

The Book of 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 11:1-16

Session 42: Head Coverings

1 Cor. 1:1-4:21 – The reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness (RCI) concerning ungodly thinking

1 Cor. 5:1-10:33 – The RCI concerning ungodly living

1 Cor. 11:1-16:24 – The RCI concerning ungodly labor

- 11:1-16 – ungodly labor as a result of being influenced by or catering to vain customs
- 11:17-34 – ungodly labor with regard to the Lord’s Table
- 12:1-14:40 – ungodly labor with regard to the spiritual gifts
- 15:1-58 – ungodly labor with regard to “good manners”
- 16:1-24 – concluding exhortations to further godly labor

In verses 1-16, Paul is solving the contradictions of heathen customs when they come into the church. Many cultural behaviors or customs have no impact on our spiritual lives, while others do.

For example, if a man carved idols in his old religion, and set them up in his home, and worshipped them, once he gets saved, he may naturally think he should do this with his new faith. Even though his intentions may be good, if he were to attempt to make an image of the true and living God, and worship that image, he would be violating his faith.

God would not be flattered by such worship and condemns it in the strongest of terms. The man may not understand why this would be so upsetting to God, but until he does, it would be wise for him to set aside his old ways of worship until he understands how God desires to be worshipped. This way, he does not hinder his own spiritual life, nor that of others who are observing him.

This is what was happening with the Corinthians. Their past ways of worship had crept into the church. This was probably done honestly, as a manner of custom.

But Paul sees these different customs and together, they violate some important principles which God Himself has established.

There is a lot of different ways this passage gets explained. I do not encourage you to search them all out because this is actually a cultural issue which is not present with us today. The practice of head coverings had meaning for the Corinthians, but it doesn't for us today. What is important today are the principles of headship which Paul outlines in verse 3.

Let's start by reading the passage.

1 Corinthians 11:1 Be ye followers of me, even as I also *am* of Christ. ² Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered *them* to you. 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. 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. 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. 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. ¹³ Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered? ¹⁴ Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? ¹⁵ But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for *her* hair is given her for a covering. ¹⁶ But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.

Looking back at verses 4-5, traditionally, Christians have interpreted these head coverings to mean "hats."

1 Corinthians 11:4 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.

I don't think this has anything to do with hats, as we will see.

In order to understand what is going on here, we need to know some things about what was going on back in Paul's day.

First, let's get some background. Corinth is a mission church. When Paul writes this letter, most of the people in the church had been saved less than five years. Secondly, most of them were converts from pagan religions. Therefore, they were bringing into the assembly many of their practices and customs which they had before they were saved.

That is the same thing missionaries face today when they go to the foreign field; people hear the gospel and trust Christ, but they have a tendency to bring aspects of their unsaved lifestyle (their culture) into their new life in Christ.

Corinth was a Roman Colony (44 B.C.) by Julius Caesar. The Roman culture and value system was heavy in Corinth. Because it is located in Greece, of course the Greek culture would also be strong. This was a city of people from all over the world; Jewish people, Egyptian people, Asian people, etc.

The point is that the people from all these different backgrounds did not all practice religion the same way before they were saved. So, as we study through this passage, keep in mind that there were a variety of cultures in play.

The oldest and most common interpretation of 11:2ff is that in the church in Corinth there were a group of women who were troublemakers. They didn't keep their heads covered like they were supposed to, and people thought they looked like prostitutes because their heads weren't covered when they came to church. And the teaching was that Paul was telling these women to go around with a head covering so they would not look like prostitutes. This has been the standard interpretation of this passage for many years.

But, as we look at the text, we will find there are some other ways to look at the passage which actually address the issues Paul is interested in.

For example, look at verse 4.

1 Corinthians 11:4 Every man praying or prophesying, having *his* head covered, dishonoureth his head.

From this verse we see that Paul has some concerns about what the men in the church were doing, and not just some women.

Now, put verses 4-5 together.

