

## The Head Covering

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When I think back to my boyhood and teenage years in the 1950s and 1960s, I recall the effect of what seemed to be an unquestioned practice among women. Looking forward from any pew (except the very front row), in any church (my parents visited a number of churches); my view was that of ladies' hats, large and small, and sometimes scarves. Women never entered the meeting without their heads covered, just as men universally removed their hats. Was this merely a social custom of the mid-twentieth century? Or does the Bible tell us that women should cover their heads, and men uncover their heads, during meetings of the church?

That by the mid-twentieth century, most people saw this as only a social custom can probably be assumed. After all, most women at that time wore hats whenever they got dressed up to go out. So, when women's hats went out of fashion in general, they also disappeared from most churches. This, I propose, was because those churches had several decades earlier stopped teaching the truth of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. They had allowed an entire generation of congregants to grow up thinking that women wearing hats to church meetings was merely a matter of style, not Scriptural command.

My purpose in writing this article is not to cause controversy and division in the church. But I think it is a shame that so many of even the best churches—churches that center on Jesus Christ, the Cross, man's inability and God's sovereignty in salvation—have missed the opportunity to obey a New Testament command with, as we shall see, such beautiful meaning. I hope to encourage the reintroduction of a practice that is soundly Scriptural.

This topic is addressed in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. The method of this article will be to expound these verses. In doing so, I do not intend to interrupt the simple exposition I am going to give by quoting what so-and-so's opinion was about head coverings. Nevertheless, before starting the exposition, I believe it will be helpful to note that there are at least seven common viewpoints promulgated concerning these verses. They are:

**Viewpoint 1:** The head covering of 1 Corinthians 11:2-13 was a covering in addition to the hair (addressed in verses 14-15), is still to be worn today, and is to be worn all the time. This is the belief of Mennonites and some other groups.

**Viewpoint 2:** Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, was dealing with a cultural issue that applied only to his time, and, perhaps, only to the Corinthian church.

**Viewpoint 3:** The head covering was a matter of modest dress. Like the view above, what is at issue is a social custom. In Paul's day, it was immodest for a woman to have her head uncovered. Because such standards change in time and place, western women do not need to wear a head covering today because it is not an essential part of dressing modestly in our society.

**Viewpoint 4:** Paul is only addressing proper hair length. The covering for women is long hair. Men are to have no covering (short hair).

**Viewpoint 5:** As he explains in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, women are to be silent in church. So, in 1 Corinthians 11:2-6, Paul is saying that women can say public prayers and prophesy outside of church as long as they cover their heads.

**Viewpoint 6:** These verses are really only the beginning of a rebuke Paul is making about the conduct of women in the Corinthian church. The remarks continue in chapter 14, verses 34 and 35. What Paul is really saying, according to this theory, is something like this: Shame on you, Corinthian church! You have let your women speak in public without covering their heads. This shamed you in front of the surrounding community. What's more, you should not have let them speak in public in the first place. Women are to be silent in church. According to this view, Paul spent fifteen verses explaining the proper use of head coverings in chapter 11 only to say in two verses in chapter 14 that it is all unnecessary because the women are to remain silent anyway and, therefore, do not need head coverings.

**Viewpoint 7:** The head covering of 1 Corinthians 11:2-13 was a covering in addition to the hair (addressed in verses 14-15), is still to be worn by Christian women today, and is to be worn during times of public worship. Paul's instructions for the covering of the woman's head and the uncovering of the man's head during worship were not based on the custom of the times but on the Scriptures.

Now, let's look at 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 one verse at a time. (By the way, most commentators agree that 1 Corinthians 11:1 is the ending sentence of chapter 10. Nevertheless, it is certainly not irrelevant to what follows.)

**Verse 2: Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.**

The Greek word translated "ordinances" here is *paradosis*. Elsewhere in the Bible, it is translated "traditions." In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, for example, Paul writes, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions (*paradosis*) which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle." The ordinances or traditions Paul has in mind are important. We are to hold them and keep them as Paul delivered them.

