

WOMEN'S HEAD COVERING IN THE CHURCH

A STUDY ON 1 CORINTHIANS 11 by Max Jefferies.

INTRODUCTION

Head coverings is one of a number of “done to death” topics that have and will continue to crop up all too frequently for most Christians. It is an area that some Christians use to judge the spirituality of another. For some it is an area to be completely ignored as it requires too much work to formulate an opinion, and yet others will not be drawn into any discussion on the topic at all, because of the argumentative nature of some. Yet all Christians must face this passage eventually, by simple reason it is in the Word of God and we are told that “ALL scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). Older Christians should have a scriptural answer to give to the younger enquirer when this issue is raised.

Paul said,
“...we have no
such custom,
nor do the
churches of God”

There are many factors that motivate people into formulating a certain view on a passage of scripture. Ones denominational or cultural background may have a major influence, or a preference to a certain translation of the Bible may lead to a particular conclusion. There is a host of pitfalls that work against us at times, such as pride, laziness, tiredness, traditionalism, prejudice, to name a few. It is common for people to accept a well known Bible teacher's view on a subject with the simple reasoning that he has been such a blessing in the past, and surely he wouldn't be wrong? But this practice may lead people into a “secondhand faith”, i.e. a faith based on what others say the Bible says. Not checking what the Bible is *actually* saying has lead many into the cults over the years. When we are pressed to give the reasons behind what we believe, we must direct people to the scriptures, not to “so and so”, a book or a pamphlet. We are exhorted to “rightly divide the Word of Truth” (2 Tim 2:15). The first line of 2 Timothy 2:15 says to “be diligent as a worker who does not need to be ashamed”.

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

With this in mind I would encourage you to check out the scriptures with me as we go through the different verses and, if possible, if you are real keen, to have the different translations to hand as well so you can follow the train of thought as it is presented. May it be said of us as it was said of the Bereans, that they “were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the Word with all readiness of mind, **and** searched the scriptures daily, (to see) whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11 KJV). Our study will bring us into contact with several “hot” issues. It would seem that most who write on this subject prefer to “keep it simple” and tell their listeners what they want to hear. But in this short passage we are forced to:

- a) Look at the context
- b) Refer to other passages;
- c) Distinguish between a translation and a paraphrase or commentary;
- d) Examine different base texts; and
- e) Reach a conclusion based on scripture alone.

As preparation for this study, you should read all of 1 Corinthians, taking mental note of the tone of the letter as you go through. A small book that may help you to understand the background of the Corinthian church and some of the problems they had to grapple with is “The Corinthian Catastrophe” by George E. Gardiner (Kregel Publications 1974), or the background notes given in any commentary on the Corinthian church should help.

(All scripture quotes taken from the New King James version unless otherwise indicated.)

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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 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. ⁴ Every man praying or prophesying, having *his* head covered, dishonors his head. ⁵ But 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. ⁶ For 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. ⁷ For 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. ⁸ For man is not from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. ¹⁰ For this reason the woman ought to have *a symbol of* authority on *her* head, because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless, neither *is* man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. ¹² For as woman *came* from man, even so man also *comes* through woman; but all things are from God. ¹³ Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? ¹⁵ But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; **for *her* hair is given to her for a covering.** ¹⁶ But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such **custom**, nor *do* the churches of God.

(Enforces added to text for this study and will be explained below as we come to that section.)

THE PASSAGE

The section we will examine begins with “Now” in chapter 11, verse 2 and finishes in verse 16, because the next verse commences a new section with the word “Now” stated again. Our passage starts on the topic of “traditions”, “ordinances” or “teachings,” (depending on your translation of the Bible) passed on from Paul (vs.2) and finishes on a similar thought about “custom” or “practice” in the churches (vs.16). We will examine these words more closely later in our study. So let us begin by reading verses 3-15 again so we can see all the verses in the order as they were originally presented. We note in the passage that a number of words and themes appear several times.

It must be realized that when you begin to examine specific doctrines or themes of scripture, it is often very helpful to go back to the base text that our English translations are taken from. The Greek language, from which our New Testament is translated, is a much ‘fuller’ language in that we often require more words to accurately convey in English the meaning of a single word in the Greek. It should also be realized that no lengthy translation can be 100% accurate to the original. With this in mind, let

us take a closer look at the key words in our passage to see if we can narrow down the meanings a little more precisely.

