

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **Head Coverings (1 Corinthians 11) - Part 2**

Welcome to the second half of our teaching on 1 Corinthians 11:4-5. In part 1, we delved into some of the themes contained in 1 Corinthians 11. Here is a quick review of what we covered:

First, Paul frames this passage in verses 1 and 2 by talking about “traditions” that he commends the Corinthians church for keeping. Since no other place in Scripture describes a dress code for prayer or prophecy, it makes sense that Paul is speaking of a tradition.

Second, in verse 3, Paul explains the chain of headship and authority. In other places where this chain of authority is mentioned, the point is that men and women should emulate Christ; they should obey the authorities that are over them, and love those that they have authority over.

Third, to “dishonor” one’s head means to discredit or humiliate it. This is almost certainly a reference to the “heads” described in verse 3. A person can bring dishonor to Christ or to her husband, but not to a literal head.

Fourth, being in the image and glory of God is the condition that mankind was originally in, but we fell short of the glory of God when we sinned. Yeshua is “the image of the invisible God,” and he glorified God by obeying him and doing the work that God had for him to do. In Christ, we too can bear the image of God and display his glory. One of the elements of obeying God is providing for our families, and women who provide for their families bring glory to their husbands, rather than shame.

Fifth, the cultural standards of the time were that men should have short hair, and women should have long hair. Paul used these standards to illustrate that a woman should have a spiritual covering on her head as well as the physical covering of her hair.

So, with those elements in mind, we will return to our main question: how should we interpret the following verses?

#### **1 Corinthians 11:4-5**

Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.

What does it mean for a man to have his head covered, or for a woman to have her head uncovered? There are three interpretations that we will examine in this teaching. Those interpretations are:

- 1) The head covering Paul is referring to is a cloth covering that women wore on their heads. Women did this for the sake of modesty and/or as a sign of submission to their husbands.
- 2) The head covering is long hair, so Paul is saying that men should have short hair, and women should have long hair.
- 3) The head covering is not a physical thing, but a metaphorical reference to something else.

We will go through these interpretations one at a time. We will compare them to the themes that we discussed in part 1, discuss their strengths and weaknesses, and then discuss what practical conclusions we can draw from all of this. Let's start with the first interpretation: that is, that the covering that men should not wear, and women should wear, is a cloth covering. We'll start by showing some of this interpretation's strengths.

The first point in favor of this idea is that, in the first century Roman empire, one of the garments that women commonly wore could be used to cover the head. Men typically wore a *toga*, a loosely draped cloth (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/toga>). Women wore two garments: a *stola*, which was a long gown, and a *palla*, a rectangular piece of cloth which was wrapped around the upper body ([http://www.fashionencyclopedia.com/fashion\\_costume\\_culture/The-Ancient-World-Rome/Palla.html](http://www.fashionencyclopedia.com/fashion_costume_culture/The-Ancient-World-Rome/Palla.html)). The *palla* could be pulled up to cover the woman's head. So, the typical woman was already wearing a garment that could be easily used to cover her head, while the typical man was not wearing such a garment.

Second, Paul introduces the topic of head covering by stating that the Corinthians obey the traditions that he delivered to them:

### **1 Corinthians 11:2**

Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.

As we mentioned, it is a Jewish tradition for married women to cover their heads, which is described in the Talmud by the second century Rabbi Yishmael (*Ketubot* 72a:19). It's entirely conceivable that this tradition could have existed in the first century as well, when Paul was writing to the Corinthians. Also, if wearing this head covering was a traditional sign that a woman was married, it would certainly be dishonoring her husband for her not to wear it. That would be like a married woman today refusing to wear her wedding ring. So, the married woman's head covering would symbolize a lot of the themes that we discussed in part 1 of this teaching.

Third, some ancient cultures considered a woman's hair to be part of her reproductive system. That is, they considered it to be a defining feature of being a woman, just like her actual reproductive organs (Troy W. Martin, "Paul's Pneumatological Statements And Ancient Medical Texts", *The New Testament and Early Christian Literature in Greco-Roman Context*, pp. 102-123). Consequently, some historians

claim that covering her hair would be seen as a necessary component of modesty, just like covering other parts of her body would be. Paul certainly would not want women to be presenting themselves immodestly while they are praying or prophesying, so it would make some sense for him to require women to be properly clothed when they were in the assembly.

Fourth, the wearing of a head covering is the most simple interpretation of the passage. If Paul is recommending something besides having women literally cover their heads, then why would he phrase his instructions in this way? Why should we suppose that he is trying to communicate anything besides what he seems to plainly say in verses 4 and 5?

