cover their heads while praying, they likely understood what *kind* of headcovering Paul was referring to. However, most English translations appear to leave the type of covering unspecified. Because of this, several different kinds of headcoverings have been proposed to explain what Paul meant: (1) a *cloth covering* worn over the top of the head, (2) a *veil* worn over the woman's face, (3) a *woman's husband* as a “spiritual covering,” and (4) a woman's *long hair*. So, what exactly were the Christian ladies to cover their heads *with*? Fortunately, a careful look at the passage provides enough insight to identify what type of covering Paul was referring to.¹

THE COVERING: A CLOTH WORN OVER THE HEAD

Defining The Terms. In v.5-7 and v.13, the Greek word that refers to the covering is *katakalupto*. It is defined as “to cover with a veil, to conceal, to cover up.” The meaning is broad enough that it can be used in a variety of contexts,² but refers to a cloth covering or “veil” when used in reference to a person's head.³ Non-biblical Greek literature similarly used this word to refer to a cloth covering worn over the top of the head. Further, while the phrase “something on his head” (v.4) by itself is fairly ambiguous, other Greek writers used it to refer to a cloth covering on top of a person's head.⁴

Understanding of the Church Throughout History. The Early Church lived with the closest understanding of the original Christian headcovering practice. It is well-documented that these believers understood Paul to be referring to a cloth covering, as have most Christians throughout history (and into the present).⁵ In fact, a variety of early Christians used a related Greek term (defined as “covering, hood, or veil”⁶) [when referring to the “symbol of authority”](#) in v.10.⁷

¹ Appendix B provides further details about the Greek terms used in this section.

² Eg., in [Isaiah 6:2 LXX](#) the word describes wings that are “covering” the feet. Cf. also [Jeremiah 28:42 LXX](#).

³ Thus, several English Bible translations specifically identify the covering as a “veil” including the [Weymouth, Revised Version, NAB](#) (Catholic), [ASV](#), [RSV](#), and [NRSV](#). A cloth covering is also specified in some foreign-language Bibles (including [French](#), [Spanish](#), [Portuguese](#), and [Italian](#) translations).

⁴ Page 16 provides further information on the use of this phrase in Greek literature.

⁵ Page Error: Reference source not foundff references Early Church artwork and statements from Christians throughout Church history.

⁶ *kalumma* (Strong's #2571). This term is connected etymologically to this passage in Scripture: it is derived from the root word of the term “cover” (*katakalupto*, mentioned above) as used in v.5-13.

⁷ E.g., [Irenaeus](#) in *Against Heresies* (Book 1, [8:2](#)); [Theodoret](#) cited in Judith L. Kovacs, *1 Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 2005), [183](#); [Theophylact](#) in *Commentarius in Epistolam I ad Corinthios* in [J.-P. Migne, Patrologiae cursus completus \(series Graeca\)](#) (MPG) 124 (Paris: Migne, 1879), [312](#). Similarly in Latin: [Ambrosiaster](#) (ed. Gerald Bray), *Commentaries on Romans and 1-2 Corinthians* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), [172](#). Cf. David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 2003), [532](#).

Alternative Proposals. A few theories about other identities of the “covering” are discussed on the following pages. As they each end up conflicting with the passage and with history, they actually serve to further identify the covering as a cloth worn over the person's head.

THE COVERING: A VEIL OVER THE FACE?

Greek Terms. As discussed on the previous page, the Greek terms referring to the headcovering indicate a garment that covers over the top of the head rather than covering the front of the face.¹

Scripture's Description. The headcovering discussed in 1st Corinthians 11 is identified as being worn on² the *head* rather than over the *face*. The passage itself does not provide any indication that Paul was concerned about covered or uncovered faces.³

First Century Culture. When women (regardless of religion) wore headcoverings during the time of Paul, the cloth covered their heads while their faces remained visible. “Many extrabiblical sources [show that the headcoverings of Paul's day] were not full facial veils; they were often attached as hoods to the women's garments.”⁴ “Statuary [sculptures] makes clear that the Greco-Roman veil was the top of the garment pulled over the head; one should not think of the modern Arabic and Islamic veil that covers most of the face.”⁵ Especially among people not located to the east of the Mediterranean Sea, “most of our evidence points to a covering that concealed only the hair from view.”⁶ “There is no extant evidence that full veiling, familiar in Islam, was current in Paul's time.”⁷

The Practice of Christianity. The general practice throughout Christian history has been to use a cover over the top of the head.⁸ Drawings from the Early Church show women praying with garments that cover the head but not the face. [Tertullian](#) (an Early Church leader) noted this difference between Christian women and a certain group of pagan women of his time period: the Christian women covered their heads while the pagan women “cover not only the head, but the face also.”⁹

Conclusion. Both Scripture and history show that Paul was not referring to a veil worn over the face.

¹ This distinction is also seen in other Greek literature. An Early Church writer used the [noun form](#) of the verb “cover” (the word Paul uses in v.5-7, 13) to refer to the garment on the head of a lady who was also wearing a *separate* veil over her face. Cf. [The Shepherd of Hermas \(Vision 4, 2:1\)](#).

² The Greek word for “on” in v.10 is commonly [translated](#) “upon” or “above.”

³ In a different context, 2nd Corinthians 3:13-18 reviews a situation in which Moses wore a “veil over his face.” The Greek term for “veil” in this passage is fairly general and its definition does not specify that the face is covered (and so Paul specifies “face” in the passage). The term is also used to refer to the face-veil in Exodus 34:33-35 LXX.

⁴ [James B. Hurley, Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective](#) (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002), 254-271. Cited in [Roy B. Zuck, Vital Biblical Issues](#) (Kregel Academic, 1994), 169.

⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 97.

⁶ [Craig S. Keener, Paul, Women, and Wives](#) (Baker Books, 1992), 22.

⁷ Piper & Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 118.

⁸ This is documented in Appendix A.

⁹ “[On the Veiling of Virgins](#)” (ch. 17) in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4 (Book One, Part Three).

THE COVERING: A WOMAN’S HUSBAND?

This proposal states that a “covered” woman is one who is *in submission* to the person who is the “head” over her. Rather than a physical cloth worn on the head, the woman’s *husband* is considered to be a “spiritual covering” for her.

Though submission is a biblical practice, several interpretive problems are created by substituting the concept of “submissive” for the term “covered” in 1st Corinthians 11.

A Symbolic Cover. While the concept of “submission” is present in the passage, it is not present in the definition of “cover.” The passage teaches that submission to authority is *symbolized* by the covering, not that the authority *is* the covering. This interpretation confuses the identity of the woman’s *head* (her authority) with the woman’s *headcovering* (garment).

A Covering “On” The Head. The Greek verb “to cover” is defined as “to cover with a veil, to conceal, to cover up.” A *cloth* could “cover up” or “veil” a woman’s head in this way. Most scholars agree that the “symbol of authority” (v.10) refers to the covering.¹ However, if that “covering” is a *husband*, it does not make sense for v.10 to describe the husband as being “on”² the woman’s head.

Hermeneutical Standards. To equate the term “covering” with “husband” requires a non-literal, “spiritualized” interpretation of the passage.³ For a variety of reasons (partly demonstrated by the issues listed above), most evangelical Christians consider this method of interpreting the Bible to be invalid and unscriptural.

Conclusion: Nothing in this text requires (or even implies) that the woman’s “covering” is a man. Because of the interpretive roadblocks that come with this proposal, there have not been many Christians who have held to it (in both Church history and in contemporary Christianity).

¹ This was also the view of those in the Early Church, as noted previously.

² The Greek word for “on” in v.10 is commonly [translated](#) “upon” or “above.”

³ Sometimes called “allegorical interpretation.”

THE COVERING: LONG HAIR?1st Corinthians 11

- (14) Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him,
(15) but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

The Proposal. Paul states here that long hair was “given” to women “for a covering.” Because of this, some have proposed that “long hair” is the only covering that Paul refers to in the entire chapter (in this case, an “uncovered” woman would have short hair or no hair). This proposal partly hinges two key words used in v.14-15: *for* and *covering*. These terms are somewhat unique in the original Greek text of Paul’s letter.

The Word Translated “For.” In the phrase “her hair is given to her *for* a covering,” the word *for* is a preposition that shows how “hair” is related to “covering.” In English, the word “for” has nearly a dozen meanings. However, this Greek word has only four definitions.

Definition of “For”	Example Usage
As a <u>substitute</u>	“Her hair is given to her <i>in place of</i> a covering.”
As a <u>cause</u>	“Her hair is given to her <i>with the purpose of</i> a covering.”
As a <u>counterpart</u>	“Her hair is given to her <i>corresponding to</i> a covering.”
As an <u>exchange</u>	“Her hair is given to her <i>in return for</i> a covering.”

Words Referring To A Covering. In v.15, the *covering* (of hair) is a noun. This term is used only once in the chapter and is defined as “a mantle or cloak that is wrapped around the body.” Everywhere else in the chapter, the verb *cover* is a completely different (etymologically-unrelated) term.¹ In relation to a person’s head, the meaning of the term refers to the use of a “veil.” Similarly, the phrase “something on his head” (v.4) was used by Greek writers to refer to a cloth covering.²

Ambiguity. The fact that 1st Corinthians 11 contains differing terms for the “covering” may indicate that there are two different “coverings” under discussion in the passage. However this becomes less clear when considering the variety of meanings of the Greek term translated “for.”³ In order to provide clarity, further insight from the passage is needed.

¹ This word and its derivatives (such as *covered* and *uncover*) are used five times in 1st Corinthians 11.

² See page 16 for further information.

³ In the Greek text, the noun “covering” is actually used only as an adjective (see page 44). Paul does not specifically state that hair *is* a covering, just that it is *for* a covering,

Insight From The Context. Paul's instructions in 1st Corinthians 11 indicate the following differences between two separate coverings on the woman's head.

- A woman's hair is a *continual* covering. It is put on the woman's head *by God Himself* (v.15).
- A cloth is a *situational* covering (v.5). It is put on the woman's head *by the woman herself* (v.6).
- Long hair is taught by *nature* (v.14-15). Women wear it *regardless* of their religion.
- A cloth covering is taught by *Paul*. Christian women wear it *for spiritual reasons* (v.2-10).
- Long hair is an *adornment*.¹ It is the woman's *glory* (v.15).
- A cloth covering provides the *opposite* effect: it *conceals*² glory (v.7, 15).

Interpretive Issues. Proposing a “hair-only” covering creates several interpretive problems.

- **Self-Contradiction:** In v.5, Paul states that an uncovered woman is “one and the same as” a woman who is shaved. At first this seems to fit the proposal that long hair is the “covering” that the woman is lacking. However, a problem with this concept becomes apparent in the next verse. Paul states in v.6 that when a woman does not “cover” her head (meaning she has *shaved* her head, according to this proposal) then she should “have her hair cut off.” However, cutting her hair off is impossible if hair is the covering that the shaved woman is already missing. For this reason, the headcovering in v.6 cannot be the woman's long hair.³
- **The Word “Also”:** Verse 6 refers to two separate choices: (1) a woman decides not to cover her head, and (2) the woman then cuts off her hair. At this point she is missing two things: the covering and “also” long hair. The word “also” shows that these two are not the same.⁴
- **Structure of the Passage:** A “hair-only” covering would mean that Paul identifies his topic only at the end of his line of reasoning. In addition to being an unusual way of teaching, this proposal ignores the structure of Paul's statements – Paul uses the woman's long hair only as *support* for his earlier instructions about the use of a headcovering.

Summary. According to v.4-13, the Corinthian women were to use a covering while praying or prophesying. According to v.15, long hair is a covering given to women as a glory around their heads. The following indications point to these coverings as being distinct and separate.

- The difference in *terms* used when referring to the coverings.
- The difference in *characteristics* of the coverings as indicated by the passage.
- The interpretive problems that result from viewing “hair” as the only covering in the passage.
- The Early Church understood the covering of v.4-13 to be cloth rather than long hair.⁵

¹ In v.15, the Greek word “hair” refers to an *ornamental style* of hair (see page 42).

² The Greek word “cover” means “to cover with a veil, to conceal, to cover up” (see page 43).

³ Thus, v.5 states only that shaving her head creates a *similar impropriety* to praying with an uncovered head.

⁴ The word “also” is present in the Greek text and in literal English translations, though [some Bibles](#) omit it.

⁵ This is also true of Christianity throughout the centuries. Only recently have a minority of writers and teachers promoted the theory that “long hair” is the only covering discussed in the passage.

Ω NATURAL HAIR LENGTH: CULTURAL OR UNIVERSAL?

1st Corinthians 11

(14) Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him,
(15) but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

These verses often prompt the question of whether Paul is describing (1) the customs of the ancient Corinthian society or (2) gender-specific hairstyles that are “natural” for people universally.¹ Should men of *every* society avoid the “dishonor”² of having long hair? Is long hair naturally a “glory”³ for *all* women?

Defining “Nature.” Paul bases his statements about hair length on what “nature” teaches. The Greek word translated “nature” (*physis*) is defined as: *order, laws, innateness, or instinct*. This word is the source of English terms such as *physics* & *physiology*. It is derived from a Greek word that means *to be born or to grow*.

Usage. The word “nature” (*physis*) is used 13 other times in the Greek New Testament. Each time, it refers to aspects of God and His Creation rather than to the norms of a particular culture.⁴ Outside the Bible, Greek writers used “nature” to refer to parts of the physical world (such as animals, water, and birth).

Practical Observations. The *physis* (or “innate law”) of hair length is seen played out within Creation.

- *Biologically natural:* As part of God's Creation, female hormones promote longer & thicker hair. Further, hair loss is more common in men due to gender-related genetic effects.
- *Innately natural:* Women around the world generally grow their hair longer than men, partially as an adornment. A man may shave his head, but it's often regarded as unnatural for a woman to do so.

¹ Many of the following topics are discussed in further detail on pages 45ff.

² The Greek word in v.14 is also translated as *disgrace* or *shame*.

³ This word is used in passages such as Matthew 6:29 (“not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these [flowers]”) and 1st Corinthians 11:7 (“the woman is the glory of man”). Cf. also Matthew 19:28, Acts 22:11.

⁴ For example, Romans 1:26-27 states homosexuality is “unnatural” or “contrary to nature.” Romans 11:21-24 uses “nature” in reference to plant growth, and James 3:7 uses it to refer to species of animals. Paul uses the term in Galatians 4:8 to make a distinct *contrast* between “nature” and culture.

God's Gift. Paul states that the woman's long hair is “given” to her for a covering (v.15). Presumably, the Creator of nature is the One that has “given” the long hair.¹ Both the gift and the Giver are cross-cultural.

Conclusion. The passage itself gives no indication that Paul's teaching about hair lengths is a reference to local Corinthian culture.² Instead, the *transcultural* aspect of “nature” is reflected in the Greek term's definition, by its usage within Greek literature, and by observations about “nature” within Creation. Paul states that long hair is a “glory” for women and that it is natural for men to have shorter hair.³

¹ In the very next chapter (12:7-8), Paul again implies the same Giver (God) when using the same phrase (“is given”). Note that in v.15, the Greek grammar also “indicates a permanent endowment by God.” Cf. Joseph Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians* (Yale University Press, 2008), 421.

² Note that Paul's appeal to “nature” is used to support a practice that occurred *outside* Corinthian culture (v.16).

³ Early Church Christians and councils likewise affirmed gender-specific hair lengths.

Ω HEADCOVERINGS IN 1ST CENTURY CULTURE

INTRODUCTION

Biblical scholars have sought to discover what the typical headcovering practices were within the First Century culture of Corinth. Were headcoverings worn by men or by women? Were they worn by Jews? By Greeks? By Romans? Were they part of everyday public life, or were they worn only during religious activities? This information is important because it helps determine whether or not Paul bases his instruction about headcoverings upon the norms of First Century society. “Some scholars claim that Paul deferred to the customs of his culture, and others claim that he rejected precisely those customs.”¹

SCRIPTURAL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT CULTURE IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he began preaching to both the Gentiles and Jews² living there (Acts 18). He initially lived with an Israelite couple and met in the local synagogue to “reason with” and “persuade” the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 18:4). However, when the Jews rejected his message, Paul turned his focus to the Corinthian Gentiles (Acts 18:6). The new focus was fruitful. Writing to them later, Paul states that the members of this church were previously “pagans” ([literally translated](#) as “[Gentiles](#)”) who had been involved in idolatry (1st Corinthians 12:2). Apparently the church was primarily non-Jewish.³

HISTORICAL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT CORINTHIAN HEADCOVERING PRACTICES

Corinth was a prominent city of the country of Greece. Like the city of Philippi (Acts 16:12), Corinth was a *Roman colony* rather than a typical Greek city.⁴ Because of this uniqueness, along with many Jews [adopting Greek culture](#),⁵ there may have been multiple cultural practices within the location and lifetime of the early Corinthian church. The best understanding of First Century culture generally seems to be as follows.⁶

The Jews: In public and in worship, men uncovered their heads and women covered them.

The Greeks: In public and in worship, both men and women uncovered their heads.

The Romans: Men & women covered their heads in worship. Men and women were uncovered in public.

¹ Susan T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1979), 106.

² Their presence may be partly due to the “[Jewish displacement](#)” initiated by the Romans (Acts 18:2, James 1:1).

³ Note that regarding his evangelistic work, Paul called himself “a teacher of the Gentiles.” (1st Timothy 2:7).

