

“On Head Coverings: An Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11 for Modern-Day Women”

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1 Corinthians 11:2-16

In this passage, Paul reminds the women of church of Corinth to continue wearing head coverings in church, as their newfound freedom and equality in Christ does not mean they should disrespect their husbands.

- I. Introduction: Paul praised the Corinthians for following traditions, but needs to remind them of something.
1 Cor 11.2-3
- II. Content/Context: Keywords in the passage contribute to many theories of the interpretation, but we want to know the intended meaning.
1 Cor 11.3, 4-7, 8-9, 10, 11-12, 13, 14-15
- III. Conclusion/Application: Women don't have to have long hair or veils today, as was the custom back then, but there are modern customary ways to show honor and respect towards their husbands.
1 Cor 11.3, 11, 12, 13, 16

People have always been confused by some passages of the Bible that seem either contradictory or inapplicable to modern culture. I am no exception. One of the passages that has always baffled me is 1 Corinthians 11. This is the passage where Paul explains to the Corinthian

church the importance of the tradition of women wearing head coverings, specifically in church. Personally, I have always liked head coverings. There's something inside of me that wants to wear one all the time; it makes me feel beautiful and closer to God, as well as more devoted to my husband. After the exegesis of this passage, I think I finally understand why this is, and I can't wait to share it with you!

²*Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. ³**But**...*[emphasis added]

(Spiritual, 1 Cor 11.2)

Paul starts this portion of the letter commending the church of Corinth for keeping certain traditions that Paul had taught them. However, Paul is about to convict them of straying from one tradition in particular.

³**But** [emphasis added] *I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.*

(Spiritual, 1 Cor 11.3)

Paul appears to be describing relationships, for which the key is the word "head". "Head" in the original Greek is "kephale", and it can also mean "cornerstone" (*Blue Letter Bible*). A cornerstone is the stone people used back then as the starting point for a building. It was the first stone that was put down, and it was meant to be a corner. Every part of the building was build based upon that stone. They would lay stones on either side of it to create two walls, and would add other "cornerstones" for the other corners. Then, starting with the cornerstone, they would start building upwards. Once the walls were build, they would build the roof. The cornerstone was the foundation of any building. There are many verses in the Bible that allude to Christ being the cornerstone for believers, and we all know how much that relationship is compared to

marital ones (*Spiritual*, Ps 118.22, Isa 28.16, Acts 4.11, Eph 2.19-20). The question of the possibility of “head” in this case meaning “cornerstone” is at hand. On one hand it makes sense; man was built in the image of God—based on God—and woman was built out of man—based on man. Now the question is whether or not this one view fits in with the rest of the passage, because “head” could also refer to authority or rule, like Christ being the head of the church and the Father being the head of Christ. Perhaps this is akin to Jesus being “part of an ideal household”, as head of the house [the body of Christ, the church] (Osiek). In a similar way, “the husband is considered the head or the ‘covering’ for the wife” (Erickson). Since God stated that man should rule over women, and since God does rule over us, this theory seems even more likely (*Spiritual*, Gen 3.16).

⁴Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. ⁵But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. ⁶For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered.

(*Spiritual*, 1 Cor 11.4-6)

Here is the first mention of coverings, and it is used in conjunction with shaving. The first interesting thing I’d like to highlight is the different versions of the word “covering”. There is a word for men and a word for women. The man’s covering is the Greek “kata”, meaning down from, throughout, according to, toward, along, after, against, in, by, daily, as, etc (*Blue Letter Bible*). It seems to be referring more to an action or relationship rather than a physical piece of clothing. The woman’s covering is katakalypto (*Blue Letter Bible*). It is meshed from “kata” and the Greek “kalypto”. “Kalypto” means to hide, cover wholly, to veil, or to hinder the knowledge of a thing (*Blue Letter Bible*). **This** meaning is more literal than “kata”...or is it?