This reminds me of Jeremiah 6:16: "Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein." Will we, like the people of Jeremiah's time, respond to a command to walk in the old paths, to keep the biblical, New Testament ordinances or traditions delivered to us, by saying, "We will not walk therein"?

Many, if not most, churches are now of the opinion that Paul was addressing in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 a social custom limited to a certain time and place. They say it was a common social custom among the people Paul was addressing for women to cover their heads and men to uncover their heads during religious services. They also say that the Corinthian church, exercising its liberty in Christ, dropped the custom. According to this theory, when church members stopped following the head covering custom, their unconverted neighbors (and, possibly, weak brethren) became offended, and Paul wrote these verses to tell them to begin following the custom again. Therefore, according to this theory, Paul was merely addressing a local custom of the times, and his instructions do not apply to men and women in the western world today, although the principle of wives being in submission to their husbands may still be valid. We hear proponents of this view say such things as, "Wearing a head covering no longer speaks to our culture." But is it the culture that the head covering is supposed to speak to, or someone else? (Hint: see verse 10.)

Also, the question must be asked, How do baptism and the Lord's Supper speak to our culture? If our twenty-first-century setting sees

these practices as culturally irrelevant, are we to give them up also? Or is the church to keep the meaning of its symbols and the reasons for its practices alive through education?

I must point out that the Bible never tells Christians to pattern their lives after the world—NEVER. The Bible never says, Make sure you do as the world does, try to blend in as much as possible, do only what is culturally relevant. Instead, we are told to "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever" (1 John 2:15-17). We are ordered: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:2). The ordinances we have received transcend time and place. They are of the kingdom of God, not the kingdoms of this world.

I must also ask, Why would the Holy Spirit move Paul to say and record in Scripture for all time that we are to follow the traditions as he has delivered them to us, if what he is about to address in the following verses is merely a temporary custom? I can only conclude that this verse deals a fatal blow to the idea that Paul is about to address something that applied only to that time and place. Paul is about to tell, not only the first-century Corinthians, but the church of God in all times and places, something he wants us to hold and keep.

It is also important to notice in 1 Corinthians 1:2 that Paul addresses this epistle not just to "the church of God which is at Corinth" but also "to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ." So, Paul, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, is writing not just to the Corinthian church of his day, but also to all saints everywhere. That includes you, if you are a saint, and me today.

I would be negligent if I did not point out the verses that follow those we are examining. While Paul chides the Corinthian church for its carelessness regarding the Lord's Supper, his instructions regarding the Lord's Supper are applicable to all churches (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). Why, then, should we see his instructions concerning the head covering as any different? The Corinthians had become careless about it, and Paul gives them, and us, positive instruction about it.

**Verse 3: But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.**

Again, if Paul is about to give instructions about a local and passing social custom, he is starting out in a very odd way. Here, in verse 3, the Holy Spirit leads Paul to reveal eternal truths concerning the relationship between God, Christ, men, and women.

God is the head of Christ. This is not teaching an essential subordination of Christ. After all, Christ is also God. But He voluntarily humiliated Himself in His incarnation by adding a human nature to His God nature (Philippians 2:5-8). In voluntary submission, Jesus came to do the Father's will (John 6:38; 8:28). In John 14:28, He states, "My Father is greater than I." Yet, we must remember that He is of the same essence as the Father and is God (John 1:1; 10:30).

The man is the head of the woman. Nevertheless, as Christ is God, so woman is man; that is, Eve was taken directly from Adam and shares his nature (see 1 Corinthians 11:8). Yet precisely because she was second in the creation order and made for man, and because the Bible teaches her to do so (Ephesians 5:22), woman is to voluntarily submit to man, using Christ's voluntary submission to the Father as an example. So, the woman is not essentially inferior to the man. As far as salvation, there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28), and they are "heirs together of the grace of life" (1 Peter 3:7).

