



Published on *Bible.org* - *Worlds Largest Bible Study Site* (<http://bible.org>)

[Home](#) > [Headship and Head Coverings \(1 Cor. 11:3-16\)](#)

By *Bob Deffinbaugh*
Created 06/08/2004 - 00:00

Headship and Head Coverings (1 Cor. 11:3-16)

Introduction

When I was actively involved in prison ministry a few years ago, a seminar in which I participated was held in a large maximum security Texas prison. Approximately 200 men had assembled in the chapel where we met. Chapel gatherings are considered potentially dangerous because prisoners are carefully segregated so particular inmates are not able to have contact with certain other inmates. Old grudges had unfortunately been settled in or around the chapel, as just one year earlier one inmate had been murdered at the entrance to the very chapel where we were meeting. Because it is important to distinguish the guards from the inmates by their appearance, the inmates in the Texas prison system wear white. The guards uniforms are a contrasting color, clearly distinguishing them from the inmates. When outsiders visit a prison, we are asked to be careful not to wear the same color as the inmates. During one of the services, I took off my coat and sat down with the inmates in the center of the chapel. Ed Williamson, then State Director of Prison Fellowship, noticed I was nowhere in sight and began looking around the chapel to identify me. Since I had taken off my coat, I no longer looked different from the other inmates. In my white shirt, I was lost in a sea of other white uniforms. I simply did not look any different from anyone else. Distinctions can be very important.

Our God is a God of distinctions. This is apparent at the very outset of the Bible. Until now, I have never really appreciated that the first 19 verses of Genesis 1 are about divine distinctions or separations.

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 *Now the earth was formless and empty*, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and *he separated the light from the darkness*. 5 God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

6 And God said, "Let there be an expanse *between the waters to separate water from water*." 7 So God made the expanse and separated the *water under the expanse* from the *water above* it. And it was so. 8 God called the expanse "*sky*." And there was

evening, and there was morning—the second day. 9 And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let *dry ground appear*.” And it was so. 10 God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered *waters* he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

11 Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, *according to their various kinds*.” And it was so. 12 The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed *according to their kinds* and trees bearing fruit with seed in it *according to their kinds*. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening, and there was morning— the third day.

14 And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to *separate the day from the night*, and let them serve as signs to mark *seasons and days and years*, 15 and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. 16 God made two great lights— the greater light to govern the *day* and the lesser light to govern the *night*. He also made the stars. 17 God set them in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth, 18 to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day (Genesis 1:1-19, NIV, emphasis mine)

The account of Genesis 1:1-19 is not one in which God calls the creation into existence, out of nothing, but one in which He takes a formless, chaotic mass and transforms it into something beautiful and good in His sight.¹²⁷ God brought about our world by separating one thing from another. He separated day and night, light and darkness (vss. 3-5). He separated the waters so that there is a water-laden atmosphere above and also the seas below (verses 6-10). God further distinguished between the land and the seas (verse 10). He distinguished between the different varieties of vegetation and of animals (verses 11-13). He distinguished times (days, years) and seasons (verse 14-15). From the very beginning, God made Himself known as a distinguishing God.

The Old Testament Law continued to emphasize this dimension of God’s nature as a distinguishing God.

19 “You are to keep My statutes. You shall not breed together two kinds of your cattle; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor wear a garment upon you of two kinds of material mixed together” (Leviticus 19:19)

5 “A woman shall not wear man’s clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman’s clothing; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God.” ... 9 “You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, lest all the produce of the seed which you have sown, and the increase of the vineyard become defiled. 10 You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together. 11 You shall not wear a material mixed of wool and linen together” (Deuteronomy 22:9-11).

The Israelites were not to cross breed different kinds of cattle or crops (Leviticus 19:19; Deuteronomy 22:9). They could not plow with two types of animals harnessed (unequally yoked) together (22:10). They were not to wear garments made of materials that contained mixed fibers (Deuteronomy 22:9, 11). Women were distinguished from men in a number of ways. The sign of the covenant with Abraham (circumcision) was restricted, by design, to men (see Genesis 17:9-14). A woman who bore a girl child was unclean for 14 days, while a woman who bore a male child was unclean for only seven days (Leviticus 12). Women were not to wear a man’s clothing nor were men to dress like a woman (Deuteronomy 22:5). God distinguished the “**clean**” from the “**unclean**,” making yet another set of distinctions which the Israelites must observe. In

the Exodus, God distinguished the Israelites from the Egyptians and Himself from all other “**gods**.” God purposed to keep many things separate, and He employed the Law to communicate what things God had separated that men must not join together.

Our text in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 is really about a particular distinction God has prescribed, which we are obliged to maintain—the distinction between men and women. In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, this divinely ordained distinction between men and women is to be maintained in a very specific way. At certain times, the woman is to have her head covered, while the man is to have his head uncovered. This distinction is important to God, and to Paul, and thus it should be important to us as well. I believe this distinction is to be observed today, most likely in the very same way Paul instructed the Corinthians to observe it in his day. If you think these words have little to do with Christians today, I must warn you this is not the case. Let us listen carefully to what the Spirit of God has to say to Christians today about maintaining male-female distinctions.

