

# Covering the Head

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### An Article in Response to Frequent Questions Regarding 1 Co 11:1-16.

Paul wrote a fascinating passage to the Corinthians that laid down principles regarding coverings of the head. There he gave counsel for women, for men, for persons in worship and in prayer, and for persons inclined to argue about such things.

From the counsel given Christians have historically come to one of the following conclusions:

1. The counsel was historically and culturally sensitive, adapted to the social norms of the first century church in Corinth. Its counsels teach us some important principles but are not applicable in a literal way to our situation.
2. The counsel is authoritative for Christians in all places and at all times. Women should have their hair covered with a bonnet or some other similar device.
3. The counsel is authoritative for Christians in all places and at all times. Women should cultivate a feminine appearance by growing out their hair. Men should cultivate a masculine appearance by keeping their hair short.

I would like to begin the study with a point that might fit nicely into any one of the three views. Namely:

**1Co 11:16 But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.**

Whatever position I come to I should abide by it in life. But the femininity or masculinity of hair or

coverings was not customarily made an issue of debate in Corinth or in the other first century churches. It just is not that kind of issue where a variety of opinions must be harmonized for the church to function effectively.

Next I would like to eliminate the first of the three traditional views as scripturally erroneous.

There are ways to hint at cultural norms and local situations. Paul indicated that his counsel regarding celibacy was given, “not by commandment” but “by permission.” It was not to test all persons in all ages for it was written in view of the “present distress”, the persecution lethally dividing many young Christian homes. 1 Co 7:6, 26.

But 1 Co 11:1-16 is couched in no such culturally-sensitive language. Rather, it is worded in universal language that can be recognized by anyone who takes the scripture as its own interpreter.

Verse three speaks of “every man” being headed by Christ. Verse four speaks of “every man praying.” Verse five speaks of “every woman that prayeth.” Verse seven speaks of man being made in the “image” of God as a reason for the counsel. Verse eight refers to the creation order of Adam and Eve at the founding of the human race.

Verse nine speaks of God’s purpose in making the feminine gender. Verse twelve brings these things up again and beckons men to consider that they all have female mothers. Verses thirteen to fourteen invite the reader to make a judgment call, not based on cultural norms, but rather on what “nature itself” teaches.

It would be difficult to make a more emphatic point that what you are writing is for the race and not merely for first century Corinthians.

A third point to make would be that Paul was not innovating. He introduces the issue of coverings

by bidding the Corinthians to follow him as he has followed Jesus.

## **The Simple Answer**

Many Jewish writings are easier for western minds to decipher if they are read in reverse, reading the final thoughts first and working backwards. Bible writers often wrote **effect-cause-cause** where western minds are accustomed to reading **cause-cause-effect**.

This passage is no exception. We have already begun with verse sixteen (above). The next verse in reverse is:

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

This is not difficult of understanding. Long hair for a woman is “a glory to her.” It is feminine and comely. Her hair is gift from God to her, given her for “a covering.” A covering of what? Very apparently, “of her head.”

The verse before this is equally easy of understanding.

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

Where the natural instincts of the race have not been corrupted (as they are in homosexuality, for example), comparatively short hair is considered a masculine trait. Long hair, according to nature (even if not according to society) ought to embarrass a male as being feminine. By way of contrast, his hair was not given him for a covering of the head.

If we understand these three verses, 1 Co 11:14-16, the rest of the passage comes together nicely.

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

Paul was appealing to the natural feelings of uncorrupted persons. Do persons, naturally, still associate long hair with females? It was a counter-culture movement that brought in long hair for the men. And what exactly does Paul bid us judge? Namely whether an uncovered person is “comely” in prayer.

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

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

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

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

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

Whether the symbol of submission to authority that the woman “ought” to have is a covering of hair or otherwise, these verses mean the same thing. They teach that women were created to help men and, at the same time, that both genders were to be mutually dependant in God’s plan.

God’s original plan helps us understand the verse before these ones.

**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.**

So man was made in God's image. Apparently he was made well for communion with God. That is what he was made for. And the woman was made, by the analogy of the verse, for communion with the man. When he speaks to his Creator his masculinity ought not be obscured by long hair. And when she was made, she was also made well. She was made feminine. When she talks to her husband, he appreciates this feature of her existence. And her Creator does also.

**4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head.**

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

**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.**

These verses can be read simply as they stand when the verses following them are taken at face value. A praying man with long hair dishonors his Creator who made him masculine. And a praying woman with short hair belittles her femininity and thus her role as a helper to her husband. Thus her husband is dishonored.

And if she have short hair it is not that much different, in terms of femininity, than if she were shaved. Bald is masculine, short hair is masculine.

And Paul tries to use the repugnance of the thought of a bald woman to move ladies to treasure their covering of long hair.

And the issue of authority is the root issue in the relation of the genders. That is how Paul introduced the whole topic.

**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.**

That is all there is to the passage regarding hair and coverings. It is neither complex nor obscure. If we accept that “hair was given her for a covering” and that women should be feminine, all is clear.

Yet there is one other point. Conscience rules the Christian. If a woman reading this is not persuaded that she could please her Savior while removing her bonnet, let the bonnet remain. A conscience void of offence against God is an inestimable treasure. It is worth the loss of friends and warmth to keep it, though it must always be kept with friendliness and warmth.

This is the point of:

**Ro 14:22 Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. 23 And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.**

Amen.

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