The relationship between a man and woman pictures the relationship between Christ and the church. The church is to voluntarily submit to Jesus Christ as Lord (Ephesians 5:23-24).

I want to make a point of stating that such profound truths are hardly an appropriate preface to a mere social custom. Paul is not addressing a social custom. He is teaching a symbolism that speaks important truth, much as do baptism and the Lord's Supper. The place where Paul says something similar is Ephesians 5:23: "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body." It is followed in verse 24, not by a temporary custom, but by an instruction that is as abiding as the institution of marriage: "Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing." We should, therefore, expect 1 Corinthians 11:3 to be followed by a similar abiding truth. We will not be disappointed.

**Verse 4: Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoreth his head.**

Paul has just explained in verse 3 that the head of every man is Christ. Therefore, the obvious meaning here in verse 4 is that every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered (having on a head covering) dishonors Jesus Christ, his spiritual head. The reason is given in verse 7. Man is God's glory and God's glory should not be covered during public worship. To cover his head in public worship would be to symbolically abandon his God-given place of authority and, so, dishonor the One in authority over him, Jesus Christ.

I want to address what Paul means by praying and prophesying. The meaning of the latter has especially been debated.

I believe that the prophesying Paul refers to is the gift of receiving and speaking direct revelation from God, especially concerning future events. The Bible does not support the position of those who say that this word also refers to preaching. I think if you use a concordance and look up the New Testament occurrences of the word, you will see what I mean. In 1 Corinthians 13:8, Paul specifically identifies prophesying, speaking in tongues, and receiving directly revealed knowledge as gifts that were to end. Most non-Charismatics understand that this ending took place when God's revelation for this age was complete—that is, when the Bible was completely written. Preachers today do not prophesy. They tend to do a mixture of preaching (that is, evangelizing and proclaiming), teaching, and exhorting. Preaching, teaching, and exhorting are all translated from their own Greek words. They are not prophesying.

Praying, of course, continues. But I must now ask what I believe is an important question: Why did Paul name praying and prophesying and not such things as speaking in tongues, speaking directly revealed knowledge, preaching, exhorting, teaching, or singing? The essence of these things is the same. That is, they are all a form of speaking authoritatively—either giving direct revelation, proclaiming revelation, calling to action based on revelation, or explaining revelation and how it can be applied, or worshipping through prayer or singing. Surely, there can be no reason why Paul chose praying and prophesying except that they are two examples from the list. In other words, I believe that Paul would agree that it is just as wrong for a man to preach or teach with his head covered as it is for him to pray and prophesy with his head covered. Paul simply named two activities of the Christian assembly to stand for all.

Some like to point to 1 Samuel 10:5 and 1 Chronicles 25:1-3 as proving that singing is also prophesying. But nothing in these verses says this. The most natural understanding of what these verses say of the relationship between singing and prophesying is that a prophet may sing a prophecy. But not all singing, even in the assembly of the saints, is prophesying. Prophesying has ended.

**Verse 5: But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.**

Again, with verse 3 in mind, we see that Paul's inspired instruction here is that every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered (not having on a head covering) dishonors her head (her man, whether husband, father, or guardian). Again, the reason is given in verse 7 (the woman is man's glory, and man's glory should be covered during worship). I will comment on "for that is even all one as if she were shaven" in my comments on verse 6.

As explained under verse 4, praying and prophesying are two parts of a Christian meeting that represent all of the meeting. In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul orders, "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands ["men"] at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church." Paul could hardly have been clearer. He repeats the instruction in 1 Timothy 2:11-12: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." In fact, the directions regarding women in 1 Corinthians 14 come right after instructions relating to speaking in tongues and prophesying. How could the women speak in tongues or prophecy if they were to be silent? Obviously, they were not to speak in tongues or prophecy. And Paul's commands about women in 1 Timothy 2 are specifically contrasted to the men praying aloud (verse 8). Again, it is obvious that the women were not to pray aloud. I discuss this more fully in "The Role of Women in the Church." Here, I want to simply point out that Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, unmistakably forbids women from speaking in public worship. Speaking involved authority that women do not have.