Preliminary Comments

We must always be careful to “**handle accurately the word of truth**” (2 Timothy 2:15). This text requires us to be especially careful. As we begin this study, a few introductory comments should help to explain why caution is required:

(1) No one should dare to claim they have this passage fully under control. I have taught this text before, and I have changed my mind on some of the particulars. Nearly 20 years ago, I preached on this text in the meeting of the church shortly after we began to meet as a church. I can remember passionately concluding that this text teaches that women should cover their heads when they come to worship. Up to that time, a small handful of women did cover their heads during our worship. I was somewhat more than casually interested to see how many more women would come with heads covered the next week. To my surprise, not one woman came with her head covered the next Sunday who had not already been doing so. One of the brothers asked me about this, perhaps thinking the elders would take some action to require women to wear head coverings. I told him that if any conclusion were to be drawn from the lack of response to my message, it probably would have more to do with how convincing my sermon was than with how spiritual (or unspiritual) the women were.

I must warn you, though; I am going to try again. And, to be honest, I am going to teach this text a little differently than I have in the past. Because this text presents us with a number of difficulties, we should be very cautious about making it a proof text for views which are contradicted elsewhere in the Scriptures. As we shall see, this passage need not be understood in a way that contradicts or changes anything either Paul or Peter have taught elsewhere on the relationship between men and women in the church.

(2) I think we all should be honest enough to admit that while we may not dare claim that we have this text completely under control, neither are we completely objective when we seek to interpret and apply it. We all have our biases, and they may show here. Not only do we have our own individual biases concerning the issues Paul raises here, but our culture is vehemently opposed to any teaching which distinguishes between the roles men and women may play in ministry and in worship. No wonder so few are willing to face this text squarely.

(3) The topic of head coverings must not be one of the fundamentals of the faith as it is only mentioned once, but it is important because it is a matter of obedience, it is

symbolic of submission to male headship, and it can be a source of contention and division (verse 16). A number of other texts teach on the relationship between men and women, on headship and submission, but this is the only text in which one of the apostles seems to require women to wear a head covering. If this is the only text about head coverings, it would probably be unwise to look upon head coverings as a fundamental of the faith, something which determines one's salvation or spirituality. But because it is a command from the pen of the inspired apostle, and an issue which can divide the saints, it is important. It may not be a "**camel**," but it is a fairly good sized "**gnat**" we dare not ignore.

(4) The matter of head coverings is one over which diversity is evident in our church. There are some women in our church who, out of a sincere desire to obey the teaching of this text, cover their heads during the worship service. Whether or not we agree with them, we should respect their convictions and their courage to live by them. I do not know of any who wish to draw attention to themselves or who think themselves holier than others. There are a good number of women in our church who do not cover their heads. Some may not do so because they have never thought (or been taught) about head coverings. It is my belief that most of those who do not cover their heads do not do so because they are not convinced the Scriptures require them to do so. I respect those who do not simply follow others, but act in accordance with their own convictions. If there are any who refuse out of rebellion (as there could be in our times), I do not know of them.

My teaching may not necessarily reflect the views of all the elders of our church nor should what I am teaching be regarded as a requirement laid down by the elders for women in our worship. There will be no "veil police" in the foyer next week to check for compliance on my conclusions. In truth, I hope no woman will act on this text until she is "fully convinced in her own mind." I would rather have each individual study this matter carefully, think and meditate on it, and then come to a firm conviction. And then, do what you believe God requires of you. I would hope that any woman who decides to wear a head covering does so because she has been a "Berean Christian" and searched the Scriptures and her own heart on this matter. I will tell you I have reached some fairly strong convictions on this matter. I am not as clear on all the particulars of the application of Paul's teaching.

For all of us, the first question should be, "What does the Bible instruct me to do?" The second question is, "Will I do it?" The order of these two questions should probably be reversed. We must first be willing to do whatever the Bible teaches us. When we have a willing heart which seeks to please God, we will be more clear-eyed as to what the Bible does require of us. Many who "can't see it" are those who would not do it if they could see it. Let us all approach these important verses with a heart that is willing to obey.

29 "Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me, and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!" (Deuteronomy 5:29)

33 Teach me, O Lord, the way of Thy statutes, And I shall observe it to the end. 34 Give me understanding, that I may observe Thy law, And keep it with all my heart (Psalm 119:33-34).

16 Jesus therefore answered them, and said, "My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. 17 If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself" (John 7:16-17).

To help us with our study, I have set out the structure of the passage on the following page.

The Structure of the Passage

Introduction (vss. 1-2)

1 Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. 2 Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

The principle of headship (verse 3) and its immediate application (vss. 4-5)

3 But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. 4 Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying, disgraces his head. 5 But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head; for she is one and the same with her whose head is shaved.

The practice of head covering defended, in the light of the principle of headship (vss. 6-10)

6 *For* if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. 7 *For* a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. 8 *For* man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; 9 *for* indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. 10 *Therefore* the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

Keeping your head when it comes to headship—let's not go too far (vss. 11-12)

11 *However*, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12 For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.

Head covering defended from a more human perspective (vss. 13-15)

13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with 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.

The last word, for those who would debate this matter— there are no exceptions (vs. 16)

16 But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

Headship and Head Covering (11:3-5)

3 But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. 4 Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying,¹²⁸ disgraces his head. 5 But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head; for she is one and the same with her whose head is shaved.