Some basic tools to help us do this would be a reliable word dictionary and an exhaustive analytical concordance. In this study I have used "Vines Expository Dictionary of the New Testament" and the "Young's Analytical Concordance of the Bible," which also gives the word in Greek plus an expanded meaning, and is useful as a cross reference to the Vines.

CREATION

Verse 3 opens this passage and gives us the bases of Paul's message here, namely that before God, male and female are different on the basis of creation and were meant to be recognized as such. God created it that way. In latter verses it is shown that women have naturally long, beautiful hair to show this distinction. As we go through we will see that where there was a lack in the length of a woman's hair, two options were given - either shave it all off or cover it fully with an artificial covering. The reverse situation existed with the man who had hair that was unacceptably long - it was clear that it should be cut shorter to make a distinction between male and female. To see that this was the case, we will look at the reason behind these statements, as an argument is only as strong as the foundation it is built on.

³ But 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.

The whole of Paul's argument here is taken back to the very beginning in Genesis when the first man and woman were created. Note here that this was BEFORE the "fall" where sin came in and spoilt what the Lord God had made. Also note that ALL men and women were represented in Adam and Eve, not just wives and husbands. Some scholars try to make this passage in 1 Corinthians refer only to the marriage situation, but this is completely void of reference in these verses. It is in Genesis that we see God set the pattern of how men and women were to relate to each other.

Suffice for us to see here that the man and woman had different but complimentary roles (1 COR 11:11) ordained by God in the beginning and that man was given the position of "head" over the woman (with all the responsibilities that that entailed), as is seen in the verses here in 1 Corinthians 11 and elsewhere in 1 Timothy 2:13-14, Genesis 2:21-23. It is a natural result that this "pre-fall" situation would carry over and be reinforced after the fall into sin, as is seen in the marriage situation where we see the husband as head of the wife as referred to in several places, i.e. Ephesians 5:22-24.

1 Timothy 2:13-14

¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.

MAN'S ADDITION TO SCRIPTURE

Verse 10 is a classic case of the Bible translators being over enthusiastic in their efforts to help us understand what they **thought** the passage was talking about. If you take a close look at verse 10, you will notice that certain words **are in italics** in your Bible. This means THEY ARE NOT THERE in the original. The words that were not placed there in verse 10 by the Holy Spirit, as is reflected in the different translations of the Bible, are as follows:

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

NKJ - "a symbol of"

- NASB - "a symbol of"
 - NIV - "a sign of"
 - RSV - "a. veil" (also leaves out the word "authority" - bad!)
 - LB - "a covering on"
 - GNB - "a covering over her head"
 - AMP - "[as a token, a symbol of her submission]"
- (Note: The old King James Version renders this verse correctly.)

It needs to be said again that the words indicated above ARE NOT IN THE ORIGINAL of any of the base texts that these translations are taken from. I reemphasize this point because it is these words that most people quote to support their argument for ALL women to wear a head covering in church. (I suggest that you grab a pencil and shade over these words in your Bible to remind you that they were not given by the Holy Spirit and so should not be there).

If you now read this verse, leaving out the words that are not in the original, you will see that it is talking about the REALITY, not the symbolism, of man being head over woman, which is a direct link to verse 3 and is in keeping with the passage from verse 8-12. Verses 8-10 give us the natural relationship instituted at creation between male and female.

Paul then very quickly reminds us in verses 11&12 that man should not get too carried away or "big-headed" because he in turn has come through the woman (at birth), and this also was designed by the Lord at the beginning, too. It was because this teaching did not originate in the "Christian" era that Paul could refer to it as a "tradition" in verse 2. The Greek Word used here is PARADOSIS, meaning "a handing down or on" (Vines) and "a giving over" (Youngs), and refers to passing on teaching or customs from generation to generation.

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

ANGELS

Another reason given for woman to be covered, and men not to be, is in verse 10, "because of the angels." Angels are beings created to do the Lord's bidding. They are ever present and observe many things. It is clear that they also have a degree of free will as is evident in the "fall" of Lucifer and the angels who chose to accompany him in his rebellion (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 1:6). If we choose to obey and submit to the Father, this is seen by the angels who also submit to authority as was instituted at their creation. We exalt the Name of the Lord as we obey Him.

