

## **Hair and Head Coverings in 1 Co. 11:1-16**

1 Co. 11 seeks order in the corporate worship of the church. The argument of 1 Co. 11:1-16 within that greater purpose attempts to persuade the Christian women of Corinth to both be modestly dressed and reflect their submission to their husbands in a corporate worship setting. The heart of the discussion revolves not around hair (though it is mentioned in verses 14-14), but the use of scarf-like hoods called “head coverings” which were used to cover a woman’s hair.

Because wearing one’s hair loosely flowing (or “uncovered”) in that society was considered a sight reserved only for a woman’s husband, the lack of head coverings became an easily recognizable trait of prostitutes. Women begin covering their hair either at puberty or after marriage, as their hair was viewed by men as the highest object of lust (much like the revealing nature of a skimpy bathing suit). It is well known that high society (the segment of Christians who most often hosted churches in their homes) did not cover their hair, but flaunted it with elaborate hairstyles; it is less well-known that such hairstyles did not simply reflect an offensive kind of gaudiness (the way many interpret the violation of “modesty” in 1 Tim. 2:9 and 1 Pet. 3:3); it was a brazenly seductive kind of adornment. In 1 Co. 11:3-16 Paul begins his argument by making a word-play between the literal “head” (as part of the body) and the figurative “head” (a reference to Christ). Verse 3 indicates that Christ is the “head” (figuratively) of a man, and a husband is the “head” of his wife (figuratively). Playing off of this usage, verse 4 indicates that if a man has his literal “head” covered while praying he disgraces his figurative “head”, namely Christ.

According to verse 4 “every man with something on his head while praying or prophesying” acts disgracefully because he associates himself with distinctly pagan practices in his worship. While this wasn’t a problem in the Corinthian church, or the issue at hand in this chapter, Paul mentions it in order to appeal to common ground with those in Corinth. Coverings were used for mourning by both men and women in Hebrew society (2 Sam. 15:30), but the covering of a man’s head in addition to a woman’s head in worship contexts was not a Judaistic practice (for the Jewish background of Corinth see Acts 18:4, 7-8). Male coverings for pagan worship, however, was a common practice among the pagan Greeks and Romans, making Jews further revile at the practice amongst themselves:

Among Romans, both genders veiled their heads in the presence of the sacred (Ovid *Met.* 1.398), and some Roman priests and priestesses wore head coverings (Oster, 495–96, 503; also Varro *Ling.* 5.29.130); both men (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Ant. Rom.* 15.9.2) and women (Plutarch *Rom.* 10, *Mor.* 266C) covered their heads for prayer and worship.

Both Paul and the Corinthians would agree that men should not have their head covered. Thus, after making a mutually acceptable statement in verse 4, Paul moves to the point of controversy, namely the Corinthian claim that women should be able to worship with uncovered heads as well – Paul says that this should not be so. 1 Co. 11:5 clearly states that if a woman lets her hair loose (that is, without a covering), that she is just like “those women who shave their heads,” which in Paul’s day referred to adulterous women who experienced the consequences of their adultery according to Roman Law (i.e. enduring the shame of a shaved head). In other words, just as a shaved head disgraced a woman’s husband, since it signified her unfaithfulness, promiscuity and rebellion, women who let their hair loose in a public worship setting cast similar shame upon their own husbands. Their provocative appearance, meant only to be seen by their husbands, causes other men to stumble.

Verse 6 goes on to argue that if a woman had the audacity to let her hair down during the service, she might as well just carry the action to its logical end, and shave off her hair entirely, piling higher the shame and dishonor she is heaping upon her husband and herself! But if she is concerned enough for her modest appearance, and Paul obviously appeals to the fact that she *should* be, then she should cover her head.

Verses 7-9 elaborate on how head coverings were not just a modesty issue but also a matter of submission. The husband has his head uncovered because in God's creation order, the man was created "in the image and glory of God", while the woman was made "in the image and glory of man." Speaking to husband and wife, Paul alludes to the garden, where the original husband (Adam) was given his wife (Eve), made from his side as his exclusive helper. Woman was man's image, taken from his own body, and his glory, made for his benefit. But the absence of head coverings violated this design. Head coverings communicated that the woman wearing them belonged exclusively to her husband. Thus absence of a head covering signified the opposite, namely a woman's single status and availability. Refusing to cover one's hair exhibited a rebellion against God's design for husband and wife, which is precisely the reason that Paul took issue with those who discarded such a practice. He concludes in verse 10 that a woman should cover her head and willingly accept the sign of her husband's authority, thus maintaining the role distinctions which exist by virtue of gender distinctions inherent in the creation order. Verse 10 also says that angels have some sort of vested interest in a woman's honoring of her husband, perhaps because they may look in on corporate worship (1 Pet. 1:12), or because saints will rule them in the future (1 Co. 6:3) and must make wise choices now to reflect our fitness to rule.

