

11. Head Coverings



Introduction: This is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. Despite the various exegetical uncertainties, the basic message is clear: wives are to be submissive to their husbands, even as Christ is to the Father. This submission is to be expressed during prayer and prophecy by a covered head.

Premise:

1. Paul, during the 1.5 years he stayed in Corinth (**Acts 18:1, 11**), taught a women's head should be covered when she is praying or prophesying. This covering is a sign of submission to her husband (**11:10**). Paul taught the proper head covering was long hair.
2. After Paul left Corinth, someone else contended that the proper head covering should instead be a garment worn over her head, **11:16** (religious clothing).
3. The church resisted the garment contention and instead continued to practice Paul's tradition of long hair as the proper covering, **11:2**. However, the church wrote Paul to ask him about it. **1 Corinthians 11a** is Paul's response.
4. Both Paul and the contender agreed that a woman's head should be covered when praying or prophesying (**11:3-6**). This covering is a symbol that she was under the authority of her husband (**11:10**). Paul built a strong case for head coverings in general, incorporating the arguments of the contender (**11:7-10**), and then added in some of his own arguments by way of balance (**11:11-12**). The strong contrastive "but" in **11:11** flags the start of Paul's balancing comments.
5. The reasons given for head coverings were not cultural, but timeless (**11:3, 7-9**). They are based on the order within the Trinity and the creation particulars of man and woman.
6. As part of his teaching on long hair as the proper covering, Paul wrote of four different hair states: "long hair" (*komao*, which he calls covered, **11:14**), short hair (which he calls "uncovered"; *akatakalyptos*, **11:5**), "cut off" hair (*keiro*, shorn, **11:6**) and "shaven" (*xurao*, razor smooth, **11:5**). There was not a problem in the church with women's hair length. All the sisters had long hair. Paul merely used the various hair lengths for illustrative purposes. The real problem was the contending view of the garment as the correct covering.
7. The NIV's marginal translation captures the sense of long hair as the proper covering: "Every man who prays or prophesies with long hair dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with no covering of hair on her head dishonors her head—she is just like one of the 'shorn women.' 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. A man ought not to have long hair ..."
8. Prior to **11:15**, the Greek beneath the verbs "cover" and "uncover" are variations on the generic verb *katakalypto* (which specifies no particular cover). The lid to a man hole is a cover. A bed spread is a cover. Pilots contend with a cloud cover. Paul did not identify the covering (though certainly his readers knew what it was). After listing his arguments for head coverings in general, Paul finally specifically stated that a woman's long hair was given to her instead of a head garment (**11:15**). The Greek underneath "for" in **11:15** is *anti* and means instead of or in place of. Further, the

Greek underneath covering in **11:15** is *peribolaion*, which literally means to throw around (as a cloth around the head) and refers specifically to a garment.

9. Paul concluded by stating that the churches had “no such practice” (**11:16**) of making women wear a garment as a head covering.

******1. Why did Paul commend the Corinthians (11:2-16)?** Paul praised them because the practice Paul’s tradition for head coverings, and had not given into a different view.

Premise: They held to Paul’s tradition regarding long hair as the proper head covering, and had not given in to the person contending for garments as the proper covering.

Important Observation: Exactly what it is that was supposed to “cover” her head was not specified anywhere in **11:3-10**. Paul knew what it was, and the Corinthians knew what it was, but we have to deduce what it was from what Paul writes later, in **11:14-16**. Arguably, the proper covering is long hair.

2. What basic order did Paul confirm in 1 Corinthians 11:3? The order is God, Christ, man, woman. The particulars of this passage are that wives are to be submissive to their husbands.

ESV **Ephesians 5:23-24** ... the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church ... as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

3. In 1 Corinthians 11:3, what does “head” mean? From *kepalé* (2776); **1**) a literal head (the part of the body that contains the brain), or **2**) figuratively, a director or leader.¹ In **11:3**, *kepalé* refers to a leader, but in **11:4** it refers in its first occurrence to a part of the human body, and in its second occurrence to a leader.

According to 1 Corinthians 11:4, how can a man dishonor his head (Christ)? A man dishonors Christ by praying with his head covered (with long hair).

