

Bible Study: 1Cor 11:1-16 Head Coverings

Author: Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ

Audience: the church at Corinth

Date: approximately 56-57 A.D.

Location: Ephesus

Theme: Dealing with a wayward church

Genre: epistle/prose

Outline

Tradition Rooted in Christ (11:1-2)

Roles and Responsibilities (11:2-9)

Submission and Interdependence (11:10-12)

Concluding Arguments (11:13-16)

Observation

Paul gives five arguments for female head coverings:

1. Divine order (headship) extends from God to Christ to man to woman
2. Male headship arises from the order of Creation (not the fall of mankind)
3. The angels are watching the church (cf. 1Cor 4:9, Eph. 3:10, 1 Tim. 5:21)
4. It is natural for a woman to have long hair but not a man
5. This was the uniform practice of the congregations of God

Therefore, a woman ought to have a token of authority on her head

Interpretation

1. What was the background and nature of female head coverings?

As to the use of veils, women in the ancient Orient were veiled in public, or when among strangers, but otherwise they were unveiled. Note that Rebecca was unveiled till she met Isaac (Gen 24:65). James B. Hurley notes that in contrast, ancient pottery shows Greek women in public without head coverings.¹

It cannot be unequivocally asserted but the preponderance of evidence points toward the public head covering of women as a universal custom in the first century in both Jewish culture ([apocryphal] 3 Maccabees 4:6; Mishnah, *Ketuboth* 7. 6; Babylonian Talmud, *Ketuboth* 72a-b) and Greco-Roman culture (Plutarch *Moralia* 3. 232c; 4. 267b; Apuleius *The Golden Ass* 11. 10). The nature of the covering varied considerably (Ovid *The Art of Love* 3:135-65), but it was commonly a portion of the outer garment drawn up over the head like a hood.²

2. What do the key Greek terms in this passage mean?

The terms man (*aner*) and woman (*gyne*) are generic masculine and feminine nouns often synonymous with “husband” and “wife” (i.e., his woman, her man). In 1Cor 11:3, Paul shifts from the general (Christ is the head of every man) to the specific (the man is the head of a woman), indicating that the husband is the head of only his own particular family.

¹Expositor’s Bible Commentary, s.v. 1Cor 11:3-16.

²John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 2:529.

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The word head (*kephale*) seems to express two things: subordination and origination. The former reflects the more usual Old Testament usage (e.g., Jud. 10:18), the latter that of Greek vernacular (e.g., Herodotus *History* 4. 91). The former is primary in this passage, but the latter may also be found (1 Cor. 11:8).³

3. Why would Paul refer to nature as a basis for head coverings?

The Greek philosophical school of Cynicism advocated a natural, self-sufficient lifestyle that eschewed the cultured intellectualism of traditional philosophy. At times, Paul appealed to the natural order to buttress his arguments, presumably because it might carry some weight with his audience (e.g., Rom. 1:26, 1 Cor. 11:14)

Mankind instinctively distinguished between the sexes in various ways, one of which was length of hair... No abstract length of hair was in mind so much as male and female differentiation. The Spartans, for example, favored shoulder-length hair for men (cf. Lucian, *The Runaways* 27) which they tied up for battle (Herodotus *History* 7. 208-9), and no one thought them effeminate.⁴

4. Are Paul's instructions culturally limited or timeless, universal commands?

There is significant evidence that Paul's instructions were culturally limited

- There is no commandment in the Torah regarding head coverings (Deut 12:32)
- Aaron and his sons ministered with their heads covered (Exod 29:5-9)
- A Nazirite could not cut his hair until his vow was completed (Num 6:1-22)
- Samson and Samuel were perpetual Nazirites (Judges 13:2-5, 1Sam 1:9-11)
- Paul also undertook a Nazirite vow as a Christian (cf. Acts 18:18, 21:18-24)

Therefore, Paul appears to be concerned with avoiding offenses based on contemporary customs and local sensitivities when certain people wanted to introduce changes (1Cor 10:31-33).

Application

An example to follow: respect male headship in a culturally appropriate ways

An example to follow: exhibit culturally acceptable gender distinctions within society

An error to avoid: avoid needless offense so that others may be saved, God is honored

³*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2:528.

⁴*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2:530.