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By *Bob Deffinbaugh*
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Introduction

Before we seek to consider some specific issues regarding the application of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, let us first sum up what Paul has taught. To sum up verses 1-16, Paul is instructing women to cover their heads in order to demonstrate to the angels and celestial powers their submission to God's appointed authority. Paul does not present head coverings as a matter of his opinion, but as an apostolic tradition. He does not describe this as a matter of Christian liberty, or as a personal conviction, but as a matter of obedience. ("**Let her cover her head**" in verse 6 is an imperative, buttressed by the "**ought**" of verse 10.) Paul mentions no other alternative symbol nor does he imply there may be some other way to symbolize submission to male headship. He also speaks of the head covering of women as the consistent practice of every church and not just that of the Corinthian church. Anyone who would wish to debate with Paul over his teaching in these verses seeks to reject a tradition held and practiced in every church.

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.¹⁵⁴

Those who hold to the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, and who consistently employ sound methods of interpretation, find it difficult to come to any other conclusions than those stated above. We must ask the question: "Do Paul's words apply to us just as they did to the Corinthians, and if so, how?" As we seek to reach the bottom line of our text, we must answer the following questions:

DO VERSES 1-16 DEAL SPECIFICALLY (ONLY) WITH THE MEETING OF THE CHURCH?

Some sincerely believe verses 1-16 refer to the church meeting. I believe Paul is speaking more generally so that his words apply both to the church meeting and elsewhere. My reasons for this view, and for rejecting the "church meeting only" position, are as follows:

(1) *The conclusion that the church meeting is in view is inferential at best.*

(2) *It is clear, to me at least, that all of chapters 11-14 are not devoted to the church meeting.* First Corinthians 11:1-16, along with chapters 12 and 13, deal with more general issues. This does not mean that what Paul teaches in these more general texts does not apply to the church meeting; it simply means his teaching is not to be restricted to the context of the church meeting.

(3) *When Paul does refer specifically to the church meeting, he clearly indicates this fact as we can see in 11:17, 18, 20, 33; 14:4, 23, 26.*

(4) *The fact that women are not allowed to function in the church meeting in the way Paul describes in verses 4 and 5 certainly calls the “church meeting only” view into question.* If Paul prohibits women to pray, or teach, or prophesy, or speak publicly in the church meeting, then how can we conclude that the teaching of this passage, which speaks of a woman taking a public verbal role, should be understood as applying specifically to the church meeting? This is about as logical as a maximum security prison passing out instruction booklets for the use of hand guns to inmates.

(5) *Some think verses 17 and 18 imply that the previous 16 verses are a reference to conduct in the church meeting:*

17 But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. 18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it (1 Corinthians 11:17-18).

I think these verses strongly argue in the opposite direction. Paul is now turning from his instructions on head coverings, which apply beyond the church meeting, to his instructions regarding the Lord’s Supper, which is a more specific context. His words, “**in the first place,**” in verse 18 do not make sense if Paul has been talking about the church meeting all along. He should now be saying, “in the second place,” because the first error was regarding head coverings. When he says, “**in the first place,**” he indicates this is his first correction under his instructions regarding the church meeting. I do not know how else to understand his words.

TO WHAT DEGREE SHOULD CULTURE INFLUENCE OUR INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION OF THESE VERSES?

The assumption is often made that we must first understand the cultural setting of a particular passage before we can understand or apply it. Knowing the cultural background of any text is helpful, but it is not mandatory. If it is vitally important, the biblical text (in the context or elsewhere in the Bible) will supply what we have to know. If this were not so, we could have no confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture—that it contains all that is necessary for life and godliness (see 2 Peter 1:2-4; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). It would also mean that some book, or books other than Scripture, are necessary for us to understand and apply the Word of God. Corinth appears not to have one given culture; rather Corinth was a cosmopolitan city with a wide diversity of cultures. In 1 Corinthians 1:1-2, 4:14-17, 11:16, and 14:33-34, Paul indicates that his teaching in this epistle is for every Christian in every culture. These truths are not culture-bound; thus, we need not know all we might wish to know about the cultural setting in Corinth. We simply do not know as much about the cultural setting of that day, as some commentators indicate:

In this case, even if we were sure of prevailing customs, we would need to be able to distinguish between Greek, Roman, and Jewish customs as well as differences in geography, how one dressed at home, outside the home, and in worship, and the differences between the rich and poor. This diversity is well illustrated in the various samplings in Goodenough.¹⁵⁵

Paul applies his teaching to all of the saints in all of the churches. A look at a map of Paul's missionary journeys, and noting 1 Peter 1:1 and Revelation 2 and 3, should remind us of the many cultures represented in the churches of Paul's day.