What, then, does Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 11:5 when he writes of “every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered”? I will give three possible answers.

**I.** Perhaps Paul is addressing behavior outside of the assembly. Women must be silent in church meetings. They may, however, pray and prophesy outside of church as long as their heads are covered.

The context, however, presents a hurdle to this being a satisfactory solution. In verse 2, Paul is introducing the topic of decorum in the church, and he continues this topic even beyond the chapter. Notice that in verse 2 he says, “Now I praise you.” But in verse 17, he says, “I praise you not.” Verse 17, as verse 18 plainly shows, is about the assembly of the church. These two phrases show cohesiveness. If verses 17 and 18 and those that follow are about “when ye come together in the church,” so are verses 2 through 16.

**II.** Possibly, the Corinthians were allowing two errors in this regard, and Paul is treating them separately. He is saying in 1 Corinthians 11, You are allowing your women to speak with their heads uncovered. This is a shame. And, furthermore, it is wrong to allow the women to speak in church at all (1 Corinthians 14).

This “solution” makes us ask the obvious: Why would Paul address this problem of women speaking with their heads uncovered in two distinct arguments that are separated by 95 verses (between 1 Corinthians 11:16 and 14:34)? And, if 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is saying that women should wear a head covering while speaking in church, but 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is saying that they should not speak in church at all, then 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is superfluous. Why would Paul even bother addressing the issue? This solution seems very unnatural and, therefore, is unsatisfactory.

**III.** Praying and prophesying can refer to more than speaking. When someone leads in prayer or in prophesying (or in teaching, etc.), the entire assembly participates, even if silently. Therefore, everyone present can be said to be participating in that aspect of worship. After all, men do not sit in church wearing head coverings and remove them only when they speak. All of the men and women are participating, whether vocally or silently. Therefore, the men’s heads should be uncovered and the women’s heads covered during the entire meeting.

For women, praying and prophesying refers to their role in the assembly, which is done in silence. The context of 1 Corinthians 11 is

the Christian meeting, not some sort of praying or prophesying outside of this. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is not addressing the idea of women speaking. It is not what he has in mind. He has the activities of the meeting in mind, but does not address the question of women speaking in 1 Corinthians 11. In this chapter, their silence is assumed. But in two other places, Paul directly instructs that women are to be silent in the meetings. In 1 Corinthians 14, he also talks of the Christian meeting, and he instructs the men about speaking in tongues and prophesying and says the women are to be silent. In 1 Timothy 2, Paul again instructs about proper decorum in the congregation and tells the men how to publicly pray and says that the women are to participate by dressing modestly and being silent. So, getting back to 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is not referring to praying and prophesying in a strict and restricted sense, but to be representative of other things (such as preaching and teaching), and to not just be the speaking, but also the silent participation. Therefore, in the meetings, men, whether speaking or not, are to not cover their heads, and women, who are not to speak, are to cover their heads.

I see this explanation as satisfactory, but there is another question. In Acts 2:17 and 18, Peter, quoting Joel, says, "...your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...and on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." And Acts 21:9 tells us that Philip the evangelist "had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy." We have already seen that the gift of prophesying has since ceased. But in what way did daughters, handmaidens, and virgins prophesy?

Philip lived in Caesarea, on the coast of the northern part of Samaria. Yet, although his daughters "did prophesy" (Acts 21:9), God had the male prophet Agabus come all the way from Judea to Caesarea to prophesy to Paul (Acts 21:10-11). Apparently, God did not give Paul the prophecy through the four daughters even though they were close at hand. From the time that Peter announced the commencement of Joel's prophecy to the end of the Bible, what words of a woman prophet are recorded? None. It seems clear to me that whatever these daughters, handmaidens, and virgins did in the way of prophesying, it was not public. It is also likely that only a few daughters, handmaidens, and virgins chosen by the Holy Spirit prophesied and that the prophesying they did may very well have been in the confines of their father's or master's homes in a family setting. This was not a gift given to women in general, it was not done in public, and it was not done in the Christian assembly. I think it is safe to say, then, that

Paul was not at all addressing in 1 Corinthians 11 the private prophesying of these daughters, handmaidens, and virgins.

