

Heads, Hair And Hats

1 Corinthians, Vol. 22

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1 Corinthians 11:1-16

1 Corinthians 11-14 is a string of subjects all related to correcting errors in public worship in the church at Corinth. The culture of Corinth influenced the church to be careless in many things, as we've already seen. We start at 1 Corinthians 11:2. But what about verse 1? There is an unfortunate placement of a chapter break. This verse appears to go much better with what we call chapter 10. Look at how it connects and fits with Paul's instruction on how best to use your liberty in Christ:

1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1: Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

It makes a lot more sense to say **Be imitators of me** as the conclusion of what he taught in chapter 10 than it does as the way to introduce what women should wear in church.

We're going to see the design of God for outward expression of the roles of women in public worship:

I. Symbolized By Culture (2-6)

1 Corinthians 11:1-6: Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. 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. 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 she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. 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.

Head is used here to imply a position of _____.

This wasn't something new.

Deuteronomy 22:5: A woman shall not wear man's clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman's clothing; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD your God.

The design of God for outward expression of the roles of women in public worship:

- I. Symbolized By Culture (2-6)
- II. Specified By Scripture (7-12)

This section refers to Genesis 2:18-25, and is similar to 1 Timothy 2:8-14.

1 Corinthians 11:7-12: *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. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.*

Because of the angels is interesting.

The design of God for outward expression of the roles of women in public worship:

- I. **Symbolized By Culture** (2-6)
- II. **Specified By Scripture** (7-12)
- III. **Substantiated By Nature** (13-15)

1 Corinthians 11:13-15: *Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.*

It's not unanimous in history and anthropology, but the dominant pattern in nearly every culture is that women have longer hair than men. Women almost never are bald, and men frequently are bald. This difference is caused by hormones, which also cause women's hair to grow longer and faster than men's hair.

Nature itself teaches:

The design of God for outward expression of the roles of women in public worship:

- I. **Symbolized By Culture** (2-6)
- II. **Specified By Scripture** (7-12)
- III. **Substantiated By Nature** (13-15)
- IV. **Summarized For All** (16)

1 Corinthians 11:16: *But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.*

In other words, any custom of women praying or speaking in church with their head uncovered was unknown to Paul or to any of the first century churches.

It's foolishness and dishonest scholarship to try to make the word of God say anything different about the relationship between husband and wife. It's spelled out even more definitively in Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, and 1 Peter 3. God designed different roles for men and women in marriage.

The man is the **head**. That means he has the greater responsibility for the direction and the tone of the home. That does not put a man into a position of **boss** or **commander**.

The man's "authority" is:

The woman is called to:

The following summary is offered to help give wisdom for applying this passage. It was written to help sort out how to apply a passage like this in light of a different tradition in a different culture.

Head Coverings

Introduction

The proper application of this passage is an issue for churches in Russia. The tradition of married women wearing head coverings in church is strong. In many other cultures, women do not wear head coverings because they do not understand this passage to require it. With respect for traditions and the personal convictions of generations of believers, you will need to be accurate as you interpret this passage and sensitive as you decide how to apply it.¹

¹There is great variety of cultural practices concerning men and women in worship. Some cultures believe a woman's head must be entirely covered or veiled; others wear decorative hats. Some believe only a symbolic covering (such as a scarf in Russia) is required. In some places women do not cover their heads, but men and women sit on different sides of the church. In other places, men sit in the front and women sit in the back. These differences illustrate that there are many different beliefs about this passage.

