

What is Headship?
Examining the controversy of women and head coverings: Part 2

1. Study 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. In his comments about church practice, what seems to be the problem and what head adornment for women is Paul recommending?

The problem appears that Corinthian women were wearing their hair loose, and this understanding is based on the following:

1. "Akatakalyptos," the Greek word in 1 Cor 11:5 describing the problem, is the same term used in the Septuagint Leviticus 13:45, which describes how a leper's hair was to be worn: "hang unloosed."
2. A term somewhat related to "akatakalyptos", "apokalyptō", is found in Num 5:18, which described that woman suspected of adultery had to wear her hair loosely. Loose and unbound hair was considered shameful.
3. During Paul's time, it was customary for respectable women to wear their hair bound in a bun. Married women or daughters wore head coverings as a sign of submitting themselves under the authority of their husbands or fathers. Prostitutes refused to wear head coverings as a sign that they were not subject to a husband and in rejection of the authority of man.
4. Because there is no evidence that full veiling existed during Paul's time, the problem cannot refer to "veiling."

While the type of head covering is not clear, Paul recommends that women be adorned in a particular way, possibly using a shawl or hood.

1. The Greek verb, "katakalyptō", found three times in 1 Cor 11:6-7, and its related cognate form, found in 1 Cor 11:5 and 13, unequivocally means "to cover" or "to hide."
2. The same verb expression is found in the Septuagint Ester 6:12 and extrabiblical literature (Plutarch, 46-120 AD), and it refers to a garment head covering.
3. Extrabiblical literature contemporary of Paul, uses an expression, which is the negative adjective of the verb "katakalyptō", to specifically refer to the uncovering of the head.

2. Break up the syntax of 1 Corinthians 11:3-15. What do you see? Why does Paul want women to have a head covering?

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.

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In his typical legal manner, Paul establishes the theological basis for his exhortation that will follow. The theological basis: Christ is the authority over man, man is the authority over woman, and God is the authority over Christ. Like the Trinity, different in function but of equal worth, men and women were created for different roles but of equal worth.

For in depth discussion of 1 Cor 11:3, see: Headship and the Trinity... Examining the controversy of women and head coverings: Part 1 at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/11Church/PublicWhichDefinitionCorrectKephale.aspx.

Verse 3 is the first of five reasons why women should not discard their adornment and cultural symbol of submission (verses 3, 7, 10, 13, and 16).

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 as the woman whose head is shaved.

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.

Following his theological principle that Christ is the authority over man and man is the authority over woman in verse 3, Paul exhorts that no man should have a head covering while a woman should while praying or prophesying in the assembly or meeting of the church. Notice how Paul uses the contrast "but" in his argument in verses 5 and 6.

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In verse 7, a second reason why women should not discard their adornment and cultural symbol of submission emerges. Paul makes another contrast: man is the image and glory of God, and woman is the glory of man. While a reference to Genesis 1:26-28 is made, Paul further explains how a woman is the glory of man with a reference to Genesis 2:18-24. Recall that God wanted to make a helper for Adam, and He made the “beasts of the field and birds of the sky”, yet no “suitable helper” could be found. In His wisdom, woman was specifically made from man and intended to be his companion and helper in the tasks of God. It is because of man that woman was created; this divine distinction in Creation is why women should honor men.

In the context of verse 7, the “disgrace” mentioned in verses 4 and 5 presents the possibility of having a double meaning.

In the literal sense, the phrase “disgraces his / her head” is about one’s physical head and thus refers to “bringing shame to oneself.”

In the metaphorical sense, in the context of the glory of God and man and “head” of verse 3 metaphorically meaning “authority”, the phrase “disgraces his / her head” could also mean to “dishonor Christ” and “dishonor man.”

Both the literal (plain-literal) and metaphorical (figurative-literal) meanings, verses 3-7 accord well and follow the logic in Paul’s arguments.

A similar concept is exemplified in Proverbs 17:25,

“A foolish son is a grief to his father,
And bitterness to her who bore him.”