Because of these reasons, many Bible translators interpret this passage to mean that Paul expects Christian women to wear physical head coverings. However, there are some problems with this interpretation as well. Here are a few of those problems:

First, and most importantly, there is no passage anywhere else in the Scriptures that indicates that women should wear a head covering. Numbers 5:18 indicates that a woman accused of adultery should stand before the priest with her head uncovered, but this alone does not indicate that her head would be covered all the rest of the time. This verse also does not mention prayer or prophecy, which is the context of Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 11. Furthermore, there is no other command instructing her to cover her head, in either the Tanakh or the New Testament. If Paul is telling women to wear head coverings in 1 Corinthians, that instruction seems to come out of nowhere.

Second, there is no command anywhere else indicating that a man should keep his head uncovered when he prays or prophesies. In fact, the priests were specifically instructed to wear turbans—head coverings—when they served in the tabernacle (Exodus 28:4, 39; 39:28-31), which was God's "house of prayer" (Isaiah 56:7). If physically covering a man's head was such a disgraceful thing, why would the priests be instructed to cover their heads?

Third, if 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 was referring to the *palla*, the women's garment that they could use to cover their heads, then this issue would not be a matter of tradition. The Scriptures already prohibit a man from wearing a woman's garment:

#### **Deuteronomy 22:5**

[A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD \[YHWH\] your God.](#)

So for a man to wear a *palla* would not only be a violation of tradition, but a violation of commandment. If Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:4, was saying that men should not wear the *palla*, then why would he mention "tradition" in verse 2? Shouldn't he be citing this commandment from Deuteronomy instead?

Fourth, in verse 15, Paul says that women already have a physical head covering in the form of their hair:

#### **1 Corinthians 11:14-15**

[Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.](#)

So, if a woman's hair already functions as a physical covering for her head, then why does she need *another* physical covering on top of that? Wouldn't it make more sense that Paul is recommending a

metaphorical covering for a woman in verse 5, since she already has a natural physical covering in the form of her hair?

Fifth, the idea that first century cultures considered a woman's hair to be immodest is actually highly dubious. The Romans left lots of art depicting noble women, and they are almost always depicted wearing fancy hairstyles, not with their hair covered. Roman empresses are depicted on coins with their hair visible, as well as on many statues and pictures. If a woman's hair was considered immodest, it would be very strange for the Romans to depict their empresses and noble women, people who they considered virtuous and honorable, to be showing their hair. Furthermore, it's not clear that Jews considered women's hair to be immodest at this time either.

Peter instructs his female readers to not pursue these fancy hairstyles when he says that their adornment should not be "the braiding of hair" (1 Peter 3:3). It's strange that Peter would advise women not to elaborately style their hair if their heads were always covered, and these fancy hairstyles would never be seen. Also, when Mary anointed Yeshua's feet in John 12:3, she wiped the ointment with her hair. If showing her hair was immodest, then the disciples would not just be complaining about the cost of the perfume (John 12:5). This situation would have been more scandalous than that. So, the idea that a woman's hair had to be covered for the sake of modesty doesn't seem to align with the historical evidence.

Sixth, Paul defines what the term "head" means right before he gives instruction about whether to cover the head:

### **1 Corinthians 11:3**

*But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.*

So, right before he gives instruction about covering the head, Paul defines the term "head." For a man, that "head" is Christ, and for a woman, that "head" is her husband. It seems like he gives this definition of "head" in verse 3 so that we will *not* think that he is talking about a person's physical head in verses 4 and 5.

Those are some of the strengths and weaknesses of the interpretation that Paul is speaking of a cloth covering in verses 4 and 5. Now, let's take a look at the idea that he is actually speaking of long hair as a covering in those verses.

This interpretation has some good points in its favor. First of all, Paul explicitly calls a woman's hair her "covering" in verse 15:

### **1 Corinthians 11:15**

*For her hair is given to her for a covering.*

It seems quite logical to apply this same definition of "covering" to verses 4 and 5. Paul also mentions cutting hair in verses 5 and 6, so it seems to be a big issue on his mind throughout the chapter. It makes a lot of sense that he could be referring to this kind of gender distinction as a head covering.

Second, this interpretation eliminates the problem of why the male priests were commanded to wear cloth coverings, but Paul prohibits men from covering their heads. If the "covering" Paul is speaking of is long hair, then this eliminates the apparent contradiction between Paul and Moses.

Third, historically it was normal in first century Rome for men to have short hair and women to have long hair. This could explain why Paul mentions “tradition” in verse 2. He is appealing to the cultural norm.