I would like to make another point concerning verses 4 and 5. They clearly show the inconsistency of the position, often taken by Mennonites and Amish, that a woman is to always wear a head covering. These verses teach that a woman is to wear a head covering in exactly the same situations that a man is not to wear a head covering. If a woman is to always wear a head covering, then a man must never cover his head, whatever the weather. But Mennonite and Amish men often wear hats. The way they get around this is to artificially define the head covering in unbiblical terms. According to their definition, a man's hat is not a head covering. In fact, these Mennonite definitions get so specific that they often define a head covering as precisely the type of covering worn by their particular branch of Mennonites. This can go so far that some Mennonites will consider the women's head coverings of other Mennonite churches improper coverings. But the Bible does not give us such precise definitions of head coverings.

Those who teach that women are to always wear a head covering miss the relationship between the long hair that a woman has all the time and the extra covering worn during the assembly of the saints. This is discussed below.

**Verse 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.**

The Greek word for "shorn" is *keiro*, and it means to have one's hair cut short or bobbed. The Greek word translated "shaven" is *xurao*. It means "shaved." Some think that Paul means the woman's hair when he refers to a covering. They say that Paul only means that a woman should have long hair, and that having her head uncovered only refers to cutting her hair. Let's read verses 5 and 6 as if that were true, by substituting "cut hair" or "hair cut" (for the sake of the grammar) for having an uncovered head and "long hair" for having a covered head: But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her *hair cut* dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman *has her hair cut* [shorn], let her also be shorn [cut her hair]: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her *have long hair*.

Obviously, Paul would not say that a woman having her hair cut is the same as having her hair shaved, and that if a woman has her hair cut, let her also cut her hair! Clearly, Paul has a covering in addition to hair in mind when he gives these instructions.

What verse 6 is saying is that if the woman, during the assembly, is not wearing a covering on her head in addition to her hair, then she may as well cut her hair short. Paul is using sarcasm. But if it is a shame for a woman to have her hair cut short (which this verse implies it is) or to be shaven (short hair and a shaven head are equally a shame to the inspired Paul), she should be wearing a covering in the meeting.

The notion that Paul is writing only of hair, and not of a covering in addition to hair, does not stand up to close examination.

**Verse 7: For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man.**

This is the reason the Holy Spirit says that women in worship are to wear a head covering and men are not to wear a head covering. It has nothing to do with fashion. It has nothing to do with modest dress. It has nothing to do with cultural norms. It has everything to do with glorifying God and Jesus Christ, His beloved Son. The man is the glory of God. When we assemble together, God's glory is to appear and not be covered. The woman is the glory of man. Thus, man's glory (the woman) should be covered so as not to detract from God's glory.

**Verse 8: For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man.**

Paul bases his argument on the creation order and the purpose for woman's creation (verse 9). Cultural norms have nothing to do with it.

**Verse 9: Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.**

God created the man first. He created the woman second, as a gift to the man, to be his helper (Genesis 2:18-23). Therefore, the man is God's glory, and the woman is man's glory. Knowing the relationship between man and woman, and Christ and the church (see, for example, Ephesians 5:24 and the surrounding verses), we see that a

woman wearing a head covering during church meetings pictures the submission of the church to Christ.