By not wearing her head covering, a woman was disgracing herself. It was akin to shaving her head and looking like a man. This symbolized an independence and rebellion against God’s intended relationship between a man and woman, and thus, disgraced the man.

10) Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

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.

Verse 10 is the third reason why women should not discard their adornment and cultural symbol of submission. While this verse is not clearly understood, there are other references in the Bible indicating that angels witness how Christians live their lives especially in the service and worship of God (Luke 12:8-9, 15:8-10, 1 Cor 4:9, and 1 Tim 5:21). And both fallen and unfallen angels understood the concept of authority and submission to it.

Some scholars object to the translation of “authority” (exousia) in verse 10. The Greek translation literally says, “the woman ought to have authority on her head....” They believe that the Greek term “exousia” should be translated in its active meaning instead of passive sense. Thus the word should refer to a woman’s own authority; wearing a head covering indicates her right to pray and prophesize and is not a sign of submission to man.

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This interpretation is incorrect for several reasons:

The interpretation does not make sense with the **syntax** and **logic** of preceding verses.

Verses 7 and 10 are complementary and parallel verses. Verse 10 is about an obligation towards authority not a right to authority.

v.7 A man should not wear a head covering.

v.10 But a woman should.

Verses 8-9 explains why the head covering is significant, and its symbolism rooted in the Creation of woman.

Verse 10 begins with the term “therefore” which refers back to the context of the preceding verses. If verse 10 was about a woman’s own authority, it would contradict Paul’s preceding verses and logic. In addition, verse 5 already acknowledges the woman’s right to publicly pray and prophesize in the church assembly.

Verses 11-12 qualify the preceding verses so that one would not get the idea that women are inferior. This qualification would not make sense if verse 10 was about a woman’s own authority.

While 1 Corinthians 11:3-10 argues for male headship and female submission, Paul qualifies his argument in verses 11-12 so that the Corinthians would not misunderstand: a woman’s subordination does not mean inferiority.

While Eve came from Adam, each man came from a woman, and both came from God. Mutually interdependent and complementary, both men and women equally bring glory to God; men are not superior in being to women.

13) Judge for 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.

Verse 13 is the fourth reason why women should not discard their adornment and cultural symbol of submission. Paul’s argument is based on man’s natural instincts, which uses cues, such as hair length, to distinguish between the sexes. Just as hair length provides the visible physical means that differentiate between the sexes, so does head covering provide the visible symbolic means that differentiate between the sexes.

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

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Verse 16 is the fifth and last reason why women should not discard their adornment and cultural symbol of submission. In his last argument, Paul speaks from the perspective of the apostles and the other churches. To those "contentious" Corinthian women who refuse their head coverings in defiance of male headship in the name of freedom, no apostle or church condones their practice of discarding their head coverings.

In today's culture, the issue of male headship remains a contentious controversy and is seen as a barrier to socio-economic advancement. Paul's letter to the Corinthians was an admonishment about *church practice*. In the first century, women, who participate in prayer and prophecy during worship, should have a head covering to acknowledge male leadership and authority. How that is conveyed today is debatable. Inasmuch as the culture today does not view the absence of a covering as evidence of being a loose woman, in view of this biblical principle, many wonder how a woman should demonstrate that she is under the submission of her husband. Some see the contemporary equivalent of this in attitude and demeanor; others suggest possibly the wedding ring.

However, the controversy is seen in today's forms of church practice. Many churches practice one of two extremes. At one extreme is the church that does not recognize male headship and fully support a woman's right to fully participate in public worship just as a man would. At the other extreme is the church that does recognize male headship but denies a woman's right to prayer and prophecy during public worship.

Paul did not advocate either extreme. He exhorted female submission to male leadership and authority in public worship while maintaining equal worth and dignity of the sexes. And while making his case, his arguments emphasized the physical and symbolic distinctions between the sexes.

References:

1. Piper, J, Grudem, W, eds, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books (1991), p.130-139.

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