2 Peter 2:4

⁴ For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment.

Jude 1:6

⁶ And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day.

A SYMBOL

We see hair given as one type of covering, but we also see an artificial covering spoken of as well. What sort of artificial covering is this and when should it be worn, if at all? We will need to take a quick look at the Greek words translated "covering," and also at a few other words that might help us. As has

been stated, the Greek is a more precise language than English and so we require more words to explain the exact meaning covered by the one word in the Greek. This will become clearer as we go along. It would be helpful if you write in pencil the fuller meaning of these words described under the word in your Bible, so that you can read the amplified and amended passage straight through when you have finished.

VERSE	TRANSLATED	GREEK WORD	EXPANDED MEANING	REFERENCES
4	“covered”	KARA	something down on	“having (something) down [on] the head.” VINES.
5 & 13	“un-covered”	AKATAKALUPTO	un-fully covered	“A - negative (of) KATAKALUPTO” VINES. “uncovered, unveiled” YOUNGS.
6, 6 & 7	“covered”	KATAKALUPTO	fully covered	“to cover up” VINES. “to cover fully” YOUNGS.
15	“covering”	PERIBOLAION	thrown around covering	“literally denotes something thrown around” VINES.
15	“for” (<i>a covering</i>)	ANTI	instead of	- VINES.

Remember, these “expanded” meanings accurately reflect the original thought as is recorded in the text that our Bible was translated from (what God put there!). Have you marked in the expanded passage and marked out the bits not in the original? Now spend a few minutes reading through it.

It must be emphasized that the most crucial point of the whole study is to realize the massive effect that the mistranslation of verse 10 has had on our thinking. This is the only passage in the whole English Bible that mentions “coverings” in relation to being a “symbol” or “sign,” and we have established that this was not given by the Holy Spirit. Verse 10 is NOT talking about a symbol of authority but is linked with the reality of verse 9 and verse 3.

Inserting the word "symbol" in verse 10 influences the whole passage in a direction that is not indicated in the original. It was, of course, very nice of the translators to “clarify” this whole passage for us, but they failed as translators in this verse and acted as paraphrases instead. A paraphrase gives you the intended meaning behind a passage and is, of course, open to different viewpoints.

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

Our Bible is meant to be a translation, and except for the few exceptions, is very reliable. Verse 10 is one of these exceptions. It should be said in fairness that most of the translators did put these words in italics, but the real issue is that they chose to add them at all. Translators do not have the option of paraphrase, they are simply to relay as precisely as possible what is there already, whether they agree with it or not. As we develop these thoughts further, you will see how important it is to read only what was put there by the Holy Spirit.

HAIR

The central subject of the passage is stated in verse 15, HAIR! But not just any type hair, its length is of major importance. Hair is specifically mentioned in:

- verse 5 - "head were shaved" i.e. hair-shaved off
- verse 6 - "shorn... shorn or shaved" i.e. hair shaved off
- verse 14 - "long hair"
- verse 15 - "long hair... hair"

There are several other verses that have hair as their subject because they are directly linked to one or more of the verses outlined above:

- verse 4 linked to 5 - contrasting man and woman's position
- verse 7 linked to 6 - the Greek word KATAKALUPTO is used nowhere else in the N.T. except vs.6 & 7. Vs.6 says woman should be fully covered, vs.7 says man should not be fully covered.
- verse 13 linked to 14 - vs.14 carries on the argument from vs.13 "Is it proper... Does not even?"

STATEMENT

I think at this point, a clear statement as to what I feel this passage is about, needs to be made:

- a) The ideal situation being put forward is:
 - Christ is the head of man, so man is to have SHORT hair.
 - Man is the head of woman, so woman is to have LONG hair.
- b) The situation that is NOT ideal is:
 - Man's head being covered, i.e. with long hair.
 - Woman's head being uncovered, i.e. has short hair and is un-fully covered.
- c) The remedy to these unacceptable situations are:
 - Man with long hair - cut it.
 - Woman with short hair - fully cover it till it grows. Because hair takes time to grow, the temporary solution is to cover it till it is acceptably long.