In verse 3, Paul has highlighted the principle of headship in three dimensions: (1) the headship of Christ over every man; (2) the headship of the man over a woman, and (3) the headship of God the Father over Jesus Christ. Verses 4 and 5 move us from the principle of headship to its practical implications. The underlying assumption of the apostle in our text is that a head covering is the required symbol of a woman's submission to the headship of her man. Since the man is to symbolize the headship of Christ, he is not to have his head covered when he prays or prophesies. So in verse 4, Paul writes that if a man were to pray or prophesy with his head covered, he would symbolically deny Christ's headship over men, which the man is to reflect in his spiritual acts of worship conducted with an uncovered head, whether in the church gathering or elsewhere. Thus, to pray or prophesy with a covered head is to bring shame upon Christ, his Head.¹²⁹ The woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered does not distinguish herself as a woman, but acts as a man would. She thereby symbolically claims headship in her activities, dishonoring her "head," the man in authority over her.¹³⁰

The Principle of Headship Demonstrated The Practice of Head Covering Demanded (11:6-10)

6 For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. 7 For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. 8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; 9 for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. 10 Therefore the woman ought to have a *symbol of* authority on her head, because of the angels.

Paul clearly senses the need to make his point, and make it he does. Even those who would debate the issue of head covering must admit that Paul has done his homework. Verses 6, 7, 8, and 9 all begin with the word "for," indicating that each verse supplies us with another line of proof of the need for women to wear a head covering. Verse 6 argues from the premise that it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut off. Some feel that this premise (i.e., it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut off) can be demonstrated from the culture of Paul's day.¹³¹ And, we can see that it is true today as well, with a handful of bizarre contradictions from the entertainment world. Women who have lost their hair due to chemotherapy do not take long to buy themselves a wig. On the other hand, most men and women take male baldness in stride.

The humiliation of cutting off one's hair can be easily documented in the Old Testament Scriptures. When the ancients wished to shame an individual, they would remove some or all of his beard and/or hair (2 Samuel 10:4-5; Isaiah 7:20; 15:2; 50:6). When men wished to symbolize humiliation and defeat, they cut off their own hair (Jeremiah 48:37; Ezekiel 27:31; 29:18; Micah 1:16). Thus, anyone who reads the Old

Testament would understand that shaving off the hair was a disgrace. If some women in Corinth were brazen enough to refuse to wear a head covering, let them play out their rebellion and shame to the full. Let them not only pray or prophesy with an uncovered head, let them also cut off all their hair, as a token of defeat and shame. If, on the other hand, a woman recognized that shaving the head was a disgrace, let her also recognize that having an uncovered head was shameful, and so let her cover her head.

In verses 7, 8, and 9, Paul gives us three reasons the woman's head should be covered, all of which establish another basis for the headship of the man over a woman. In verse 7, Paul claims that it is the man who is to have his head uncovered, since he has been divinely ordained and commissioned to reflect the image and glory of God by exercising headship (by his leadership and prominence).¹³² The woman, on the other hand, is the glory of the man. The woman's function and high calling is to seek to bring glory to her husband; the man's function and high calling is to seek to bring glory to God.

Does this seem unfair and unjust? Does it appear, as some maintain, to demean the woman? Then perhaps we need to remind ourselves of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is subject to the Son. He does what the Son desires, and He seeks to glorify the Son, not Himself (see John 16:13-15). The Son does nothing on His own initiative, but seeks to bring glory to the Father (see John 5:18-33; 8:38, 49-50; 10:25; 17:1, 24-26). There is no inequality in the Godhead. *The Son and the Spirit, though subordinate in their roles, are equal in their essence. Their delight is to bring glory to their Head. We are called to imitate them in delighting to bring glory to the one to whom we are subject, in obedience to God's command.*

In verses 8 and 9, Paul turns back the pages of history, going to the creation of man in the garden of Eden. It was the man, Adam, who was the source of Eve's life. Eve was bone of Adam's bone, and flesh of Adam's flesh, because she was fashioned from a portion of his body. One dimension of headship is that the "head" is the source of that over which he has headship. It was Adam whom God designated to exercise headship over Eve, and thus it is the man whom God has instructed to function as the head of the woman. And, while on the subject of creation, Paul presses on to remind us that Eve was created for Adam's benefit. He was not created for the benefit of Eve, but Eve was created for Adam. Once again, Paul points to the origin of mankind to defend the principle of male headship and the practice of head covering by women.

In verse 10, Paul reiterates the necessity of the woman's head being covered, representing it as the appropriate response of women to male headship which he has just documented in verses 6-9. Submission to male headship requires a head covering for the woman, just as the expression of headship obligates the man to have no head covering.

The last phrase of verse 10 comes like a bolt out of the blue. Unexpectedly, Paul adds yet another reason why women should cover their heads "**with [a symbol of] authority**"—the angels: "Therefore the woman ought to have a *symbol of* authority on her head, because of the angels." The angels? What does a woman's head covering have to do with the angels? Paul does not tell us. He expects us to be able to figure it out. Let us set our minds to understanding what Paul expects every Christian to grasp. First, we know that what God is doing on earth is a part of His plan to display His glory to the celestial beings:

8 Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to

everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. 10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 3:8-10).