Even if interesting and enlightening, there is a reason why a knowledge of the culture of Corinth is not necessary. Head covering is a symbol, a symbol designed to convey a message both to men and to angels. The symbol of head covering does not derive from the culture of Corinth, or our own culture, but from the nature of the Godhead and the divine distinctions God has determined and defined. These symbols have a message *for* culture, but they do not gain their message *from* culture. It is Scripture—not society—which provides us with the meanings of divine symbols.

Christians talk a great deal about culture, especially in reference to interpreting and applying Scripture. As popular as the word "culture" is today, I decided to see how often it could be found in the Bible. The term "culture" is foreign to the KJV, NKJV, NIV, and NASB translations of the Bible—it never occurs in the Bible. Is there a biblical term which is a synonym for "culture" in the Bible? Yes, there is. That biblical term is "**the world**" or "**this world**." What then does the Bible have to say about "**the world**"?

(1) *The unbelieving world (culture) of Jesus' day was opposed to Him, and He warns that our culture (the world) will be hostile to us as well* (John 17:13-21; 1 Peter 4:12-19; 1 John 3:13).

13 Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you (1 John 3:13).

(2) *We once walked in accordance with our culture, but through the cross of Christ, the world has been crucified to us and us to it.*

14 But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Galatians 6:14).

1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience (Ephesians 2:1-2, see also 4:17ff.).

(3) *Our culture ("this world") is seeking to squeeze us into its mold, and we are instructed to resist and to be transformed into conformity with Christ. We are not to walk according to fleshly wisdom, but in holiness and godly sincerity (2 Corinthians 1:12). We are strangers and pilgrims, whose conduct is governed by the kingdom which is yet to come with the return of our Lord (see 1 Peter 2:11ff.). We are to submit ourselves to earthly authorities (1 Peter 2:13ff.) but not to earthly values and standards (1 Peter 2:13ff.).*

1 I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:1-2).

(4) *Our calling as Christians is to live a holy life and to keep ourselves from being stained by the world.* To be a friend of the world is to be in hostility toward God. If we return to living in accordance with the culture in which we live, we have been led captive.

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ (Colossians 2:8, see vss. 20-21).

27 This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27).

4 You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (James 4:4).

Paul employs the same term for the *traditions* of men as he does for apostolic *traditions* in 1 Corinthians 11, producing a most interesting contrast. When we live in accordance with the culture, we are living contrary to the traditions of Christ.

As we read through the Bible, do we ever find any instance where godly men or women set aside or modified a commandment of God in order not to accommodate their culture? I cannot think of any. I can think of instances where men made concessions to their culture, but never compromises. Joseph was a man who made a concession to his (Egyptian) culture when he shaved off his beard (the custom in the Hebrew culture) and changed his clothes before appearing in the presence of Pharaoh (Genesis 41:14). There was no compromise here of principle or of command. Indeed, by shaving off his beard, Joseph was identifying himself with the Egyptian culture and certainly symbolizing his acceptance of his circumstances as the will of God. Doing this made it possible for Joseph to conceal his identity from his brothers and thus bring about their repentance and ultimate reconciliation. But when Mrs. Potiphar propositioned Joseph, he did not give in to this sin, but chose to obey God and to accept the consequences.

Daniel and his three friends also made concessions to the culture of the Babylonian Empire when they were forcibly taken from their homeland and relocated in Babylon. They were willing to study in Babylonian schools and to engage in the service of the king. These concessions they were willing to make, but when Nebuchadnezzar ordered everyone in his kingdom to bow down to his golden image, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego refused. Doing so would have been to disobey God's commands against idolatry. God's commandments were not to be set aside because they came into conflict with culture, even when taking a stand would likely cost these men their lives (see Daniel 3).