**Verse 10: For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.**

This verse has caused all kinds of conjecture. It is best to take it as naturally as possible. The Greek word translated "power" in this verse is *exousian*. Although it is often translated as "power" in the King James Version, its sense is that of "authority." For example, in Mark 2:10-11, Jesus said, "But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power [*exousian*] on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house." Jesus had the authority to forgive sins. And, in John 19:11, Jesus said to Pilate, "Thou couldest have no power [*exousian*] at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin." Luke 9:1 should settle the meaning of *exousian*: "Then he called his twelve disciples together, and gave them power [*dunamis*] and authority [*exousian*] over all devils, and to cure diseases." Here we see that the proper Greek word to translate as "power" is *dunamis*; *exousian* is "authority." The head covering, then, is the symbol that woman is under man's authority and by his authority participates (silently) in the public worship. The head covering shows that she has a rightful place in the assembly.

Why because of the angels? Again, we should let the Bible interpret this as best we can. That the angels are witnesses of what the church is doing is shown in such verses as 1 Corinthians 4:9, Ephesians 3:10, and 1 Timothy 5:21. In Isaiah 6:1-2, we see a picture of angels (seraphim) who covered their faces in the presence of God. As they cover their faces so that only the glory of God's face shows, so women in worship are to cover their heads so that only God's glory (man) shows.

Hence, it is not the culture that the head covering is supposed to speak to. It has meaning to the angels who are present in our public worship. Because the relationship of the man to the woman shows the relationship of Christ to the church, the head covering shows the subjection of the church to Christ. The angels, who are under a similar subjection, and show it by covering their faces when in God's presence at His throne, are witnesses of whether the women in a church are following this order. The assembly shows its submission to Christ (or

lack of it) by observing (or not observing) the head covering instructions.

**Verse 11: Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.**

Paul does not want to be misunderstood as teaching female inferiority. So he explains that, even though the woman is under the authority of the man because of their creation order, men and women are dependent on each other.

**Verse 12: For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.**

Eve was made from and for Adam, and men are born of women, but all things come from God and are for His glory.

**Verse 13: Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?**

This is the verse relied upon by those who say that the woman's head covering is merely a cultural issue. Isolated from its context, this verse can sound like Paul is saying that his readers should easily be able to judge this issue because a woman praying with her head uncovered is so obviously socially unacceptable. But the verses that follow explain that Paul is teaching the Corinthians a relationship between a woman's long hair and the extra covering she should wear while in the assembly. It is this relationship from nature that they should use to judge the matter.

**Verse 14: Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?**

How does nature teach that it is a shame for a man to have long hair? Many commentators misunderstand what Paul means by nature because they forget to let the Bible interpret itself. In verses 7-12, Paul has just explained the creation order of men and women. This is the nature that Paul is talking about. "Nature" is translated from the Greek *phusis*, which can mean (a) the natural constitution of, (b) the origin of, (c) the regular order of. The Creation account describes the origins and regular order of men and women. Nature, the Creation, tells us that man should not have long hair because man was made first and is, therefore, God's glory, and God's glory must not be

covered. In everyday life, long hair on a man covers God's glory (and in public worship, a head covering on a man would cover God's glory).

**Verse 15: But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.**

Woman was made from man. She is man's glory, and her long hair is her glory. It is given to her for an everyday covering, and she is not to cut it short. But, as we have already seen, she is to cover her hair when in church meetings so that only the glory of God—the man—is uncovered.

Of course, these things are types. Paul is not implying female inferiority. The male/female relationship is a type of the relationship between Christ and the church. When we worship, we are not to glorify ourselves, the church, but Jesus Christ. This attitude is pictured by the women in the church wearing head coverings. The head covering is a picture of the submission of the church to Jesus Christ.

**Verse 16: But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.**

Some people say that Paul is saying, after having explained about head coverings, that, if anyone challenges the matter, then we are to give in because the church does not really have such a custom. This is a completely unnatural reading of the text. It would make no sense for Paul to so thoroughly explain the head covering and then say we do not have to follow the teaching because we have no such custom.

Another misunderstanding of the verse is to say that Paul means that we have no such custom as contentiousness. True, the church has no such custom as contentiousness, but why should Paul say something so obvious? Would anyone seriously think that the church has a custom of contentiousness?