The angels, fallen or unfallen, are not only watching what is taking place on earth, they are actively involved (see Job 1 and 2; Daniel 10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-3; Ephesians 6:12; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; Hebrews 13:1-2; 1 Peter 1:10-12). In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul has informed those who would partake of idol-meats while eating in a pagan idol temple that they are sitting at the table of demons. The angelic powers are very much involved in the affairs of this world.

Some have suggested (on the basis of texts like Genesis 6:1-4) that angels have taken on human form and have entered into sexual unions with women. They think the reason Paul instructs the women to have a head covering is so angels will not be tempted to repeat this sin. We know Satan is a fallen angel and that his demonic force is made up of fallen angels (see Isaiah 14:12-14; Ezekiel 28:12-15; Matthew 25:41; 2 Peter 2:4; Revelation 12:9). So far as I can tell, it is still possible for angels to fall (Revelation 12:4?). If this is the case, the angels would do well to watch women submit to the headship of their man, just as the angels must submit to God. Since the celestial beings are witnesses to and participants in the outworking of God's marvelous plan on earth (Daniel 10; Ephesians 3:8-10; 6:12; 1 Peter 1:10-12) what we do, even when it appears to be in private, is of great cosmic importance.

Some have made a point of the fact that Paul uses the word "**authority**" in verse 10 and not the word "submission." Why did Paul not say, "Therefore the woman ought to have a *symbol of submission*", instead of, "**Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority**"? F. F. Bruce really reaches when he writes,

Here, as elsewhere in this letter, 'authority' is probably to be understood in an active sense: the veil is not a sign of the woman's submission to her husband's authority ... nor even of her social dignity ... and immunity from molestation ... ; it is a sign of her authority. In the synagogue service a woman could play no significant part: her presence would not even suffice to make up the requisite quorum of ten (all ten must be males). In Christ she received equality of status with man; she might pray or prophesy at meetings of the church, and her veil was a sign of this new authority ... ¹³³

It seems impossible to reach this conclusion from the evidence of the text. *First*, this passage is about the headship of the man over a woman and its implications for Christian men and women. Authority is not the only dimension of headship, but it is a prominent one, and here it is clearly the man who is in authority, not the woman. *Further*, the head covering must be used consistently as a symbol. The absence of the head covering symbolizes the authority of the one whose head is not covered. This is why it is shameful for a woman to have her head uncovered. The presence of a head covering is a symbol of submission, of being under authority, and thus it is appropriate for the woman but not for the man. How then can Bruce change the symbolism of the head covering to represent authority, rather than submission to authority?

Although I strongly differ with Bruce's conclusion, there is at least an element of truth in his position, one which I believe is implied in this text and more clearly taught elsewhere. It is only when we are under the authority of our "head" that we have authority. Jesus had great authority, and yet He constantly acknowledged that He was under the authority of His Father. The centurion said to Jesus, "**I, too, am a man under authority**" (Matthew 8:9). He understood that our Lord's authority came from

being under authority. In this sense, it is the woman's submission to the headship of her man which gives her authority.

Don't Lose Your Head Over Headship (11:11-12)

11 However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12 For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.

Every truth is capable of being perverted, in principle or in practice. Paul wants to be very careful that his teaching on headship does not give the men in the church a big head. Nowhere has Paul indicated that men are to exercise headship because they are stronger, smarter, more spiritual, or better leaders than their wives. We husbands are the head of our wives because of creation and the teaching of Scripture. Our headship is symbolic and not due to our superiority. Men should not feel either smugly superior or independent of¹³⁴ women. Because of the unique characteristics of each, men and women are, so to speak, co-dependent upon each other. Have you ever seen a child born by the action of just one parent? Eve was brought forth from Adam, it is true, but from that time on, each of us has been brought into this world through a woman. While men are to initiate, to lead, to provide and protect their wives as their head (see Ephesians 5:22-33), they are never to forget that ultimately all things come from God. Headship should humble us, not cause us to become puffed up with pride.

Further Proof for Head Coverings (11:13-16)

13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray¹³⁵ to God with head uncovered? 14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him,¹³⁶ 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 one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

When women worship without a head covering, it is shameful because it is one of the practical applications of the principle of headship (11:3-5). Women who worship with uncovered heads are not far removed from those whose heads are shaved, and this is clearly shameful (11:6). A man symbolizes his headship role by worshiping with his head uncovered because he is the image and glory of God, while a woman must have her head covered because she is the glory of man (11:7). Because Adam was the source of Eve, men are divinely assigned the role of headship over their women (11:8).¹³⁷ And because Eve (woman)¹³⁸ was created for Adam's (man's) sake, it is evident that man is the head of a woman (11:9). The submission of the woman to her man is also a lesson to the angels (11:10).

Now to these reasons already stated by Paul, he adds his closing arguments in verses 13-16. The previous arguments Paul has presented in favor of head coverings are what we might call "external evidences." These are arguments based largely upon biblical precedent. Now Paul asks his readers to simply look within themselves and to admit that head covering is a "natural"¹³⁹ conclusion.¹⁴⁰

Paul appeals to his readers in a way that we might paraphrase like this: "Be honest, now, don't you think it improper when a woman prays with her head uncovered?" We should think it improper if we thought rightly about it. Looking about, one may say that

throughout history the norm has been for men to have shorter hair than women. “In the sculptures of the catacombs the women have a close-fitting head-dress, while the men have the hair short’ (Vincent).”¹⁴¹ There are those exceptions, but they are exceptional. Normally, women can be distinguished from men by the fact that they have longer hair, while men have shorter hair. Paul presses the matter: “Doesn’t this tell you something?” It indicates that if hair already serves as a covering for the woman, something hanging down from the head, that a head covering is proper for the woman, too. The reverse is also true, though not stated. Since men do not normally have their hair serving as a covering, this must tell us that men do not need a head covering, even though women do.

