

Teachings about Head Coverings in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

A Short Commentary on Arguments For and Against

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Key Question: Paul is arguing that a woman must have her head covered while praying or prophesying in the assembly and men must not. How should this apply today and why?

I. Arguments from the text

Context and purpose of Paul's address

- In 1 Corinthians Paul delivers 11 correctives of which 11:2-16 is one
 - Division over leaders
 - Immorality
 - Litigation
 - Going to prostitutes
 - Marriage
 - Food sacrificed to idols
 - Head coverings
 - Abuse of the Lord's Supper
 - The need of intelligibility in the assembly
 - Authority
 - Angels
 - On women remaining silent
 - The resurrection of the believers
- Context before the passage
 - Idolatry
 - Believer's freedom
 - Follow my example as I follow Christ
 - Praise for holding to the teachings
- Paul is responding to a letter from the Corinthians that we don't have
- The two crucial contextual questions, what was going on and why, are especially difficult to reconstruct (Fee, p. 492).
- Some of the key terms provide uncertainty of meaning: "head", "having down the head", "uncovered", "glory", "authority over her head", "because of the angels", "in the place of a shawl", "such custom" (Fee, p. 492).
- This all makes this an exceedingly difficult passage to interpret.

The ordered spiritual world (3-6)

- Headship of man/Christ; woman/man; Christ/God.
 1. Head = chief, overseer, ruler
 2. Head = source of life, origin
- Central issue: the use of “shame, disgrace, and dishonor” (as a result of women blurring sexual distinctions)
 1. Woman prays or prophesies with head uncovered
 2. Man prays or prophesies with head covered
- Covering
 1. Hair (long)
 2. Cloth covering

The Creation order (7-12)

- Man is the image and glory of God, i.e. ‘reflects’ God’s glory?
- Women is the glory of man, she was created ‘for him’
- Woman came from man
- “For this reason and because of the angels” (10)

Observations from the natural world (13-16)

- Central issue brought forward again including the issue of “shame”
- “Think about your own world for a moment”
 - Long hair = disgrace for man
 - Long hair = glory for woman
- No “such custom” (apparently of the kind these women are contending for)

II. Arguments from history

- It seems that until the middle of the twentieth century, women in every Christian faction in the world practiced some form of head covering in the assembly
- Early Christian writers: references to head covering are rather scant

III. Arguments from culture

- “Cultural” can mean a number of things:
 1. The covering of the head by women was common practice showing the distinction between men and women in that culture.
 2. The culture surrounding the early church routinely saw women covered to various extents in different ways.
 3. Many of the practices of the early church became part of a “Kingdom culture”, i.e. they are not open to a “cultural interpretation” (Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, Eldership, etc).
- The Bible teaches timeless truths that are not open to cultural, i.e. worldly, interpretation (Romans 12:1-2).

IV. Why should a woman wear a head covering when praying in the Church?

1. The simplest reading just states that. If I am not sure, why would I just not do it out of obedience to God's word?
2. The reference "because of the angels" – even if I don't completely understand what it means – makes a very strong argument that there is no "cultural relativity." This is supported by the broad agreement that there was no uniform practice with regard to women wearing head covering in religious rites. Therefore Paul was handing down a universal rule, based on the natural order of things: God, Christ, man, and woman.
3. Many excellent and credible scholars come down on this conclusion.
4. The 11 directives Paul gives in 1 Corinthians are all very clear and important to Paul. Why would this be the only "exception?"
5. It was the practice of the church for the better part of its existence.

V. Why should a woman not wear a head covering when praying in the church?

1. The text is very difficult to interpret since we cannot reconstruct what was going on. Paul taught to a well understood need – which we don't understand anymore today (because we are not privy to the other side of the conversation). The Corinthians clearly understood what he was talking about.
2. It is the only place this issue is raised in the NT. The Holy Spirit would have made it clearer if it was important today (the fact that Paul seems the least emotional of all issues in 1 Corinthians seems to support this thought).
3. Many excellent and credible scholars come down on this conclusion.
4. Head covering was a sign for something. It is a sign for something today (Germans don't take off their hats when the national anthem is sung). So it was cultural, even if we don't know what it meant.
5. It seems that Paul was teaching more general doctrine here (order in the church) rather than a specific behavior (which is consistent with the context).

VI. Conclusion

We firmly believe that the issue of head coverings falls into the realm of Romans 14. Everyone should consider, then choose, then accept both their own choice and the choices that others make. Hopefully at the end of this everyone will feel the need to pray about what to do, some may even feel the need to explore the issue more deeply, but everyone should feel free to settle on a personal practice without doubts or fears gnawing at them as they go forward. Further, everyone should be willing and able to defend, with a spirit of unity and respect, the choices that others make.