

Covered Glory



1ST CORINTHIANS 11 & THE CHRISTIAN USE OF HEADCOVERINGS

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PREFACE

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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, Paul teaches 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. 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.

For a long time I left the passage alone until I could take a closer look at it. In the meantime, I figured that the use of headcoverings was probably just an ancient cultural practice that God was re-enforcing for the church in Corinth. But, if using a headcovering was still required by the Lord for Christian women today, then a lady's long hair probably qualified as an adequate “cover.”

Since the Lord calls the husband to love and lead his wife (Ephesians 5:23), I eventually 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. My interest was further piqued when I realized that Christian men often follow Paul's instruction to

uncover their heads when they pray. I was also surprised to learn that for the first 1900 years of Christianity, it was the norm for women to use headcoverings during times of prayer.

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 study¹ 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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¹ This is a condensed version of the full-length study available at www.bit.ly/CoveredGlory

Ω WHAT SCRIPTURE TEACHES

1st Corinthians 11:2-16 (NASB)

2 Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

3 But 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.

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, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.

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.

10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of 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?

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.

*In this study, all instances of the word "verse"
(or the abbreviation "v.") refer to 1st Corinthians 11.*

Ω WHAT IS THE “HEADCOVERING”?

Introduction. Readers of 1st Corinthians 11 often ask: What were the Corinthian woman to cover their heads *with*? Most English Bibles appear to leave this question unanswered. Fortunately, a careful look at the passage provides enough insight to identify what type of headcovering Paul was referring to.

Identity. First, there is no indication from the passage (nor from history) that Paul is describing a *veil* worn over the *face*. The passage also doesn't allow for the “covering” to refer to the husband – this perspective confuses the woman's “head” (her husband, v.3) with the symbolic covering “on” her head (v.10).² Instead, the original Greek terms that refer to the headcovering indicate that it is a cloth worn over the head. Thus, “a cloth over the head” has been the primary interpretation within Christianity from the Early Church until modern times.

Is It “Long Hair”? Another proposal states that the woman's long hair (mentioned in v.14-15) is the only “covering” that Paul has in mind throughout the entire chapter. However, v.6 indicates that “long hair” is distinct from the cloth headcovering. The verse describes a woman who decides not to cover her head when she prays, and then she “also” cuts off her hair. At this point she is missing two things: the headcovering and “also” her long hair.

² In other words, the authority over the wife (v.3) is not the same thing as her symbol of authority (v.10).

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the woman's “covering” of hair (in v.14-15) is described using a *different* Greek word than the “covering” of cloth (in v.5-13).

Further, 1st Corinthians 11 shows several differences between the cloth headcovering and the woman's long hair.

1. A woman's long hair is worn 24 hours a day; it is a *continual* covering. This is because it is put on the woman's head by the Creator of nature, *God Himself* (v.15).
 2. A cloth covering is worn only “while” praying (v.5); it is a *situational* covering. It is put on the woman's head *by the woman herself* (v.6).
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1. For a woman to have longer hair than men is somewhat instinctive; it is “taught” *by nature* (v.14-15). Women usually wear longer hair *regardless* of their religion.
 2. A cloth headcovering is taught *by Scripture*. Christian women wear it *for uniquely-spiritual reasons* (v.2-10).
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1. Long hair is an *adornment*.³ It is the woman's *glory* (v.15).
 2. A cloth covering provides the *opposite* effect: it *conceals* glory (v.7, 15).

³ In v.15, the Greek word “hair” refers to an *ornamental style*.

Ω SCRIPTURE'S REASONS FOR THE HEADCOVERING

God's instructions in 1st Corinthians 11 include not only *direction* for the use of headcoverings, but also a specific *explanation* for that direction. This explanation is composed of five different points.

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). The woman's "head" is man, 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). 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).
3. **Angels.** Paul states that women should cover their heads "because of the angels" (v.10). Paul's grammar indicates that he connects this reason for the headcovering on his previous two reasons, but he does not further elaborate.
4. **Hair Length.** Paul states that there is a difference between the genders regarding natural hair length – and that this difference presents a hint for what Christian men and women should do regarding the use of headcoverings (v.13-14). 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 – it was already the standard practice among the other churches (v.16). 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). 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).

ALTERNATIVE 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 the assumption that Paul had *unmentioned* reasons for his instructions about headcoverings. The most common alternative explanations are considered below.

1. In Corinthian culture, headcoverings were used for modesty, as a sign of marriage, or to avoid looking like a prostitute.
2. Paul gave instructions about headcoverings so that Christians wouldn't imitate the style of pagan Roman worship.
3. Paul's headcovering instructions were given so the Corinthians would imitate Jewish practices, in order to avoid offending the Jews.