1 Corinthians 11:4 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.

Paul says, if a man prays or prophesies with his head covered, he dishonors his head, and if a woman prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, she dishonors her head. Evidently, this is not just a problem with the women. All through this section (verses 1-16) Paul gives equal attention to behavior changes for both men and women.

So, what is Paul referring to when he talks about men praying or prophesying with their heads covered?

The background for men having their heads covered when they engage in certain acts of worship comes out of Roman culture. It was the normal practice in Roman culture (not Greek or Egyptian or Asian cultures) that whenever a Roman would pray, prophesy or make a sacrifice, they would take their Roman toga and pull it over the top of their head.

The toga: a distinctive garment of Ancient Rome, was a roughly semicircular cloth, between 12 and 20 feet in length, draped over the shoulders and around the body. It was usually woven from white wool, and was worn over a tunic.

The type of toga worn reflected a citizen's rank in the civil hierarchy. Various laws and customs restricted its use to citizens, who were required to wear it for public festivals and civic duties.

Now, keep track of how we got here; we were identifying the “head covering” which Paul is referring to in chapter 11. I have already told you it was when the toga was pulled over the top of the head when a person was engaged in certain worship ceremonies. Let's look at some pictures.



Caesar Augustus as Pontifex Maximus

This title originated in the Roman Empire where it referred to Caesar as the high priest. The term literally means “greatest bridge-builder.”

Sometimes the Roman ruler was portrayed in his military attire and other times in his religious attire. In this picture, it is his religious attire. Notice that his head is covered. This is the normal way Romans dressed when they were engaged in religious worship, such as praying or prophesying.



This is a statue of the Roman Emperor, Tiberius. Again, he is portrayed in his religious position as high priest of the Roman religion.

Notice in these two pictures, it is not a “face covering” as in Islam, but a “head covering.” This is what Paul is referring to.



These are pictures of Roman sacrifice. Notice the head covering worn by the priest.



There are three times when Romans covered their heads 1) when praying, 2) when prophesying, 3) when sacrificing. Why were these instances of worship the only times when they would cover their head? Because the covering indicated a submission to the God they were engaged in worshipping.

In 1 Corinthians 11:4-5, the two practices Paul mentions are when Christian men and women are praying or prophesying.



This is the Ara Pacis Augustae, or the Altar of Peace. It has carvings all down its sides, and it is quite large.



This is one of the carvings on the Ara Pacis, picturing the royal family going to sacrifice, some of them with the head covering.



This is another carving on the Ara Pacis showing them going to sacrifice, with the participants wearing a head covering. See the guy with the axe over his shoulder, which is to be used in the sacrifice ceremony.



Roman women also participated in the worship practices and when they did, they covered their heads, as you can see here.





If you look at the wand or staff in the hands of some of these – that wand or staff was used in prophesying. Any time you see this instrument, it is clear that this is a religious occasion which included prophecy.



This wand is called an “augur’s wand” not to be confused with “auger” or “agar.” An augur was a priest in the classical Roman world. His main role was augury, the interpretation of the will of the gods by studying events he observed within a predetermined sacred space called the templum. The templum corresponded to the heavenly space (sky) above.

The augur’s decisions were based on what he personally saw or heard from within the templum. These could include thunder, lightening or an accidental signs such as falling objects, but in particular birdsigns; whether the birds he saw flew in groups or alone, what noises they were making, the direction of flight, what kinds of birds, how many there were, etc.

If you look at this picture, you actually see a chicken at the feet of the augur who is holding the wand. This was significant in that if there were no wild birds to observe, or weather patterns to see, domesticated chickens would be released into the templum where their behavior, particularly how they fed, could be studied by the augur.



Sometimes, the head covering was not a part of a toga, but it was a cap, like in this picture. This cap was used particularly when a religious official was giving a prophecy. While a normal person who was praying or prophesying would cover his head with his toga, a priest was more likely to have a cap to cover his head when prophesying.