Why head coverings are not absolute

The notes in the *MacArthur Study Bible* on 1 Corinthians 11:2-26 and John MacArthur's commentary on 1 Corinthians contain much valuable information about this issue. Here are some additional comments to consider in regard to this text:

1. "As in all the churches" is not used in 1 Corinthians 11 the same way it is in 14:33-34. The subject in context there is also proper conduct of women in the church. The fact Paul inserted "as in all the churches" in one place but not the other in the same epistle and on the same subject is good evidence that the reference to head coverings in chapter 11 is not universal. In 11:16, when he mentions other churches, it is in connection with the universal principle of women's hair being longer than men's, not with a statement that head coverings are required in all places.
2. There is no reference to head coverings in all the other New Testament passages on the submission of wives in the home and in the church (Ephesians 5:22-24, Colossians 3:18, 1 Timothy 2:11-15, Titus 2:3-5 and 1 Peter 3:1-6). If head coverings were normative, we would expect them to be mentioned in several of those passages which deal with wives' submission and with the role of women in worship. Submission is taught in all those passages, but head coverings as a symbol of submission is mentioned only once.²
3. It appears there are two references to cultural practices in 1 Corinthians 11, the other being to cutting of all the hair (11:6), which was apparently acceptable only for a prostitute, or it might refer to a woman desiring to appear as a man. In either case, her appearance shows that she does not accept God's order for men and women. The principle Paul applies is that believers should submit themselves to their culture's practices which distinguish men from women and those which symbolize male leadership in marriage.
4. Wearing a head covering (a symbol) does not equal submission (an absolute). God is concerned with the "hidden person of the heart," not with external symbols or mere professions of obedience. To equate a woman's decision to cover or not cover her head with a heart of obedience misses the point. Analogous Scriptures include 1 Peter 3:3-4, James 2:14-20, and 1 John 3:18-20.
5. This passage says in plain language that "her hair is given to her as a covering" (11:15), in the context of saying that women's hair grows longer than men's hair. Therefore a second covering is merely symbolic and not required.

²The fact something is mentioned only once does not by itself mean it is not normative. In harmonizing several texts on the same subject we need to understand why any of them differ from the others. In this case, the best explanation is that Paul used a cultural practice as an illustration in writing to one group, which fits with his own plan of adapting his behavior to his immediate audience (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

What should you say?

Here are suggestions for how to respond to questions about head coverings:

1. Deal with the text. Deal with what it says, including the exegetical evidence above, and make a clear distinction between essentials and matters of culture or personal conviction. It is important to recognize that godly women in most cultures do not believe it is *required* to wear head coverings.
 2. If the practice is not actually required by Scripture, it is a “gray area” in which each person should make up his or her own mind. To enforce a certain conviction on others is legalism, and to judge one who chooses contrary to your conviction is divisive and wrong. See Romans 14, and substitute “head covering” for “meat” or “days.”
 3. Also from Romans 14, note the command (14:13) neither to judge nor to place an obstacle or stumbling block in a brother’s way. That means we are obligated to understand the convictions of those around us (including cultural practices) and to avoid needless offense or misunderstanding. *“When in Rome, do as the Romans do”* has a certain Biblical parallel. Paul “acted Jewish” among Jews, and “acted Gentile” among Gentiles in regard to everything not prescribed or proscribed by Scripture.
 4. Therefore, we recommend the matter be regarded as a “gray area.” Wisdom dictates going along with the expectations of the culture, which in this case means wearing a head covering and neither making a show of it nor making it a matter for judging others. It should never become an issue over which we separate from other believers. Inevitably, the practices of believers from elsewhere in the world will be more widely known among the Russian church, and we want the issue of head coverings not to be a battleground. A good pastoral comment would be something like *“In Russian culture it is traditional for married women to wear head coverings in church. This was the practice of some of the women in the early church. What really matters is that a woman’s heart is right toward Christ and toward her husband. Seek wisdom from God and choose for yourself what you believe best glorifies Him, what is the best testimony to your brothers and sisters in the church, and what will not offend other believers. This applies to you in every situation, including if you worship with believers who follow different traditions.”*
 5. We also recommend that you exercise great care toward unbelievers who may visit your church and toward believers who come from other cultures. If a married woman visits, but does not wear a head covering, it should not be mentioned. Such a woman should be welcomed on the basis of her faith in Christ (if she is a believer), and she should be welcomed as a soul in need (if she is not a believer). You should always leave the matter to a person’s own conscience, and not impose a legalistic rule. The heart is far more important than a symbol.
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