Let's talk veils. This is my personal theory constructed from my own research, Perry Stone's teachings, and a heaping portion of maternal influence. The tradition of wearing veils had to start somewhere, but most people assume it was started to force women to be inferior and submissive to men. While many cultures have adapted this belief still today, I do not believe it to be initially true. I believe the custom began in Genesis 6/Enoch 3 (*Spiritual*, Gen 6.1-7; Winter, Enoch 3.1-10). Enoch 3 includes some of the verses from Genesis 6 below:

¹And it came to pass when the children of men had multiplied that in those days were born unto them beautiful and comely daughters. ²And the angels, the children of the heaven, saw and lusted after them, and said to one another: "Come, let us choose us wives from amongst the children of men and beget us children." ³And Semjaza, who was their leader, said unto them: "I fear ye will not indeed agree to do this deed, and I alone shall have to pay the penalty of a great sin." ⁴And they all answered him and said: "Let us all swear an oath, and all bind ourselves by mutual imprecations not to abandon this plan but to do this thing." ...⁷And all the others together with them took unto themselves wives, and each chose for himself one, and they began to go in unto them and to defile themselves with them ...⁹And they became pregnant, and they bare great giants ...

(Winter, Enoch 3.1-4, 7, 9)

I believe it is because of this incident that women were required to wear veils to hide themselves from the fallen angels, who were tempted just as we are. God could not have Lucifer's angels disrupting the multiplication of human life, and, since the angels were drawn to the women rather than the other way around, it would make sense for them to be made to wear veils so as not to tempt the angels. From there, the custom would've evolved. The idolatrous cultures would've most likely rejected the angelic theory. Somewhere along the line, probably

due to Genesis 3:16, people began to interpret the custom the wrong way. This alone is probably where much of the confusion is. However, this does not mean that the “rule” theory should be dismissed.

⁷For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man is not from woman, but woman from man. ⁹Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man.

(Spiritual, 1 Cor 11.7-9)

I became very interested in this word “glory”. We know glory mostly as God’s glory, etc. I wondered especially if this was the same “glory” or not. Here, it is doxa, which means opinion/judgement/view, splendor, brightness, dignity, excellence, majesty, a thing belonging to God, resulting in praise, honor, and glory (*Blue Letter Bible*). I latched onto the definition “dignity”, which is akin to pride. I’ve always liked the phrase “glowing with pride”; perhaps this is something that could fit this passage. It is like saying, “man is the pride of God, but woman is the pride of man”. This theory could be applicable in conjunction with the cornerstone theory, that the source of woman is man and the source of man is God. God made man, and thus is proud of man. He did indeed say it was “very good” (*Spiritual*, Gen 1.31)! Man did not make woman himself, but woman was made from him, so it would make sense that man would feel proud of woman, and emotional that woman was a part of himself.

Indeed, woman was created as a companion and a “helper” for man (*Spiritual*, Gen 2.18). It would appear that this is the sole purpose woman was created for, thus, the “women are inferior” theory is somewhat credible. Only, women aren’t inferior as much as they are helpers. Personally, I also think God created woman to do all the things that man couldn’t do [you ladies know what I’m talking about!]. Our minds are wired differently, and I like to think that God wanted two different human points of view on the earth—perhaps to keep each other balanced. I

would love to elaborate, but I'd end up chasing a rabbit trail rather than staying on topic. Anyone who is married can understand what I mean by spouses balancing each other out.

¹⁰*For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the*

angels.

(Spiritual, 1 Cor 11.10)

This is actually one of the defining verses for the Enoch theory, however, I was shocked that the early church still kept this in mind. It seemed to have gotten lost between then and now.

Notice the word “authority”. The original theory about the veil hiding the women from the angels doesn't seem to match up with this word. The Greek word is “exousia”, and it means power, rule, liberty, strength, jurisdiction, freedom, privilege, and the veil with which propriety required a women to cover herself (*Blue Letter Bible*). To me, this symbol of authority is more of a symbol of protection; it is a husband's duty to cover his family, just like God covers the church. I think this veil is like a loving protective--and yet disciplined—symbol that God and man care for woman. I believe this veil is figurative as well as literal, at least in those days.

¹¹*Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the*

Lord.

(Spiritual, 1 Cor 11.11)

I'll let you in on a secret: this verse is the key to the intended meaning of the passage! As a married woman myself, I've often wondered if I am indeed still a woman, or just part of this married blob [can I say “blob”?] of husband and wife. I have a great analogy for this, but, like I said, I'm desperately trying to avoid rabbit trails. So the focus of this verse becomes “independence”. We often think of this word as it pertains to freedom, but that specific word isn't used as a meaning for this Greek word. Instead, “choris” means without, beside, separate, or by itself (*Blue Letter Bible*). Thayer's Greek Lexicon describes it as “having no association with” (*Blue Letter Bible*). Choris is used most often in the Bible as a preposition, namely “without”. Here's an example translation with such a preposition: In the Lord, man isn't by himself without woman and woman isn't by herself without man. I believe Paul is describing the freedom that we

have in Christ. If man were superior to woman, then he would have more freedom in Christ, and woman would be lower on the stool. But no, Paul essentially says that woman is right up there with man! “In Christ, we are all the same” (Erickson). Yet, “Paul states that differences are to exist between a man and a woman” (Erickson).