Not everyone who attended a religious ceremony had their head covered, only those who were officiating in one of the three aforementioned ways.



This is a 1st century B.C. Roman coin. It shows the worship head covering. Do you see that little jug behind his head? That is a jug used for libations or liquid sacrifices, and in the front of his neck, we can see the staff used when prophesying.

This imagery was everywhere: on coins, statues, monuments, artwork, etc. This was known by everyone. It was not secretive. It was common in Roman territories and especially in Roman colonies.

I have given you this so you can visualize the physical practice that Paul has in mind.

In Romans 11:4-5, Paul says that Christian men are doing at least two of the three things which pagan Romans were doing; praying and prophesying. And there were some women in the church who were praying and prophesying with their heads uncovered. And these things were bothering Paul. We will see why shortly.

In the makeup of the Corinthian house-churches, you would have Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Jews, and people from Asia Minor. They all brought to the church all kinds of practices and customs from before they were saved. Some of those might have been acceptable, but some were not.

The Christian men and women who prayed or prophesied with their heads covered would have been from the Roman culture. This was what they had always seen done and they were just continuing to do what they were used to.

There were also some men and women in the church who were praying or prophesying with their heads uncovered. These would have been everyone who was not from a Roman culture.

So, why is Paul so concerned about this? Firstly, notice that Paul is not concerned with what people wear or don't wear when they come to the church. Verse 5 does not say that any woman who comes to church with her head uncovered has dishonored her head; it said that if she prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, then she dishonors her head.

Neither is this talking about modest Christian attire for a woman when she is out in public. The head covering issue was only for those who were praying or prophesying as part of a public worship service where both men and women were present.

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1 Corinthians 11:1-16

Session 43: Head Coverings

So, again, what is Paul concerned about? I think we find the answer to this question in verse 3.

1 Corinthians 11:3 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.

Paul is setting forth positions of authority. The head of every man is Christ. The head of the woman is the man. The head of Christ is God. These are not statements of worth or inferiority, but of position.

As an example, let's talk about the divine institution of the church. There are, within the church, positions and offices. The pastor of a church is not more important than the members, and the members are not inferior to the pastor. But, Pastor is a position of headship within the church, and someone must fill the position by preaching and ministering. The church then puts itself willingly into a position of submission to that position whereby they are ministered to in the way God intended and the church functions as God designed it to function.

1 Corinthians 16:15 I beseech you, brethren, (ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and *that* they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints,) ¹⁶ **That ye submit yourselves unto such**, and to every one that helpeth with *us*, and laboureth.

In every divine institution there are positions of authority and positions of submission to that authority. In fact, in every institution, whether it is divine or of men, there is a structure of authority which is necessary if the thing is to actually function.

Our American culture doesn't like the word submission, so when people read Paul's epistles and see that word "submit," they react against it. But, in the kingdom of God, submission is not a bad thing at all, in fact, it is a noble attribute that acknowledges an authority structure. Proper submission is not about being weak, it is about being godly.

We are so engulfed by our notions of democracy that we think this is the only legitimate form of government. But when Jesus shows up, it will not be a democracy. And “civil disobedience” against Him or His laws will not be met with dialogue, but with a rod of iron.

Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, the Creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, He has no trouble submitting to the authority and will of His Father. Why? Because in the ordained order of things, God is the Head of Christ.

As godly men who understand the underlying principles which God has put in place, we gladly recognize that Christ is the Head of every man. This does not convey anything negative about us, or anything demeaning. While it is true that we are not equal with Christ, this is NOT what submission is about! But this is what people think, which is why they brace themselves against wives submitting to their husbands because they interpret this as somehow being less important or having less value than men. Unfortunately, many have acted like this was the case; this is not the case.

The pastor, in turn, while not relinquishing his position or authority, becomes a servant to all the members of the assembly.