There are those who argue that a woman’s long hair serves as the only covering she requires. The Greek preposition *anti* more often conveys the idea of substitution, but not always. Here, Paul is saying that her hair serves as a covering,¹⁴² which is further evidence for the fact that a head covering is appropriate.¹⁴³ Paul can hardly mean that a woman’s long hair serves as a substitute for a head covering. Paul’s words in verse 6 simply do not allow it: “For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head.” Far from saying that since the woman has her hair for a covering, she needs no other covering, Paul argues that if she will not cover her head, she might as well shave off the hair so that now she has no covering at all! Furthermore, since long hair serves as a natural covering for all women, the submission of a godly woman is hardly evidenced by being just like every other woman. The voluntarily worn head covering sets the submissive woman apart from all the rest.¹⁴⁴ Finally, if a woman’s long hair is her glory, and the woman’s calling and intent is to bring glory to her husband, she veils her head so that her glory is veiled, thus calling attention to her husband’s glory and not her own.

This issue of head coverings seems to have been a matter of debate in the Corinthian church and could well have been the source of some of the divisions in the church. Knowing that his teaching on head coverings may still be resisted and debated, Paul ends with one final thrust in verse 16. For those who would be contentious over this issue, let them know that there is no other¹⁴⁵ practice in any of the churches. For anyone to disregard and disobey Paul’s teaching is for them to set themselves outside the traditions of every New Testament church. It is not just Paul’s traditions but rather the consistent teaching and practice of every church. To disregard this instruction is to stand alone in disobedience and defiance.

Conclusion

Before we attempt to sum up Paul’s message and its implications for us, we must first call attention to a wrong conclusion which many evangelicals have reached, claiming that Paul’s words in verse 5 require it. This conclusion is plainly stated by F. F. Bruce and has been taken up recently by many others:

That there was liberty in the church (for it is church order, not private or domestic devotion, that is in view here) for women to pray or prophesy is necessarily implied by Paul’s argument: he does not suggest that there is anything undesirable about their doing so (whatever the injunction of 14.34 means, it cannot be understood thus), but requires them to do so with their heads covered.¹⁴⁶

It would seem that the symbol of head coverings is still understood as essential by Bruce, and we would surely think that Schreiner agrees:

Nothing is clearer in verses 3-9 than that Paul wants the woman to wear a head covering because such adornment appropriately distinguishes women from men. Indeed, the focus on male headship over women in verse 3 shows that Paul wants women to wear a head covering in order to show that they are submissive to male headship.¹⁴⁷

It does not take long for us to learn that while head covering was certainly applicable for Paul's day, it is no longer appropriate for our own:

For Paul the issue was directly tied to a cultural shame that scarcely prevails in most cultures today.¹⁴⁸

Paul was concerned about head coverings only because of the message they sent to people in that culture. Today, except in certain religious groups, if a woman fails to wear a head covering while praying or prophesying, no one thinks she is in rebellion. Lack of head coverings sends no message at all in our culture.¹⁴⁹

And so, when all is said and (not) done, we end up with this as the final outcome of Paul's teaching:

The principle still stands that women should pray and prophesy in a manner that makes it clear that they submit to male leadership. Clearly the attitude and the demeanor with which a woman prays and prophesies will be one indication of whether she is humble and submissive. The principle enunciated here should be applied in a variety of ways given the diversity of the human situation.¹⁵⁰

Women everywhere are freed from Paul's requirement of head coverings, and they can demonstrate their submission to the principle of male headship any way they think best.

Let us step back momentarily to think about what has been concluded in general. I understand Paul's teaching on the role of women to have at least these four major components:

(1) The conduct of Christian men and women is to be governed by the principle of male headship in the home and in the church.

(2) The principle of headship requires that women not be preeminent, that they not exercise authority over men, that they do not teach or even speak publicly in the church meeting.

(3) The principle of headship requires that when women pray or prophesy, they must do so with their heads covered, to indicate their submission.

(4) The principle of headship is to be followed in the ways prescribed above, and this is to be done uniformly, that is without any exception, throughout every church.

Paul expected the saints to embrace the principle of male headship and to practice it by women refraining from functioning like men and from looking like men, by wearing a head covering. The outcome of Bruce's conclusion is that the principle of headship is apparently accepted, but without any of the practices required by Paul (as outlined in points 2-4 above). Paul's commands regarding the function of women (exercising authority, teaching, speaking publicly) are set aside by an inference based on verse 5, and Paul's command regarding head coverings is set aside as merely cultural. And so while Paul called for the same action in every church, we are told that women may

exhibit their submission to male headship, not by refraining from headship functions, and not by wearing a headship symbol, but in any way they may choose. If Paul's instruction were likened to a Thanksgiving turkey, what is left of Paul's teaching could be likened to a few bones, which will be placed in the trash. The principle of headship is not flatly denied; it is just functionally cast aside.