Unfortunately, this interpretation has problems too. The first problem is that that no other scripture prescribes a particular hair length for men or women. Yes, Paul does mention “tradition” in verse 2, but why is he recommending something that isn’t mentioned at all in other scriptures?

Second, the Scriptures mention at least one situation where a man growing out his hair is acceptable, and that is the case of the Nazirite vow in Numbers chapter 6. When the Nazirite vow was taken, the person taking the vow would not cut his hair for a set period of time (Numbers 6:5). This was an unusual situation, but certainly not a dishonorable one. Women could also take the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:2), and at the end of the vow, she would cut off her hair (Numbers 6:18). Again, this was an unusual situation, but not a dishonorable one. In fact, Paul himself took a Nazirite vow along with four other men (Acts 21:20-26). It would be strange for him to call something dishonorable that the Scriptures regard as good, and that he himself did.

Third, verse 3 seems to point toward the term “head” being a metaphor for authority, rather than a reference to a physical head. We already established that the “head” that is dishonored in verses 4 and 5 is probably a metaphorical head—that is to say, it is a reference to a person, not a body part. So, it seems logical that the “head” that is covered or uncovered in those same verses could also be a person, rather than a body part. In other words, in verse 4 the man who prays or prophesies with Christ covered dishonors Christ, and in verse 5, the woman who prays or prophesies with her husband uncovered dishonors her husband. Rather than use the term “head” to mean a physical thing, and then a metaphor, why not translate the term “head” consistently throughout these verses?

Fourth, the idea that the covering is hair encounters a logical problem when we consider verse 6:

### **1 Corinthians 11:6**

*For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head.*

If “cover her head” means to have long hair, then Paul would be saying, “if a wife will not have long hair, then she should cut her hair short.” But this is a nonsensical statement; how would a woman cut her hair short when it is already short? It would seem that “not covering her head” and “having short hair” have to be two different things for verse 6 to make any sense.

Now, let’s take a look at the third interpretation, which is that this head covering is not cloth or hair, but is a spiritual or metaphorical thing. Here are some points in favor of that idea:

First, this makes sense of verse 3, which states that a man’s head is Christ, and a woman’s head is her husband. The reason Paul includes this information is so that we can interpret the word “head” correctly in verses 4 and 5, and won’t think that he is talking about physical heads there. Why would he bring up what a “head” is in verse 3 if he didn’t want us to use his definition for “head” in verses 4 and 5?

Second, this interpretation eliminates many of the problems with the cloth covering and with hair. There is no problem with what the priests are wearing; there is no contradiction in verse 6; there is no need to assume anything about historical clothing traditions; and, it aligns well with other scriptures that describe the proper authority structure in church and marriage.

Third, it makes sense of Paul's comparisons of this head covering to long hair throughout the chapter. This would make perfect sense if there was a spiritual head covering being spoken of in verses 4 and 5, and it is being compared to the natural physical head covering of a woman's hair. "Nature" shows us that women have a head covering and men do not; so, women should also have a spiritual head covering that men do not require.

Of course, this idea is also not without its problems. First, why does Paul use this cryptic language in this passage? If his point in 1 Corinthians 11 is the same as it is in Ephesians 5 or Titus 2, then why doesn't he use direct and plain language here like he does in those chapters? Peter also uses straightforward language to communicate this idea in 1 Peter chapter 3. So, if Paul is saying basically the same thing, then why use this "head covering" analogy at all? That seems unnecessarily complicated.

Second, how would the church evaluate whether a person has a "spiritual" head covering? If Paul was instructing men and women to have a certain hair length, or to wear particular clothes, it would be easy for church leaders to recognize whether people were obeying that instruction. But if the head covering is a metaphor, then what would they look for to determine whether a person is allowed to pray or prophesy? Practically speaking, how could they enforce Paul's rule here?

Third, what exactly does this metaphor mean? What does it mean to "cover" or "uncover" one's metaphorical or spiritual head? How would a man "cover" Christ, or a woman "uncover" her husband? This kind of phrasing isn't used anywhere else in the Scriptures, so we have to make some significant assumptions to determine what this might mean. This idea just doesn't give us anything solid to go on.

Now that we've covered their strengths and weaknesses, let's quickly review these three interpretations.

The first interpretation is that Paul is recommending a cloth covering for women's heads in 1 Corinthians 11:5. The strengths of this interpretation are:

- 1) Women at that time were already wearing a garment that could be easily used as a head covering,
- 2) Later Jewish tradition held that married women should cover their heads,
- 3) Some ancient nonbiblical texts refer to a woman's hair as part of her reproductive system,
- 4) This is the most straightforward interpretation of the passage, and many translators interpret the passage in this way.