Word Study: “head covered” (**11:4**) is from *kata kephalés*, literally, “down from the head.” The word for covered is not actually used. This could refer to long hair hanging down from the head. Others hold that it refers to a garment hanging down from the head (a shawl).

Note: How this dishonors Christ is not explained until **11:7**.

According to 11:5, how can a woman dishonor her head (her husband)?²

¹ Thayer, *Lexicon*, #2776.

² Feminists opine that “head” here merely means source (as in the head of a river). However, in context, it means leadership or line of authority. This leadership aspect of head is clear in Ephesians 5, Colossians 3 and 1 Peter 3.

Reminder: “Uncovered” (11:5), is from *akatakaluptos* (177); *a* is a negative prefix and *katakalupto* means “to cover up.” Thus, Paul is contrasting two hair lengths here: long hair versus short hair.

Based on 1 Corinthians 11:5, if a woman prays or prophesies with her head “uncovered” what is it the same as? It is just as though her head were shaven. A head uncovered (i.e. she has short hair) is in the same category of dishonor as a woman with a shaven head.

4. What does “shaven” (11:5) mean? A man shaves his face with a razor. The Greek is *xurao*, and means to shave; it is related to the Greek word for razor. Shaven means smooth, without any hair at all.

Note: Paul is saying that it is as dishonoring for a woman to pray with her head uncovered (i.e. she has short hair) as it is for her to have a shaved head.

In 1 Corinthians 11:6a, what should a woman do if she refuses to cover her head (with long hair)? The ESV says she should cut her hair “short”. However, the Greek word here means more than simply short. The Greek for “cut short” (*keiro*) actually means to shear, as is done to sheep; it is to cut really short (like a crew cut). A woman could have short hair without it being shorn. The KJV brings this out more clearly:

KJV **1 Corinthians 11:6** For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.

What’s the difference between shave and shear? “Shave” is from *zuaro* (3587b) and does indeed means to remove the hair with a razor. “Short” is from *keiro* (2751), “to shear” (a sheep). When you shear a sheep, it still has stubble at least. When you shave there is no hair left showing.

Premise: Paul is dealing with four hair lengths: Long hair (which qualifies as a covering), short hair (an uncovered state), shorn hair (an uncovered state) and shaven hair (an uncovered state).

Reminder: “Cover” (11:6) is from *katakalupto* (2619), the same as in 11:5.

5. What word did Paul use in 11:6 to describe the state of women with either shorn or shaven heads? Paul indicated that it is disgraceful, from the same Greek word used in 11:4-5 (“dishonors”).

6. Why would it be disgraceful for a woman’s hair to be “cut off” or to “shave” her head (11:6)? Most women don’t want the Yul Brynner look. In most cultures, a woman’s hair is an integral part of her beauty. Bald women are generally thought to be less than attractive. For instance, women undergoing chemotherapy (wherein their hair falls out) almost always wear wigs (this is not necessarily the case with male chemotherapy patients). Also, at the end of World War II, French women guilty of befriending Nazi soldiers were shaved in order to shame them.

According to 11:6b, since it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair either cut off or shaved, what should she do? She should cover her head (with long hair).

7. When Paul wrote that she should have her hair “cut off” (11:6a, literally “shorn”), do you think he really expected for a woman would do this? Paul is saying that a woman should have long hair as a covering. If not, then women with short hair (bobbed hair) might as well shear their hair even shorter (crew cut) or even shave their hair completely off. Paul assumes no woman would want a shorn or shaven head, so the alternative is to have her head covered (with long hair).

8. In 11:6, what response is Paul ultimately seeking from uncovered women? They should cover their heads (with long hair).

9. According to 1 Corinthians 11:7-9, why should a man *not* cover his head? Paul gave three reasons: **a) 11:7 b) 11:8 c) 11:9.**

a. What does that man is the glory of God, but woman is the glory of man (11:7)? It could mean that as God glories in man, man correspondingly glories in women. Perhaps he means that just as when a man submits to God it glorifies God, so too when a woman submits to her husband it glorifies her husband.

b. To what historical event is 11:8 a reference? To the creation event, when Eve was fashioned from Adam’s rib.

c. What does 11:9 tell us about who was helping whom in the Garden? This clearly shows that Adam (man) had/has the priority position.

10. Based on 11:10, what is the woman’s head covering a symbol of? See 11:3. It is a sign that she is in submission to her husband’s authority.