Alternative Explanations Considered In Light of History

1. **Corinthian Society.** Corinth was a Roman colony, and the Corinthian church was primarily a Gentile church. Roman men normally wore a headcovering during religious activities. Roman women normally went without a headcovering in public. So, rather than reenforcing the headcovering customs of the local society, Paul's instructions were actually the *opposite* of the Corinthian's Roman culture. Even in nearby Greek culture, women did not wear a headcovering during worship.
2. **Prostitutes.** Scholars have pointed out that the Corinthian Temple of Aphrodite (which supposedly housed 1000 prostitutes without headcoverings) was destroyed over 200 years before Paul wrote 1st Corinthians. Further, the Corinthian prostitutes of Paul's day were not known for having uncovered heads.
3. **Religion.** If indeed an association with pagan Roman worship was the reason that Paul did not want Corinthian men to cover their heads, [Dr. Roy Ciampa](#) (of Gordon-Conwell seminary) notes that "one would wonder why Paul would not have similar problems with women covering their heads, since that was also the norm for Roman worship."
4. **Testimony of the Early Church.** Early Church theologians never described the use of a headcoverings as conformity to (or rejection of) the local Corinthian society. Tertullian (a theologian in the Early Church) specifically stated that the Christian practice of headcovering was not something that came from the Gentiles. Multiple Early Church sources document the wide use of headcoverings *outside* of Corinth.

Alternative Explanations Considered In Light Of Scripture

1. **The Origin.** Paul introduces the topic by reminding the Corinthians of the practices he “delivered” (v.2) to them. These are practices that weren't already a part of their native religion. Paul ends his instructions by appealing to the headcovering practices of the rest of Christianity (v.16). This was not a practice oriented around the church of Corinth or around Roman culture.
2. **The Focus.** Paul gives specific theological reasons for his instructions that cannot be accounted for from within the Corinthian's own pagan culture. Specifically, he states that the headcovering symbolizes God's creation of *gender roles* and relates to the concept of *glory* during communication with God. Paul explains that the headcovering is worn “because of the angels” (v.10) – not “because of local society.” Further, the passage teaches the use of headcoverings only for times of Christian prayer and prophesy. Thus, the headcovering cannot be just a reference to local Corinthian customs regarding modesty, prostitution, or marriage. The passage itself does not discuss any need to honor (or reject) local cultural practices.
3. **The Jews.** The New Testament states that Christian women “ought” to wear a headcovering when praying (v.10). However, nowhere in the Old Testament did God require Jewish women to wear a headcovering. Further, the Corinthian church was primarily Gentile (not Jewish). Any concern for Jewish culture does not explain the Christian practice of using a headcovering *outside* of Jewish areas (see v.16). Note that prior to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the Paul and other Jewish church leaders decided that they should “not trouble” Gentile Christians with the “burden” of having to follow Jewish customs, except four specific “essential” practices, none of which included the use of headcoverings (Acts 15). This matches up with Paul's typical response to Gentiles in matters of Jewish custom, which was not to require Christians to follow Jewish practices (Galatians 2:1-5, 14). The passage itself provides no indication that Paul is seeking to promote the adoption of Jewish religious practices among the Corinthian Christians.

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 cannot be harmonized with history and Scripture. [Dr. 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.”

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. [Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.](#) (former 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... 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... Those are not cultural reasons.”

R.C. Sproul (pastor and theologian) addresses these same issues in his book *Knowing Scripture*.

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.”

The practice of headcovering is a *uniquely* Christian command, especially because the *reasons* for the command are uniquely Christian. God's direction for the use of headcoverings was actually *counter-cultural*. The culture-based explanations for v.2-16 ignore the passage's appeal to both “universal principles” of Creation and the “universal practice” of the Church.

Ω CHRISTIAN HEADCOVERINGS FOR TODAY?

"*This passage can't really mean what I think it says. I mean, none of the Christian women that I know use a headcovering.*" This is a common reaction that many Christians have when reading 1st Corinthians 11 for the first time. However, to dismiss any command in Scripture requires clear, biblically-valid reasons.⁴ Those who do not follow these directions today often give one of the following four reasons.

1) The Headcovering Is Meaningless In Contemporary Culture: Discontinue This Obsolete Practice

It was noted above that 1st Corinthians 11 is not simply a case of God requiring Christians to follow First Century culture. The use of headcoverings by pagan society didn't have the same purpose, theology, or requirements as it has within Christianity.