Assuming the interpretation described above is wrong, then how do we deal with the particulars of our text so that the details of this passage are explained and the point of this passage harmonizes with Paul's commands elsewhere? I would like to deal with this text by *first* pointing out the "camels" which it contains—the broad, guiding *principles* which should always govern our practices. Then, *secondly*, I will attempt to deal with some of the "gnats," the particular *practices* which these principles imply or require.

The Guiding Principles of This Passage

(1) *The guiding principle for every disciple of our Lord should be: "Just say yes!"* I confess, I am making a play on words based upon the current phrase, "Just say no" (to drugs). There are times when we should, "Just say no." But there are also times when we should, "Just say yes" to the commands of our Lord. Jesus spoke often about His commandments:

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

15 "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15).

21 "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:21).

10 "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love" (John 15:10).

It is clear that the disciples are to keep the Lord's commands and that when we set out to make disciples, in obedience to our Lord, we must teach them to obey all that Christ has commanded us (Matthew 28:20). *Paul's teachings on the role of men and women in the church are the command of Christ.*

36 Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?
37 If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command (1 Corinthians 14:36-37).

We have become experts in reasoning our way around the commands of Christ, even though a disciple is to be one who keeps "every" command of our Lord. I must admit that it is interesting to observe the disproportionate reaction one often experiences when dealing with this command to women to cover their heads. As the writer to the Hebrews once wrote, "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (Hebrews 12:4). Why does something so seemingly insignificant as putting a covering on one's head cause such a great reaction? I leave this question for each to ponder. But let us seek to develop a mind set that, "Just says yes" to the commands of our Lord rather than one which first asks, "Why?" It is not

wrong to want to know why we are commanded to do so, but it is not necessary to know why before we obey. If I understand the psalmist correctly in Psalm 119, he first obeys, and then he ponders God's commandments so that he may understand more fully, to know God better, and to obey more fully. Let us seek to imitate this spirit toward our Lord's commands.

(2) We must submit to God as the God who makes distinctions. As I attempted to demonstrate at the outset of this message, all through the Bible God has separated things according to His sovereign will. Creation was an act of separation. Salvation was and is an act of separation. Sanctification is about separation. Headship is but one facet of divine distinctions which we are to observe. We are to observe distinctions which God has made, and we are to refrain from distinctions which God has nullified. In the Old Testament, saints were to avoid certain things as unclean and others as clean, because God distinguished them as such. In the New Testament, Peter had to cease making distinctions on the basis of the Old Testament Law because God had set them aside. In the church, God has set aside the distinction between Jews and Gentiles (see Ephesians 2:11-22), and so retaining these distinctions is wrong (see Galatians 2:11-21). If God has distinguished between men and women, we must observe those distinctions, in obedience to Him. If our culture is striving to remove the distinctions which God has made, then we must obey God rather than men. Those who resist the roles and the rules which God has set down to distinguish men and women ultimately must face the fact that they are resisting the sovereign God who has every right to make distinctions.

Having said this, I must also point out that one thing is distinct from another, not because that one thing is intrinsically better, but because God chose to distinguish it. Women should not feel inferior because God has distinguished men by assigning them headship. Men should not feel superior for being the head of his wife. Indeed, we should rather be humbled, whether man or woman, because God has chosen us and given us a part to play in His eternal plan. Remember God's warning to the nation Israel—that being distinguished by Him was no reason for pride (see Deuteronomy 9:1-6).

(3) What God has separated, let no man join together. This is, of course, a reversal of our Lord's words on the subject of marriage and divorce in Matthew 19:6. But the reverse is true, based upon divine distinctions or separations. Israel was to live in separation from the Canaanites and the people of the lands surrounding them. They were to be a holy people, separate and distinct from the rest. When it comes to the distinction which God has made between men and women in the household of faith, we must maintain them rather than challenge them. Our culture is striving to eliminate the distinctions between men and women. It is one thing to seek to eliminate the unfair discrepancies in wages. Women should not be paid less than men for the same work. But our culture is attacking all distinctions. Men are beginning to wear their hair like women and to dress like women. They wear blouses and panties, while women are wearing shirts, pants, and male-like briefs. The tragic thing is that many men today are puzzled as to what makes them uniquely manly, and women are questioning what it means to be a woman. Satan has won a major victory here, because divinely ordained distinctions have become very cloudy, at best, and in the case of the role of women in ministry, the distinctions have been cast aside like a worn out (and much disliked) garment. Let us purpose not to blend what God has separated.

(4) Principles are not to be merely matters of theory and intellectual assent; they are meant to be practiced. Have you ever noticed how the Bible teaches theology? It does not do so in the same way that theology books are written. Take the doctrine of our Lord's incarnation¹⁵¹ in Philippians 2:5-8 for example. Paul teaches this doctrinal truth

in the midst of a passage dealing with Christian unity and harmony. *The point Paul is making is that unity is directly related to humility, and nothing illustrates true humility better than our Lord's incarnation, where He set aside His divine prerogatives¹⁵² as God in order to obey the Father's will and to bring about our salvation on the cross of Calvary.* Many of the epistles, like Ephesians, begin with a doctrinal foundation (chapters 1-3) and then move to the practical implications of that doctrine (chapters 4-6).