⁴ Corinth's various Roman distinctions were noted in the *Introduction* of this study.

⁵ Acts 6:1 & 9:29 mention these “[Hellenistic](#)” Jews. However, ethnic distinction still existed within Israelite cities (cf. Acts 6:7-8) with a clear distinction between Jewish and Roman authority (cf. John 11:48, Acts 16:20-21).

⁶ Cf. pages 49ff. Note that some Bible teachers and commentators unintentionally create confusion by attempting to draw conclusions about headcovering practices using unrelated information. For example, some attempt to explain First Century Corinthian headcovering practices using Old Testament Scripture, the behavior of ancient Germanic tribes, the culture of a previous Greek city of Corinth (prior to its destruction in 146 B.C.), the practice of the [Spartans](#), or even modern Jewish customs. Also, some do not distinguish whether the garment they discuss is a *veil over the face* or a *covering over the head*.

Ω SCRIPTURE'S REASONS FOR THE HEADCOVERING

THE FIVE KEY ISSUES IN 1ST CORINTHIANS 11

In the Bible, the Lord gives some commands without explaining His reasons for them. 1st Corinthians 11, however, includes not only *direction* for the use of headcoverings, but also a specific *explanation* for that direction. This explanation is composed of five different reasons for the use of headcoverings.

1. **Distinct Gender Roles.** The topic that initiates Paul's discussion of headcoverings is God's universal order of "headship" (v.3). Paul states that the headcovering relates to distinct gender roles – roles that are seen in God's creation of the genders (v.8-9). Man is the "head" of woman, and the headcovering is a symbol of the woman being under his "authority" (v.10).
2. **Glory & Honor.** Paul next explains the connection between *gender roles* and *communication with God*. The reason that men should not cover their heads when praying is that they are the "glory of God" (v.7). Paul says that to "cover" the glory of God is a dishonor (v.4). The reason that a woman covers her head is that she is the "glory of man" (v.7).¹ Uncovering her head when communicating with God would be a dishonor (v.5). While praying or prophesying, God's people are to symbolically "uncover" the glory of Deity (man) while "covering" the glory of humanity (woman).²
3. **Angels.** Paul states that women should cover their heads "because of the angels" (v.10). He bases this reason for the headcovering on his previous two reasons,³ but does not further elaborate.
4. **Hair Length.** Nature's teaching about *hair length* is used by Paul to support the woman's use of a headcovering (v.13-15). In other words, natural hair lengths present a hint for what Christian men and women should do regarding the use of headcoverings. The passage provides for only one outcome: if a woman won't cover her head, she must cut her hair off (v.6) – but since nature teaches that this would be a disgraceful loss of her "glory" (v.15), she should cover her head (v.6).
5. **The Universal Practice of The Church.** Christianity's use of headcoverings did not begin with Paul's letter to the Corinthians – the other churches were already practicing it before the church in Corinth did.⁴ Paul states that it was the standard practice among the "churches of God" as a whole (v.16).⁵ His instructions were not only for the Corinthian church or only for people of a certain culture, but rather were for "every man" and "every woman" (v.4-5).

¹ Paul then explains *how* woman is the glory of man: she originated *from* man and was created *for* his sake (v.8-9).

² This reason for the headcovering is "not because she is in the presence of man, but because she is in the presence of God and his angels – and in their presence the glory of man [that is, the woman] must be hidden." [Morna Dorothy Hooker, From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul \(CUP Archive, 1990\), 119.](#)

³ Note the structure of Paul's reasoning in v.6-10, especially the progressive use of "for" and "therefore."

⁴ It was from the rest of Christianity that Paul "delivered" this practice to the Corinthians (v.2) – just as he had similarly "delivered" to them the practice of the Lord's Supper (v.23).

⁵ At the time of Paul's writing, there were churches in Israeli, Greek, and Roman cities. Additionally, Christianity may have spread to Africa (ie., the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 and the evangelists of Cyrene in Acts 11:20). The Apostle Thomas may have already planted churches in India. Early Church artwork and writings show that believers outside of Corinth followed Paul's instruction for the use of headcoverings (see Appendix A).

OTHER PROPOSED EXPLANATIONS FOR THE HEADCOVERING SYMBOLISM

When explaining the topic of headcoverings, Scripture gives five specific reasons for their use. However, some Bible teachers have proposed *different* explanations for Paul's instructions. Each of these other explanations depend on a specific assumption: that Paul had *unmentioned* reasons for his instructions about headcoverings. The most common alternative explanations are considered below. Each proposal is assessed by taking a careful look at both history¹ and Scripture.

Alternative Proposal #1: The Use of Headcoverings Was A Required Aspect of Corinthian Culture

Explanation: “Paul wanted Christians to maintain the *status quo*. The use of headcoverings by women was an honorable part of First Century culture in the city of Corinth. Paul did not want the Corinthians to abandon their cultural connections since it would hinder their witness for Christ and draw undue attention.”

In Light Of History

- 1) Rather than reenforcing the headcovering customs of the local society, Paul's instructions were actually the *opposite* of the Corinthian's Roman culture. Specifically, Roman men wore a headcovering during religious activities, and Roman women normally went without a headcovering while in public. Thus, Paul's instructions cannot be a requirement for cultural conformity. Even in nearby Greek culture, women did not wear a headcovering during worship.
- 2) The Early Church writings on the topic also do not describe the use of a headcovering during prayer as conformity to the local society. To the contrary, Tertullian (a theologian in the Early Church) specifically stated that the Christian practice of headcovering was not something that came from the Gentiles.² Further, multiple Early Church sources document the use of headcoverings *outside* of Corinth.

In Light Of Scripture

- 1) The passage does not provide instruction for the general public use of headcoverings within secular Corinthian culture, but rather for their use only within times of Christian prayer and prophesy.
- 2) It is difficult to imagine that Paul's motivating desire would be that the Church's own worship practices would match the worship practices of the surrounding pagan religion.
- 3) Even if Paul's instructions had matched up with the Corinthian culture, **correlation does not show causation**. That is, any *similarity* to the practice of others does not automatically mean that Scripture's instructions are *based on* the practices of others. Instead, Paul gives specific theological reasons for his instructions that cannot be accounted for from within the Corinthian culture.
- 4) Paul “delivered” (v.2) the practice of Christian headcoverings to the Corinthians. This indicates that it wasn't already part of their native religious practice. Also, ending the passage with an appeal to the rest of Christianity (v.16) wouldn't make sense if indeed the practice was uniquely Corinthian.
- 5) The passage itself does not present any need to maintain the *status quo* or to avoid drawing attention.

¹ Specifically, the history of First Century culture (cf. Appendix C) and the history of Christianity (cf. Appendix A).

² “On the Veiling of Virgins” (ch. 2, 8) in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4 (Book One, Part Three).

Alternative Proposal #2: Headcoverings Were A Required Cultural Symbol of Modesty

Explanation: “Paul required women to wear a headcovering because in Corinthian culture a woman's uncovered head (and visible hair) was considered immodest.”

In Light Of History

1) The Corinthian church was primarily a Gentile church. For Gentile women in First Century Roman Corinth, being in public without a headcovering was not a sign of immodesty – rather, it was the norm.¹

In Light Of Scripture

1) This proposal does not explain why Paul was concerned about the headcovering only during times of prayer and prophesy, as modesty is important during any public gathering. In other words, the passage doesn't teach the use of a headcovering as general public attire, but specifically for times of prayer.

2) Paul's reason for *why* it is inappropriate to pray uncovered is not that it immodestly reveals a woman's hair. Rather, he states it is the opposite: it is equivalent to the woman having no hair (v.5).

3) This proposal does not account for why Paul prohibits men from wearing a headcovering.

4) As discussed previously, women in the Old Testament sometimes (but not always²) wore a covering to show modesty and propriety. [Philo of Alexandria](#), a Jewish philosopher who lived during the time of Paul, stated that the headcovering was the Jewish woman's “symbol of modesty.”³ However, in contrast to Paul, nowhere did *God require* Jewish women to wear a headcovering in the Old Testament.⁴

5) Even if Corinthian culture had required a headcovering for the sake of modesty, [correlation does not imply causation](#). In fact, the concept of modesty is simply not found in the passage. Rather, Paul states that the symbolism of the headcovering is related to *headship* (not modesty).⁵

6) In the Gospels, two women applied their hair to Jesus' body.⁶ In response, He has nothing but praise for them. Jesus demonstrates no concern for supposedly “immodest” hair being revealed in public.

7) The Corinthian church was primarily Gentile (not Jewish). Any concern for modesty within Jewish culture does not explain the Christian practice of using a headcovering *outside* of Jewish areas (cf. v.16).

¹ See page 11.

² For example, Rebekah had not yet put on her veil but was still in the presence of a male (Genesis 24:65). Rather than being a symbol of modesty, Tamar's covering was an *indication* that she was a prostitute (Genesis 38:15).

³ Philo, [Special Laws](#), X:56.

⁴ The [Talmud](#) is a collection of Jewish writings that taught a variety of religious rules not given in the Bible. It provides the opinion of some rabbis who stated that a woman's hair is erotic ([Berakhot](#) 24a), required married Jewish women to cover their heads, and stated that a married woman who appears in public with uncovered hair can be divorced without the benefit of a marriage settlement (Ketubot 7:6). However, the Talmud was not inspired by the Lord, its writings are dated well after Paul's lifetime, and it was specifically Jewish. It thus does not serve as a good explanation for Paul's instructions to the Gentile Corinthian church. Note also that some of its statements applied to married women only, while Paul speaks to “every woman” (v.5).

⁵ Regarding the proposal that visible hair was considered immodest, Paul's emphasis is on the *head* (not the *hair*) since it is the head (not the hair itself) that provides the theological word picture for the headship relationship.

⁶ Mary does this in John 12:3. In a separate incident, an unidentified woman does the same in Luke 7:37-38.

Alternative Proposal #3: Headcoverings Were Necessary to Avoid Looking Like A Prostitute

Explanation: “Paul required women to wear a headcovering (and grow long hair) because in First Century Corinthian culture a woman without a headcovering (or long hair) was usually a prostitute. Corinth was known for its immorality. Specifically, the Temple of Aphrodite¹ in Corinth housed 1000 temple prostitutes with uncovered, shaven heads. Paul desired the women in the local church to avoid any shame or 'appearance of evil'² – specifically, to avoid dressing like a prostitute associated with a pagan religion.”

In Light Of History

- 1) Scholars have pointed out that this explanation is, for multiple reasons, historically inaccurate. The Temple of Aphrodite was destroyed over 200 years before Paul wrote 1st Corinthians. Further, the Corinthian prostitutes were not known for having shaved hair and uncovered heads. Corinth's reputation as a very immoral city was long gone by the time of Paul.³
- 2) This explanation contradicts the fact that First Century Greek and Roman women *normally* had uncovered heads while in public.⁴
- 3) The Early Church writers, when discussing the use of a headcovering, make no mention of the proposed need to avoid looking like a pagan temple prostitute. Further, this proposal is very Corinth-centric, but multiple Early Church sources document the use of headcoverings *outside* of Corinth.

In Light Of Scripture

- 1) This proposal does not account for why Paul instructed men not to wear a headcovering.
- 2) This proposal does not account for the connection that headcoverings have to *gender roles*, as well as the relationship between the headcovering and *glory* during communication with God (v.3-10).
- 3) This explanation doesn't explain why creating the visual distinction (between a Christian woman and a Corinthian prostitute) would be important only during times of prayer and prophesy. The passage doesn't teach the use of a headcovering as general public attire, but specifically for times of prayer.
- 4) There is no reference to prostitution in 1st Corinthians 11. Even if the historical record had indicated that Corinthian prostitutes did have uncovered and shaved heads during the time of Paul, **correlation does not show causation**. That is, a cultural norm of uncovered and shaved prostitutes would not automatically mean that Scripture's instructions are a response to that practice.
- 5) This proposal is very Corinth-centric. It does not take into consideration the fact that the use of headcoverings was standard practice among the rest of the churches *outside* of Corinth (v.16).

¹ “Aphrodite” was the Greek goddess of love. The equivalent Roman name was “Venus.”

² 1st Thessalonians 5:22 (KJV).

³ See page 57ff for further details.

⁴ Page 11 provides an overview of First Century culture in regards to the use of headcoverings.

Alternative Proposal #4: Male Headcoverings Were An Imitation of Pagan Roman Worship

Explanation: “Paul prohibited men from wearing a headcovering because in First Century Corinthian culture Roman men covered their heads with a toga when making sacrifices to false deities. Paul didn't want Christian men to shame their 'head' (Christ, v.3-4) by bringing the clothing styles of pagan religions into the Corinthian church.”

In Light Of History

- 1) The writings of the Early Church refer to Paul's reasons for the use of headcoverings, but never discuss a connection to Roman sacrificial customs.
- 2) If indeed an association with pagan Roman worship was the reason that Paul did not want Corinthian men to cover their heads, then “one would wonder why Paul would not have similar problems with women covering their heads, since that was also the norm for Roman worship.”¹
- 3) While the phrase “something on his head” (v.4) could be used in reference to a toga pulled over a man's head during a Roman sacrifice, this specific religious context was not inherent in the phrase. The same Greek phrase could also refer to someone simply covering their head to hide their appearance.²

In Light Of Scripture

- 1) This proposed explanation states that Paul's primary concern is a shameful imitation of pagan religious practices. However, the passage itself reveals a completely different set of primary issues (namely, gender roles and the symbolic covering of human glory). The passage does not include any mention of pagan religious practices.
- 2) This proposal does not provide an explanation for why a woman was obligated to wear a headcovering.
- 3) The theory is itself inconsistent. Roman *women* also veiled their heads during pagan religious practices. According to this proposal, Paul would have desired to instruct them to similarly avoid wearing a headcovering. However, he actually instructed them to do the opposite.
- 4) This theory doesn't match with the fact that the use of headcoverings was Christianity's practice in non-Roman areas as well (v.16), while this proposed theory seeks to explain only Roman culture.
- 5) The connection between the specific context of this proposal (religious sacrifices) and the context of 1st Corinthians 11 (prayer and prophesy) is questionable. In other words, it seems unlikely that Corinthian Christian men assumed they should come dressed to perform pagan sacrifices during their church's time of prayer. The passage gives no indication that this was the case.

¹ Roy E. Ciampa, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 2010), 514.

² For example, Esther 6:12 LXX uses the same phrase to describe Haman's behavior after being forced to honor his enemy Mordecai. Also, [Plutarch](#) (a Greek historian who lived during the time of Paul) used the phrase (in a Roman non-religious context) to describe a man walking through a city while covering his head in order to avoid being recognized. Cf. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 506-507; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 2003), 517. Another indication that Paul used this phrase to refer to headcoverings is that the next verse specifically *contrasts* it with the case of women who are not wearing headcoverings.

Alternative Proposal #5: Female Headcoverings Were An Imitation of Pagan Roman Worship

Explanation: “When making a vow to their local gods, pagan Corinthian women would sometimes shave their heads and dedicate their locks of hair to the false deities. In Corinth, if a Christian woman were to similarly 'uncover' her head, then she would dishonor God by imitating local pagan worship practices.”

In Light Of History

- 1) The writings of the Early Church mention the reasons for the use of a headcovering, but never mention the sacrifices of pagan Corinthian women as being one of the reasons.
- 2) The Early Church used a cloth headcovering in response to Paul's instructions, whereas this proposal identifies the headcovering as being “locks of hair.”
- 3) This proposal seeks to explain a rejection of pagan religious customs that existed in the city of Corinth. However, multiple Early Church sources document the use of headcoverings *outside* of Corinth.

In Light Of Scripture

- 1) The primary issue with this proposal is that it mistakenly interprets an “uncovered” head to mean a “shaved head” or “short hair.” Instead, Paul used the term “uncovered” to refer to the lack of a cloth headcovering.¹
- 2) The passage itself does not mention any concerns about imitating pagan worship. Further, this proposal does not account for the passage's connection between *headcoverings* and *gender roles*, which Paul describes as being at the foundation of his instructions for the use of headcoverings.
- 3) The *reason* that Paul stated women should keep their long hair does not match up with this proposal's reason for why a woman should keep her long hair. Paul states that women should have long hair because this is what “nature teaches.” This proposal states that women should keep their long hair to avoid a similarity to certain pagan worship practices.
- 5) Paul states that the context of his instructions are the specific activities of Christian *prayer and prophesy*. Thus, it would be a contextual stretch to propose that this passage is addressing the imitation of pagan *sacrificial practices*.
- 6) This proposal does not explain Paul's direction for men not to wear a headcovering.
- 7) Paul stated that the use of headcoverings by women was the standard practice of churches *outside* the city of Corinth (v.2, 16). However, this proposal seeks to explain only the religious customs of Corinth.

¹ See page 7ff.

Alternative Proposal #6: The Headcovering Was A Sign of Being Married in Roman Culture

Explanation: “In the First Century, if a Roman woman uncovered her head in public it meant that the woman considers herself to be *independent* – to have withdrawn from being under the authority of her husband. Paul's goal was that married women in the Corinthian church would not make that type of fashion statement.”