When Daniel's enemies realized they could not find any grounds for accusing him of wrong-doing with regard to his job, they also concluded he was a man who would not violate the "**law of his God**" (Daniel 6:5). They knew Daniel would not make compromises concerning God's commandments. And so they tricked the king into signing a law which forbade anyone to pray to anyone other than the king for 30 days. Daniel could have ceased praying for 30 days, or he could have closed his windows and prayed privately. But Daniel refused to make any concessions or compromises because this was a matter of obedience to God's commands. Daniel, like his three friends, would rather die in obedience to God's commandments than live because of compromises made in these things to comply with their culture.

Paul was a man willing to make concessions to his culture. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul sets down his guiding principles regarding his willingness to surrender his liberties for the sake of the gospel:

19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. 20 And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; 21 to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. 23 And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Paul was willing to give up any of his personal liberties if it might enhance the gospel. For this reason, Paul was willing to have Timothy circumcised (see Acts 16:1-3). But Paul would not budge when it came to divine principles or divine commands. And for this reason he refused to have Titus circumcised, and he rebuked Peter for his hypocrisy in his associations with Jews and Gentiles (Galatians 2:1-5, 11-21).

Nowhere in the Scriptures do we ever find concessions or compromises made to culture when it requires disobedience to God's commands. Head covering is a command, a tradition which was to be followed by every woman in every church. There is no reason and no room for compromise or change, and Paul does not so much as hint that there is. Why then are we so quick to make such changes, and why are we so bold to speak of doing so because of culture?

WHAT ABOUT THE EXPRESSION, "WHILE PRAYING OR PROPHESYING" IN VERSES 4 AND 5?

First and foremost, let us be clear that the main point of the passage is not the possibility of whether a woman can pray or prophesy in the church meeting. In this text, Paul is not as concerned with when and where a woman can pray or prophesy, but with *how* she would do so—with her head covered. Do we have problems with why Paul may have employed these terms and referred to these activities? That is understandable because Paul does not explain why these terms and activities have been chosen or what the implications of his words are. This is because whether or not a woman can pray or prophesy in the church meeting is not his primary concern in this passage. His concern is that which he consistently comes back to in verses 1-16—women wearing a head covering as a symbol of their submission.

Second, concluding that a woman can publicly pray or prophesy in the church meeting can only be done on the basis of several inferences. *First*, one must infer (without any clear indication of this possibility as seen above) that Paul's words in verse 1-16 apply solely to the church meeting. *Second*, one must infer that because Paul mentions the possibility of a woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered in the Corinthian church, this means any woman could and should do so anywhere. But the inferences do not stop here. Some go on to reason that if prophecy is the greatest gift (see 12:31; 14:39), if Paul allows women to do the greatest thing (prophecy), he must allow women to do anything less, like teaching, or leading.

Third, it is only possible to conclude that a woman can pray or prophesy in the church meeting if one's conclusion is based on a chain of inferences, which then allow this inferred conclusion to overrule the clear commands of the apostle elsewhere (see 1

Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-38). Unclear texts should not override clear texts, and inferences must never take precedence over commands.

Fourth, if Paul is speaking more generally than just the meeting of the church (as I contend), then women could and did pray and prophesy, only not in the church meeting. And when they did so, they were to have their heads covered.

Why did Paul pick these two activities, one of which (prayer) is not a gift, and the other (prophecy) which is a gift? We can only conjecture. These two activities are not represented as the only things a woman could do, but as things which a woman should not do with an uncovered head. Why should a woman's head be covered when praying or prophesying? For one thing, prayer and prophecy are functions which both have a strong element of authority. In both cases, the one who performs these functions is in direct contact with God. The one who prays speaks directly *to* God; the one who prophesies speaks directly *from* God. The prayer or prophecy of 1 Corinthians 11:5 is not all that different from the "**prayer and the ministry of the word**" to which the apostles devoted themselves (Acts 6:4). If there ever was a time when a woman seemed to be in authority, it would be when she was praying or prophesying. At these times, Paul insists, a woman should be thought to be acting shamefully if she does not cover her head.