Important: A woman’s covered head is merely a sign of her submission. It is not the substance of her submission. Though the sign is still important, what ultimately matters is the underlying principle.

Angels: It is unknown what angels have to do with head coverings. Paul did not explain himself any further. It may be linked to **11:3** (divine order). Some angels fell, and followed Satan. Another answer might be found in **1 Peter 1:12**. In as much as angels might visit any place at any time, the head covering Paul has in mind should probably be something the woman wears at all times — not just in public. If long hair is the covering, then she does indeed don that continuously.

******11. According to 11:11-16, what natural covering has been given to a woman?** It is long hair, **11:15b**.

Note: This is the first time a covering has been specified.

What is the purpose of 11:11-12? It is to show that in the Lord, both men and women are important.

12. What function does 11:11-12 serve in relation to 11:7-9? It is a counter balance. “However” (11:11) is from *plén* (4133), “only, nevertheless, but”; a strong word of contrast. In 11:11, *plén* is used to break off the discussion of 11:7-10 and to emphasize something else that is important.³ Thus, 11:11-12 is a direct counterpoint to 11:7-10.

11:7-9 and 11:11-12 do not contradict each other (both are true) but they do complement each other (balance each other out). Either one without the other would be a half-truth, truth out of balance.

Chiasm: A chiasm is a literary device; it is a stair-step, mirrored image point and counter point, in reverse order. To wit:

v7 states that man has his source in God, and woman in man; v12b balances this by asserting that everything has its source in God.

v8 states that woman is said dependent on man for her initial existence; v12a counters that man is dependent on woman for his continued existence.

v9 indicates that woman’s purpose is to benefit man and that she is dependent upon him; v11 shows that man and woman are interdependent.

Arguably, 11:7-9 constitutes the reasoning of the contentious people of 11:16. Although true, 11:7-9 is only half the story. 11:11-12 is the rest of the truth (omitted by the contentious people but supplied by Paul).

13. Follow Paul’s suggestion of 1 Corinthians 11:13 and judge for yourself: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? How so? It seems to me that a woman who purposely shears or shaves her head is obvious violation of God’s design. However, it never would have occurred to me that it was wrong for a woman to pray with her head uncovered by a garment.

Observation: In Western culture (1960s), men who began to grow their hair long were generally in rebellion against the establishment (the government, the social order, the Vietnam war, traditional moral values, or whatever). Similarly, women in Western culture first began to “bob” (cut short) their hair in the roaring 1920s. The “flapper” was a sexually loose woman, a woman in revolt against traditional social and moral roles for women. Thus, the comparison in 11:5 between short (“cut off”) hair and a shaved head.

14. What answer is expected to the question of 11:14-15a? Yes, nature does seem to teach this. It is a truism, a general fact, a reality in most cultures, that women have longer hair than men and this long hair is to her glory.

What is the logical link between 11:13 and 11:14-15? After writing about an uncovered head, Pau wrote of hair length. This is an awkward juxtaposition unless the covering he has in mind is indeed the amount of hair.

³ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 669.

15. In 11:15b, we are told that a woman's long hair is given to her "as" a covering. What is the Greek behind "as"? It is from *anti* (#473), which literally means instead of or in place of.⁴

16. What is the Greek word behind "covering" (11:15b)? It is from *peribolaion* (4018), "covering wrap, cloak, robe." It is an article of clothing; also used in Hebrews 1:12.⁵ It refers to a hood or hat or some type of garment. *Peri* means "around" and *ballo* means "to throw." It is a wraparound, something thrown around the head.

ESV Hebrews 1:12 like a robe (*peribolaion*) you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed ...

17. How is the Greek behind "covering" in 11:15 different from the Greek root behind "uncovered" (11:5) or "cover" (11:6) or "covered" (11:13)? A *peribolaion* (11:15) is a piece of clothing, whereas *katakalypto* (11:6, 13) is a verb that simply means to cover, but does not of itself specify what is doing the covering (for example, it could be wings, as in Isaiah 6:2, LXX):

NAS Isaiah 6:2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

Taking these differences in Greek wording into account, **11:15b** could be translated, "For long hair is given to her *instead of a wrap around.*"

18. In 11:16, what information did Paul have for anyone inclined to be "contentious"? Neither Paul nor the churches⁶ did what the contentious person advocated.⁷

What is the difference in meaning between the word "such" and the word "other"?