In Light Of History

- 1) History records that married Roman women sometimes wore a garment called the *palla*, which could be pulled over the top of the head. However, in contrast to Paul's instructions, the *palla* was not *required* by the culture and so was not always worn. Further, when worn, it was also not always pulled up over the top of the head. Rather than the *palla*, the wearing of the *stola* (a type of sleeveless Roman dress) was the more-standard symbol of being a married woman.¹ In actuality, Roman women (including those who were married) are *most often* presented in First Century portraits *without* any covering on their heads.
- 2) Tertullian (an Early Church theologian) specifically stated that the Christian practice of headcovering was not something that came from Gentile culture.²
- 3) The Greek word for “woman” in 1st Corinthians 11 is generic: it can refer to either married or unmarried women. Thus, some Christians in the Early Church brought up the question of whether or not Paul intended the headcovering to be worn by unmarried women. This indicates that the Early Church felt the question could not be decided by a quick look at *traditional Roman culture*. Instead, Tertullian noted that the unmarried women in most of the *churches* throughout Greece – specifically including the single ladies in the church of Corinth – used headcoverings. Later, [Jerome](#) (an early Latin theologian) also referred to unmarried women wearing a covering on their head in obedience to Paul's instructions.

In Light Of Scripture

- 1) This proposal refers to what Roman women wore in public to indicate their marital status. However, Paul was concerned only about what Christian women wore during times of prayer & prophesy.
- 2) This proposal is based only on Roman culture, but Christian headcovering was practiced in churches outside of Roman culture (v.16). Rather than being a native custom, the practice was something that Paul “delivered” to the Corinthian Christians (v.2).
- 3) Paul states his instructions were for “every woman” (v.5), not just married women. Similarly, Paul's appeal to natural “hair length” (v.13-15) is something that applies to all women, not just married women.³
- 4) This proposal doesn't explain why Paul directs men to keep their heads uncovered.
- 5) This proposal states the covering simply indicated marital status. However, Scripture's purpose is different: the headcovering conceals human glory during communication with God (v.7).

¹ cf. Judith Lynn Sebesta, Larissa Bonfante, *The World of Roman Costume* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), [49](#); Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman* (Routledge, 2012), [1-12](#); Lynn Cohick; *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* (Baker Academic, 2009), [61](#); Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), [82, 84](#).

² Tertullian, “[On the Veiling of Virgins](#)” (ch. 2, 8) in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4 (Book One, Part Three).

³ Similarly, it is not just *married* men who have Christ as their head (v.3), who are in “the image and the glory of God” (v.7), and who “have their birth through women” (v.12). Paul's statements are about males in general, regardless of marital status. His statements that women are “the glory of men” (v.7) and have glorious hair (v.15) are thus most likely statements about the female gender in general (including unmarried women).

Alternative Proposal #7: Headcoverings Were A Cultural Indication of Gender Roles in Marriage

Explanation: “Paul's statement 'there is neither male nor female' (Galatians 3:28) had been taken out of context by the Corinthian believers. Ladies in the Corinthian church wanted to remove their headcoverings in order to symbolize that they were independent from their husbands and equal in authority – perhaps even to state that they were usurping the church's male leadership (a First Century Corinthian “woman's liberation movement”). Paul sought to restore biblical gender roles by using the *cultural* cue of the headcovering and the *natural* cue of hair length.”

In Light Of History

- 1) Within the Corinthian culture, an uncovered woman did not imply a rejection of gender roles. Roman women were *normally* uncovered when in public. Also, Roman men wore a headcovering in religious settings. Thus, Paul's instructions did not match up with the Corinthians' cultural gender distinctions.
- 2) This proposal states that Paul's instructions come from a culture cue found in the Corinthian culture. However, Tertullian (a theologian in the Early Church) specifically indicated that the Christian practice of headcovering did not come from Gentile culture.¹ Early Church artwork and writings document the use of headcoverings as being the practice of Christians outside of Corinth, and never attribute the practice to Corinthian confusion about gender roles.

In Light Of Scripture

- 1) This proposal presents Paul's message as a correction or rebuke to the Corinthian believers for rejecting the gender roles that God established. Rather than a rebuke, though, Paul's attitude in this passage is one of praise (v.2). The passage itself contains no specific evidence that Paul was seeking to reverse a “woman's liberation movement.”² When Paul does seek to correct the Corinthians, he does so later (v.17) and clearly indicates that he is switching his tone.
- 2) It was on the basis of God's glory (v.7) and “the angels” (v.10) that Paul “delivered” (v.2) the use headcoverings to the praying women of the Corinthian church. This goes beyond any possible “cultural cue” that he found in the Romans' pagan society.
- 3) This proposal is very Corinth-centric. Thus, there is a disconnect between it and the fact that Paul's instructions about the headcovering were the universal practice among the rest of the churches (v.2, 16).
- 4) Had Paul not mentioned headcoverings at all, the passage would still have been sufficient to correct confusion about gender roles. The amount of time Paul takes to specifically promote the headcovering indicates that there is more to the issue than gender role confusion. Further, gender roles affect various aspects of life while the headcovering was used only during times of prayer and prophesy.

¹ Tertullian, “[On the Veiling of Virgins](#)” (ch. 2, 8) in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4 (Book One, Part Three).

² The passage also contains no indication that the Corinthian church was misinterpreting the phrase “there is neither male nor female.” Since the Corinthian church did not possess the complete New Testament at this time, and since Paul's time with the Galatians came *after* he had ministered in Corinth (Acts 18:18, 23), it's very possible that the believers in Corinth had never heard this phrase before.

Alternative Proposal #8: A Headcovering Should be Worn To Prevent Offending The Jews

Explanation: “Paul was telling the Corinthian Christians to adopt the Jewish use of a headcovering. Because of the Jews that were living in First Century Corinth, Paul wanted the Christians there to avoid offending the Jewish sense of proper worship attire.”

In Light Of History

1) Paul's instructions to the Corinthians make it a clear *requirement* that the men pray with their heads uncovered. Scholars state that Jewish men during the First Century “probably” prayed with their heads uncovered. However, they also state that the evidence for this is minimal, with perhaps *no* evidence that it was a religious *requirement* (beyond being simply a cultural practice). It is not a requirement found in the Old Testament. “The *de facto* requirement that Jewish men cover their heads for prayer is a relatively recent phenomenon, arising largely as a reaction to the Christian practice of praying bareheaded.”¹

2) The writings of the Early Church discussed Paul's reasons for a headcovering. However, they never mention Jewish culture as the reason for the use of the headcovering.

In Light Of Scripture

1a) Prior to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the Apostles and other Jewish church leaders had brought up the question of whether Gentile Christians should be required to obey Jewish religious rules (Acts 15:5). The group adopted the proposal of Apostle James (a Jew), who said that they should “not trouble” the Gentile Christians in this way, but rather should place on them “no greater burden” except four specific “essential” practices (15:19, 28-29). None of those practices included the use of headcoverings.

1b) Paul was a member of this Acts 15 discussion group and was involved in announcing their decision to the Gentile churches (Acts 16:4). In writing to the Corinthians, Paul followed through on the decision to not increase the burden of the Gentiles – but rather decreased it.² Increasing the Gentile burden (through a new universal Christian practice of adhering to Jewish headcovering customs) would have contradicted the decision made in Acts 15.

1c) In a different situation, Paul himself confronted another Christian for trying to “compel the Gentiles to live like Jews” (Galatians 2:14). He also made a special point to say that a Gentile disciple named Titus didn't feel compelled to adopt Jewish practice (Galatians 2:1-5). In view of Paul's typical response to Gentiles in matters of Jewish custom, it is difficult to imagine him requiring the Roman Corinthians to take on Jewish cultural and worship practices.

2) Paul did teach “cultural accommodation” in certain situations when a Christian is with someone from a different society.³ However, this is different than Paul giving commands related to Christian worship that believers in all locations are to follow as standard practice (as presented in v.2-16).

3) The passage itself provides no indication that Paul is seeking to promote the adoption of Jewish religious practices among the Corinthian Christians.

4) Paul appeals to the practice of the *Christians outside* of Corinth (v.16), not to the *Jews inside* of Corinth. This proposal doesn't explain use of headcoverings within churches in non-Jewish locations.

¹ E. Frankel & B. Teutsch, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1992), 90-91.

² He permitted some situations of eating food sacrificed to idols (1st Corinthians 10:25-33), whereas the Acts 15 decision had provided a blanket ban on the practice.

³ Cf. Romans 14:13-21, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, 10:25-33, Galatians 2:3.

Reasons for the Headcovering: Conclusions

A variety of culture-based proposals seek to explain 1st Corinthians 11:2-16. While each of the explanations are “creative” in attempting to find some kind of societal connection for the use of headcoverings, they are merely speculative and cannot be harmonized with history and Scripture. Darrel Bock, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, states, “Suggestions that the presence or absence of a head covering was associated with prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, pagan worship, mourning, immodesty, etc... often suffer from a lack of evidence... Moreover, they often only explain why the behavior of just one of the sexes is forbidden.”¹ The fact that these explanations widely differ from each other further betrays the fact that an obvious historical-cultural interpretation does not exist. Those who seek a cultural basis for Paul's instructions are unable to legitimately identify one.²

However, the role of Scripture and the historical record in disqualifying these interpretations is only a side-effect of the fact that Paul specifically bases the practice of headcovering on *trans-cultural* issues. William Kelly, a theological scholar of the 1800's, noted that Paul appealed only to universal principles: “It is an admirable way of settling questions... by conveying to others the ways of God in creation and providence... It [the headcovering] is not argued on grounds of habit, modesty, or the like, but of the facts as revealed by God... Creation is the proof, not... the ordinary course of things since.”³

Similarly, [S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.](#), professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote that Paul's objections to the uncovered woman “have nothing to do with social custom... each of the reasons given for the wearing of a veil is taken from permanent facts, lasting as long as the present earthly economy.”⁴ He concluded, “Is the head covering merely a cultural matter? That's frequently said today. We don't really have to pay much attention to this passage because this is just cultural... [But] look at what the reasons are the apostle says, the reasons that Paul gives, for what he's talking about here... Creation. Woman's hair itself. Nature itself. Angelic beings are looking down upon us. Those are not cultural reasons.”⁵

Sometimes perspectives from *outside* the Word of God contradict the truths *inside* the Word of God. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Luke stated that the Jews in Berea were “noble” because they searched the Scriptures to see if what the apostles were teaching was in fact true (Acts 17:11). Similarly, believers must be careful to evaluate various perspectives about the use of headcoverings in the full light of Scripture and history.

¹ [Darrell Bock](#), *The Bible Knowledge Word Study: Acts-Ephesians* (David C. Cook, 2006), [283](#).

² For example, in his search for a culture-based explanation of Paul's prohibition for the use of headcoverings by men, Fee states: “In the final analysis... we simply have to admit that we do not know.” [Gordon Fee](#), *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 1987), [508](#).

³ [William Kelly](#), *Notes on the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (London: G. Morrish, 1878), [171-174](#).

⁴ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. (Pfeiffer and Harrison, ed.), “1 Corinthians,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), 1247-48.

⁵ S. Lewis Johnson, *Covering the Head in Worship* ([sermon transcription](#)).

Conclusions, continued...

These observations point to broader issues within the practice of Bible interpretation. Robertson McQuilkin, former president of Columbia Bible College, expresses it this way when writing in the [Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society](#)...

*"The task of bridging the gap between the distant world of the Biblical writers and the contemporary world is not new. It has always been important for any who would understand the meaning of the Bible to study the context in which a passage was written... But since the text itself is God-given, contemporary understanding of the ancient cultural context may not be used to change the meaning of the plain words and expressions [of the text]... [as in the case of Paul's statement that] women must wear a head covering... In each of these, cultural understanding of the context of the original author and recipient may well clarify the meaning. But if it is used to set aside that meaning, the interpreter has assumed greater authority in determining truth than he has permitted [of] the Bible itself."*¹

Theologian & pastor R.C. Sproul addresses these same concerns in his book *Knowing Scripture*...

*It is one thing to seek a more lucid understanding of the biblical content by investigating the cultural situation of the first century; it is quite another to interpret the New Testament as if it were merely an echo of the first-century culture... For example, with respect to the hair-covering issue in Corinth, numerous commentators ... [state] the reason why Paul wanted women to cover their heads was to avoid a scandalous appearance of Christian women in the external guise of prostitutes. What is wrong with this kind of speculation? The basic problem here is that our reconstructed knowledge of first-century Corinth has led us to supply Paul with a rationale that is foreign to the one he gives himself. In a word, we are not only putting words into the apostle's mouth, but we are ignoring words that are there. If Paul merely told women in Corinth to cover their heads and gave no rationale for such instruction, we would be strongly inclined to supply it via our cultural knowledge. In this case, however, Paul provides a rationale which is based on an appeal to creation, not to the custom of Corinthian harlots. We must be careful not to let our zeal for knowledge of the culture obscure what is actually said. To subordinate Paul's stated reason to our speculatively conceived reason is to slander the apostle and turn exegesis into eisegesis."*²

The practice of headcovering is a *uniquely* Christian command, especially because the *reasons* for the command are uniquely Christian. Rather than Paul appealing to First Century culture, God's direction for the use of headcoverings was actually *counter-cultural*. Further, the *meaning* of the Christian headcovering symbolism did not match the *meaning* of the First Century headcovering practice. The culture-based explanations for v.2-16 ignore the passage's appeal to both "universal principles" and "universal practice." And so, it is "inappropriate to assign to Paul a reason for his saying something that is different from the one he himself gives."³

¹ J. Robertson McQuilkin, "Limits of Cultural Interpretation" in the [Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society](#) (Vol. 23/2, June 1980), 113-120.

² R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1977), 110.

³ R. C. Sproul, "To Cover or Not To Cover?" in *Hard Sayings of the Apostles* (Ligonier Ministries). Available on [MP3](#), Audio Tape #675 Side B, and [YouTube](#).

Ω CHRISTIAN HEADCOVERINGS FOR TODAY?

INTRODUCTION

The Exegetical Task. Christians today are not the original recipients of Paul's letters. Every look at Scripture is, to a certain extent, like reading someone else's mail.¹ The question then becomes: is the practice of headcovering a command meant for one specific group of people² (the First Century Corinthian believers) or did God intend that it would be followed by the Church as a whole (believers of all locations and time periods).³ Two prominent evangelical scholars provide some helpful advice for answering this type of question:

“We share with all interpreters the challenge of discerning how Biblical teaching should be applied today in a very different culture. In demonstrating the permanent validity of a command, we would try to show from its context that it has roots in the nature of God, the gospel, or creation as God ordered it... In contrast, to show that the specific forms of some commands are limited to one kind of situation or culture, (1) we seek for clues in the context that this is so; (2) we compare other Scriptures relating to the same subject to see if we are dealing with limited application or with an abiding requirement; and (3) we try to show that the cultural specificity of the command is not rooted in the nature of God, the gospel, or the created order.”⁴

John Piper and Wayne Grudem

The Principles & The Practice. The Apostle Paul taught that all Scripture is inspired by God Himself, and every passage of the Bible has practical benefit for the believer (2nd Timothy 3:16-17). Most evangelical Christians agree that the *principles* found in 1st Corinthians 11:2-16⁵ are universal and should be honored by Christians of all time periods and cultures. The next question is whether the *practice* of headcovering should also be honored by Christians of all time periods and cultures. The previous section of this study discussed the reasons Paul gave for his instruction and found that he was not simply a reenforcing *ancient culture*. In this next section, the same Scriptural reasons for the headcovering are discussed in relation to *modern culture*.

¹ While some aspects of Paul's letter speak to issues related specifically to the Corinthian believers (cf. 1:14, 3:5, 4:17, 5:1, 6:7, 7:1, 11:18, etc.), many sections include teaching for the Church universally. In fact, Paul's letter may be *specifically* addressed to a wider audience than just the Church in Corinth, depending on how the second verse of the book is understood: “To the church of God which is at Corinth... together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

² Similar to Luke 10:24: “Carry no money belt, no bag, no shoes; and greet no one on the way.”

³ Similar to Romans 12:9: “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.”

⁴ John Piper & Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 1991), 67-68.

⁵ That is, the principles regarding the distinctions between gender roles, the prominence of God's glory, and the unseen presence of angels.

REASONS AGAINST CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

The Situation. The New Testament gives direction for the use of a headcovering by Christian women during times of prayer. Most Christians in Western culture, though, could hardly imagine following Paul's instructions nowadays. This may be expressed in various ways, such as...

- *“This passage can't really mean what I think it says. I mean, none of the Christian women that I know use a headcovering, and we can't all be wrong.”*
- *The use of headcoverings as described in 1st Corinthians 11 is just an ancient “cultural issue that we are not concerned about today.”¹*

The Proposals. However, to dismiss any command in Scripture requires clear exegetical reasons. Those who do not practice headcovering often give at least one of the following four reasons...

- *The headcovering is meaningless in today's culture, so it should not be used.*
- *The headcovering is meaningless in today's culture, so a new symbol should be chosen.*
- *The headcovering is unnecessary because only the principles in the passage matter.*
- *The passage is too obscure to confidently know what is being commanded.*

¹ J. Lee Grady, *Twenty-Five Tough Questions About Women and the Church* (Charisma Media, 2003), [147](#).

