

Women's Head Coverings

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Note: The following study was written by the late Dr. Herman Hoyt, who was a colleague of Dr. John Whitcomb for many years. The views presented in this article are solely Dr. Hoyt's, and are not necessarily those of Dr. Whitcomb or Whitcomb Ministries, Inc., which posts this writing here for its theological and historical value. Throughout this transcript, italics are used to represent Dr. Hoyt's points of emphasis.

Many religious denominations teach that the woman should wear a covering. Some insist that this covering is natural; namely, the woman's hair; while others teach that it is artificial. Some teach that it should be worn all the time, others only in the public service, and still others only while performing certain functions within the church involving authority. Some teach that this wearing of the covering is obligatory for all women; others for only a few of the women. One passage of Scripture provides the major source of information for all groups, no matter what their views. That passage is 1 Cor. 11:1-16.

Important Preliminary Facts

1. This passage teaches that Christian women who serve in some position of authority in the public assembly should wear *an artificial covering*. The natural covering, a woman's hair, cannot be in view as the easiest reading of verses 4 and 5 clearly attests. If the covering is the hair, then by putting the word "haired" in the place of the word "covered" of verse 6, the verse should read sensibly, but instead it reads like nonsense. After arguing for 16 verses, Paul says, "We have no such custom" (verse 16). He cannot be talking about hair, so he must be talking about an artificial covering. And certainly he is not dismissing the subject by saying an artificial covering does not matter after all. Therefore, there is only one conclusion. He is insisting that some artificial covering is the custom among all the churches of God.
2. This passage of Scripture deals with matters that pertain to conduct in the *public assembly*. The word "ordinances" of verse 2, though meaning traditions

in the more basic sense, in this chapter refers to policies, practices, rites or customs performed when believers gather for public worship. In verses 2 to 16, the discussion centers around the proper adornment of women in public worship, while verses 17 to 34 are given over to the correction of abuses at the Lord's table. The word "head" of verse 3 points to governmental authority as exercised in public, and the word "power" in verse 10 designates the sign of authority. The functions of leadership performed in public such as "praying" and "prophesying" (verse 4) are the immediate occasion for this discussion. And the use of the word "churches" (verse 16) can only mean the various gatherings of believers for public worship.

3. In this passage of Scripture, the apostle is especially concerned with *the exercise of authority* in the public assembly. He is not concerned with all the women all the time, nor a part of the women all the time, but only with some of the women some of the time. And the few he has in mind are those who "pray" or "prophesy" (verse 5), that is, those who perform two functions of leadership in the public assembly. The place of constituted authority and leadership in the public assembly belongs to the man (1 Tim. 2:11-14). In an emergency, when women are called upon to perform these functions, they should wear the artificial covering to indicate to all that they know their own place and are not in any sense usurping the place of the man.

From verse 2 it is evident that Corinthian Christians were following the general teaching of the apostle and therefore deserved some praise. But there was need for some further instruction concerning women officiating in public. Certain fundamental facts are first pointed out.

1. The supreme fact on which they needed instruction was *governmental order* (verse 8). The use of the word "head" has to do with government and marks the position of leadership. God is the head of Christ. Christ is the head of man. Man is the head of woman. This is not intended to suggest that the one who is

the head is superior in being, nature or quality over the other. It is teaching that headship involves position over the other. This verse with its underlying teaching is fundamental and foundational, and provides the doctrinal basis for the entire discussion that follows. There is order in heaven among the Persons of the Godhead, there is order in the relation of Christ to mankind and there is order in *the* human family. Since this is true, this order should be recognized in the conduct of the public worship services.