In verse 3, Paul sets down the principle of headship as the basis for head coverings. Tragically, by the time the scholars have finished with the text, we are left with a principle and no practice. Truth is meant to be believed and to be acted upon. *The principles which underlie the Christian faith also underlie Christian practice.* We dare not profess to believe the truth without doing something about it. And what is it that we must do to practice biblical principles? That, my friend, is easy—we are to obey biblical commands. *The commands of our Lord are the application of divine principles.* I hear many people say they want to hear sermons that are more “practical,” more “applicational.” I may need to improve in this area, but I hope and pray that my teaching urges people to obey the Lord's commands. Much of the “practical preaching” of our time has little to do with God's commands and much to do with human wisdom. Let us strive to practice God's principles by obeying God's commands.

Any interpretation which sets aside a command of our Lord should be carefully scrutinized. Each of the commands of our Lord needs to be applied in the light of God's principles, in the light of other commands, and in the light of the practice of the early church as described in Acts and the Epistles. If there is a command which we conclude we must not obey, we had better have good biblical reasons for setting it aside. And if we do not obey a command in the way it requires, we must certainly seek to obey in a way that accomplishes the same goal and at the same price to us.

I fear that most of us set aside the commands of our Lord simply because we do not like them, and this is because they cost us too much. We are too much like Jonah, who tried to avoid doing what God commanded him. We can readily identify with Moses when God commanded him to go back to Egypt (where he was in earlier days wanted for murder). Moses spent an enormous amount of energy trying to talk God out of sending him to Egypt. He spent a great deal of effort to avoid obeying a command. If we spent as much time and energy striving to keep our Lord's commands as we did trying to avoid them, we would be far better off.

(5) The principle of the headship of the man over the woman has implications and obligations for both the woman and the man. How easy it is for those of us who are men to read this passage in 1 Corinthians as though it were written solely to women. Our responsibility is not so trivial as merely leaving our heads uncovered, as we would normally do anyway. If God has given men the responsibility of representing God's headship, then we need to act out our parts. The women submit to our headship by following our leadership and by wearing their head coverings at the proper time. We fulfill our headship when we exercise godly leadership. This is not for selfish gain, but it is sacrificial leadership which is aimed at the edification of the church and of our wives (see 1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:23-32; 1 Peter 3:7; 5:1-5). I will not say, as some do, that if we lead as we should, our wives will gladly follow. Christ is the good Shepherd, and this does not mean that we always follow. We are to exercise godly headship because we are commanded to, and because in so doing, we bring glory to God. This week, one husband told me that the big lesson he gained from this passage is not what his wife should be doing, but what he should be doing. I think he is right. Both men and women need to look at what God has required of them and not at what God requires of the other.

(6) *When we fail to observe distinctions in one area, we will likely fail to make distinctions in another.* This is a significant and even disturbing principle. Notice how God required the Israelites to make seemingly trivial distinctions in the Old Testament Law. Why would God be so meticulous in seemingly insignificant matters? Such minute distinctions may rightly be considered “gnats.” Nevertheless, we do not brush “gnats” aside; we give them proper attention, *along with the “camels”* (see Matthew 23:23). We need to see the connection between the gnats and the camels.

When we cease to observe divine distinctions in one area, we can expect to see sloppiness with regard to other distinctions. Those who fail to maintain the distinctions between males and females are likely to get sloppy about distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong. We know the Corinthians were getting sloppy about their other distinctions. The distinction between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the human wisdom and philosophies of that day was becoming blurred. The distinction between godly morals and heathen morals had gotten fuzzy; in fact, it was so fuzzy that the Corinthians were not at all distressed that a man in the church was living with his father’s wife (chapter 5).

When we cease to observe divinely ordained distinctions, we may begin to make wrong distinctions. Some Christians were maintaining an unbiblical distinction between Jewish saints and Gentile saints (see Ephesians 2 and Galatians 2). Some of the saints were making improper distinctions in regard to leaders so that cliques were forming (see chapters 1 and 2). Some were making wrong distinctions regarding spiritual gifts and their “status” in the church (chapter 12). Distinctions which are not sustained are lost and even replaced by those which are unbiblical and ungodly.

I fear that some crucial distinctions may have been set aside by recent efforts to create an institutional “unity” between very diverse religious groups. To be specific, I speak of the efforts to bring about a unity between Evangelical Christians and Catholics. There should be a unity between all who have been truly born again, and who are thus “one in Christ.” But let us not cast aside biblical and doctrinal distinctions in an effort to create a unity that is not based upon the truth of God’s Word. ¹⁵³

127 I am certainly not attempting to suggest that God did not create the world from nothing originally. It could be, as some have suggested, that the account here is one of God’s re-creation of the original world, which was thrown into chaos because of Satan’s fall. Some of the same terms used to describe the chaos in Genesis 1:2 are also found in Jeremiah 4:23 to describe the chaotic state of Judah due to divine judgment for her sins.

128 “It is not certain whether the Jews at this time used the *tallith*, ‘a four-cornered shawl having fringes consisting of eight threads, each knotted five times’ (Vincent) as they did later. Virgil (Aeneid iii., 545) says: ‘And our heads are shrouded before the altar with a Phrygian vestment.’ The Greeks (both men and women) remained bareheaded in public prayer and this usage Paul commends for the men.” A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), IV, p. 159.