The Symbol Is Meaningless In Contemporary Culture And Thus Shouldn't Be Used

Explanation: *“Paul was concerned about appropriate headcoverings only because of the 'message' that wearing the coverings sent to First Century residents of Corinth. A headcovering does not have the same meaning in modern Western culture, so wearing one today would be pointless since modern society wouldn't understand the intended symbolism.”*

A Message to Culture? One source of confusion on this issue is often the assumption that the headcovering provided a symbolic message for *the culture*. Paul does not give any indication that the headcovering is intended to “speak” a message *to* the unbelieving culture, nor reflect a God-approved message *from* First Century culture. In other words, Paul's *reasons* for the headcovering were meaningful specifically to *Christians* and only within a Christian perspective. With the symbol's relationship to God's authority structure, God's glory, and God's angels (v.3-5, 10), those outside of the Church would not have understood the theological basis and reasons for the headcovering – just as they often do not understand what baptism and the Lord's Supper symbolize. These teachings are given specifically to the *churches* – not the secular public. Those that the symbolism *is* intended for *do* understand it.¹

An Obsolete Symbolism? Christians today (and throughout history) practice other Scriptural commands, regardless of whether they are understood by the Christian's local culture. The question could similarly be asked: “How do baptism and the Lord's Supper speak to modern culture?” Most non-Christians do not understand the biblical meaning of these symbolic actions, but this does not prompt believers to give them up. Christians recognize that Scriptural symbolism has meaning beyond the often-changing culture that believers live in (especially if the symbolism is specifically cross-cultural).

Biblical Commands With Cultural Connections. At times, culture may promote behavior that the Bible teaches (e.g., “Thou shall not murder”). However, Christians do not discount biblical teachings just because they have the support of the surrounding non-Christian culture. In other words, **correlation does not show causation**: the idea that “because they did it in their culture means that it doesn't apply to our culture” isn't enough to propose that a command is *only* cultural. For example, baptism was a religious practice in use before it became a God-ordained practice of the Church. Christians do not discount it just because it has pre-Christian cultural connections. The use of headcoverings was similarly a practice found in certain cultures throughout history. However, it didn't have the same purpose, theology, or requirements as it has within Christianity. Though baptism and the Lord's Supper have ancient cultural roots, they are meaningful to Christians today because believers are taught the biblical and uniquely-Christian message that they symbolize. The only reason that the headcovering has little meaning to many Christians today is that in the last century Western churches generally stopped teaching the meaning.

¹ For the headcovering, this includes the Lord, angels (v.10), and Christians familiar with 1st Corinthians 11:2-16.

The Symbol Is Now Meaningless – A New Symbol Should Be Chosen

Explanation: *“If Scripture commands the use of a symbol to represent the principles discussed within 1st Corinthians 11:2-16, then Christians today can find a new, culturally-relevant symbol.”*

A Purposeful Symbol. The headcovering is apparently a very *intentional* symbol. Scripturally, it is *because* of a woman's “head” (man) that she covers her physical “head.”¹ Thus, the headcovering creates an appropriate word-picture. If something else were substituted for the headcovering, there would be a loss of symbolism. Elliot Johnson, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, writes, “If we accept... the practice of substituting cultural equivalents, the danger of abandoning [the] prescribed form of response involves the related problem of losing or distorting the type of meaning... In the case of headcovering (1 Cor 11), the basis for the form must be clearly demonstrated to be nontheological before the form itself can be dismissed without possible loss of theological truth taught in the apostolic practice.”²

Other Options? Verse 10 states that the symbol should be “on” the head. This disqualifies most alternative symbols that have been proposed (a wedding ring, a dress, etc). This also disqualifies many options (including the wedding ring) due to the fact that whatever the woman is putting on during times of prayer and prophesy is (according to the passage) also the same thing that the man is to be taking off. Some symbols (such as a wedding ring) also cannot be used by “every woman” (v.5) – specifically, those that are unmarried. In Western culture today, there is no alternative “symbol” that points to the Christian principles that Paul describes in 1st Corinthians 11.³

Scriptural Alternatives? Both Paul and the Early Church used no alternative symbol among different cultures. The symbol Paul gives is one that he states is universal to the churches. Christians likewise don't have the authority to change the other symbolic actions found within Scripture (baptism and the Lord's Supper).

¹ This is not a word play created by the English translators. The Greek word for “head” in v.3 is [the same](#) Greek word for “head” as used in the rest of the chapter.

² [Elliott E. Johnson](#), *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Zondervan, 1990), 259-260.

³ Not to mention that Paul's instructions about the wife's submission is itself counter-cultural to most “modern” societies.

The Symbol Is Unnecessary – Only The Principle Counts

Explanation: “God looks at a person's heart, not their outward appearance. The principles represented by the headcovering symbolism are still valid, but Christian women can practice these principles without actually wearing a headcovering.”

The Principle. A person's “heart” matters *much* more than a person's attire.¹ The *meaning* of a symbol is always more important than the symbol *itself*. For example, Christ's death is what saves a person, not the Lord's Supper that represents it. The thief on the cross experienced salvation (Luke 23:43), even though he was never baptized. Christian women can indeed practice the principles found within 1st Corinthians 11:2-16 without wearing a headcovering. Further, it is quite possible to *use* the headcovering symbol while *acting* contrary to it, just as the Corinthians abused the symbolism of the Lord's Supper.

The Practice. Similar to baptism and Lord's Supper, the headcovering symbol is to indicate *a condition of the heart*. The headcovering *reflects the principles* of 1st Corinthians 11. In v.16, Paul stated that among the churches the “practice” (not just the *principle*) was the standard. The Corinthian women could likewise have argued, “I respect God's order of headship when I pray, so I don't need something on my head to show it” – but Paul still required it for them. Christians still practice the symbolic actions taught in Scripture because (1) the symbolism is meaningful, and (2) the symbolism is commanded.

¹ Cf. 1st Samuel 16:7, Matthew 15:19, Proverbs 4:23, Luke 6:43-45, and Matthew 7:17-18.

Obscurity Prevents Confident Obedience

Explanation: *“The topic of Christian headcoverings is found in only one chapter of the New Testament. It must not be an important issue if it wasn't repeated in other passages or mentioned by Jesus. Because Paul's instructions are not very clear, it's safe to say that it is not necessary for them to be followed by Christians today.”*

Prevalence. Many Christians wish that Scripture contained more information about certain topics. Some of these subjects are indeed “obscure” in that they are contained within only a single verse.¹ However, more than making a passing reference to the use of headcoverings, Paul devotes half of a chapter to discussing the topic. While the use of headcoverings is not frequently discussed throughout other New Testament books, v.16 states that it was widely taught and practiced throughout the New Testament churches.² Early Church artwork & writings document this as well, and the Church has continued the practice through most of Christian history.³

Clarity. Some passages in Scripture are “vague” in that they do not provide detailed information about a specific topic. The instructions in 1st Corinthians 11:2-16 are different in several ways.⁴ *Clarity* is Paul's goal: he starts by writing, “I want you to understand” (v.3). Instead of leaving the practice of headcovering unexplained, he provides five reasons for it. Rather than a societal custom understood only by the a certain ancient culture, Paul needed to deliver, explain, and even defend the practice to the Corinthian Christians. Many New Testament practices are taught without this amount of explanation.

Authority. The use of headcoverings has greatly decreased relatively recently in Church history. However, 1st Corinthians 11:2-16 was inspired by God and so it has full authority. The importance of a command can't be evaluated simply by counting up the number of times it was repeated in Scripture.⁵

Summary. Are Paul's instructions shrouded in obscurity? Quite the opposite. The use of the headcovering by Christian women has been the *prevailing practice* within Church history. This is due to Paul's detailed, authoritative instructions. Core Christian practices, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, have been the cause of major confusion (and debate) at different points in Christian history, yet both are still practiced to this day. The instructions of 1st Corinthians 11:2-16 are similar. They reflect the believer's relationship to God and are valid, understandable, and applicable for Christians today.

¹ Such as baptism for the dead (1st Corinthians 15:29), the statement that “women shall be saved through childbearing” (1st Timothy 2:15), the prophesy about Christians judging angels (1st Corinthians 6:3).

² Thus, like many other Scriptural practices, early churches were individually taught this practice before it was written in Scripture. On a related note, not every teaching of Scripture is recorded in multiple books of the Bible.

³ God's communication is intentional and His Word is sufficient (cf. 1st Peter 1:3). For this reason, believers can be content with the way that the Author of Scripture decided to communicate His instructions on this topic.

⁴ The following factors are absent from certain other commands in the Bible (cf. the “holy kiss” in Romans 16:16).

⁵ This “method” of evaluating importance is not used in relation to other important doctrines or commands. The amount of space that Paul devotes to the headcovering (15 verses) is nearly the same amount he devotes to the Lord's Supper (18 verses). There is no passage on baptism that is this long. Only 12 verses in the Bible directly reference the virgin birth of Christ (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:18-25, and Luke 1:27, 34-35). Even the foundational doctrine of the “Trinity” has no passage devoted to its explanation.

Conclusions About Contemporary Obedience

Christians are commanded to “examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1st Thessalonians 5:21). This study has examined *alternative proposals for interpretation* (based primarily on First Century culture) and found that each is contradicted by both Scripture and First Century culture. Next, *alternative proposals for application* (based on modern culture) were considered. Each was similarly found to be disconnected from Scripture. How did these alternative proposals come to exist?

The source of these discrepancies is not Scriptural, but human. R. C. Sproul wrote, “I am convinced that the problem of the influence of the twentieth-century secular mindset is a far more formidable obstacle to accurate biblical interpretation than is the problem of the conditioning of ancient culture.”¹ In other words, the mindset of modern culture can sometimes hinder a Christian from interpreting Scripture accurately. That mindset can cause even more problems than the perspective that the Bible as an ancient document intended only for historic societies that no longer exist.

Robertson McQuilkin, former president of Columbia Bible College, wrote about a trend he observed regarding the interpretation of Scriptural passages that conflict with personal preferences and opinions. “Suddenly I find myself confronted with a new brand of interpreter who assures me... that divorce is to be preferred to a ‘dead’ marriage, that homosexual conduct is fine so long as it is faithful... [and] that husband/wife roles should be interchangeable... [However,] I am convinced that God intended the Bible to mold our culture, not to have the meaning of Scripture molded by our culture.” As one example of his opposition to this new trend in Bible interpretation, McQuilkin wrote that “I have found myself increasingly willing... that my wife let her hair grow long and cover it in church.”²

This emphasis on a careful and humble application of the Bible provides integrity to Christianity. The need for interpretive integrity and consistency plays out in both individuals and churches. For example, most theologically conservative churches permit only men to become pastors. They do so in view of passages such as 1st Timothy 2:11-14,³ which connects the gender roles of Christians with the events of Genesis. Paul similarly references Genesis 1-3 when teaching about headcoverings. “The same argument Paul uses in one passage for forbidding women to teach he uses in another passage to argue [for the use of headcoverings]... [Those within contemporary Western Christianity often] take the argument as transculturally applicable in one case, but not so in the other. This seems very strange indeed.”⁴

However, Scripture is both alive (Hebrews 4:12) and consistent. The Word of God provides truthful and current direction. “If there’s ever an indication of a perpetual ordinance in the church, it is that which is based on an appeal to Creation. I’m persuaded that the principle of covering the head is still in effect.”⁵

¹ R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 118.

² J. Robertson McQuilkin, “Limits of Cultural Interpretation” in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Vol. 23/2, June 1980), 113-120.

³ “I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.” Cf. 1 Timothy 3:2ff and Titus 1:6ff.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, & Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 19.

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Now, That’s a Good Question!* (Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), 348.

EXEGETICAL REVIEW AND SUMMARY

The Old Testament. The New Testament teaches that Christians should value the teaching of the Old Testament (2 Timothy 3:16, Romans 15:4). However, most of the Old Testament passages on the subject of headcovering are *descriptive* of what people did, rather than *prescriptive*.¹ While the Old Testament provides a helpful perspective regarding the use of headcoverings in ancient Israel, it does not include any direction for Christians to follow on this topic.²

History of the Church. The practice of Christians throughout history can be informative and interesting, but it is not an authoritative source of Christian doctrine and practice.

First Century Culture. It is important to interpret Scripture with its historical context in view. However, First Century society does not identify any cultural source for Paul's instructions about the use of headcoverings. Culture-based interpretations depend on unmentioned (speculative) reasons the use of headcoverings. In contrast, Paul gives *trans-cultural reasons* while explaining a *trans-cultural practice*.

Modern Culture. While contemporary society often finds the use of headcoverings to be uncommon, there is no biblically-valid reason that modern culture negates Paul's instructions in 1st Corinthians 11.

Conclusion. In view of the interpretive advice given by Piper and Grudem at the beginning of this section, Paul's instructions are to be applied today. 1st Corinthians 11 teaches is that since man is the head of woman (v.3), Christian women "ought" to cover their heads with a "symbol of authority" (v.10). It is not "proper" for a woman to go without a headcovering while praying or prophesying (v.13). Since the woman is the "glory of man" (v.7), she should symbolically cover her head when communicating with God (v.6). Beyond teaching standard *principles* for Christians, Paul is teaching a standard "practice" (v.16). Though it has been proposed that "the rule ceases when the reason of the rule ceases,"³ each of Paul's reasons for using the headcovering still stand.

¹ That is, the Old Testament passages that mention headcoverings are usually narratives; they are not giving commands. Those passages that are prescriptive speak only of males (Jewish priests) wearing a headcovering, which is the opposite of the New Testament instruction for Christians.

² Though Paul appeals to Creation (v.7-9), the Bible indicates that headcoverings were not used by Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:25). After all, Paul bases his instructions only on the *principles* related to Creation, not on *practices* that occurred at that time. While headcoverings were later used by some (perhaps even most) Jewish ladies, there is no Old Testament command for the practice. The key difference in the New Testament is that Christian men are identified as being under *Christ* and it is for *this* reason (v.3-4) they ought not cover their heads when praying or prophesying. Paul makes no appeal to the traditional practice of the Jews. In fact, the Old Testament priests (serving *before* Christ's death) were commanded by God to wear a covering on their head, the opposite of Paul's instructions. While some of the same Creation-based principles were at play in the Old Testament, the New Testament context provides for a different application of them. Note that 1st Corinthians 11 is not the only time when Paul bases a uniquely New Testament *practice* on information and *principles* provided by the book of Genesis (cf. 1st Timothy 2:12-14).

³ [Daniel Denison Whedon](#), *Commentary on the New Testament, Volume 4* (Hunt & Eaton, 1903), 79.

UNBIBLICAL REASONS FOR WEARING A HEADCOVERING

Tradition Alone. While many Christian groups have a godly heritage, the practice of headcovering is promoted by some groups *only* because of the group's heritage. When the “tradition of man” becomes the only reason for wearing a covering, the “ordinance of God” becomes ignored.¹ At the point that the *practice* of headcovering is divorced from the *purpose* of the headcovering, the result is a form of legalism.

Modesty. God's Word teaches that Christian women should dress modestly.² For many Christian women who wear a headcovering, the covering goes along with their modest attire. At the same time, modesty is not one of the reasons given by Paul for wearing a headcovering.³ The context for Paul's direction about the use of headcoverings is not modesty, but rather headship, glory, and communication with God.⁴

Style. A biblical headcovering is not intended as merely a fashion accessory, just as baptism isn't a bath and the Lord's Supper isn't meant only to relieve physical hunger. In fact, rather than drawing attention to the wearer, the headcovering's Scriptural purpose is to symbolically *conceal* human glory.

Gender Inequality. Headcoverings may serve a demeaning or repressive role for women in some cultures or religions. In the Bible, though, God's direction for how men should treat their wives is the opposite.⁵ Both genders are equally made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Paul proclaims gender equality in the realm of salvation (Galatians 3:28) and in the middle of his discussion on headcoverings he was careful to show the inter-dependence between man and woman (v.11).⁶ The world often confuses “equality” with “sameness”⁷ and often believes that “submission” means “inferiority.” However, Scripture does not describe submission as demeaning. As the Son submits to the Father and is yet equal in value, so the wife submits to the husband and is equal in value. The various New Testament teachings on the woman's submission have their foundation in God's good Creation (v.8-9, cf. Genesis 1-2). Further, God's standard of submission (symbolized by the woman's headcovering) does not begin with the woman. As v.3 teaches, men must submit to the authority over them (Jesus) and Jesus submits to the authority over Him (the Father).⁸ This is the opposite of male chauvinism. Christian women should be able to find great examples of submission by looking at the lives of godly men (who choose Christ's desires over their own desires) and Jesus Himself (who submitted to His Father in everything).

¹ Conversely, the choice to begin wearing a headcovering is not the same as a choice to adopt the identity of any specific Christian group, nor is it a choice to adopt a specific style or design of headcovering.

² cf. 1st Timothy 2:9-10, 1st Peter 3:3-5.

³ However, when “modesty” is [defined as humility](#), then it can be symbolized by a headcovering (v.3, 10).

⁴ It is Islam, not Christianity, that officially teaches that a lady's uncovered head is immodest. However, because of their local cultures, in certain time-periods Christians have felt that the headcovering also promotes modesty. Though Scripture doesn't make this connection, for some believers this may have been a valid concern.

⁵ Husbands are to love their wives sacrificially (Ephesians 5:25) and to “show them honor” (1st Peter 3:7).

⁶ See also [1st Timothy 2:15](#) and Psalm 127:3-5.

⁷ Thus, sometimes secular culture has sought to blur the lines between the genders. However, *equality in essence* does not imply *sameness of role*. As Jesus and the Father are of equal divinity and yet have unique roles, man and women are equally human and have unique roles.

⁸ Jesus said to His Father: “Not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42). The submission of Jesus to the Father is also referred to in John 5:19, 30; 6:38, 14:28; 1 Corinthians 3:23, 15:28; Philippians 2:6-11.