2. The supervising function of *praying and prophesying* provided the occasion for this particular discussion (verses 4 and 5). There were two parts in the conduct of the public worship service, and they remain so today. “He that prophesieth edifieth the church” (1 Cor. 14:4), and he who prays does so in the church to be understood (1 Cor. 14:14-16). But these two functions required direction and therefore leadership. And the leaders needed to be properly constituted for their tasks. Since it is clearly forbidden to women to usurp this place of authority (1 Tim. 2:11-14), then where emergency arises, she needs to discharge these functions with every token that she is doing so as directed by the assembly of believers and is not usurping the place of the man.
3. This means that the *sign of authority*, namely, the artificial covering, is required when women are pressed into service (verses 4 and 5). The Apostle Paul was a wise man. By the time he had written 1 Corinthians, he had been to Philippi, where only women were present in the first gathering to which he spoke. And down through the years many churches have had to depend upon women at one time or another in order to have a public worship service. While this is the exception and not the rule, nevertheless lest matters get out of hand and great harm come to the cause of Christ, the Holy Spirit of God directed Paul to write these words to the church at Corinth. By means of this counsel the emergency is met; yet disorder is prevented from entering the church and women are saved from bringing dishonor upon those in headship over them.

The “power” or sign of authority (verse 10) they wear gives ample testimony that they are devout and godly women.

4. The sad results of failing to recognize and observe this simple fact brings “shame” upon the woman and upon the cause of Christ (verse 6). It is very unlikely that a godly woman would be seen in public shorn or shaven. Yet to pray or prophesy uncovered is just as shameful. This not only indicates that a woman is writhing under restraint and therefore recognizes no authority above her, but when this practice went to the extreme it was like identifying oneself with the public prostitutes of Corinth, who had not only thrown off the restraints of headship but had given themselves to public shame. It was true in that day, and it is still true, that where women boldly usurp the place of the man and assume the place of leadership, no spiritual, virile type of Christianity is present in that congregation.

Turning from the fundamental facts, the apostle now advances some powerful arguments favoring the artificial covering.

1. He begins with the argument based upon the *creation* of man and woman (verses 7 to 9). Man was created in the image of God and is the visible manifestation of the glory of God. He should not cover that glory when discharging functions of leadership in public. But the *woman* was first out of the man and for the man. Being bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh and in some peculiar way belonging to him, the woman should recognize *this* and be submissive to it, and thus display the fact that she is in agreement with it by wearing the artificial covering when serving in a place of public authority.
2. This raises the whole problem of the relation of man and woman (verses 10 to 12). “Power,” that is, the sign of delegated authority upon her head, is evidence to the angels (good and bad) that here is a godly woman subject to the governmental order God has established. This covering brings the

approval of the good angels (cf. 1 Tim. 5:21; Eph. 3:10), and it protects from the evil angels who are also looking for opportunity to destroy the people of God (cf. Gen. 6:1-4; Eph. 6:11-12; Jude 6). If women hesitate to submit to this command of God, they need to recognize that the authority of the man rightfully carries with it the protection and blessing of the man (verse 11). No man can function by himself, nor can the woman. Self-sufficiency is a terrible thing. And in order that the man not be lifted up with pride, Paul reminds him that every man since Adam came into being through the woman (verse 12).

3. Nor does Paul ignore the argument based upon *institution* (verses 13 to 15). Knowing that men everywhere possess innate ability to reason some things to a proper conclusion without special Bible training, he is willing to submit the matter to their judgment (verse 13). “Nature” teaches some things. The essential nature of the sexes has taught men everywhere that there is an essential difference in the sexes. This difference has made it proper for men and women to dress differently in order to distinguish them. And this has been true of the hairy dress. The hair of the woman has been given to her for a permanent mantle and is certainly a part of her essential glory. Since this is true, the apostle argues that it is given to her “for a covering” (v. 15). In this phrase, Paul is saying that this covering points to and calls for an artificial covering. Such is the meaning of the preposition “for” in this verse.

4. *Church* custom is the concluding argument on this point (verse 16). Because some people are never convinced – in this case it might have been women chafing under restraint – Paul brings the discussion to an abrupt end. He deems the above facts as sufficient evidence on this point. If people will not be reasonable and see the issue of the argument, then this fact is conclusive to settle the whole issue. There is no such custom of not wearing the covering, and this is true throughout the churches of God. Since the covering of that day was the normal and customary veil in that society, the covering for women in

Corinth and in any other place should be that which is customary among women.

Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.