One thing we can see from verses 4 and 5 is that by using the expression "**while praying or prophesying**" in relation to both men and women, Paul may be emphasizing that both men and women are doing the same thing—praying or prophesying. If they are doing the same thing, how then is the woman distinguished from the man? The answer: by wearing a head covering.

Here is a somewhat radical thought on this matter of prayer and prophecy related to the relationship between angels and women. Prayer is man approaching God, while prophecy involves man going forth, as it were, from God with a message and ministry from Him. Satan, the fallen angel, seems to lack the reverence he should have toward God. His interaction with God in Job 1 and 2 seems to lack any sense of reverence. In Luke 22:31, Satan is described by our Lord as "**demanding permission to sift Simon like wheat.**" The false teachers are referred to as "**angels of light,**" sent from Satan (2 Corinthians 11:13-14). One of the dominant characteristics of false teachers is their disdain for those in authority who "**do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties**" (2 Peter 2:10). If one of the first appearances of angels in the Bible is Jacob's vision of the angels "**ascending and descending**" to heaven (Genesis 28:12), then is it not safe to say that angels are constantly going to and from God? If they watch godly women, who cover their heads as they approach God in prayer and as they go forth from God in prophecy, should they not learn to reverence God as described in Isaiah?

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: *With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.* 3 And they were calling to one another: "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*" 4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isaiah 6:1-5).

Will the angels not be instructed as to their proper response to God by what they see women doing as they approach God? Will they not be reminded that God is holy—

distinct from and vastly above all others. And will they not realize that glory belongs to Him?

One thing more should be noted on this matter of prayer and prophecy. Jesus was a master teacher. When He taught, neither the crowds nor the disciples went away saying, "That was really clear; I understood everything He said." Just the reverse was true. They went away shaking their heads, wondering what He meant. The disciples did not fully grasp what our Lord was saying until after He had risen from the grave and ascended to the Father. I believe God does not over-simplify those truths He wants us to ponder. His wisdom must be mined, not picked up like lost coins. The enigmatic expression of "**praying or prophesying**" may be by divine design. We are not supposed to get it immediately, but we are to think about it a lot. And until (and after) we do get it, we are to obey anyway because we do understand that the command is for the women to cover their heads.

DOES THE WOMAN'S SILENCE SUBSTITUTE FOR A HEAD COVERING?

Some contend that the woman's silence is sufficient evidence of her submission. Thus, in the meeting of the church, if a woman is silent, a head covering is not required. But if silence is sufficient, then why does Paul not start with chapter 14 rather than conclude with it, for it is in chapter 14 that he calls for silence? Why would Paul make such a point of having your head covered in chapter 11 if it were not necessary in the first place due to the woman's silence? In chapter 14, when Paul speaks about silence, it is not just the women who are to be silent, but some of the men as well. The problem in Corinth was not too much silence but too much speaking. If only one person is to speak at a time (see 14:27, 30-31), then everyone else is to be silent. If both men and women are silently worshiping, as some reason, then a woman will distinguish herself from a man not by her silence but by her head covering.

DOES THE WOMAN'S "LONG HAIR" SUBSTITUTE FOR A HEAD COVERING?

The fact that all women wear their hair longer than men (as a rule) is used as the premise on which Paul builds to show another reason why women should have their heads covered. In verse 6, Paul argues that if a woman will not cover her head, she should shave it. Thus, a woman's long hair is not sufficient. Furthermore, a woman's long hair is her glory, and her head covering veils this glory so that her husband is preeminent. One final observation: if all women in general wear long hair, then long hair does not distinguish the submissive Christian woman from the rest, but a head covering does.

WOULD SOME OTHER SYMBOL SUBSTITUTE FOR A HEAD COVERING?