THE SNARE OF LEGALISM

Unbiblical *perspectives* and *rules* can be dangerous. While the term *legalism* is not found in the Bible, it does warn believers against the concept. Legalism is often an attempt to create (works-based) self-righteousness, rather than submit to the God-directed (and grace-based) process of sanctification.

It was, of course, appropriate for the Corinthian believers to respond in obedience to the God-inspired instructions regarding the use of headcoverings. But would the same response by Christians today be a form of legalism? Three types of legalism should be considered when answering this question.

1) Legalistic Beliefs About Salvation. “Legalism” is often used to describe attempts to *earn God's forgiveness* by living obediently. This is the “classic” definition of legalism, in which God's mercy is falsely thought to be received by following religious rules. This is the type of legalism Paul warned the Christians in Galatia about after they had been taught they needed to obey the Old Testament law in order to be accepted by God. Legalism is completely contrary to the Scriptural concept of *salvation by grace*, in which forgiveness is an *unearned* and *undeserved* gift from God through the death of His Son Jesus on the cross.

2) Legalistic Unbiblical Rules for Living. “Legalism” can also refer to *non-Scriptural requirements for behavior* – without any connection to the issue of salvation. This type of legalism appears when Christians create “moral rules” beyond those given by God. These rules often originate from a misinterpretation of Scripture,¹ false teaching,² or as the fruit of “spiritual pride.”³ This type of legalism can also happen when one particular application of biblical principles is set forth as a universal command.⁴

3) Legalistic Biblical Rules For Living. “Legalism” can describe a *wrong kind of emphasis on behavior* – behavior that is otherwise biblical, right, and good. The improper emphasis is on obeying “the letter of the law” to the exclusion of “the spirit of the law.” In other words, biblical behaviors can become legalistic if the obligation of the behavior itself is emphasized over the reasons for the behavior. *Obedience to God* becomes divorced from *relationship with God*. This can occur with almost any Christian activity, including church attendance, financial giving, prayer, and Christian ministry.

Conclusions: (1) The Bible does not teach that wearing a headcovering earns God's love or forgiveness. (2) If the use of headcoverings is biblically required *only* in the Corinthian cultural context, then any other requirement for their use would be legalism. (3) The use of a covering can also become legalistic if the Scriptural *purposes* and *principles* of the covering are ignored. (4) Legalism is spiritually toxic and can produce confusion, hurt, and separation. Therefore, much caution ought to be exercised in relation to any groups that legalistically practice headcovering. (5) The solution to legalism is not an avoidance of behavioral rules. Paul, who was known for preaching against legalism and man-made traditions (cf. Romans 14:1-10 & Colossians 2:20-23), still taught God's rules for Christian behavior. Jesus indicated that the solution to legalism is to honor both the Scriptural rules *and* the Scriptural principles (Matthew 23:23).

¹ Such as when non-Jewish churches avoid eating pork because of Old Testament dietary rules.

² Such as the idea that God approves of only one particular denomination or one certain translation of the Bible.

³ Prideful legalism can result from an attempt to gain a “superior” spirituality through “higher standards.”

⁴ Examples: “To promote modesty (1st Timothy 2:9), our congregation believes that ladies *must* wear dresses to church services.” “To avoid the sin of becoming drunk (Ephesians 5:18), Christians *must* never drink alcohol.”

NEXT STEPS

Faithfully Teaching Scripture

A Nigerian church leader once reminded an American missionary that the Bible gives commands against theft and also against women praying with their heads uncovered. He then asked, “Why is it that you missionaries teach us that we are to obey the one command and to ignore the other?”¹

Indeed, the first half of 1st Corinthians 11 is rarely touched in most Evangelical circles, while the second half of the chapter is frequently read for Paul’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper. When seeking to understand and follow the direction of Scripture, the believer’s goal is to “accurately handle the word of truth” (2nd Timothy 2:15). But “sometimes we have so ‘domesticated’ the faith, we’ve ‘tamed’ the Scriptures... to where it only says what we want it to say... and we only focus on those things that we want to focus on.”²

When believers do take the time to focus on 1st Corinthians 11:2-16, the risk is *eisegesis* rather than *exegesis*.³ “The danger lurks that interpreters will try to make it say what they would like to say.”⁴ Thus, there is a need for Western Christians to become carefully and thoughtfully re-acquainted with the passage. In this, Paul leads by example. He told the Christians in the city of Ephesus: “I did not shrink from declaring to you the *whole* counsel of God” (Acts 20:27, emphasis added). The practice of headcovering was important enough that it was not only taught among the assemblies of the Early Church, but was included in Scripture to be read as long as believers are on the earth. Thus, it is important enough for churches today to hear the “whole counsel of God” on this topic. In the same letter, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “If anyone thinks he is...spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment” (1st Corinthians 14:37).

Paul’s instructions leave “many of us puzzled, because head covering has no symbolic meaning in modern, Western culture.”⁵ Like baptism and the Lord’s Supper, modern society *outside* the Church does not understand the Christian headcovering – it must be taught from within the church. Similarly, the Jewish background of the Passover lamb and the Passover dinner is often forgotten when Christians participate in the Lord’s Supper. The practice of baptism was understood by the Jews of Jesus’ time, but many people today are unclear about its actual meaning. Similarly, much of Western Christianity is in need of being re-taught the headcovering symbolism that was practiced throughout the history of the Church. A careful and detailed consideration of the passage (as well as evidence from First Century culture) simply reenforces the simple and straightforward direction that Paul gives for the use of headcoverings when communicating with God.

¹ Charles H. Kraft, “[Interpreting in Cultural Context](#)” in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Vol. 21/4, 1978), 363.

² Milton Vincent, *Head-coverings in Worship, Part 9* (Cornerstone Fellowship Bible Church, Feb. 10, 2002), 52:53.

³ A term that comes from a Greek word meaning, “to lead out.” *Exegesis* is the process of gaining meaning *from* a text. It is contrasted with *eisegesis*, which is when an outside meaning is “read into” a text.

⁴ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 2003), [505](#).

⁵ Iver Larsen, “[1 Corinthians 11.10 Revisited](#)” in *The Bible Translator* (Vol. 48 No. 3, July, 1997), 345-350.

Faithfully Obeying Scripture

“Paul appeals to universal custom and to the fact that this is the habit throughout the Christian churches... [however] in the Western world of our day, the custom of a veil or covering is not generally followed.”¹ The initial reaction for many Christian women in Western churches today is that wearing a headcovering would be a social discomfort. Personal appearance is often considered to be in the realm of “personal freedom” (often with an emphasis on “cultural conformity”) such that it becomes uncomfortable to consider that the Lord may have direction on the matter.

As Daniel Wallace, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote, “The argument that a real head covering is in view and that such is applicable today is, in some respects, the easiest view to defend exegetically and the hardest to swallow practically... The real danger, as I see it, is that many Christians simply ignore what this text says because any form of obedience to it is inconvenient.”²

However, obedience is important, not only because disobedience dishonors God but because His commands exist for a *purpose*. Scripture states that the purpose of the headcovering is to honor God's structure of authority and to promote His glory during communication with Him. His authority and glory are highly valued among His people. They are especially “on display” within marriage, a covenant intended to symbolize the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22-33). Thus, the headcovering symbolism is full of spiritual significance. “The wearing or not wearing of the veil may *seem* to be a small matter... [but] everything depends upon what the wearing or not wearing implies.”³

Still, knowing that resistance to this practice would yet occur, the Lord included v.16: “If one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.” It can be tempting to forgo God's direction for the sake of a human alternative. One of Jesus' concerns with the Jewish religious leaders was that they had let go of the “commands of God” in order to “hold onto the traditions of men” (Mark 7:8-9). During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns against downplaying the importance of even the “least of these commandments” from God (Matthew 5:19).⁴ His principle of obedience was that “he who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10). In other words, “‘Let her cover her head’ (1 Corinthians 11:6) may not be as important as ‘pour yourself out for the hungry’ (Isaiah 58:10) - if you can call any part of God's Word unimportant. But I figure if the king tells you to go conquer the hinterlands one day, and tells you to shoe his horse the next day, you should do them both without slacking. He is the king.”⁵

¹ Paul Hamar, *The Book of First Corinthians* (Gospel Publishing House, 1980), 98-99.

² Daniel B. Wallace, *What is the Head Covering in 1 Cor 11:2-16 and Does it Apply to Us Today?* (bible.org, 1997).

³ Arch Robertson & Alfred Plummer, *First Corinthians* (C. Scribner's Sons, 1899), 235. Emphasis added.

⁴ Jesus taught that obedience “ought” to include the “weightier matters” of God's commands “without neglecting” the commands that are less foundational (Matthew 23:23 ESV).

⁵ Andrée Seu, “A Symbol of Glory” in *World Magazine*, Vol. 22, No. 20 (June 02, 2007).

Practical Next Steps

In a letter that Paul wrote to another church, he provided this exhortation: “Brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us” (2nd Thessalonians 2:15). The word “traditions” here is also translated “instructions” or “ordinances.”¹ It is the same word Paul used in the opening verse of his instructions about headcoverings. Here, he praised the believers in Corinth for “holding firmly to the traditions.” This is one of the few things that Paul praised the Corinthian Christians for.

A biblical “ordinance” is defined as a *symbolic action*² that is designed by God to reflect the believer’s relationship with Him. The two primary ordinances taught in Scripture are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. For these, the Lord (1) modified a known practice of ancient society, (2) gave it a uniquely Christian *meaning, purpose, and theology*, and (3) presented it to the universal Church to reflect the believer’s relationship with God. In view of these three components, the use of headcoverings is essentially a third ordinance.³ The headcovering symbolism, according to the Bible, points to two spiritual truths that are important during communication with God: relationships and the glory of God.

“There are a growing number of churches in evangelical North America that have reinstated the biblical practice of women wearing a head-covering in public worship. It is being rediscovered that Paul’s use of theological arguments in support of this position makes it clear that godly women wearing a head-covering in public worship is a divine ordinance taught in God’s Word and not a result of legalism or tradition... A careful study of 1 Corinthians 11:1–16 teaches that God’s precept regarding head-coverings is binding for the New Testament church until Christ returns.”⁴

This study has discussed the interpretive issues of 1st Corinthians 11.⁵ There are several practical issues that this study has not discussed. A supplement entitled “Practical Issues” seeks a biblical perspective for questions such as: “Exactly *when* and *where* is a headcovering to be worn? Does Paul indicate what *style* is to be used? How should a Christian handle any relational concerns connected to the use of headcoverings?” While Christians have held a variety of opinions on these issues, the Church throughout history has, by and large, been unified on the general requirement for the use of headcoverings.⁶

¹ Παράδοσις / *paradosis* (Strong’s #3862). The word is used in Scripture both *negatively* (referring to man-made traditions, cf. Matthew 15:3) and *positively* (the instructions given by the apostles, as in 2nd Thessalonians 2:15).

² That is, a physical act that represents a spiritual reality.

³ As noted above, Paul uses the word “ordinance” to introduce the topic of headcoverings in 1st Corinthians 11:2 (cf. KJV). His focus on ordinances continues beyond v.16 with the subsequent discussion of the Lord’s Supper.

⁴ Bartel Elshout, “The Wearing Head Coverings by Women in the Worship Services” in *The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth* Vol. 20, No. 6 (Grand Rapids: Heritage Reformed Congregations, July/August 2012), 158.

⁵ For those not “fully convinced in your own mind” (Romans 14:5) about the contemporary use of headcoverings, this question is helpful until a firm conclusion is made: “Would it be better to treat a (possibly) local custom as a universal command (and thus follow it) and *be guilty of being over-scrupulous*, or would it be better to treat a (possibly) universal command as a local custom (and thus not follow it) and *be guilty of sin* – demoting the requirement of God to the level of human convention?” (R.C. Sproul, “To Cover or Not To Cover?”)

⁶ Note that www.HeadCoveringMovement.com provides contemporary testimonies, articles, and discussion.

Ω APPENDIX A: HEADCOVERING THROUGHOUT CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Beginning with the Early Church, the use of headcoverings during prayer has been the norm for Christian women throughout history.¹ In Western society, this practice greatly declined (and often ceased) only within the last century.² However, even today most men remove their hats when praying – throughout the centuries this practice “has ever ruled the custom of the Christian church.”³

The book [Headcovering Throughout Christian History](#) provides an extensive historical overview of the Church's practice of 1st Corinthians 11:2-16. It includes statements from the Early Church, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Charles Spurgeon, and many others. Also included are more recent theologians that endorse the use of headcoverings (such as R.C. Sproul and Charles Ryrie) as well as denominations and locations in which this Christian practice continues today.

¹ Several pictorial collections provide a historic overview of Christian women's attire. Online displays are offered by [La Vista Church of Christ](#) and [Scroll Publishing](#). Cf. Gary Sanseri, [Covered or Uncovered](#) (Back Home Industries, 1999), 182ff.

² This means that Christians have generally followed 1st Corinthians 11:2-16 for about 95% of Church history.

³ Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 1041.

Ω APPENDIX B: KEY TERMS AND PHRASES

When seeking to understand a section of the Bible, it can be helpful to look at a word's definition(s) in the original language of the passage. This is especially true in regards to 1st Corinthians 11, in which a person's conclusions about Paul's teaching can depend on the specific meaning of the words Paul used.¹

This Appendix contains further information on the following key terms and phrases.

- Headcoverings in the Old Testament
- The word *head* in 1st Corinthians 11
- The phrase *have her hair cut off* in 1st Corinthians 11
- The word *hair* in 1st Corinthians 11
- The terms referring to the coverings in 1st Corinthians 11
- The word *for* in 1st Corinthians 11:15
- The word *nature* in 1st Corinthians 11:14

¹ For the Greek and Hebrew definitions given in this study, the following resources were consulted: *Strong's Bible Dictionary* (James Strong), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider), *Smith's Bible Dictionary* (William Smith), *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon*, *Vine's Greek Dictionary* (William Vine), *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Spiros Zodhiates), *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon* (Joseph Thayer), *Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, *A Manual Greek Lexicon* (Abbott-Smith), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* ("BDAG"), *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Ceslas Spicq), *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Danker & Krug), and *Louw-Nida Greek Lexicon* (Eugene Nida, Johannes Louw).

FEMALE HEADCOVERINGS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT¹

Hebrew Term	Passage	Summary
<i>tsa'iyph</i>²	<i>Genesis 24:65</i>	Rebekah covers herself with her shawl when she sees her future husband
	<i>Genesis 38:14,19</i>	Tamar put on a veil as a prostitute ³
<i>para</i>⁴	<i>Numbers 5:18</i>	The priest uncovers the head of women accused of adultery ⁵
<i>radiyd</i>⁶	<i>Song of Solomon 5:7</i>	The wife's veil was taken by the city watchmen
	<i>Isaiah 3:23</i>	God removes the turbans of prideful women
<i>tsammah</i>⁷	<i>Song of Solomon 4:1,3 & 6:7</i>	The wife's eyes are behind her veil
	<i>Isaiah 47:2</i>	God shames the “daughter of Babylon” by removing her veil
<i>pě'er</i>⁸	<i>Isaiah 3:20</i>	God removes the veil of prideful women
<i>tsaniyph</i>⁹	<i>Isaiah 3:23</i>	God removes the turbans of prideful women

¹ Headpieces such as crowns (Esther 2:17, 2nd Samuel 12:30) and helmets (1st Samuel 17:5, 38) are not included in this section. Genesis 20:16, with the phrase “a covering of the eyes” (KJV), is also omitted since this archaic English phrase (not shared by modern translations) is not referring to a literal “cover” over the eyes.

² *tsa'iyph* / צַעִיף (Strong's #6809), which means “wrapper, shawl, or veil.”

³ Tamar's veil was the *cause* for Judah's belief that she was a prostitute (Genesis 38:15). This obviously was not same signal that Rebekah's veil gave (Genesis 24:65, above).

⁴ *para* / פָּרַע (Strong's #6544), which means “to loosen restraints.”

⁵ Generally, newer translations render this verse as “unbind her hair” while older translations have “uncover her head.” The Hebrew text has the word “head” rather than “hair.”

⁶ *radiyd* / רָדִיד (Strong's #7289), meaning “something spread, wide wrapper or large veil.”

⁷ *tsammah* / צַמְמָה (Strong's #6777), meaning “veil.”

⁸ *pě'er* / פֶּאֶר (Strong's #6287), meaning “head-dress, turban, or bonnet.”

⁹ *tsaniyph* / צָנִיף (Strong's #6797), meaning “turban or headdress” (from a word meaning “to wrap around”).