THE REALITY

Verses 8-12 talk about the REALITY of the position of woman to man (not just to husband or father) and is the basis for the instructions in the rest of the passage. Verse 10 says a woman must have "authority over her," NOT a "symbol" of authority.

⁸ For man is not from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. ¹⁰ For this reason the woman ought to have *a symbol of* authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. ¹² For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God.

Verse 15 is a clear statement and sums up the passage from Paul, so all of the previous verses must be read with this verse in mind.

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

Remember that the word “for” a covering is actually “ANTI,” meaning “instead of.” A woman’s long hair is given her instead of a “thrown around covering”. If the hair is not long, she must wear an artificial thrown around covering. A woman should have long hair to show the relationship between man and woman. This is what should be taught, not that ALL woman need to wear something extra on the head, but only those that have short hair and appear like men are supposed to appear before the Lord. This is most noticeable in the Feminist movement where women seek to usurp the role of man.

So how long is long hair? We are not told in centimeters (or inches in the KJV?), but we do have a few clues:

- a) The length should be noticeably longer than mans. Male and female should be distinguishable by their hair length at a casual glance;
- b) Verse 15 says that a woman’s hair is given her instead of a “thrown around covering”. This would imply that it would be doing the same sort of job that the hair should be doing. I would suggest that it would be on or below the shoulders to give this impression of being able to be “thrown around”. One would never talk about hair being thrown around the neck, rather it just hangs there, but it only takes a turn of the head to wrap hair around the shoulders if the length is sufficient.

Most Bible teachers feel that the wearing of head coverings only applies when the Church meets together in worship. This can be based on verse 16 which mentions the “church” and verses 4 and 5 which talk about “praying and prophesying.” Also, chapter 11 begins several chapters which relate to the church “coming together.” But I would suggest that the application of these verses may have had a wider significance as is previously mentioned in this article in the paragraph on angels, as seen in verse 10.

LEGALISM

In all such matters of this kind there is a tendency towards “legalism,” where we forget that we are not under the law, but under grace. “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?” (Gal 3:2-3).

It would seem that most people either forget about verse 16, honestly do not realize it is there, or can not equate it with the previous verses, and so ignore it. Some use it to apply the preceding verses to the church. The result is usually the same - a tendency towards legalism. Paul is careful to point out in verse 2 that you do well and are worthy of praise if you keep the “traditions” or “ordinances” he delivered. He then writes concerning “coverings” and finishes this passage by referring to this issue as a “custom” when applied to the church (v.16). The Greek word translated “custom” here is SUNETHEIA and means “a common usage” (Youngs) or “force of habit” (Vines).

¹⁶ But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such **custom**, nor *do* the churches of God.

The Corinthian church was a church with many problems. It would seem that one of those problems was this area of head coverings. It is obvious that certain ones were making a big issue of it and that this was affecting the whole church at Corinth. Some must have been putting forward some weird and wonderful arguments for the continuation of this tradition, so much so that Paul felt it was necessary to explain its origin. This would at least stop the false explanations being put forward and confirm that it

was God who instituted the system of authority among men. Therefore it is what God says on the subject that really counts, not mans opinions.

VERSE 16

Verse 16 is a verse that I must confess to having misquoted many times in my eagerness to “uphold the truth,” though I do have some of the modern translators to thank for some of that. Many of the modern translators decided that the Holy Spirit had, unfortunately, left out a word that should have been there. So they put it in and COMPLETELY REVERSED the meaning of the whole verse. In verse 16 the word “**other**” is NOT THERE IN ANY BASE TEXT that our English Bibles are taken from. This can be easily seen by checking a Greek-English Interlinear of each translation.

Here are some translations(?) of vs.16 in some popular Bibles taking you down the wrong path:

- NASB - “But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no **other** practice, nor have the churches of God.”
- NIV - “If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no **other** practice—nor do the churches of God.”
- RSV - “If any one is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no **other** practice, nor do the churches of God.”
- NLB - “But if anyone wants to argue about this, I simply say that we have no **other** custom than this, and neither do God’s other churches.”
- GNB - “But if anyone wants to argue about it, all I have to say is that neither we nor the churches of God have any **other** custom in worship.”
- AMP - “Now if anyone is disposed to be argumentative *and* contentious about this, we hold to *and* recognize no **other** custom [in worship] than this, nor do the churches of God generally.”