I do not think so. The basis of the symbol is the divine order. Headship is symbolized by a head covering, which represents a woman's submission to her (metaphorical) head. There is a clear and direct relationship between "headship" and "head coverings." Paul does not mention any alternate symbols and seems to prohibit any practice other than head coverings (verse 16). I think there is significance to the fact that every woman testifies to her submission to male headship by the same symbol. If every woman was free to express her submission in any way she chose, how would the angels or anyone else understand what they were seeing? A wedding ring is a universally accepted symbol of marriage, at least in this part of the world. What if every person decided to symbolize their marriage by a symbol of their own choosing? Finally, how can a woman signify submission to male authority, as Paul has instructed, by setting aside the very instructions (for a head covering) that Paul has given? If submission to male headship starts anywhere, it starts by submitting to the authority of

the apostle Paul. If we submit to God's headship, surely this is by submitting to His commands and not by modifying them according to our preferences and judgments. In all too many ways, we function like the Supreme Court in relation to Congress. The Supreme Court passes judgment on the laws of Congress, rejecting those which it deems unconstitutional. We pass judgment on God's commands, rejecting those which seem unreasonable.

25 In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25).

WHEN AND WHERE SHOULD A WOMAN COVER HER HEAD?

The question in our minds should not be *if* a woman should have her head covered, or "*Why?*" The questions we ask should be: "When?" and "Where?" Let us seek to establish some general guidelines for the answers to these questions. I would point out at the outset that Paul's words imply that head coverings are not the exception, but the norm. I would also point out that Paul does not give precise "if ... then" formulas for when a covering is required. It would seem that individual judgment is required here.

(1) Women should cover their heads when the angels are watching. When are the angels watching?

9 For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men (1 Corinthians 4:9).

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; 10 in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly *places* (Ephesians 3:8-10).

10 As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that *would come* to you made careful search and inquiry, 11 seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. 12 It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look (1 Peter 1:10-12).

The angels seem to be watching all the time. I do not say this to suggest that women should cover their heads all the time, but to indicate that Paul is speaking more broadly than just the time when the church gathers. Other guidelines will help to narrow down the application of head coverings.

(2) Women should cover their heads when they are praying or prophesying. It should be self-evident that these two activities—prayer or prophecy—are an occasion for a head covering, because Paul specifies these two activities as such. If prophecy ceased with the apostolic age, then prayer alone remains. Is Paul speaking of verbal, public prayer? I would definitely think so. Is he speaking of public, unspoken prayer (as in the church meeting)? He may well be, especially since the angels would be observing. Is he speaking of private prayer at home? If it is the kind of regular prayer we see in Daniel 6:10, this would certainly be evident to the angels, and so a head covering would be appropriate. Of course, we are to "**pray without ceasing**," and in this sense

we are constantly in prayer. I think Paul is speaking more of covering the head when it is obvious (to men and/or to angels) that we are praying.

(3) *Women should cover their heads when they are engaged in exercising their priesthood as believers.* I do not think that we should consider “**praying**” or “**prophesying**” the only occasions in which a head covering is necessary. It seems that Paul has chosen these as two of the more self-evident instances in which a head covering is appropriate for women. Remember that Paul is dealing with those who seem to want to debate this matter (see verse 16). Praying and prophesying are the engagement of the believer in what we might call a person’s priestly activity. We are a “**kingdom of priests**” (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6), and we exercise our priesthood by ministering for men to God (by intercessory prayer) and, in apostolic time, by prophets who ministered to men for God. Paul does not speak about wearing a head covering to work, or around the house all day, but specifically when we engage in those ministries which we have as priests.

(4) *Women should cover their heads when the spiritual ministry in which they are engaged has a leadership or authoritative function or appearance.* Headship is about authority and preeminence. Prayer and prophecy certainly have a “leadership dimension” as we can see in Acts 6:4. When women function with some measure of authority, the head covering seems required.

(5) *Women should cover their heads when their submission to male headship is not apparent.* This whole passage is based upon our observance of divine distinctions between men and women, between male and female. When men and women are engaged in the same activities, then the head covering visibly symbolizes the distinction which might not otherwise be apparent. When a woman (or a man) prays, she approaches God directly. There is no clear evidence of her submission to male headship, unless it is by her head being covered. When a woman once prophesied, she spoke to others directly for God. Again, a sign of her submission is necessary. When the distinctions between men and women are not evident, head coverings distinguish the women by symbolizing their submission to male headship.