MALE HEADCOVERINGS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Hebrew Term	Passage	Summary
<i>mitsnepheth</i>¹	<i>Exodus 28:4, 37, 39; 29:6; 39:28, 31; Leviticus 8:9, 16:4</i>	The priest wears a turban
<i>migba`ah</i>²	<i>Exodus 28:40, 29:9, 39:28 Leviticus 8:13</i>	The priest wears a cap
<i>macveh</i>³	<i>Exodus 34:33-35</i>	Moses veiled his face after standing in God's presence
<i>para</i>⁴	<i>Leviticus 10:6</i>	Moses tells the priests not to uncover their heads
	<i>Leviticus 13:45</i>	A leper must uncover his hair
	<i>Leviticus 21:10</i>	The high priest must not uncover his head
<i>chaphah</i>⁵	<i>2nd Samuel 15:30</i>	David covered his head when mourning
	<i>Esther 6:12</i>	Haman goes home in shame with his head covered
	<i>Jeremiah 14:3-4</i>	The farmers cover their heads in shame
<i>addereth</i>⁶	<i>1st Kings 19:13</i>	Elijah wrapped his face in his mantle
<i>kacah</i>⁷	<i>Isaiah 29:10</i>	God covered the seers' heads, to discipline them
<i>pe'er</i>⁸	<i>Isaiah 61:10</i>	A bridegroom wears a turban like a priest
	<i>Ezekiel 24:17, 23</i>	God tells Ezekiel to not remove his turban
	<i>Ezekiel 44:18</i>	The priests must wear turbans
<i>karbla</i>⁹	<i>Daniel 3:21</i>	Wearing turbans , Daniel's friends were thrown into the fire
<i>tsaniyph</i>¹⁰	<i>Zechariah 3:5</i>	In a vision, a clean turban is put on Zechariah's head

¹ *mitsnepheth* / מצנפה (Strong's #4701), meaning "turban" or "mitre" of the high priest.

² *migba`ah* / מגבעה (Strong's #4021), meaning "turban" or "bonnet" or "headgear."

³ *macveh* / מסוה (Strong's #4533), meaning "veil."

⁴ *para* / פרע (Strong's #6544), meaning "to loosen restraints."

⁵ *chaphah* / חפה (Strong's #2645), meaning "cover, overlay."

⁶ *addereth* / אדרת (Strong's #0155), meaning "mantle/cloak made of fur or fine material."

⁷ *kacah* / כסה (Strong's #6380), meaning "to cover, conceal, or hide."

⁸ *pe'er* / פאר (Strong's #6287), meaning "head-dress, turban, or bonnet."

⁹ *karbla* / כרבלע (Strong's #3737). The meaning is debated, but may include "mantle, robe, cap, turban, helmet."

¹⁰ *tsaniyph* / צניף (Strong's #6797), meaning "turban or headdress" (from a word meaning "to wrap around").

THE WORD “HEAD”

As in English, the Greek word translated “head”¹ can refer to either a *physical* head (ie., “the hair on your head”) or a *positional* or *authority* head (ie., “the head of a company”).²

At the beginning of 1st Corinthians 11, Paul uses “head” to refer to position/authority when discussing the role relationships between men and women, between men and Christ, and between Christ and the Father. Elsewhere in this passage, the *covered*, *uncovered*, and *shaved* heads are obviously referring to a physical head.

However, in the middle of this passage, it's less clear which type of “head” is “disgraced.”

1st Corinthians 11

(4-5) Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered **disgraces his head**. But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered **disgraces her head**, for it is one and the same thing as having a shaved head.

Is the “disgraced head” referring to the person's own physical head, or to the one whom the person is under authority? The reference to authority (v.3) is in close context here, so perhaps the “disgraced head” is referring to Christ (for men) or to men (for women). On the other hand, since the shame of having a shaved head is primarily the woman's own *personal* shame, the shame of no headcovering may also be personal.³ In the end, the effect may be the same – *both* personal disgrace and disgrace to one's authority could result.⁴

¹ *kephalē* / κεφαλή (Strong's #2776).

² While most scholars conclude that “head” refers to *authority*, a minority argue that it means *source*. Two observations from v.2-16 are: (1) that *authority* (not *source*) is in view by Paul when he says, “God is the head of Christ” (each have eternally co-existed) and (2) v.10 specifically uses the word “authority” when referring to the symbol of headship.

³ This “personal” connection may also be strengthened through the relationship between personal hair length and the personal use of a headcovering (v.14-15).

⁴ Similarly, shame can be brought to both an organization and its designated representative when it becomes publicly known that the representative made some embarrassingly poor choices.

THE PHRASE “HAVE HER HAIR CUT OFF”1st Corinthians 11

- (4) Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.
 (5) But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.
 (6) For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head.
 (7) For a man ought not to have his head covered...

Paul says (v.6) that a woman who does not wear a covering should “have her hair cut off.” The Greek word translated “cut off”¹ means *to cut short, clip, shear, or crop*. The word indicates hair cut with scissors or shears,² while the word “shaved”³ (also used in v.6) indicates hair cut with a razor.⁴

However, the NIV Bible provides an alternative rendering⁵ of v.4-7...

1st Corinthians 11

- (4) Every man who prays or prophesies with long hair dishonors his head.
 (5) But every woman who prays or prophesies with no covering of hair dishonors her head—she is just like one of the “shorn women.”
 (6) 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.
 (7) A man ought not to have long hair...

This rendering (not found in any other translation nor in the original Greek text) removes the concept of “covered” and replaces it with “long hair.” This adjustment in wording creates several inconsistencies:

- In v.5, the word “shaved” is replaced by the word “shorn.”⁶ This modification was apparently necessary because the text would otherwise be inconsistent with the original message.⁷
- In the beginning of v.6, the commanded action (“let her have her hair cut off”) is changed into a command for non-action (“let her be for now with short hair”). This happens again at the end of the verse: “let her cover her head” becomes “she should grow it again.”
- This modification of Scripture suffers from the interpretive inconsistencies listed on page 7ff.

¹ *keirō* / κείρω (Strong’s #2751). The NASB’s literal rendering of this phrase is: “let her also shear herself.”

² In Acts 8:32, the same word “shorn” is used in reference to shearing sheep.

³ *xurao* / ξυράω (Strong’s #3587). Used in Leviticus 21:5 LXX to refer to shaving a beard.

⁴ Both words are used in Acts to describe men who are under a vow: Acts 18:18 (“crop”) & Acts 21:24 (“shave”).

⁵ This rendering is found within the NIV footnote for v.7.

⁶ These are two different Greek words. Interestingly, the NIV is faithful to differentiate them in v.6.

⁷ As in all English translations, the phrase “she is just like” is used to express similarity. But the alternative rendering of “with no covering of hair... she is just like a shaved woman” would express equality, not similarity.

THE WORD “HAIR”

1st Corinthians 11

(14) Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him,
(15) but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

In this passage, two different terms are used to refer to hair.¹ They are somewhat unique words; neither of them are the common term for “hair” in the New Testament.

#1) “...if a man has long hair ... if a woman has long hair...”

- The phrase “has long hair” comes from only one Greek word. The word means simply “to wear long hair” or “to let one’s hair grow long.”²
- [Plutarch](#), who lived during the time of Paul, also used this word when he wrote:
 “In Greece... men cut their hair short; women let it grow.”³
- This is the only chapter in the New Testament where this term is used. This word is derived from the other Greek word for “hair” used in this passage (listed below).

#2) “...her hair is given to her for a covering.”

- Here, the term “hair” specifically refers to “ornamental locks.”⁴
- *Length* is not the specific emphasis of this word, but rather *style*.⁵
- “From classical to hellenistic times κόμη often denotes hair perceived as an ornament... [in contrast to] hair in a more anatomical sense.”⁶

¹ In the Greek text, v.14-15 are the only verses of the chapter which use the word “hair.” English translations often add the word “hair” within v.6, but the original literal phrase is “let her shear herself.”

² *komao* / κομάω (Strong’s #2863). Strong’s Greek Dictionary provides a [one-word English translation](#): “tresses.”

³ Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Zondervan, 2009), 201. This statement is from Question #14 of Plutarch’s “[Roman Questions](#)” found in Book IV of *Moralia* (available online in [Greek](#) and in [English](#)).

⁴ *kome* / κόμη (Strong’s #2864), used only once in the Bible. This word is also found in the Septuagint (Numbers 6:5 and Ezekiel 44:20). In both passages, the NASB translates the word “locks.” The word’s extra-biblical usage is [noted](#) in Liddell-Scott’s Greek Lexicon.

⁵ As noted in Strong’s Bible Dictionary, Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, BDAG, and Zodhiates’s Word Study Dictionary. Liddle-Scott-Jones [states](#) that Aristotle used this term in [his book on meteorology](#) when describing the luminous tail of a comet. The English word “comet” [finds its roots](#) in this Greek word because of the resemblance of the comet’s tail to long, streaming hair.

⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), [825](#).

THE COVERINGS1st Corinthians 11

- (4) Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.
 (5) Every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head.
 (6) For if a woman does not cover her head... let her cover her head.
 (7) A man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God.
 (13) Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?
 (15) ...if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her... For her hair is given to her for a covering.

v.4 → *kata kephalē* (prepositional phrase): to have something over the head

- The phrase is literally *down/over/along [the] head*.
- It is used by other Greek writers to refer to a cloth covering over the head (cf. page 16)

v.5-7 & 13 → *katakalupto* (verb): to cover with a veil, to conceal, to cover up¹

- This is a compound word, the combination of *kata* (“down” or “over”) and *kalupto* (“to cover” or “to conceal”).² The combined meaning can have the idea of *to cover wholly*.
- This word is also used in a variety of passages [in the Septuagint](#) (such as Genesis 38:15 and Isaiah 6:2). In each case, the word means *veil, hide, or cover*.³
- Outside the Bible, the word is used by Greek authors during the time of Paul (including [Philo](#) and [Josephus](#)⁴) to refer to a cloth covering worn over the head.⁵

v.15 → *peribolaion* (noun): a wrapper, a mantle/cloak, or clothing “thrown around” the body.⁶

- This word is derived from the verb *periballo*, meaning “to wrap around” or “to clothe.”⁷
- It is [used in the Septuagint](#) to refer to clothing and to the covering of a ship.
- [Outside the Bible](#), it is used to refer to such things as chariot covers, bed covers, and gowns.

¹ *katakalupto* / κατακαλυπτο (Strong's #2619). Variations of this word occur eight times in this passage.

² This word is found in Matthew 8:24 (“the boat was being covered with the waves”), Luke 8:16, (“no one after lighting a lamp covers it over with a container”), and 1st Peter 4:8 (“love covers a multitude of sins”). It is the source for the word *kaluma* (Strong's #2571), meaning “covering, hood, or veil.”

³ Cf. Piper & Grudem, [Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood](#) (Wheaton IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 130.

⁴ BDAG cites [Antiquities of the Jews](#) (Book 7, Chapter 10, [Section 254](#)).

⁵ Piper & Grudem, [Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood](#), (Wheaton IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 118-119; Darrell Bock, ed, *The Bible Knowledge Word Study: Acts-Ephesians* (Cook Communications, 2006), [282](#); Geoffrey Bromiley (ed. Kittle & Friedrich), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1985), [406](#).

⁶ *peribolaion* / περιβολαιον (Strong's #4018). Used only twice in the NT, once in 1st Corinthians 11:15 and once in Hebrews 1:12, which reads: “Like a mantle You will roll them [the foundations of the earth and the heavens] up.”

⁷ *periballo* / περιβαλλο (Strong's #4016), a compound word: *peri* = “around” (the source of English words such as *perimeter* and *peripheral*) and *ballo* = “throw.” It is used in Acts 12:8 (“[Wrap](#) your cloak around you”), Revelation 19:13 (“He is [clothed](#) with a robe dipped in blood”), and Matthew 6:28-29 (“Observe how the lilies of the field grow... not even Solomon in all his glory [clothed](#) himself like one of these”). In the New Testament, the word is often used in relation to a robe or cloak.

THE WORD “FOR” (v.15)

In v.15, Paul states that “her hair is given to her for a covering.” The English word “for” has nearly a dozen definitions. However, in this verse, the Greek word translated “for”¹ had only four primary meanings during New Testament times.

1. “Hair is given to her in place of a covering” (that is, a substitute or replacement)²
2. “Hair is given to her with the purpose of a covering” (that is, a reason or cause)³
3. “Hair is given to her corresponding to a covering” (that is, a counterpart or opposite)⁴
4. “Hair is given to her in return for a covering” (that is, an exchange)⁵

Several aspects of v.15 become a little more obvious when the last phrase is rendered using the original word order of the Greek text: “Does not even nature itself teach you that... if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For *her ornamental hair (for a mantle) is given to her.*” The word *covering* (or “cloak”⁶) is used as an adjective to describe the *hair*.⁷ The word *anti* defines the connection between this *mantle/covering* and the *ornamental hair*.⁸

¹ *anti* / ἀντί (Strong’s #473). The word originally meant “opposite” or “over against,” which is where the English prefix *anti-* comes from. It is used only 22 times in the New Testament. In contrast, the word *for* in the phrase “for God so loved the world” (John 3:16) occurs over 1000 times, and the word *for* in the phrase “for her hair is given to her” (v.15) is used over 1300 times.

² Examples of ἀντί used this way: Matthew 2:22 (“Archelaus was reigning over Judea *in place of* his father Herod”) and Luke 11:11 (“give him a snake *instead of* a fish”). The Septuagint uses it this way in Genesis 4:25 and Genesis 22:13. Thus, the Darby Bible renders v.15 as: “hair is given to her *in lieu of* a veil.” Young’s Literal Translation similarly has: “hair *instead of* a covering hath been given to her.”

³ Examples of ἀντί used this way: Luke 1:20 (“you shall be silent and unable to speak...*because* you did not believe my words”), Acts 12:23 (“immediately an angel of the Lord struck him *because* he did not give God the glory”). Cf. 2nd Thessalonians 2:10 and Ephesians 5:31.

⁴ ἀντί is used this way in the New Testament only as part of compound words such as *antichristos* (1st John 2:18,22, 4:3, 2nd John 1:7), *antitype* (Hebrews 9:24, 1 Peter 3:21), and *antidikos* (Matthew 5:25).

⁵ Examples of ἀντί used this way: Romans 12:17 (“Never pay back evil *for* evil”) and Hebrews 12:16 (“Esau, who sold his own birthright *for* a single meal”). See also Matthew 5:38, Matthew 17:27, Genesis 9:6 LXX, and Hebrews 12:2. Frequently, when *anti* is used to indicate an exchange, the context states that something is “given” or “sold.” Such is the case in v.15 (“hair is given to her *for* a covering”), which provides this scenario: God *gives* the woman “glorious” (v.15) hair, and *in return* she wears a covering for Him when praying.

⁶ As noted previous, the word is defined as *clothing “thrown around” the body*.

⁷ Note that the word “covering” here is a noun, despite the verb-like “ing” suffix in English. The grammar of the Greek phrase indicates that “covering” is a *descriptive noun* (called a “genitive case”), meaning that it “modifies” (describes) another noun. Similarly, for example, the *noun* “business” is used *as an adjective* in the phrase “business attire.” What noun is described by the word “covering”? There are only two other nouns in the phrase (“her” and “hair”). The word “her” is in the “dative case” (that is, a noun to which/whom something is given). But the word “hair” is in the “nominative case” (which marks a *subject of the predicate noun*). In this phrase, the predicate noun is “covering,” and so “covering” describes the “hair.”

⁸ The word “hair” in this verse refers to *style* rather than *length* (as discussed previously).

THE WORD “NATURE” IN v.14

This section supplements the discussion of “nature” on page 9.

Definition: The meaning of the Greek word for “nature”¹ is *order, laws, innateness, or instinct*. The word can refer to a “natural endowment or condition inherited from one’s ancestors.”² It comes from another Greek word³ meaning *to be born, to produce, or to grow*.

Outside the Bible: Greek writers [used the word “nature”](#) as used to refer to animals, water, birth, etc.

- “Aristotle considered *physis* as the original substance of the elements.”⁴
- [Plato](#) used the phrase “nature itself teaches” (without referring to any societal customs) when he discussed what works and what does not within the process of trial and error.⁵
- The [Book of Wisdom](#) refers (19:20) to the “quenching nature” of water.
- [4th Maccabees](#) has a statement (5:8) that “nature has granted” an animal’s meat for use as food.
- During Paul’s time, [Epictetus](#) wrote: “Woman is born smooth and dainty by nature; if she is very hairy she is a prodigy. But for a man... if by nature he has no hair he is a prodigy. If he removes his hair... you complain against your nature.”⁶
- [Ignatius](#) contrasted character that comes “by nature” with character that is “by usage or habit.”⁷

Within the Bible: The word “nature” is often used in Scripture with reference to biology and reality.

- Romans 1:26-27 states that homosexuality is “unnatural.”⁸
- Romans 2:14 states that the conscience is cross-cultural and is “instinctive.”
- Romans 11:21-24 use “nature” in reference to plant growth.
- Romans 2:14 each state that uncircumcision is the “natural” condition of mankind.
- Galatians 2:15 refers to the Jewish ethnicity as something that comes “by nature” (by birth).
- Galatians 4:8 provides a contrast between idol worship and “nature.”⁹
- Ephesians 2:3 refers to the spiritually fallen condition of mankind, which is “by nature.” In contrast, 2nd Peter 1:4 states that it is by God’s promises that Christians can “become partakers of the divine nature.”
- James 3:7 uses “nature” twice: once to refer to “species” of animals, and once to refer to the human “race.”

¹ *physis* / φύσις (Strong’s #5449).

² BDAG, 2nd ed., 869.

³ *phyō* / φύω (Strong’s #5453).

⁴ “Nature” in [William Mounce](#), *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary* (Zondervan, 2009).

⁵ Roy E. Ciampa, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), [539](#).

⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), [845](#).

⁷ BDAG (2nd ed., 869), citing Ignatius’ [Letter to the Trallians](#) (1:1).

⁸ Paul describes unnatural practices as “vile, degrading, or disgraceful” (*atimia* / ἀτιμία, Strong’s #819) in both Romans 1:26 and 1st Corinthians 11:14.