19. What custom was this contentious person advocating (11:16)? Based on the correct translation of *toioutos* as "such," the contentious man wanted women to wear a *peribolaion*. Paul agreed that a woman's head needed to be covered, but that long hair is given to her "as" (*anti*, that is, "instead of") a *peribolaion* (11:15b). Thus, the contentious people needed to realize that the churches had no "such" custom of requiring women to wear a *peribolaion*, 11:16.

⁴ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 73.

⁵ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 646.

⁶ "Churches" (*ekklesia*, 11:16) could refer to a meeting of believers, or to the totality of Christians living in one place (Bauer, *Lexicon*, 240). The importance of a sign of authority for the angel's sake (11:10) suggests a context greater than just church meetings as angels presumably could be present anywhere. Incidentally, the angel angle (11:10) would also suggest that a woman should wear this garment whenever she prayed or prophesied, no matter where or when she prayed (24 hours a day).

⁷ The NIV has "other" rather than "such" in 11:16. In English, the words "other" and "such" are opposite in meaning. Suppose someone claimed that I promised him \$100. If I responded, "I said no such thing", it would mean that I did not make that promise. Conversely, if I replied, "I said no other thing", it would mean that \$100 is exactly what I promised. The Greek behind "other" is *toioutos* and definitively means "such," not "other."

That long hair is Paul's intended covering is suggested in the NIV's marginal translation: "Every man who prays or prophesies with long hair dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with no covering of hair on her head dishonors her head — she is just like one of the 'shorn women.' 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. A man ought not to have long hair ..."

Synthesis

20. What in 11:2-16 indicates the head covering is a cultural idiosyncrasy or a timeless truth? Just as the order of God/Christ/man (11:3) is timeless and has not changed nor has the man/woman order changed. Also, the appeal in 11:8-9 back to creation signals that this is a timeless truth that transcends all time and culture. Finally, the mention of the angels also suggests a universal application (angels are presumably not given to fads or cultural changes!).

R.C. Sproul: "What if, after careful consideration of a biblical mandate, we remain uncertain as to its character as a principle or custom ... Would it be better to treat a possible custom as a principle and be guilty of being over-scrupulous in our design to obey God? Or would it be better to treat a possible principle as a custom and be guilty of being unscrupulous in demoting a transcendent requirement of God to the level of a mere human convention? I hope the answer is obvious."⁸

Summary: This passage transcends culture and time. It is as binding on the church today as it was in the first century. A woman should pray or prophesy only if her head is covered with long hair, as a sign of her submission to authority. Her long hair was given to her instead of a head garment. 1 Corinthians 11 is a very liberating passage. In it, women are freed from the bondage of wearing religious head garb.

21. What tradition of head coverings did Paul teach the church in Corinth?

Teacher's Note: Many sincere believers understand 1 Corinthians 11a to refer to an actual garment that is to be worn in addition to long hair. Be sure to remember to respect those who differ on this issue. Historically, the argument has been over what the proper size of the garment should be, not whether it is a garment or hair length. However, the salient points (below) are not usually dealt with by those who hold to the garment interpretation.

⁸ RC Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove: InverVarsity Press, 1977), 111.

Review of Salient Points

1. Nowhere in 1 Corinthians 11:2-10 does Paul specify what constitutes the required covering. Be careful not to read into it.
2. What is the literary purpose of the strong contrast (“however”) and counterbalancing arguments in 11:11-12, if not to deal with the arguments of the contentious people (11:16)?
3. 11:12 specifically states that a woman’s long hair is given to her *anti* (instead of) a *peribolaion* (garment).
4. What contentions were the contentious people making (11:16)? We propose they were advocating that women wear a garment as the proper head covering. Paul agreed that women should have a head covering, but denied that a garment was necessary. Rather, God has given women’s long hair as the proper covering.

Optional Further Reading: See article on head coverings at NTRF.org.

**** = Ask this question before having someone read the text aloud.

Next Lesson: E-mail the next set of discussion questions out to the class (or print them up and hand them out at the end of this lesson). Ask everyone to consider the issues, answer the questions and be prepared to discuss them at the next meeting.

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