(6) *While Paul’s words in our text indicate that there are times when no head covering is shameful, Paul mentions no time when a head covering would be inappropriate.* What I mean by this is not that a women should always have her head covered, but that one who is intent upon obeying Paul’s command and does not know for certain whether a covering is “required” would always be safer to lean to the “covered” side than to the “uncovered” side.

WHAT ABOUT MINISTRY GROUPS?

As elsewhere in this message, I speak only for myself, and it is an opinion with less conviction on my part than much of what I have said above. When there is the normal interchange (discussion, sharing, etc.) between men and women where the element of authority is not prominent, I do not see the need for head coverings. During the prayer time, when women would join in, I think it is appropriate for the woman to cover her head.

WHAT ABOUT A COVERING WHEN WOMEN TEACH OR LEAD WOMEN OR CHILDREN?

The element of authority is very evident in such cases. When men are not present, the need for a distinction may not be as great as when men are present. In His earthly ministry, Jesus frequently spoke of His submission to the Father’s authority (see John

5:17-26, 36-37; 6:37, 40, 57, 65; 8:27, 38, 49; 10:17-18, 29; 12:49-50; 13:3; 14:13, 16, 28, 31). It certainly does not hurt to remind others that we are under authority.

WHAT IF A HEAD COVERING ATTRACTS ATTENTION?

Jesus made it very clear that men should not perform their acts of obedience in such a way as to draw attention to themselves so as to obtain man's praise rather than God's (Matthew 6:1-18). As we identify ourselves with Christ by our obedience to His commands, we will become a "**spectacle**" to men and angels (1 Corinthians 4:9). Daniel and his three friends drew attention to themselves when they chose to obey God rather than men. We will do likewise, if we live obediently to God in a culture that hates Him (1 Peter 4). We are to obey God's commands in order to publicly proclaim His excellencies to the world (1 Peter 2:9; Philippians 2:15) and to the celestial beings (1 Corinthians 11:10; Ephesians 3:10).

WHAT KIND OF HEAD COVERING IS REQUIRED BY PAUL?

The Greek expressions used of the woman's head covering seem to indicate that something more than a piece of cloth (or a hat) resting on the head is required. Not only should something be on the head, but something should hang down from the head to cover the hair:

... what Paul had in mind is a veil which covers the whole head and in particular conceals all the hair; something worn on top of the head like a present-day cap or hat does not really come within the scope of his argument.¹⁵⁶

... it is probable that Paul is speaking of wearing a head covering of some kind, such as a shawl. That a shawl rather than a full veil is in Paul's mind is indicated by the word *covering* (*peribolaios*) in 11:15, which is not the usual word for veil but probably refers to a wrap-around. The evidence in favor of this position is as follows: (1) The verb translated as "cover" in the NIV (*katakalypto*) occurs three times in verses 6-7, and related cognate words occur in verses 5 and 13. These words most often refer to a covering of some kind. For example, the angels who saw the glory of Yahweh in the temple *covered* their faces (Isaiah 6:2). Judah thought Tamar, his daughter-in-law, was a harlot because she *covered* her face (Genesis 38:15). Since the word almost universally means "to cover" or "to hide," the text is probably referring to a hair covering of some kind. ... Esther 6:12 (LXX) employs the same expression found in verse four, *kata kephales*, of Haman, who hurried home mourning, covering his head in shame. He probably used part of his garment to do this. ... To sum up: the custom recommended here is a head covering of some kind, probably a shawl.¹⁵⁷

IS WEARING A HEAD COVERING "LEGALISM?"

I am hearing the word "legalism" a lot lately, and I do not like what it implies. Legalism, of course, is wrong and ought to be avoided. But the solution is not to throw out all the rules or commands of Scripture. A legalist is one who has a "fatal attraction" to rules. The rules become primary, and the principles get lost in the shuffle. A legalist gets lost in the details, the "gnats," and loses sight of the "camels," the underlying principles and motives. A legalist does not keep the commands of God because he loves God; he keeps the rules because he thinks that doing so makes him better than others, and because rule-keeping is the way to earn God's favor and blessings. A legalist sticks to the rules because they deal with outward, external standards. Legalism is wrong.