1 Corinthians 9:19 For though I be free from all *men*, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more.

The positions are not a statement of worth or value, but of responsibility and authority. The same is true in the genders. The man is the head of the woman. But Christ is the head of the man. And God is the head of Christ. It means that we all submit ourselves to the positions that God has set forth.

Head coverings, whenever they were used, were symbolic of submission. So, here is what was going on in Corinth: they had non-Roman women in the church praying or prophesying with uncovered heads (implying authority), while at the same time Roman men in the church covered their heads when praying or prophesying (implying submission) these all seemed to defy and blur the principles of verse 3.

I think they are doing what they are doing largely out of ignorance. They did not realize how this looked to anyone who understood God's authority structure.

Notice that Paul is not talking about when just women meet together for study, or when just men meet together. To be honest, we have no record of gender restrictive services from the early church. That doesn't mean they didn't, it means we don't know if they did or not. Even if they did, that is not the context of Paul's comments. He is talking about when men and women are together, their participation in aspects of worship should support the authority structure of headship which God has put into place.

If we discard the structure, we either destroy or render ineffective the institution. What am I saying? I am saying that God set up structures of authority and submission for a purpose.

In other words, when the different cultures of the world came together in the house-churches at Corinth, those different cultures, operating in accordance with their old customs, sent a mixed message (they presented a picture) which contradicted God's structure and purpose.

What Paul is after is that if they are going to retain any kind of head covering issue, then it must be done in accordance with God's structure of authority.

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

What does Paul mean, "if any man seem to be contentious?" He means, "If any man has a problem with what I am telling you about these roles of men and women, then understand that we have no such custom, and neither do the churches of God." In other words, it may work like that when you are worshipping Zeus, or Aphrodite, but it doesn't work like that with the true and living God.

Were there any people that opposed Paul and his teachings? Yes. They would read what Paul wrote in chapter 11 and they would not believe it, they would not agree with it. These people are contentious. What difference does it make? We have been doing it this way for centuries. Now, here comes Paul telling them they need to stop.

Let me ask you, do you know what you get when you quit identifying the roles of gender, or when you abandon the structure of authority for men and women? You blur the roles of men and women and corrupt the divine institutions connected to them. And if you do that long enough, girls will think they are boys and boys will think they are girls. Then they will have sex change operations, and the resulting contradiction of who these people really are, and who they are trying to be, will drive these people to the highest suicide rates in the world.

As Paul anticipates opposition to what he is writing, he brings up the subject of hair length in order to make his point. There are some people who are going to say to Paul, “We just don’t see it the way you do. We don’t think the head covering has anything to do with anything. We can’t see how what is on your head has anything to do with gender at all.”

Because Paul is going to say that what is on your head does have something to do with gender. So what Paul is doing here, by talking about hair length, he is giving a supporting argument from nature to teach that what is on your head as a covering has something to do with gender.

If I can put this in the vernacular of today, Paul is making the point (by talking about long hair on men or women being bald) that if you went to bed at night, and when you woke up in the morning, all the men had long hair and the women were bald, you would know something unnatural (something contrary to nature) happened during the night. In other words, you wouldn’t just see that and say, “so what?”

The hair length issue is not about men coming to church with hair down to their shoulders or women coming to church who are bald, but it is an argument based on what he assumes would be common ground. And what is that common ground? That, in terms of gender, the hair which God has given to men as a covering is different from that given to women.

Paul is supporting his argument about head coverings as they pertain to gender by pointing to an accepted understanding of how the hair coverings are different between genders. My old independent Baptist days notwithstanding, this is not

about men having to cut their hair to a certain length before they can come to church.

Paul is using an example from nature, which he thinks the people would agree with, about men and women not being the same, as a supporting argument for his head covering instructions. He is saying that in nature, the hair of your head is the natural covering which God has given by nature.

It is true that how we see things depends upon our cultural background. There are women in tribal places in Africa, who come to church dressed in a way that would not be acceptable at Cross Branch Fellowship, or even in the city of Glen Rose.