Similarly, it is also important to note that Scripture does not indicate that the headcovering is intended to "speak" a meaningful message *to* culture. The question could similarly be asked: "How do baptism and the Lord's Supper speak to modern culture?" Christians recognize that Scriptural symbolism has meaning beyond the often-changing culture that believers live in. Those that the symbolism *is* intended for *do* understand it. In other words, Paul's *reasons* for the headcovering were meaningful to *Christians* specifically, and only made sense from within a *Christian* perspective. The only reason that the headcovering has little meaning to many Christians today is that in the last century Western churches generally stopped teaching its Scriptural meaning.

2) The Headcovering Is Meaningless in Contemporary Culture: Choose A New, Relevant Symbol As A Replacement

The headcovering is apparently a very *intentional* symbol. Scripture says that it is *because* of a woman's (authority) "head" that she covers her (physical) "head." Thus, the headcovering creates an appropriate word-picture. [Dr. Elliot Johnson](#), professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, notes that if something else were substituted for the headcovering, there would be a loss of symbolism, a "problem of losing or distorting the type of meaning."

Scripture states that the symbol is to be worn "on" the head, specifically during times of prayer. It is to be worn by "every woman." And the man is to take off the same thing that the woman is to put on. These four specifications disqualify most alternative symbols that have been proposed (such as a wedding ring or dress). In Western culture, there is no alternative "symbol" that points to the Christian principles found in 1st Corinthians 11. 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).

⁴ Especially since it is well-documented that until just the last century, it was the norm for Christians to follow the directions in v.2-16.

3) The Symbol Is Unnecessary – Only The Principle Counts

The Principle. A person's "heart" matters *much* more than a person's attire. 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. And so, in v.16 Paul states 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 practice the symbolic actions taught in Scripture because (1) the symbolism is meaningful, and (2) the symbolism is commanded.

4) Obscurity Prevents Confident Obedience

Prevalence & Authority. Many Christians wish that Scripture contained more information about certain topics. Some of these topics are indeed "obscure" in that they are mentioned in only one or two verses. 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 widely discussed throughout the New Testament, v.16 states that it was widely taught & practiced throughout the New Testament churches. Early Church artwork & writings provide evidence for this as well, and Christianity has continued the practice through most of its history. The importance of a command can't be evaluated simply by counting up the number of times it was repeated in Scripture. Verses 2-16 were inspired by God and so they have His full authority.

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. *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.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In various times and locations, some Christian women have worn headcoverings *only* because of tradition or style. However, when the “human tradition” becomes the only reason for following a Christian practice, the “command of God” becomes undervalued. Note that while God's Word teaches that Christian women should dress modestly, modesty is not one of the reasons given by Paul for wearing a headcovering. Similarly, 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.

Instead, Scripture teaches that the headcovering is *meaningful*. Since the woman is the “glory of man” (v.7), she should symbolically cover her head when communicating with God (v.6). To symbolize gender roles (v.3), Christian women “ought” to cover their heads with a “symbol of authority” (v.10). And so, Paul is not just teaching standard Christian *principles*, but is defending a standard “practice” (v.16). Though it has been proposed that “the rule ceases when the reason of the rule ceases,” each of Paul's reasons for using the headcovering still stand. For this reason, it is not “proper” for a woman to be without a headcovering while praying (v.13).

As [Dr. 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.”

However, obedience to Scripture is important, not only because disobedience dishonors God but because His commands exist for a *purpose*. Paul states that the purpose of the headcovering is to honor God's structure of headship and to promote His glory during communication with Him. The Lord's 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).

Still, knowing that resistance to this practice would yet occur, God inspired Paul to include 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).

This study has discussed the interpretive issues of 1st Corinthians 11. There are several practical issues that this study has not discussed. A supplement entitled “Practical Issues” seeks a biblical perspective for these topics. Also, the website www.HeadCoveringMovement.com provides contemporary testimonies, articles, and discussion.

APPENDIX: OTHER CONCERNS

Legalism? Unbiblical *perspectives* and *rules* can be dangerous. While the term *legalism* is not found in the Bible, Scripture 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 Paul's 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. 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. "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 new "moral rules" beyond those given by God Himself.

3) Legalistic Biblical Rules. "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." *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 service.

Legalism: 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 indeed be legalism. (3) The use of a headcovering can also become legalistic if the Scriptural *purposes* and *principles* of the covering are ignored. (4) The solution to legalism is not to avoid rules. Paul, who was known for preaching against legalism and man-made traditions, 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).

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. Both genders are equally made in the image of God. Paul proclaims gender equality in the realm of salvation and in the middle of his discussion on headcoverings he was careful to show the inter-dependence between man and woman. Note also that Scripture does not describe submission as demeaning. Verse 3 teaches that men are to submit to Christ. As Jesus 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).