The solution to legalism is not the absence of all rules and commands in the name of Christian liberty. This kind of liberation is unacceptable:

16 Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God (1 Peter 2:16).

In Matthew 23, Jesus does not teach that throwing out the rules is the solution to legalism.

23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; *but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.* 24 You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! 25 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. 26 You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. 27 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:23-28, emphasis mine).

The solution to legalism is to continue to obey the rules, to keep God’s commands, but to always do so in the light of the principles which underlie them. Women should cover their heads because Paul commands them to, and because of the principles of headship and of God’s sovereign distinctions. Legalism is keeping the rules for the rules’ sake. Christian liberty is keeping the rules for God’s sake, and with a heart and mind which seeks most of all to be pleasing to Him by obeying His commandments.

THERE IS YET ONE MORE QUESTION WHICH SOME MAY BE ASKING: “WHY AM I MAKING SUCH A BIG ISSUE OF HEAD COVERINGS?”

First, Paul commands women to wear a head covering. We do not do well to ignore any command of God. To set one command aside is not only wrong, it sets a precedent. Can we now set aside any command we do not fully understand or which we dislike and with which we disagree? *Second*, the head covering of the woman is a symbol, a symbol of one of the great truths of the Bible. A woman’s head covering symbolizes her submission to the principle of headship. The headship of the man over a woman is important because it reflects the headship of Christ over His church and of God over Christ. When Adam and Eve sinned, they acted against the headship of God, following the precedent set by their tempter, Satan. All men are sinners, subject to the eternal wrath of God. The message of the gospel is not only that Jesus died for sinners, but that Jesus is Lord of all. Those who will be saved are to acknowledge Him as Lord and Christ (Acts 2:22-26; Romans 10:9-10). Those who will not acknowledge this now must ultimately acknowledge it when they bow the knee to Christ as His defeated foes (Philippians 2:9-11). God does not reveal Himself to men through idols, but He does reveal Himself through His church. As we acknowledge and practice our submission to His headship, we announce to the world that He is Head of all. To the degree that we fail to obey this command (and others), we distort the image of God which we are privileged to symbolically display.

It is now time for me to turn the question around. Why is this simple act such a problem to so many today? Is it really that Paul’s meaning is so hard to grasp? We should read this text repeatedly. For me, the more I read it, the more clear his message is. (Conversely, the more one reads most commentators on this text, the cloudier its message becomes.) Is it because we, individually or as a church, have not done it this way before? Then let us change our practice if we now understand this as our duty and privilege. If we as individuals and as a church are growing in Christ, our grasp of God’s

Word should grow too, and we should be constantly changing our lives to conform to what we now understand. That is what **“walking in the light”** means. Is our disproportionate reaction due to the fact that the world is not wearing head coverings and neither is the church? Standing up for God’s Word may mean standing alone. Daniel and his three friends were four men living in foreign captivity along with thousands of other Jews. They stood alone against the sins of that culture, as aliens and strangers. We should do likewise:

13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:13-16).

For some, the symbol of wearing a head covering may be a big thing because it is. If the symbol of head covering is to reflect our submission, not only to male headship but to God’s distinctions and His ways of doing things, we may need to ask ourselves whether we are truly submissive to God.

Perhaps some woman is thinking, “That’s all right for you; you’re a man. It’s easy for you to tell us to obey because it doesn’t affect you.” But you see, it does. It means that I am obliged to lead, and not just to lead in a way that pleases me. I must lead in a way that reflects Christ’s headship. I must lead in a way that is sacrificial to my own interests and which seeks to bless those under my leadership. And, beyond the matter of headship, I assure you that there are other commands which also strike me between the eyes. Obedience to God’s commands is not easy for any of us, but disobedience is not a viable option, if we wish to please God and to reflect His glories to the world, and to celestial beings as well.

15 “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

I think that while I have not answered every question you may have on this passage, I have answered some, and that my understanding of this text is clear. You may very well disagree with it. And if you do, I hope and pray it is for good and biblical reasons. If my message has caused you who differ with me to rethink your position, and to be more convinced about your conclusions than mine, I think I have done my job. The interpretations and opinions expressed here are my own. They do not necessarily represent the individual interpretations of the other elders, and they certainly do not represent the collective decision and policy of the elders of our church.

