

A Non-legalistic Understanding of Biblical Head-Covering

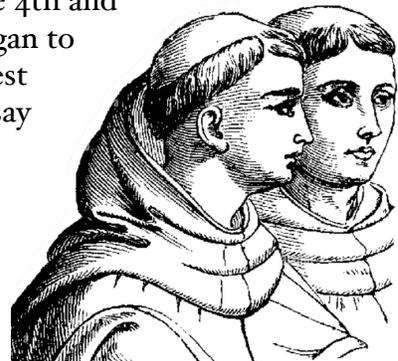
by Jason B. Washington

When some Christians in America hear about the practice of head-covering, they might think of the Amish folks they have seen up north. Others may be reminded of an Islamic practice (or something like that) which has no place in the church of Jesus Christ. Because the practice of head-covering found in 1 Corinthians 11 has not been widely observed in North American churches since the early twentieth century, modern application is often reduced to principle due to outdatedness. However, a bare-bones understanding of the text does not require first-century application; it only requires first-century context which means a person does not have to worry about being outdated or unfashionable.

In order to properly apply 1 Corinthians 11 (specifically the first half), one must first understand what it says and means. Paul makes two assertions in verses four and five: (1) a man dishonors Christ, his authority [*see vs. 3], if he prays or prophesies with his head covered; and (2) a woman dishonors her husband, her penultimate (i.e., last but one in a series of things; second last) authority under God [*see vs. 3; Eph. 5:23], if she prays or prophesies with her head uncovered. The question is "What is this covering?" Some take verses fourteen and fifteen, which say, "*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. (NKJV)*," and understand the head covering to be long hair, so that men are required to cut their hair short and women are required to keep theirs long. While this is not an outlandish understanding, it has a few issues from what I can see.

The first is that, in verses five and six, "*5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with [her] head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. 6 For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. (NKJV)*", Paul compares a bald or short-haired woman to a woman with her head "uncovered" (notice "as" in verse 5). This seems to mean that when he refers to an "uncovered" woman, he is not referring to a woman with a bald or short-haired head. Otherwise, he would not compare the two.

Notice that verse fourteen does not say that a man's long hair is a dishonor to Christ but, merely, a dishonor to the man, himself. This demonstrates that long hair on a man is something other than what Paul considers a "head-covering" because, according to verse four, a man who prays or prophesies with his head "covered" is dishonoring Christ specifically—not merely himself. Another issue with the "long hair view" is this: What does long hair cover that short hair does not? Answer: Neck, shoulders, back (maybe); but Paul says nothing about those. All he mentions is the head, and short hair covers the head just as much as long hair does. This is why, around the 4th and 5th centuries, many Roman Catholic monks and clergymen began to shave the tops of their heads bald. They figured this was the best way to honor the command in 1 Corinthians 11; but does Paul say anything here instructing men to shave the tops of their heads bald? No, he does not. This is why I am convinced that, when Paul says in verse fifteen that "*. . . if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for [her] hair is given to her for a covering (NKJV)*," he is simply acknowledging the contribution a woman's long hair makes to her beauty in covering her bald head.



I am not convinced that long hair is an alternative head-covering. This is partially because of Church history. For the most part, up until the early twentieth century, Christian women universally observed the practice by wearing external headwear such as veils, headscarves, bonnets, and hats. In past cultures, it was fashionable for



women to wear veils, headscarves, bonnets, and hats; and so, the Christian women of those days simply made sure they were wearing one of these while praying or prophesying. But, nowadays--though hats are still fashionable--veils, headscarfs, bonnets, and the like generally are not. What is a woman to do--be unfashionable and where one of these? I say not!

Though traditional forms of the head-covering such as veils and such are out of secular fashion, many women in the West today still wear sun hats, baseball caps, beanies, bandannas, headbands, and even sunglasses on the tops of their heads. I would say that Christian women (especially married ones) should simply make sure they are wearing one of these on their heads while praying or prophesying. There is an idea out there that the purpose of head-covering is modesty. This idea is present in Islamic head-covering. Modesty, however, is not a clear reason and certainly not the primary reason Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 11. Christian head-covering, therefore, should not be conflated with the Islamic custom; they are two separate religious practices.

Verse ten of 1 Corinthians 11 says, *"For this reason the woman ought to have [a symbol of] authority on [her] head, because of the angels (NKJV)."* It seems pretty clear that the head-covering is not primarily to be a signal to other people of modesty or submission. Rather, it is a symbol of divine order mainly for the angels to see. The Greek word *angelos* (ἄγγελος) is one who is sent by God (most-likely a heavenly angel). In Ephesians 3:10, Paul said that God was using Him *"to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly [places], (NKJV)."* This is the primary reason for the Christian practice of head-covering. Part of the church's responsibility is to instruct the angels by being a model of God's plans, purposes, and design.

Some say that verse sixteen makes the whole thing obsolete. *"But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor [do] the churches of God." - 1 Co. 11:16 (NKJV).* Certain people assume that the "custom" referred to in this verse is the practice of head-covering, and that, basically, Paul is saying, "I want you Corinthians to practice head-covering, but--if anyone gives you trouble--just forget about it. None of us practice it, anyways." The issue with that reading is that Paul begins the chapter in verse one by saying, "Imitate me..." This means the instructions which follow verse one are probably imitations of his behavior. In other words, Paul most-likely did practice head-covering, and we are reading verse sixteen incorrectly.

The more logical reading of verse sixteen is that the custom referred to is contentiousness. *"But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor [do] the churches of God." - 1 Co. 11:16 (NKJV).* Paul is saying that neither his church nor any of the other churches were contentious over things like the head-covering. Corinth, however, did have this issue. Look at what he says in the next couple of verses: *"17 Now in giving these instructions I do not praise [you], since you come together not for the better but for the worse. 18 For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it*

(NKJV). " It seems much more reasonable to read it this way, especially after Paul spent fifteen verses making a case for the practice of head-covering. Why go into such detail over something that ultimately does not matter? This is my understanding, anyway.

This is a very complicated subject with good and reasonable arguments on multiple sides. My thought is this: It's better to be safe than sorry. I, as a man, decide to take my hat off while praying or prophesying; and, if I get to Heaven and find out I was wrong, I've got nothing to lose. But, if I decide to take a slightly easier road and I get to Heaven and find out that I dishonored my Lord every time I spoke to or for Him, what a disappointment that would be! Though the issue is important, it is not of a salvific (referring to the process of salvation) nature. It is neither an essential doctrine, nor is it grounds for separation and division. No matter which side of the argument we are on, I believe in controversial matters such as this, we should strive to observe the commands which are written here in the following passage of Scripture: *"1 Therefore if [there is] any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, 2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, [being] of one accord, of one mind. ... 14 Do all things without complaining and disputing, 15 that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain."* - *Philippians 2:1-2, 14-16 (NKJV)*.