There are believers in Jesus who live in Middle Eastern countries who, if the people here at Cross Branch were to visit in their services, would find our women to be unacceptable, because your face and part of legs can be seen. To them, that is unacceptable. The point here is to say that various cultures see dress differently.

So, here is Paul speaking to a multi-cultural group, and he is trying to present God's plan concerning the genders and their related structures of authority and headship.

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.

If a woman's hair is her glory – and it is, then it is not natural for a woman to be bald. If her head is shaved – which was often the case in centuries past when a woman was found to be of immoral nature her head was shaved and she was paraded through the public streets – it was a shame and disgrace to her.

For a man, whose short hair was less of a head covering than the long hair of a woman; it was not a shame for him to be bald. The unnatural thing was for a man's hair to be long like a woman's. As the Romans and Greeks well knew, it was a natural thing for a woman to have long hair and for a man not to have long hair. It was a confusion of the gender roles. And while there is no spiritual knowledge or maturity which automatically comes from a man not having long hair, the violation of these concepts will lead to more ungodliness.

In this country, we went through a time when some men wanted long hair and just about everyone thought that it was okay – live and let live – and anyone who didn't see that, well, there was something wrong with them. But I see the ignoring of biblical principles as leading to a progressive downward spiral. So where are we today? Gender confusion. And now we find ourselves in a debate where we want to erase the genders and pretend there are no differences. Or, we want to create a hundred different genders and act like they are all legitimate. Don't think it is going to stop there. We are still on this downward spiral and this is just one more evidence of it.

I know that in an audience the size of ours, there will be someone who has a family member who is caught in this trap of the policy of evil (PoE). You love them and I understand that. You should. So how should we be looking at them?

2 Timothy 2:25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; ²⁶ And **that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil**, who are taken captive by him at his will.

This is where *Sonship Transformation* can be a great first step for them to no longer be a captive to this kind of lifestyle, but can experience true freedom in Christ. This ought to be our aim, to love them and speak the truth in love so they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil.

My point here is to say that Paul is not using the hair issue as a separate issue which he is instructing the body of Christ in, but what Paul is after here is to reinforce his original argument, that the head covering issue is about our actions accurately reflecting the biblical principles of headship.

Here is the last issue for this section of scripture. There are a couple of things which Paul says whereby we can know that this instruction is not intended to be for every church; it is specific to Corinth.

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

Having supported his argument from nature, Paul now winds up his argument for the head covering issue. “If any man seem to be contentious” is not about hair length, it is about his comments on head coverings while praying or prophesying.

In reference to this, Paul says “we have no such custom” which means, when it comes to this issue of wearing a head covering when you pray or prophesy, Paul says he has no such custom as the employment of head coverings.

The whole idea of men covering their heads when they pray or prophesy came from their pagan religious Roman practices. The idea that women should pray or prophesy without a head covering comes from their religious past – which was non-Roman. By mixing these cultural religious practices, Paul is pointing out that they are doing it backwards. They are sending the very opposite picture of God’s truth as it pertains to believers in Jesus Christ. Doing it the way they were doing it, it looked like the men were in submission and the women were in authority, which is the opposite of what Paul writes in verse 3.

But in verse 16, Paul says he personally has no such custom – referring to head coverings when praying or prophesying.

And neither do his other churches. They all pray and prophesy the same, with their head uncovered. That is not to say that the principles of headship do not apply in every church, they do. But those principles are lived out in your life.

Let’s summarize:

The problem was the mixed cultures of religious practices resulted in sending a message counter to God’s truth.

Paul’s instructions were specifically for the church at Corinth.

Head coverings were only for those women engaged in praying or prophesying in a church setting with both men and women present.

Paul does not mean to make these instructions a custom for other churches.

In this DoGG, a woman does not have to wear a head covering to church, or at home. If she wants to, she can. Since the gifts of the Spirit are no longer in operation, the issue of praying or prophesying with her head covered is no longer an issue.