While my interpretation of this text has changed since I last taught publicly on 1 Corinthians 11 in 1982, I think some of my concluding words from that lesson years ago (cited below) are appropriate as we close. *First*, these words will remind you that I have changed my mind and will at least raise the possibility that I might change it again. *Second*, I hope that while my interpretation of these verses has changed, the spirit which I called for in these concluding words of my previous message might still be evident among us, as we each attempt to understand and obey this portion of God’s Word:

I urge you not to confuse form with function. To merely place a covering upon one’s head does not make one submissive. I have observed some very unsubmitive women who would not think of going to church without their head coverings. The scribes and Pharisees had an obsession about keeping certain forms, but in function

they completely missed the point of the Law. These discrepancies between form and function, between practice and principle, were a major bone of contention between the religious leaders of Israel and our Lord Jesus. May I add that they were meticulous about crucifying Jesus according to the rules (cf. Matthew 26:57-66, 27:3-6; John 18:31-32), but it was a sinful and damnable act (cf. Acts 2:23).

I also ask you not to make head covering the touchstone of submission and spirituality. It is so easy for the one who believes head covering is a biblical requirement to pass judgment on the submissiveness of a woman solely on the basis of whether or not she has a covering on her head. No external act, no matter how meritorious, is proof of one's spirituality. Neither is the absence of a head covering proof that a woman is unsubmitive. While we might desire to be made (or at least considered) spiritual by the observance of some specific practice such as head covering, the spiritual life is simply not like that. Many godly women may cover their heads as an act of submission; many submissive wives may not do so, convinced that it is not required or even beneficial. In and of itself, head covering, or the absence of it, will not determine and may not reflect one's spiritual state.¹⁵⁸

What I would hate to see from these lessons on headship and head coverings is hasty, ill-conceived action. I would be disappointed to see a woman covering her head, simply because I have taught the text as I have, or because other women are covering their heads. I would also be greatly disappointed to see a woman refuse to cover her head without giving this text serious consideration. I would also be somewhat disappointed to see a man "instruct" his wife to wear a head covering, so that she does so without being convinced this is what God requires. If the symbol is to be meaningful, it should be voluntarily worn, for submission is voluntary. Let me urge each one who reads this lesson to now leave my words behind and to turn to the text of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 itself, reading it repeatedly over the next weeks until you are convinced of what Paul and God require of you.

154 Thomas R. Schreiner, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1991), p. 135.

155 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], pp. 508-509. In two footnotes, Fee adds: These kinds of problems render generally useless a large amount of the literary evidence that is often cited in reference to this text. This is especially true of the large collection of otherwise helpful texts, both Greek and Jewish, in Conzelmann, 185 nn. 39-40, since they deal for the most part with "going out in public." The question is whether women in Christian worship in Corinth would be thought of as "going out in public," or whether, in light of their gathering in homes and calling themselves "brothers and sisters," the wearing of ordinary home "attire" would be proper—not to mention all the difficulties that may obtain from the fact that the gathering is also "religious" and that the women are prophesying. See n. 61. Cf. fig. 99 (where a priestess of Isis is uncovered) and 101 (another Isis example, where one woman is covered while the other is not). With this compare the literary evidence from Apuleius, *Met.* regarding the Isis festival in Corinth: "The women had their hair anointed, and their heads covered with light linen [cf. fig. 101 in Goodenough]; but the men had their crowns shaven and shining bright" (Loeb, 555). See also the two frescoes from Pompeii (nos. 117 and 118), where in scenes that "unquestionably represent religious ceremonies" (Goodenough, IX, 137) the central figures (women) are covered with the *himation*, while in fig. 117 the flute girl is not. The same ambiguity prevails in fig. 218,

where the woman “crowning the dead” is covered while the (apparently slave) woman holding the umbrella is not.

156 F. F. Bruce, *The New Century Bible Commentary: I & II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1971), p. 104.

157 Schreiner, p. 126.

158 Bob Deffinbaugh, “How to Be Pious in a Pagan World, A Study of 1 Corinthians, When Women Worship,” Lesson 16.

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