This forms the final theory: that the initial problem that Paul is addressing is the disrespect women were now bestowing upon their husbands because of their newfound freedom and equality in salvation. According to Gordon Fee, Paul wanted “the distinction between the sexes to be maintained” and the head coverings to remain on (Fee, 586). He also thinks that Paul qualifies woman’s use of authority to a degree (Fee, 578). This is a theory that would be applicable today. It bothers me somewhat that the fights for “women’s rights” are raging across the country. Sure, some women can do the same jobs men can do, but, let’s face it, those jobs were created for men because women are “the weaker partner” (*Spiritual*, 1 Pet 3.7). Many women are intelligent enough to have all the brainy jobs, but women were initially created as a helper to man, the means by which man could accomplish God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply” (*Spiritual*, Gen 1.28). Face it ladies, we were made to have babies. The women’s rights activists are focused on killing unborn babies. It seems to me like a defiance of God’s command and purpose for woman.

In the end, Paul instructs the Corinthian church to decide amongst themselves (*Spiritual*, 1 Cor 11.13). Fee takes this as a sign that this topic isn’t a “life-and-death matter” (Fee, 586). I think that Paul meant that the church of Corinth could decide whether or not to have the women wear veils, but that is the extent of Paul’s leniency. I believe the instruction for wives to remember their purpose and their place as man’s helper is what Paul wanted them to focus on—and that’s what I choose to focus on. It looks as if Paul states that he and his brethren do not follow the custom of wearing veils (1 Cor 11.16). Pastor Scott Erickson stated, “Paul is using the

hair as an example”; he “insists upon female head-coverings to safeguard the honour of the community”, and reminds them that, even though “nature has provided woman with a head-dress of hair”, women aren’t “to consider this as a substitute for further covering” (Finney; Massey; *Spiritual*, 1 Cor 11.15).

To add to the Enoch theory, perhaps this is the point at which men started viewing women as inferior, because of this reprimand about continuing to wear veils. Knowing humanity’s tendency towards pride, this is a very likely possibility, and something to consider.

“Marginalization is a thing of the mind” (Nihinlola). Indeed, Paul is not discussing the inferiority of women, but rather explaining a relationship similar to the Godhead. “Christ is only functionally subordinate to the Father, not ontologically subordinate. The wife, too, is functionally subordinate to the husband” (What is the Head).

One last thing--and this is something most people miss—: this passage appears to be talking about head coverings **in church gatherings**, because of the mention of prophesy and prayer (1 Cor 11.4-5). There are many ways to interpret this, but this is mine: when we come before God, we have to examine ourselves to make sure our hearts are right with God in the “context of the potential presence of non-believers in a communal service of worship (*Spiritual*, 1 Cor 11.28; Finney). I think this helps the transition into the passage about communion (*Spiritual*, 1 Cor 11.17-34). If the issue back then was women dishonoring their husbands, that would definitely be something to gut out of their hearts before meeting with God.

It would seem that the intended meaning of this passage is actually all of these theories combined, with the main point being: respect your husbands. Personally, I like to wear head coverings from time to time. I think they are like buttons that activate our core purpose: to be a helper to our husbands and to serve the Lord and obey His instructions—especially the first one. So wives, if you ever need a lifeline to get yourself to clean the house, put on a long dress and

wrap a scarf around your head. Then stop and give thanks to God for the purpose that He's given you, the opportunity to carry out that purpose, and the freedom that you've found in His Son.

In addition, with the way the world has gone on to expand "women's rights", I am beginning to wonder if we should be called back to this passage, back to the reminder of what God created us for. While we are equal in Christ, we are not independent from men; we will always be here to assist them, not break away from them. I almost feel as if I'm forwarding Paul's *letter* to the modern church. As Paul suggested, remember this tradition and why it was in place. We hate hearing it, but we honestly do need to "remember our place". For, if we do not accept our submissive position to men, how do we expect to be submissive to God? I say take up that broom when you take up your cross! You are a woman. **Be** a woman.

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