

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. Meanwhile, I figured that the use of headcoverings was probably just an ancient cultural practice that God was reinforcing 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 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. Further, I was surprised to learn that through the last 2000 years, it has generally been the norm for Christian women to use headcoverings during times of prayer.¹

This subject challenged me to learn more about Christian history and to sort through some issues within First Century culture. It provided a great opportunity to study Scripture carefully and to read from a very wide variety of Bible teachers and theologians.

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 study² will help provide a well-grounded understanding of the direction that the Lord gives us within the first half of 1st Corinthians 11.

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¹ As documented by the writings of Christian leaders across Church history, including Augustine, Martin Luther, Charles Spurgeon, and many others.

² You are reading a condensed version of the full-length study, which is available at www.bitly.com/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 supposed 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* that is to be 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).³ 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 to the present.

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.

³ In other words, a thing that is represented by a symbol is not the same thing *as* the symbol. Similarly, 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 a continual covering, worn 24 hours a day. 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).
1. For women to have longer hair than men is somewhat instinctive; it is “taught” by nature (v.14-15). Women usually have longer hair regardless of their religion.
2. Using a headcovering is not instinctive – rather, it is a unique practice taught by Scripture. Christian women are to use it for distinctly-spiritual reasons (v.2-10).
1. Long hair is an adornment.⁴ It is the woman's “glory” (v.15).
2. A cloth headcovering provides the opposite effect: it conceals glory during communication with God (v.7, 15).

⁴ 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.** God's universal order of "headship" (v.3) is the topic that initiates Paul's discussion about Christian headcoverings. 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 "head" of woman is man (v.3), 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 the "glory of man" would be a dishonor (v.5). Essentially, Paul explains that while communicating with God, it is proper for His people are to symbolically "uncover" the glory of Deity (man) while symbolically "covering" the glory of humanity (woman). The Lord's glory is to be preeminent.
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 to his previous two reasons, but he does not further elaborate.
4. **Hair Length.** Between the two genders, there is a natural difference in hair length – and Paul says that this difference presents us with a hint for what Christian men and women should do regarding the use of headcoverings (v.13-14). Further, 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 Corinthian believers (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

As discussed on the previous page, Scripture explains five specific reasons for the use of headcoverings. However, some Bible teachers have come up with *alternative* explanations, each of which depend on the idea that Paul had *unmentioned* reasons for his instructions about headcoverings. In the right-hand column, the most common alternative explanations are listed. Below are Scriptural and historical considerations to aid in evaluating these alternative explanations.

- ✓ "In Corinthian culture, headcoverings were used for modesty, as a sign of marriage, or to avoid looking like a prostitute."
- ✓ "Paul's instructions were intended to prevent Christians from imitating the clothing style of pagan Roman worship."
- ✓ "In order to avoid offending the Jews, Paul desired the Corinthians to imitate Jewish headcovering practices."

Alternative Explanations Considered *In Light of History*

1. **Corinthian Culture.** 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 of The Practice.** 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 of the Practice.** 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 (1) symbolizes God's creation of *gender roles*, (2) relates to the concept of *glory* during communication with God, and (3) 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. Because of all these dynamics, the headcovering cannot be just a reference to local Corinthian customs regarding modesty, prostitution, or marriage. Paul gives no indication that he was concerned about Corinthians women coming to church dressed like a prostitute. 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, 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 of not requiring Christians to follow Jewish practices (Galatians 2:1-5, 14). Note that 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 alternative 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. As [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, when Scripture and history disqualify these alternative proposals, it does so only as 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) once asked the question, “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.” Dr. Johnson then answered his question by saying that Paul’s objections to the woman praying without a headcovering “have nothing to do with social custom... Each of the reasons given for the wearing of a veil is taken from permanent facts... [Look at] the reasons that Paul gives for what he’s talking about here... Those are not cultural reasons.”

Dr. 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*. 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. 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 cultural practices. 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* a Christian's public society. 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 culture that the believer lives within. Those whom the symbolism *is* intended for *do* understand it.⁵ The only reason that the Christian use of headcoverings has little meaning to many believers today is that in the last century Western churches generally stopped teaching its Scriptural meaning.

⁵ In other words, Paul's reasons for the headcovering were meaningful to Christians *specifically*, and only made sense from within a *Christian* perspective.

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

As described by Paul, the headcovering is evidently 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. It is worn specifically during times of prayer. It is for "every woman." And the man is to take off the same thing that the woman is to put on. These four specifications disqualify most symbols that have been proposed as replacements (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 (v.16). Christians likewise don't replace the other symbolic actions found within Scripture (baptism and the Lord's Supper).

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 misused the symbolism of the Lord's Supper (v.17-34).

The Practice. Similar to baptism and Lord's Supper, the headcovering symbol is to indicate *a condition of the heart*. Paul states that the use of a headcovering *reflects the principles* of v.2-16. He says that among the churches, the "practice" (not just the *principle*) was the standard (v.16). Thus, 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 have wished 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 throughout 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 details five reasons for their use. Rather than a societal custom understood only by a certain ancient culture, Paul needed to deliver, explain, and even defend the practice to the Corinthian Christians. In the passage, Paul takes multiple approaches in seeking to convince the Corinthians to follow his teaching. 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 culture. However, when “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). Thus, 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* for 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 have her head uncovering during a time of prayer (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 in this matter for the sake of a man-made alternative perspective. 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 covered the main 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. Contemporary articles, testimonies, and discussion can also be found at the website www.HeadCoveringMovement.com.

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 follow God's grace-based process of sanctification.

It was, of course, appropriate for the Corinthian believers to respond with 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).