Not to be misunderstood, Paul balances his concern for a woman's submission with a statement about the dignity and honor of womanhood in verses 11-12 – indeed the woman was made from man, but man continues to have birth through the woman, and ultimately both only have their existence by virtue of God's initiative. Verse 13 continues the line of thought from the previous verses, asking the Corinthians to decide for themselves on the matter, based on the arguments he has just made, as an appeal to the obvious – "can't you see how it's wrong for a woman to pray with her head uncovered? In throwing off this symbol of her husband's authority and exposing herself as an object of lust to others she disgraces her husband, God, and herself!" In verses 14-15 Paul uses an analogy from the created order to illustrate his point. "Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering." Though these verses are commonly cited to govern hairstyles in the church, such an interpretation entirely misses the point of Paul's argument. Firstly, the "long hair" which was a dishonor to men but a glory to women was the *effeminate* sort of uncut flowing locks which were commonly worn by women of this period:

The normal Israelite custom, for both sexes, seems to have been to let the hair grow to considerable length. Absalom's luxuriant growth is recorded with apparent admiration (2 Sa. 14:26). It was only the weight of it that forced him to have it cut annually. Barbers are mentioned (Ezk. 5:1), but their function was to trim rather than to crop the hair. But by the NT period long hair was a 'shame' to a man (1 Cor. 11:14), although Paul made that statement to a church in Greece. Women, on the other hand, wore the hair long and practically uncut in both periods.

But secondly, these verses were not written to legislate hairstyles in the church. Paul's point in mentioning hair is not to admonish men to have short, cropped hair and women to leave their hair long or uncut. Rather it is intended as *part of his rationale for commanding women to wear head coverings*. He says that nature itself

alludes to some sort of need for the woman's head to be covered – a man's hair does not naturally grow as long as a woman's, and thus nature has, in effect, given a woman a "covering" for her head – her hair! His point then, is that since nature itself attests to the head's need for covering, women should wear the hoods or head coverings he has been arguing for.

The correct application of this passage is dependent upon the purpose for this discussion in the first place – namely, to emphasize propriety and the existence of role distinctions between men and women in a corporate worship context. Head met that purpose. Paul was concerned that women dress modestly, and in a way that did not muffle their distinction from and submission to their husbands. They should not dress in a way that dishonored their husbands by drawing attention away from Christ and to themselves. A Christian's personal dress-code must seek instead to reinforce God's design of Christ's headship over man and a man's headship over his wife. In applying these verses, then, the question becomes, "Would wearing head coverings in our day honor this principle?" Consider a quote from the following article by Kenneth T. Wilson, entitled, "Should Women Wear Head Coverings?":

The headship established by God should not be disregarded. To overlook God's distinctive function for men and women is disgraceful. That is true in any culture. The expression of disregard in the Corinthian culture was the removal of women's head coverings. Paul's response was to tell them to wear what was the normal cultural expression of male-female distinction. In the Greco-Roman culture that distinction was revealed by women wearing head coverings.

However, to require women today to wear head coverings in church is to ask them to do something abnormal rather than normal. This is exactly what Paul wanted to avoid. He wanted women to do what was normal in their culture in reflecting their womanhood and the creative order and distinction set forth in verse 3. To be obedient to this passage Christian women should not dress in a way that blurs the distinction between male and female.

The entire force of wearing a head covering is lost on the average 21<sup>st</sup> C. observer. But to the degree that symbolic accoutrements (such as wedding rings) can be used to demonstrate a woman's role of completion and submission to her husband, they should be gladly adorned. To the degree that a believer's clothes displays unrestrained pride, immodesty and an attitude of rebellion toward God's created order (1 Co. 11:3), they should be rejected in favor of a more "theologically fitting" attire.

To summarize, then, 1 Co. 11:1-16 is neither a mandate for long hair, nor does it establish the use of head coverings for Christian women of every generation. The purpose of this section of Scripture is to reinforce the role distinctives among men and women in a corporate worship setting. Though verses 14-15 are commonly used to legislate certain hairstyles in the Church, they were never intended to address such concerns. Yet the principles taught in 1 Co. 11:1-16 certainly could apply – if a woman were to cut her hair in a way that obscured her femininity, it would be undeniably inappropriate, as if a man were to wear his hair such that it obliterated his masculinity. But the problem with making hard and fast judgments about which hairstyles are "masculine" and which are "feminine" is that *the standard of what constitutes a sinful blurring of gender distinctions change*, even as they did during Bible times (different periods of OT era were accustomed to moderately longer hair for men than during the inter-testamental era, while Jewish men in the 1<sup>st</sup> C. often cropped their hair in much like the Romans did). If expressions of masculinity and femininity, at least in terms of hairstyles and head coverings, changed according to cultural influences from the writing of the Old Testament to the writing of the

New, how much more have such expressions changed from Bible times to modern times! Not only are women with tastefully cut short hair able to retain their femininity, but men with longer hair are able to avoid the appearance of being “effeminate.” Consequently the issue of head coverings and hairstyles in 1 Co. 11 must be applied in cultural expressions that are easily recognizable in a contemporary setting.