129 Some see the term “**head**” as referring to one’s physical head. This does not seem probable, for several reasons. First, this would be the only time Paul used this term to refer to shaming a thing, rather than a person. Second, Paul has just established the principle of headship. The act of covering or uncovering one’s head is a symbolic act, which either honors or dishonors the one who is our (spiritual) head.

130 In the case of the married woman, this would be the wife's husband, who is her head (Ephesians 5:23). In the case of a single woman, I am inclined to assume this would be her father. See Numbers 30 where a woman's vow may be nullified either by her husband or her father.

131 "Amongst Greeks only the *hetairai*, so numerous in Corinth, went about unveiled; slave-women wore the shaven head—also a punishment of the adulteress' (Findlay)." A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, IV, p. 60.

132 I understand this not to be a setting aside of Genesis 1:26-28, where man and woman are created in the image of God, but an extension of the principle of headship put forth in 1 Corinthians 11:3. There is an Old Testament sense in which man and woman reflect the image of God, but there is a further (New Testament) sense in which the husband is the image of God when he exercises headship over his wife, as Christ does over the church (see also Ephesians 5:22-33).

133 F. F. Bruce, *The New Century Bible Commentary: I & II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 106.

134 Compare this same smugness and independence evident in those who possess certain spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:21.

135 It is interesting to note that prophecy, which was named along with prayer in verses 4 and 5, is now dropped, although I will not venture an explanation for why.

136 The subject of the length of one's hair could hardly have been avoided during Paul's stay in Corinth, because it was there that he had let his hair grow long, symbolic of his taking a Nazarite vow (see Acts 18:18).

137 I do not use the expression "their women" to suggest that husbands "own" their wives, but, as suggested earlier, to keep the broader view which Paul himself indicates by his use of "**man**" and "**woman**" as opposed to "husband" and "wife." The headship of a man over a woman will at least include fathers, who are the head of their daughters, and husbands, who are the head of their wives.

138 Eve is named "**woman**" by Adam in Genesis 2:23, and it is not until 3:20 that Adam names her "**Eve**." "**Woman**" indicates that she came from out of the man (2:23), while "**Eve**" indicates that she is the mother of all the living (3:20).

139 "... Paul's use of *nature* elsewhere and the use of *teach* suggest that he is referring to the natural and instinctive sense of right and wrong that God has planted in us, especially with respect to sexuality. ... Nature teaches, then, in the sense that the natural instincts and psychological perceptions of masculinity and femininity are manifested in particular cultural situations. Thus, a male instinctively and naturally shrinks away from doing anything that his culture labels as feminine. So, too, females have a natural inclination to dress like women rather than men. Paul's point, then, is that how men and women wear their hair is a significant indication of whether they are abiding by the created order. ... The function of verses 13-15 in the argument is to show that the wearing of a head covering by a woman is in accord with the God-given sense that women and men are different. For a woman to dress like a man is inappropriate because it violates the distinction God has ordained between the sexes." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1991), p. 135.

140 In Romans 1, Paul argues that sexual perversion is sinful because it is contrary to nature, contrary to the way things normally should and do work (see 1:26-27). Here, he follows the same logic. We have a natural sense of how men and women should look. Head coverings are a natural conclusion once one admits that women naturally look good with long hair, while men look good with short hair. The issue here is not how long a man or a woman's hair could grow, but how long most people feel they should grow their hair.

141 A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, IV, p. 162.

142 “For a covering (*anti peribolaiou*). Old word from *periballo* to fling around, as a mantle (Heb. 1:12) or a covering or veil as here. It is not in the place of a veil, but answering to (*anti*, in the sense of *anti* in John 1:16), as a permanent endowment (*dedotai*, perfect passive indicative).” A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, IV, p. 162.

143 “The preposition *anti* in 11:15 need not refer to substitution. It can also indicate equivalence. The latter makes better sense in the context. See Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (henceforward *BAGD*), trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, ed. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 73, 2.” Thomas R. Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.” *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1991), p. 486, fn. 7.

144 This is not to imply that every woman with a head covering is submissive, and all others are not. It is to say that all women with long hair are not necessarily submissive, and thus the head covering is necessary to set the submissive woman apart from the rest.

145 Others, and in the past I as well, have made much of the fact that the word “**other**” is literally “such.” This is why the King James Version reads, “**we have no such custom.**” It does not really matter which word is used, because the sense is the same, as required by the context. Paul means either, “We have no *other* practice than that women cover their heads in worship,” or, “We have no such practice as women praying or prophesying with an uncovered head.”

146 F. F. Bruce, p. 104.

147 Schreiner, p. 135.

148 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary*, F. F. Bruce, General Editor (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987 [reprint, 1993]), p. 512.

149 Schreiner, p. 138.

150 Schreiner, p. 138.

151 Theologians speak of this as the “kenosis,” the doctrine pertaining to the things which our Lord set aside in His taking on human flesh in the incarnation.

152 Not His divine attributes, for God can never be less than God.

153 I believe John MacArthur had rightly criticized some of our top evangelical leaders for allowing some vitally important distinctions between Catholics and Protestants to be blurred, in an effort to produce unity. Let us always beware of becoming sloppy

regarding divine distinctions. I highly recommend John MacArthur's recent book, *Reckless Faith* (Crossway Books, 1994). In this book, he has an excellent chapter on "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" (chapter 5).

Source URL: <http://bible.org/seriespage/headship-and-head-coverings-1-cor-113-16>