⁹ Note that the statement in this verse would be false if “nature” referred to cultural practice, because the Galatians were in fact slaves to that which were gods culturally.

Nature: God's Universal Creation

- In nature, female hormones promote longer hair growth, while male hormones influence hair loss, and so women biologically have the ability to grow *longer* hair than men.¹
- “Hair follicles undergo several phases... hair length is proportional to the duration of the anagen [growth] phase... Estrogens prolong the anagen phase.”² “The male hormone testosterone speeds up the loss of hair in men. Estrogen causes women's hair to grow longer, and for a longer time.”³
- The male hormone *androgen* “shortens the duration of anagen” while estrogen “prolongs anagen” with the result that “a longer anagen phase = longer hair.”⁴
- “Estrogen lengthens the life cycle of each hair so that it stays on the head longer, which results in thicker hair... What is called estrogen deficiency alopecia [*alopecia* is the medical term for “hair loss”] generally starts some months before or just after menopause.”⁵
- “The most common type of female hair loss is *androgenetic alopecia*... It is caused by an excess of male hormones.”⁶
- “The best-known example of a sex-influenced gene is the gene for pattern baldness.”⁷ “Geneticists tell us that it takes two genes in a woman to produce baldness, but only one in a man. Some women do get bald, but it is very rare. Here is a natural factor that has been functioning since the race began which does, indeed, display the very thing that Paul declares.”⁸ “More women than men are not bald. It has been shown that baldness is due to peculiar genes, called sex-influenced genes. The character is dominant in men and recessive in women. A man is bald if he has only one gene for baldness, but in a [bald] woman two genes are present.”⁹ “The gene credited with male hair loss is on chromosome 15. Baldness is autosomal dominant in men, and women only show the phenotype of hair loss when they're homozygous for the gene.”¹⁰

¹ John MacArthur, *First Corinthians MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Moody Publishers, 1984), 262; John MacArthur, *Divine Design: God's Complementary Roles for Men and Women* (David C. Cook, 2010), 49; John MacArthur, *Women, Prophecy, and Headcoverings. Constable's Notes* (1 Corinthians 11:14-15): “I understand that women’s hair generally grows fuller and faster due to the estrogen in women, whereas men’s hair tends to become thinner and fall out faster because of the testosterone in men.”

² Fima Lifshitz, *Pediatric Endocrinology* (CRC Press, 2007), 329.

³ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Studies: 1 Corinthians* (Thomas Nelson, 2006), 70. Cf. Clarence R. Robbins, *Chemical and Physical Behavior of Human Hair* (Springer, 2012), 34.

⁴ Asra Ali, *Dermatology: A Pictorial Review* (McGraw Hill Professional, 2007), 3.

⁵ Ellen Phillips, *Everything You Need to Know About Menopause* (Rodale, 2003), 158.

⁶ Barbara Seaman, Laura Eldridge, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Menopause* (Simon and Schuster, 2008), 295.

⁷ Daniel D. Chiras, *Human Biology* (Jones & Bartlett Publishers, 2013), 380.

⁸ Ray Stedman, *What Is Headship?* (December 3, 1978, sermon transcription).

⁹ A. V. S. S. Sambamurty, *Genetics* (UK: Alpha Science Int'l Ltd., 2005), 295.

¹⁰ Tara Rodden Robinson, *Genetics For Dummies* (John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 79.

Nature: Mankind's Universal Practice

- Many women that lose their hair (whether due to biological issues, disease, the effects of chemotherapy, or other causes) wear a wig, a hat, or some type of cloth covering. Women consider their hair as their “glory” (v.15).¹
- Since Paul appealed to “nature” as support for a Christian practice (headcovering) that occurred *outside* the Corinthian's local society (v.16), it is very likely that churches outside of Corinth also followed the “teaching” of nature in regard to hair length.
- In Romans 1, Paul speaks of homosexual activity without providing any *command* that “thou shall not participate in homosexual behavior.” Because no command was given, some have proposed that Paul had no concerns with homosexual behavior. However, Paul's disapproval is obvious from the passage, including his statement that it is “contrary to nature.” Paul similarly states that it is contrary to nature for men to have long hair and women to have short hair.² The lack of a command about hair lengths doesn't mean there is no direction to follow. When Scripture describes certain choices as right or wrong (or “honorable” and “dishonorable”),³ God expects Christians to follow that direction even if He does not phrase that direction as a command.

Natural Hair Lengths & Church History

- **The Catacombs:** “In the sculptures of the catacombs... the men have the hair short.”⁴
- **Basil of Caesarea** (c. 330 – 379 A.D.): “The Apostle... says: ‘Does not even nature itself teach you that a man, indeed, if he has long hair, it is a shame to him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her,’ and so on. Properly, then, we should follow the customary ways of nature.”⁵
- **The Council of Gangra** (A.D. 370) prohibited women from cutting their hair short like men.⁶

¹ One survey showed that 75% of British women who experienced hair loss felt less attractive, with one-third considering the loss of their hair as being the most disturbing event in their life. This study cited in: Faith Hickman Brynie, *101 Questions About Your Skin* (Twenty-First Century Books, 1999), 51.

² Interestingly, God prohibited the Old Testament priests from growing their hair long (Ezekiel 44:20). In contrast, King David's ungodly son Absalom grew his hair out very long (2nd Samuel 14:25-26). The [Babylonian Talmud](#) prescribes punishment for priests who grew their hair long. Cf. Philip Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Zondervan, 2009), 202.

³ As it does with both homosexuality and hair length.

⁴ Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament, Volume 3* (Charles Scriber's Sons, 1905), 248; cf. Arch Robertson & Alfred Plummer, *First Corinthians* (C. Scribner's Sons, 1899), 236.

⁵ Basil, *Ascetical Works*, translated by M. Monica Wagner (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 408.

⁶ William Smith, Samuel Cheetham, *A Dictionary of Christian Antiquities, Volume 1* (Little, Brown, And Company, 1875), 581. See also John MacArthur, *The Role of the Godly Woman*.

Natural Hair Lengths & Church History, continued...

- **Severian of Gabala** (Syrian bishop, preacher in Constantinople; d. 408): “It has always been forbidden for women to shear their hair.”¹
- **Epiphanius of Salamis** (theologian; c. 315 – 403 A.D.) stated that a “form of error” was found in some “brethren of ours.” This error was that they were “deliberately having their hair long like a woman’s... [which was] out of place... because of the apostle’s injunction, ‘A man ought not to have long hair.’” He argued that “long hair was proper only for Nazirites.”²

Nature: Interpretive Notes

- The implied question of v.6 (“Is it disgraceful for a woman to have her hair shaved?”) is answered (“Yes”) in v.14-15.³ In context of this chapter, Paul is not trying to promote appearance that is consistent with *cultural gender distinctions*, but rather with *universal gender roles*.
- Though some may consider long hair on men or short hair on women to be normal, their opinion does not negate “nature.” As Romans 1:26-27 states that homosexuality is unnatural, this does not prohibit some people from choosing against nature or being accepted by a culture as “normal.”
- As v.15 states, it is “natural” for women to have longer hair than men and that they consider it part of their distinct beauty. It is often considered to be somewhat unusual to see a bald woman or one with a crew cut, both of which are normally accepted for men. Women undergoing chemotherapy often buy wigs or wear some type of cover on their heads. This correlates with Paul’s indication that it is a considered improper for a women to shave her head (v.6).⁴
- Similarly, for the Jews, the Nazarite vow (and Paul’s vows in in the Book of Acts) indicate that long hair was the exception, not the norm. In Scripture, the Creator of Nature deems certain “unnatural” choices as dishonorable⁵ while deeming others to be acceptable in certain situations (in which He provides specific instructions).⁶ This is often (but not always) recognized by non-Christian culture. For example, in ancient Corinth men who had long hair were considered to be effeminate or homosexual.⁷

¹ “Fragmenta in epistulam i ad Corithios,” ed. K. Staab, *Pauluskommentar aus der griechischen Kirche aus Katenenhandschriften gesammelt*, (Aschendorff: Münster, 1933), 262. Translated in: A. Philip Brown II, *A Survey of the History of the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16* (Aldersgate Forum, 2011), 7.

² Epiphanius, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Books II and III (Sections 47-80, De Fide)*, trans. By Frank Williams (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill: 1994), 634-635.

³ Since Paul, beyond v.6, continues to promote the use of a headcovering, it is evident that Paul expected a “Yes” answer to the question.

⁴ However, this is not an exact correlation. Paul does not imply that women who lose their hair due to health or medical causes are suffering a “disgrace” or are at fault. In v.6-7, Paul is referring to a *voluntary decision* of the woman to cut her hair off, not the involuntary effects of biological/chemical processes.

⁵ Such as homosexuality (Romans 1) and the practice of maintaining unnatural hair lengths (1 Corinthians 11).

⁶ Such as circumcision (Ephesians 2:3), the long hair of Sampson, and the long hair of those who took Nazarite vows.

⁷ Philip Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Zondervan, 2009), 142-143.

Ω APPENDIX C: FURTHER DETAILS ON 1ST CENTURY CULTURE

INTRODUCTION

There were three main cultures among the early New Testament Church: Jewish, Greek, and Roman. Each had its own societal norms for when men and women would wear headcoverings. These are overviewed on the following pages.¹ “In the ancient world head coverings were apparently in vogue in some parts of the Graeco-Roman empire. Some groups expected the men to wear head coverings; others expected women to wear them. Still others felt that such were optional for both men and women.”² While it is helpful to observe cultural & religious patterns for the use of headcoverings during the First Century, 1st Corinthians 11 itself does not provide any indication that its instruction was based on those patterns.

Edwards (*Principle of University College of Wales*): “We have here an example of a distinctly Christian observance.”³

Clark (*author & Christian leader*): “There is no exact parallel to Paul’s instructions here in either the Jewish or the Greco-Roman sources of the time.”⁴

Lias (*Professor, University of Cambridge*): “The Christian custom was not... due to the Hellenic custom being followed in the Hellenic churches, but is rather to be explained by this passage.”⁵

Klock (*Rector, Reformed Episcopal Church*): “The lack of covering for men and the covering for women [as Paul described] has often been very counter-cultural... Men in the Greco-Roman world did just the opposite of the Christian custom. When the men of Corinth went into the temples to pray, they covered their heads with a scarf or the well-to-do would pulled their toga up over their heads... The culture’s norms were opposed to God’s, but that’s what we should expect.”⁶

Terry (*professor, theologian*): “The tradition which Paul advocated in I Corinthians 11 was, contrary to popular opinion today, not grounded in the social customs of Corinth, but opposed to them.”⁷

¹ A summary of these considerations was noted on page 11.

² Daniel Wallace, *What is the Head Covering in 1 Cor 11:2-16 and Does it Apply to Us Today?* (bible.org, 1997).

³ Thomas Charles Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd Edition (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1886), 270.

⁴ Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* (Servant Books, 1980), 168.

⁵ John James Lias, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (University Press, 1885), 106.

⁶ William Klock, *Headship and Its Symbols* (British Columbia: Living Word Reformed Episcopal Church, October 2009). [Sermon transcription](#).

⁷ Bruce Terry, *A Discourse Analysis of First Corinthians* (Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1995), 31.

Jewish Culture: MEN'S HEADCOVERINGS

Some Bible teachers assume that Jewish worship attire of recent centuries must reflect the conventions of the First Century. However, upon further examination, scholars have concluded that this is not so.

In Public

- » “Jewish men in the time of Paul... probably did not wear a yarmulke... in public.”¹

In Worship

- » “What little evidence that exists² seems to indicate that, with few exceptions, men in the first century left their heads uncovered while worshipping. The Jewish custom of men covering their heads at prayer probably does not go back to the New Testament period.”³
- » Jewish men covered their heads *after* the apostolic age.⁴

- » “Male headcovering customs like the yarmulke are far too late to be of relevance.”⁵

- » “It is doubtful whether the Jews used the *tallith* or veil in prayer as early as this.”⁶

- » “The evidence for the use of the *tallith* in prayer is much too late to be helpful for [showing] Jewish customs in the time of Paul.”⁷

- » “Evidence for the customary Jewish practice of men wearing a tallith or prayer shawl is dated well past Paul's lifetime.”⁸

- » “Jewish men in the time of Paul... probably did not wear a yarmulke in worship... nor cover their heads in worship with a prayer shawl, as many Jews do today.”⁹

- » “The Jewish custom for men to cover their heads when praying and studying the law is later than New Testament times.”¹⁰

- » “The word '*kippah*'... also *yarmulke* [Yiddish] or '*skullcap*'... [describes] the shape of the typical head covering worn nowadays by Jews... The evolution of head coverings in Jewish tradition is long and complicated... The *de facto* requirement that Jewish men cover their heads for prayer is a relatively recent phenomenon, arising largely as a reaction to the Christian practice of praying bareheaded.”¹¹

- » “Head covering at prayer was not a Judean custom among Israelites during Paul's day, as it was to become in later Jewish religion.”¹²

¹ Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Servant Books, 1980), 169.

² “There are no contemporary portraits of Jews in the province [of Judaea] during the Roman period, so an understanding of their costume has to come from a study of a few surviving garments and literary evidence.” Alexandra Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Tempus Publishing, 2000), 128.

³ *Reformation Study Bible* (ed. R.C. Sproul). *Commentary on v.4.*

⁴ Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1972), 120.

⁵ Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Baker, 1992), 27.

⁶ Arch Robertson & Alfred Plummer, *First Corinthians* (C. Scribner's Sons, 1899), 229.

⁷ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 507.

⁸ Darrell Bock (ed), *Acts-Ephesians* (David C. Cook, 2006), 281.

⁹ Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Servant Books, 1980), 169.

¹⁰ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 97.

¹¹ E. Frankel & B. Teutsch, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1992), 90-91.

¹² Bruce Malina and John Pilch, *Social-science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* (Fortress Press, 2006), 106-107.

Jewish Culture: WOMEN'S HEADCOVERINGS**In Public**

- » Philo, a Jewish philosopher who lived during the time of Paul, provides the following statement about the Jewish woman's headcovering (note the use of the present-tense): "the head-dress on her head [is]... the symbol of modesty, which all those women are accustomed to wear."¹
- » Tertullian, a writer from the Early Church, stated: "Among the Jews, so usual is it for their women to have the head veiled, that they may thereby be recognized."²
- » "In Paul's day Jewish women always wore veils in public."³
- » "Jewish women were always veiled in public in the first century."⁴
- » "Jewish women were required to wear veils in public."⁵
- » "In Tertullian's day Jewish women were prominent in North Africa because they wore veils on the streets."⁶
- » "Jewish women in the Palestine of Paul's day always covered their heads and faces when in public."⁷
- » "When the Jewess of Jerusalem left her house, her face was hidden by an arrangement of two head veils, a head-band on the forehead with bands to the chin, and a hairnet with ribbons and knots, so that her features could not be recognized."⁸
- » "Since biblical times, married Jewish women have traditionally covered their heads out of modesty."⁹
- » "Jewish sources rather uniformly call for women to be veiled in public."¹⁰
- » "A headcovering was a necessary sign of public modesty for all Palestinian Jewish women who could afford it."¹¹
- » "The veil was an important part of the [Judaean] costume, as women by custom (but not by Law) had to keep their head covered when outside."¹²

In Worship

- » "Jewish women always covered their head in worship."¹³
- » "Jewish women in the Palestine of Paul's day... definitely covered their heads in the temple and synagogue."¹⁴
- » "Among the Jews of the New Testament age it appears to have been customary for the women to cover their heads... when engaged in public worship."¹⁵

¹ Philo, *Special Laws*, 3:56.

² Tertullian, *De Corona*, ch. 4.

³ Walter Elwell, Philip Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 328.

⁴ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985), 148.

⁵ Daniel Harrington, *First Corinthians* (Liturgical Press, 1999), 410.

⁶ Geoffrey Bromiley (ed. Kittle & Friedrich), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1985), 406.

⁷ Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Servant Books, 1980), 169.

⁸ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation Into Economic and Social Conditions During the New Testament Period* (Fortress Press, 1969), 359.

⁹ E. Frankel & B. Teutsch, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1992), 90-91.

¹⁰ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 96.

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Baker Books, 1992), 26.

¹² Alexandra Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Tempus Publishing, 2000), 130.

¹³ NIV Life Application Study Bible, [note on 1st Corinthians 11:2ff], (Zondervan/Tyndale, 1991).

¹⁴ Stephen Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* (Servant Books, 1980), 169.

¹⁵ William Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4 (Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1888), 3370.

Greek Culture: MENS' HEADCOVERINGS**In Public**

- » “The Greeks remained bareheaded... in their ordinary outdoor life.”¹

In Worship

- » In Greek culture, “men normally remained uncovered during religious ceremonies, and in which an uncovered head indicated authority.”²
- » “The Greeks (both men and women) remained bareheaded in public prayer.”³
- » “The Greek practice was to keep the head uncovered at their religious rites.”⁴
- » “The men ... covered their heads when praying and prophesying, each of which was a Grecian custom.”⁵

- » “It was the Greek custom... for men in worship to be uncovered.”⁶

- » [Plutarch](#) indicated that Greek worship practice was to pray with an uncovered head.⁷

- » “Greek men were also to worship bareheaded.” This is supported by a direction quote from a Greek inscription.⁸

- » “Among the Greeks men... prayed bareheaded.”⁹

- » “The Greek practice was for men to have their heads uncovered when joining in religious ceremonies.”¹⁰

¹ Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Scribner, 1890), [246](#).