KJV, NKJ, NRSV, ASB, CEB render this verse correctly, as do many other Bible translations.

It also goes against Paul’s teaching in Galatians 2:11-12 where Peter was tending to force on the Christians the burden of circumcision. Paul had to withstand him to his face because he was playing the hypocrite. To make even one concession to the law and turn a tradition into a commandment that must be adhered to makes Christ death vanity (Gal 2:21). Paul says “For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor” (Gal 2:18). It adds works to salvation which is a free gift of God by faith.

Galatians 2:11-12

¹¹ Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; ¹² for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.

What the Holy Spirit put in verse 16 is, “...we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.” You would do well to blank out the word “other” if it is in your version of the Bible. Paul is saying that what he has just explained is **NOT** a “common occurrence or force of habit” at the church he was attending, nor do they practice it in ANY of the churches of God that he knows.

¹⁶ But if anyone seems to be contentious, **we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.**

Though some would come to the defense of the translators of particular versions of the Bible, it still remains that men decided to add a word to this verse, which has tended to continue the contention,

instead of ending it as Paul fully intended.

SUMMARY

- 1) We noted that we must examine this issue in the light of scripture only, not allowing man's words to influence our thinking.
- 2) We looked into the Greek which our New Testament translations are based on to gain a more accurate meaning of some of the key words.
- 3) We discovered that the key phrase "a symbol of" (vs.10) and the key word "other" (vs.16) that most use to apply this passage are mans addition to God's Word, and are not to be considered at all.
- 4) The background to our study was that the Corinthian church was having a problem with the issue of head coverings (as well as many other problems).
- 5) Certain ones were putting forward reasons for or against head coverings that were not based on the truth.
- 6) Paul first of all establishes the true basis of this tradition which has been handed down from generation to generation.
- 7) God instituted the order of authority in creation before the fall and that the difference in the length of hair between males and females was the natural, outward sign of this.
- 8) In effect, Paul is saying, "If you are going to keep this tradition, keep it for the right reason."
- 9) Paul ends this passage by saying that the church he is attending does not have this practice, nor does any church he knows.
- 10) We also looked at the danger that this issue could and does draw some towards legalism.

CONCLUSION

1 Corinthians 11 does not require women to wear a covering when the church meets, or at any other time either. This is a passage that has been heavily influenced by the thoughts of men, and the lack of clarity in translation. We are not bound by traditions or customs as those who were under the law were enslaved to the law (Rom 7:1), but we have been set free (Rom 8:2). Paul is our example in that being well schooled and zealous for God, he did not allow himself to become entangled with such things and says, "let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb 12:1-2).

We have looked at this issue in isolation, but there are a number of other related issues which may have need of a close exegesis of the texts concerned. I pray that no one will use this treatise to "bash" a brother or sister over the head on this topic. We are told to "receive one who is weak in the faith" (Rom 14:1). It would be profitable to read Romans chapter 14 through very slowly, taking special note of verses 3, 4, 10, and 19. If we really love our brother and sister, and we are commanded to (1 John 2:7-11), then we should help them into a correct understanding of the scriptures, but on no account should we ever leave our audience with the impression that we despise them or hold them in contempt because of their view of a certain doctrine.

So many people use the catch-cry that they can not have any fellowship with so-and-so because they have wrong doctrine on a certain point. But the question that must be asked is where do you draw the line? If you were to carefully question all of those in your present circle of fellowship, you would most likely find very few, if any, that believe in all points as yourself.

We can and will have our areas of close fellowship, but we are commanded to have love for all those who are our true brothers and sisters in the Lord. It is comforting to know that Jesus does not disown me and you just because we have misunderstood Him in some point. So let us sort out the essentials of the faith, uphold the truth, but also aim to be like Christ. He associated with sinners and was very gentle and patient with a group of very ordinary men, who like ourselves, were very slow of learning (a bit thick) at times.

If we were to rewrite Romans 14:6 to fit this issue, it might read, "He or she who thinks a head covering should be worn in the church does so unto the Lord; and he or she who does not think a head covering should be worn in the church, to the Lord, they do not wear it." (Paraphrase mine.) "Let each be fully convinced in his own mind." (Rom 14:5)

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