The Greek does, however, allow for a variation on the above. One might think that the word "custom" in this verse is the same as that translated "ordinances" in verse 2. But it is not. Here in verse 16, "custom" is translated from an unusual word, *sunētheia*. It can mean "custom," but, among other things that would not fit this context (such as "sexual intercourse" and "herding together"), it can also mean "habit" and "mutual habituation" (or "mutual addiction"). The word translated "contentious" is *philoneikos*. It means "love strife" or "fond of contention." So, this verse could be saying, "But if any man seem to

love strife, we have no such habit [or "mutual addiction"], neither the churches of God. In other words, if this interpretation is correct, Paul is being sarcastic. If anyone who loves strife wants to argue with him, he doesn't share an addiction for strife and neither do the churches. We are to do as he says and not argue about it.

The simplest and best understanding of the verse is that Paul is saying that if anyone is contentious, that is, takes an opposing view, "we" and "the churches of God" do not have a custom that supports the opposing view. The custom to follow is what has just been stated in the preceding verses.

Who is "we"? I think it refers to Paul and Sosthenes (see 1:1). I think we tend to forget that Paul did not always write alone. Paul says that the churches of God (plural) do not have a custom that opposes what he has just explained concerning the head covering. Paul knew the churches well, and he knew that none of them were acting contrary to his teaching in this regard.

### **Conclusion**

Let's look again at the seven common views of these verses.

**Viewpoint 1:** As we have seen, those who say that women must always wear a head covering are inconsistent in allowing men to ever wear hats. This view also misses the symbolism of the hair and the extra covering during public worship.

**Viewpoint 2:** Those who say that Paul was only trying to get the Corinthians in line with a social custom that does not speak to our culture today are opening a Pandora's Box. If we say that Paul's instructions concerning the head covering are only about a social custom, even though he does not say so, then why can we not say that baptism and the Lord's Supper are merely first-century social customs that do not speak to our times? In fact, if we allow this kind of picking and choosing without any internal, biblical evidence as to what is and what it is not a social custom, we can tear the Bible to shreds.

Further, those who promote this view often say they are supported by historical evidence. First, it is not historical evidence but the Bible that is to determine our beliefs and practice. But, second, the historical evidence is not on their side anyway. Some will say that Oriental women always wore a head covering, apparently not realizing that

Corinth is in Greece, which is in Europe, not the Orient. Others say that only temple prostitutes in Corinth did not wear a head covering. While this may have been true about 200 years before Paul wrote, it was not true of Paul's time. Extra biblical evidence shows that the Corinthian women of Paul's day were influenced by Roman culture and likely did not always wear a head covering, even during religious services. The men, however, often did wear a head covering during pagan worship ceremonies. So Paul's instructions, if they had any relationship to the prevailing culture, *were counter to it*. But, again, we must base our conclusions on the Bible, not extra-biblical evidence. And there is nothing in the Bible to indicate that Paul is telling the Corinthians to conform to their culture.

**Viewpoint 3:** Now that we have examined these verses, we can see that Paul says nothing in them to make us think he is addressing an issue of modesty. As even a Muslim author examining 1 Corinthians 11 on an Islamic website explains, the Islamic head covering is worn for modesty, but Paul teaches that Christian women are to cover their heads as "a sign of man's authority over woman." This author ends the article by asking, "Do any Christian women today cover their heads? It is true that most Christian women do not, and many don't take other teachings of the Bible (against pre-marital sex, adultery, etc) literally either" ("The Veil in Christianity"). This is a sad commentary on our churches by an outsider. Once again, if we take the head covering command to be only cultural or an issue of modesty, we are doing nothing less than tearing down the authority of the Bible.

**Viewpoint 4:** Saying that Paul has only long hair in mind as a covering makes a hash of the verses in question, especially verses 5 and 6. This explanation simply does not stand up to close examination.