² Robert Morey, “Head Coverings”, [The Encyclopedia of Practical Christianity](#) (Las Vegas, NV: Christian Scholars Press, 2004), 5.

³ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (1931), 159.

⁴ W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul, Vol 2* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1856), [57](#).

⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homily XXVI: On the Veiling of Women*.

⁶ Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments, Vol. 2* (S.S. Scranton & Company, 1871), [283](#).

⁷ Cf. Richard Oster, *First Corinthians* (College Press, 1995), [250](#).

⁸ [Craig Keener](#), *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Baker Books, 1992), [28](#).

⁹ Thomas Charles Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, 2nd Edition* (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1886), [270](#).

¹⁰ Charles John Ellicott (ed.), *The New Testament commentary for schools: Corinthians* (Casswell, Petter, Galpin & Co., 1879), [99](#).

Greek Culture: WOMEN'S HEADCOVERINGS**In Public**

- » “It is quite wrong that Greek women were under some kind of compulsion to wear a veil in public... Passages to the contrary are so numerous and unequivocal that they cannot be offset.”¹ “There is no evidence to support the view that Greek women were under any compulsion to be veiled in public.”²
- » “Only one Tarsian characteristic... was... utterly different from the Hellenistic custom... the extremely modest dress of the Tarsian women, who were always deeply veiled when they went abroad.”³
- » “Grecian pottery provides abundant information concerning elegant hair styles and an absence of headcoverings among the Greeks from a very early period.”⁴

- » Wearing a headcovering was only for special occasions: “Women of the Hellenistic royal families...are portrayed on coins with a *himation* draped over their heads... [other times women wore a garment on their head include] match-making, the bride in her marriage ceremony, funerals, mourning... Hellenistic women did not normally wear a garment over their heads.”⁵
- » “Greek... women were not obligated to wear a headcovering in public. Some did cover their heads and this practice was even common among some groups, but it was not an obligation.”⁶

In Worship

- » “Among the Greeks... women prayed bareheaded.”⁷

- » “In most Greek religious activities women uncovered their heads.”⁸
- » “There is virtually no evidence that veiling was a custom or that the lack of a shawl in daily life or in worship was generally regarded as disgraceful. Women in Greek culture typically participated in worship without a veil or shawl.”⁹

¹ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament 3:562. Cited in Philip Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Zondervan, 2009), 152-153.

² Geoffrey Bromiley (ed. Kittle & Friedrich), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1985), 406.

³ William Ramsay, *The Cities of St. Paul* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), 202.

⁴ Hurley, *Man and Woman in 1 Corinthians* (1973), 44. Cited in Philip Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Zondervan, 2009), 153.

⁵ Philip Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Zondervan, 2009), 155, 200. cf. 152-155.

⁶ Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Servant Books, 1980), 169.

⁷ Thomas Charles Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd Edition (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1886), 270.

⁸ Craig Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Baker Books, 1992), 25.

⁹ Philip B. Payne, “Wild Hair and Gender Equality in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16” in *Priscilla Papers*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer 2006).

Roman Culture: MENS' HEADCOVERINGS**In Public**

- » Compared to the use of headcoverings during times of mourning, for Roman men it was “more usual... to go forth in public... with their heads uncovered.”¹

In Worship

- » “Roman men sometimes pulled the loose folds of their toga over their head while they worshiped pagan gods.”²
- » “In pagan Roman piety the person (male or female) offering the sacrifice would cover their head as the sacrifice was offered (a ritual act referred to as *capite velato* [a Latin phrase that means 'with covered head']).”³
- » “The statue from Corinth of a veiled Augustus – with his toga pulled over his head in preparation to offer a libation – may offer an important clue... Wearing the toga over the head at pagan sacrifices was a familiar practice.”⁴

» “The practice of men covering their heads in a context of prayer and prophesy was a common pattern of Roman piety and widespread during the late Republic and early Empire.”⁵

» “It was common practice for Romans, however – including men – to wear head coverings for liturgical settings of prayer and prophecy in both public and private devotional contexts.”⁶

» “The head was covered not only when offering a sacrifice but also during the prophetic reading of the entrails.”⁷

» [Lucretius](#) (a Roman poet and philosopher) notes the Roman custom of having the head covered when at an altar.⁸

» “The Romans... prayed with the head veiled.”⁹

» According to “Virgil, the famous Latin author who wrote shortly after the time of the refounding of Corinth as a Roman colony,” “it was sacred law for the Romans to veil their heads when worshiping and sacrificing to their gods and goddesses.”¹⁰

» “[Dionysius of Halicarnassus](#) [a Greek historian] likewise observed that this use of the devotional head covering was an important Roman religious practice used when participating in prayer, prophesy, or sacrifice.”¹¹

» For the Romans, “Paul’s argument that a man should not cover his head during the ritual gatherings since he is God’s image must have sounded odd. Statues of emperors that intended to make them look pious, represent them with covered heads while in the act of sacrificing.”¹²

» “[During religious sacrifices,] it was necessary to cover the head as a sign of respect.”¹³

¹ Plutarch, [Roman Questions](#). Cf. Richard Oster, *First Corinthians* (College Press, 1995), 250.

² *ESV Student Study Bible*, note for 1st Corinthians 11:4.

³ Roy E. Ciampa, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 2010), 515.

⁴ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 2003), 517.

⁵ [Richard E. Oster](#), “Use, Misuse and Neglect of Archaeological Evidence in Some Modern Works on 1 Corinthians” in *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* (1992), 62.

⁶ [Richard E. Oster](#), “Going to Worship in Ancient Corinth” in *Leaven*, Vol. 6:1 (Pepperdine University, 1998), 2.

⁷ Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 234.

⁸ [Richard Oster](#), *First Corinthians* (College Press, 1995), 250.

⁹ Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Scribner, 1890), 246.

¹⁰ [Richard Oster](#), *First Corinthians* (College Press, 1995), 251.

¹¹ [Richard Oster](#), *First Corinthians* (College Press, 1995), 250.

¹² [Jorunn Økland](#), *Women in Their Place* (Continuum, 2004), 244.

¹³ [A. Croom](#), *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Tempus, 2000), 47, cf. 69.

ROMAN CULTURE: WOMENS' HEADCOVERINGS**In Public**

By pointing to historical evidence regarding Roman weddings, some writers have sought to show that Roman women wore a headcovering in public. However, the yellow veil (called a flammeum¹) worn by brides during their wedding was used only for the ceremony. It is distinguished from a rectangular cloth (called the palla²) worn by married Roman women. The palla covered from the shoulder to the knee and was sometimes (but not always³) worn over the top of the head.

¹ Judith Lynn Sebesta, Larissa Bonfante, *The World of Roman Costume* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 55; Lynn Cohick; *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* (Baker Academic, 2009), 61; Francis Marion Dana, *The Ritual Significance of Yellow Among the Romans* (University of Pennsylvania, 1919), 12-14; A. T. Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Tempus, 2000), 110.

² cf. Lynn Cohick; *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* (Baker Academic, 2009), 61; Judith Lynn Sebesta, Larissa Bonfante, *The World of Roman Costume* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 48; Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman* (Routledge, 2012), 33; Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Eerdmans, 2003), 80; A. T. Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Tempus, 2000), 87.

³ Judith Lynn Sebesta, Larissa Bonfante, *The World of Roman Costume* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 228.

» Marble portraits of Roman women suggest “it was socially acceptable in a Roman colony for women to be seen bare-headed in public.”⁴

» “Woman, at least those of the upper class, are most frequently depicted with their head uncovered in Roman portraits.”⁵

» “Existing public portraits of women (presumably well-to-do women) from Roman Corinth often show them bareheaded.”⁶

» “Public marble portraits of women at Corinth, presumably members of wealthy and prestigious families are most frequently shown bare-headed.”⁷

⁴ David Gill, “[The Importance of Roman Portraiture For Head-Coverings in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16](#)” in *Tyndale Bulletin* 41.2 (1990), 251.

⁵ Burge, Cohick, and Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament within Its Cultural Context*, (Zondervan, 2010), 306.

⁶ Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 234.

⁷ David W.J. Gill, “[The Importance of Roman Portraiture for Head-Coverings in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16](#)” in *Tyndale Bulletin* 41.2 (1990), 245-260. In the context, “bare-headed” is referring to a lack of a cloth veil, not to a lack of hair.

» “There is a general consensus within scholarship that Roman women were not required to wear any garment over their heads. This does not mean, however, that veiling never occurred or that it was rare for women to wear a garment over their heads. It does mean, however, that evidence is lacking that Roman culture at large regarded it as disgraceful for a woman not to wear a garment over her head.”⁸

» “Roman women were not obligated to wear a headcovering in public. Some did cover their heads and this practice was even common among some groups, but it was not an obligation.”⁹

» “Roman sources are mixed in their evidence” regarding whether or not “first century women wore veils in public.”¹⁰

⁸ Philip Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Zondervan, 2009), 155-156.

⁹ Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Servant Books, 1980), 169.

¹⁰ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 96.

- » “Modern authors have stated that the covered head was part of the everyday costume of the Roman *matrona*. But again we note a disjunction between literary and artistic evidence. The vast majority of female portrait busts we possess show the woman with an unveiled head, probably in order to display her elaborate hairstyle to the viewer.”¹
- » “Considerable evidence indicates that covering a woman’s head with a veil was... much less prevalent in western Roman areas by the middle of the first century.”²
- » “All statues, except one, of Roman women found in Corinth portrayed them with heads unveiled.”³
- » “Roman women had to cover their heads when offering sacrifices.”⁵
- » “[W]omen devotees of the Dionysus cult [were depicted] with their heads... uncovered and hair down. Roman worship customs regarding a garment over the head made no distinction between the sexes.”⁶
- » The “liturgical covering of the head applied equally to woman.”⁷
- » “In pagan Roman piety the person (male or female) offering the sacrifice would cover their head as the sacrifice was offered (a ritual act referred to as *capite velato* [a Latin phrase that means ‘with covered head’]).”⁸

In Worship

- » “A woman leader in Roman worship or sacrifice would, as customary practice, pull part of her *stola* or *palla* (the Greek *himation*) over her head just as men did in the Roman Empire.”⁴

¹ Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman* (Routledge, 2012), 34.

² Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Fortress Press, 2005), 8.

³ Bruce Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 129.

⁴ Philip Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Zondervan, 2009), 155.

⁵ Craig Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Baker Books, 1992), 28.

⁶ *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament within Its Cultural Context* (Zondervan, 2010), 306.

⁷ Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 234.

⁸ Roy E. Ciampa, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 2010), 515.

WAS A SHAVED OR UNCOVERED HEAD THE STYLE OF FIRST CENTURY CORINTHIAN PROSTITUTES?

- **McGee:** “In 146 B.C. Corinth rebelled and was totally [destroyed by \[Lucius\] Mummius](#), the Roman general... For a century it lay desolate... In 46 B.C., the Emperor Julius Caesar rebuilt the city.”¹
- **Gill:** “Some have taken the urge for women to wear veils as Paul ensuring that they were not mistaken for prostitutes or hetairai [or [hetaera](#), educated/artistic mistresses or prostitutes]. Part of the reason for this view lies in the interpretation of Corinth as a 'sex-obsessed' city with prostitutes freely roaming the streets. The 1000 hetairai linked to the cult of Aphrodite, and the corresponding notoriety of Corinth, belong to the hellenistic city [swept away](#) by [Mummius](#) in 146 BC. In contrast the [new] Roman shrine was far more modest.”²
- **Baugh:** After reviewing the claims for an active Temple of Aphrodite in Corinth, the author concludes: “I do not believe that cult prostitution was practiced in Greek (and Roman) regions of the NT era. The evidence thought to support [this institution in the cities of Corinth](#) and Ephesus was found wanting.”³
- **Lenski:** “All the evidence that has been discovered proves that only a few of the very lowest types [of prostitutes] had shorn or shaven heads. As a class these women endeavored to make themselves as attractive as possible and did their utmost to beautify also their hair.⁴ We cannot, therefore, accept the idea that is advanced by not a few of the best commentators that in our passage Paul refers to [having short hair as] the practice of the prostitutes.”⁵
- **Martin:** “There does not seem to be enough evidence in the works of secular writers to suggest that 'shorn hair' was the mark of a prostitute.”⁶
- **Fee:** The sexual vice “of Corinthian life, however, has tended to be overplayed by most NT scholars... It was commonly suggested that short hair or a shaved head was the mark of the Corinthians prostitutes... But there is no contemporary evidence to support this view (it seems to be the case of one scholar's guess becoming a second scholar's footnote and a third scholar's assumption).”⁷

¹ J. Vernon McGee, *I Corinthians* (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Books, 1987), 7.

² David Gill, “[The Importance of Roman Portraiture for Head-Coverings in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16](#)” in *Tyndale Bulletin* 41.2 (1990), 245-260.

³ S. M. Baugh, “[Cult Prostitution In New Testament Ephesus: A Reappraisal](#)” in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Vol. 42.3, 1999), 459-460.

⁴ Ancient pictures of the *hetairai* show them wearing long hair, often with a headband or headcovering holding it in place. Some examples are available online ([#1](#), [#2](#), [#3](#), [#4](#), [#5](#)).

⁵ R. Lenski, *Interpretations of I and II Corinthians* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1946), [439](#).

⁶ William J. Martin (Gasque & Martin, eds), *Apostolic History and the Gospel* (Paternoster Press, 1970), [233](#).

⁷ [Gordon D. Fee](#), *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1987), 2-3, 511, 496.

- **Garland:** “The old view that made Corinth almost synonymous with prostitution should be abandoned... [These references are] to Greek Corinth, destroyed in 146 B.C., not in Corinth after it had been resettled and rebuilt as a Roman colony. It is anachronistic to apply the epithets to the Corinth of Paul's day.”¹
- **Adams & Horrell:** “Older commentaries on Paul's Corinthian letters often... [depict] the city as a particular hotbed of sexual license and vice... Paul's Corinth was no more sexually promiscuous than any other cosmopolitan city in the empire.”²
- **Oster:** “The assumption that Paul's position is constructed in response to the lack of head coverings or veils on women of shame is likewise without support in either the text or the relevant ancient historical evidence.”³
- **Clark:** “Some older scholarly works and some popular works hold that an unveiled woman in Corinth would be mistaken for a prostitute. However, this opinion cannot be substantiated.”⁴
- **Winter:** The *hetairai* actually wore “transparent veils” as a “distinguishing feature.”⁵
- **Gardner:** Though some have proposed that prostitutes and women convicted of adultery were compelled to wear a certain indicative style of clothing, “there is no firm evidence that they [prostitutes in Roman culture] were prevented from wearing the modest, concealing garments usually associated with Roman matrons.” In fact, “elaborate hairdressing and make-up were part of the self-presentation for the better-class whores.”⁶
- **Keener:** “The evidence for *head coverings* distinguishing wives from prostitutes is slender... [any evidence for the practice was] from far to the east of Paul's cultural world, and from well over a thousand years before him.”⁷

¹ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Baker Academic, 2003), 240.

² Edward Adams & David Horrell, *Christianity at Corinth* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 7-8.

³ [Richard E. Oster](#), “Going to Worship in Ancient Corinth” in *Leaven*, Vol. 6:1 (Pepperdine University, 1998), 2.

⁴ Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Servant Books, 1980), 169.

⁵ Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 81.

⁶ Jane Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Indiana University Press, 1991), 190.

⁷ [Craig S. Keener](#), *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Baker Books, 1992), 24-25.

- **O'Connor:** The original source of the theory that “one thousand-plus sacred prostitutes who served the temple of Aphrodite” (something “many New Testament introductions and commentaries have stressed”) is [Strabo](#), a Greek historian. “However, the context clearly indicates that Strabo is here referring to the pre-146 B.C. city and not to the newly constituted Roman colony that he visited in 29 B.C... Even for the pre-146 B.C. city [well before Strabo's lifetime] the reliability of Strabo's account has been called into question... Sacred prostitution was never a Greek custom.”¹
- **Ciampa:** “The ancient geographer Strabo's famous account of 1,000 prostitutes in the temple of Aphrodite refers to the Corinth destroyed in 146 B.C. by the Romans and not the new Corinth, which was founded by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony... Recent publications in fact raise doubts about the reality of cult prostitution anywhere in the ancient world.”²
- **Fant & Reddish:** “A temple to Aphrodite stood on the higher east peak of the Acrocorinth, and Strabo claimed that a thousand sacred prostitutes served there... However, he had misunderstood an earlier reference to the woman... who had entered the temple to pray during the wars with the Persians. Furthermore, no evidence of any structure large enough to accommodate so many people has ever been found on the Acrocorinth... Sacred prostitution was not a practice among the Greeks.”³
- **Budin:** After extensive analysis, “we are left with *no* firsthand accounts of this practice [of sacred prostitution] in the classical repertoire... The majority of our supposed documentation of sacred prostitution comes from Strabo... We have been far too blithe in accepting what classical authors have told us about far-of, long-gone societies without considering the actual evidence from those societies themselves.”⁴

¹ [Jerome Murphy-O'Connor](#), *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Liturgical Press, 2002), 56.

² [Roy E. Ciampa](#), *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 248.

³ Clyde Fant & Mitchell Reddish, *A Guide to Biblical Sites in Greece and Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 55.

⁴ Stephanie Budin (ed. Faraone & McClure), *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 90-91. Emphasis in original.