The weaknesses of this interpretation are:

- 1) This cloth covering is not mentioned in any other scriptures,
- 2) Some men (the priests) are specifically commanded to cover their heads during their religious service,
- 3) Men are already prohibited from wearing women's clothing, so this would be a matter of commandment, not tradition,
- 4) Paul argues later in the chapter that women's hair already functions as a physical head covering,
- 5) Both artistic and written depictions of women in the first century depict them not covering their heads, and these are not shameful depictions of them, and
- 6) Paul defines the term "head" in verse 3, and he is not referring to physical heads at all.

The second interpretation is that Paul is calling long hair a head covering in verses 4 and 5. So, men should have short hair, and women should have long hair. The strengths of this interpretation are:

- 1) Paul explicitly calls a woman's hair her "covering" in verse 15,
- 2) There is no contradiction between this interpretation and the dress code of the priests, and
- 3) This aligns with the typical hairstyles of men and women in the first century.

The weaknesses of this interpretation are:

- 1) Hair length standards are not mentioned in any other scripture,
- 2) Paul's definition of "head" in verse 3 is not a physical head, and
- 3) Verse 6 compares having no head covering with having short or shaved hair. Why would this comparison be made if having no head covering was exactly the same thing as having short hair?

The third interpretation is that Paul means something spiritual or metaphorical when he mentions having the head covered or uncovered in verses 4 and 5. The strengths of this interpretation are:

- 1) It aligns with the non-physical definition of "head" that Paul provides in verse 3,
- 2) There is no contradiction between Paul's words here and the dress code of the priests, no logical problem with verse 6 or verse 15, and no need to rely on historical or cultural assumptions,
- 3) It aligns with other scriptures that speak about gender roles and proper relationship between husband and wife,
- 4) It makes sense that, throughout the chapter, Paul is comparing a physical symbol of hair length with a spiritual principle of "covering the head."

The weaknesses of this interpretation are:

- 1) It seems like an unnecessarily complicated way of saying the same thing that Paul says in much simpler terms in his other writings,
- 2) It would be difficult for the church to recognize or enforce this "tradition," and
- 3) There's no way to know what exactly this metaphor of "covering the head" would even mean. It isn't mentioned anywhere else in Scripture.

So, all three of these ideas have promising strengths, and crippling weaknesses. We don't know why Paul is bringing this issue up, so in the end, it's difficult to say what the correct interpretation of this passage is. It's not clear what exactly Paul is saying to do or not to do. However, there are some practical conclusions we can draw from this passage even if we don't know precisely how it should be interpreted.

First, whether the head covering in verses 4 and 5 is a traditional wife's garment, long hair, or something metaphorical, this passage is not prohibiting men from wearing hats. None of the major interpretations would prohibit men in such a way. In the first interpretation, men are being told not to wear a woman's garment; in the second, they are being told not to wear a woman's hairstyle, and in the third, the point of the passage is spiritual, rather than physical. Also, since the priests were commanded to wear turbans, it stands to reason that it is not inherently disgraceful for men to wear something on their heads.

Second, men and women should recognize that they honor God in their different roles. Husbands should love and honor their wives, and wives should respect and submit to their husbands. They should both seek to emulate Christ, who is our example of how to serve and how to love. For more on how Biblical headship can be applied in a marriage, we recommend our teaching, Marriage Authority.

Third, men should not wear women's clothing, and women should not wear men's clothing. They should

not attempt to pass themselves off as the opposite sex, or to confuse others as to which sex they actually are. There is value and even glory in being a man or a woman, because that's how God created us. We should accept that God made us the way we are for a reason, and seek to glorify him as men and women.

Finally, the question of whether women should wear head coverings is, as far as we're concerned, inconclusive based on this passage. Even if Paul is advocating for physical head coverings here, then they were a cultural norm of the time, and he is advocating for them as a tradition, not as a commandment. Most cultures today do not regard the head covering as an essential woman's garment. There is certainly nothing wrong with wearing a head covering, but they are not commanded in the Torah, or even mentioned anywhere in Scripture except for possibly here in 1 Corinthians 11. What is conclusive is that neither women nor men should do things that disrespect their spouses or their families.

So, in the end, even though this passage is difficult to interpret, there are some valuable lessons we can still learn from it. May God grant you wisdom in how to apply these lessons to your life.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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