**Viewpoint 5:** Saying that Paul was teaching that women are to be silent in assembly (1 Corinthians 14:34-35), but, in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, permitted women to publicly pray and prophesy outside of the assembly as long as they cover their heads is not supported by the context. The context of verses 2-16 of 1 Corinthians 11 is the meeting of the saints. The Bible seems to indicate that those daughters, handmaidens, and virgins who had the gift to prophesy did so in a family context in their own homes. Certainly, the Bible never records or even mentions their prophecies.

**Viewpoint 6:** If Paul is saying that women should have their heads covered when speaking in public worship, but they should not be speaking in public worship anyway (1 Corinthians 14:34-35), then we

must conclude that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is basically useless. This is completely inconsistent with the high view of Scripture that I hope most of us have. God does not inspire useless Scripture. If these verses are to make sense, then “praying or prophesying” must refer to something other than just speaking.

**Viewpoint 7:** There is only one view that fits all of the biblical evidence. In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul is teaching that men are to have their hair cut short and not wear a head covering during church meetings. Women are to have long hair as an ordinary covering, but are to put on an additional covering during public worship. The man’s head is to be uncovered because, being made first, he is the glory of God. The woman is to have long hair (not shorn close) as a sign of her submission to man. Because her hair is her glory and because she is man’s glory, during the Christian assembly, she is to wear an additional covering over her hair. In this way, man’s glory—the woman—is covered, and God’s glory—the man—is uncovered. The head of the woman is the man, the head of the man is Christ, and the head of Christ is God. In not following these instructions, we are ultimately dishonoring Christ and God. Because the relationship between the man and the woman is typical of the relationship between Christ and the church, this covering of man’s glory and uncovering of God’s glory is typical of the church not glorifying itself, but submitting to and glorifying its head, Jesus Christ.

The head covering, therefore, is a remarkable sign of Jesus Christ’s headship over the church. Those who see the head covering as only a relic from a bygone or far-away culture or as a matter of modesty or as a legalistic dress code or merely as the hair are missing its profound meaning. Being careful to follow Paul’s instructions concerning the head covering is no more outdated or legalistic than following the biblical instructions concerning baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

But, some may still ask, does not God look upon the heart and not the outward appearance? It is true that God looks on the heart, but the attitude of the heart is reflected in our willingness to obey. We cannot fool God. He knows the motives behind our outward actions. The motive must be right, but so should the outward actions. If we are unwilling to do what the Bible says we should, there is something wrong inwardly.

We certainly should not be whitened sepulchers, giving only an outward appearance of righteousness. This is hypocrisy. It is certainly possible for a woman to wear a head covering and not be submissive

to her husband's God-given authority. But it is also possible for someone to be baptized and regularly take the Lord's Supper and be a hypocrite. Should we, then, all stop being baptized and eating the Lord's Supper so as not to appear to be hypocrites? Of course not!

I have no doubt that there are many converted, God-fearing women attending church without a head covering. But I suspect that the reason is that they are unaware of the meaning of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and may even have been taught a wrong understanding of this passage. If they are taught and accept the truth about the head covering, their inward attitude will be reflected in their outward conformity to Paul's inspired instructions.

I know of Christians who see the head covering as a practice followed by people they consider to be spiritually weak and fearful. I hope that this article shows the case to be the opposite. It takes faith and courage to honor the Lord by wearing something as conspicuous as a head covering, especially when no one else in your church is doing so. It takes no courage to blend in with the culture of the day and say the head covering is outdated.

There are sovereign grace preachers who are cautious to baptize only proper subjects using the right mode. They are careful about whom they administer the Lord's Supper to and the elements they use. But when the head covering is mentioned, they dismiss it as cultural or say the hair is the covering and then emphasize that they preach only Jesus Christ and Him crucified. But having a proper emphasis on the central message of the Gospel does not mean that we should forsake conducting our meetings according to biblical instructions.

It is my sincere prayer that this article will cause Christians to see that the Bible teaches that women are to wear a head covering in the assembly. I also pray that pastors will reexamine this issue, see that the Bible teaches the head covering, and lovingly and patiently reintroduce this beautiful picture of the submission of the church to Jesus Christ our Lord.