

1 Corinthians

Bible Study

Head Covering

1 Corinthians 11:2–16

Paul had been applying grace principles to things that affect us every day of our life. In the case of the Corinthians, they were struggling with how they should interact with the world, including within marriage. A previous letter written by Paul was misunderstood by them to completely distance themselves from unbelievers. Paul straightened them out with the letter we call 1 Corinthians by saying he was speaking about the assembly, not the entire unsaved world. They were to deal with sin within their congregation, but they were to retain contact with unbelievers in order to be a testimony to them. Paul emphasized that the believer has much liberty, but that the believer's liberty was to be used only for the benefit of other believers, not to satisfy a personal desire. Paul presented himself as their example of the proper use of liberty and as the person to be followed in doctrine. The Corinthian church had erred by accepting doctrine that differed from Paul's which causes a number of divisions within the church. Paul now lays out a hierarchy of authority that they needed to learn to submit to.

Head coverings (11:2–16)

There are many people who follow this section as instructions for believers about head coverings. On the surface, it is easy to see why people get that impression. It doesn't help that people are always looking for ways to put themselves under some sort of law. Keeping these so-called biblical laws makes people feel good about themselves by thinking they are pleasing God when they perform good works. Unfortunately, these good works spring out of the old nature and therefore can never be acceptable to God or used as conduits of receiving some special grace.

As we read through this passage and try to understand what it is saying, it is important to keep the context firmly in mind. This whole section is about the order of subjection. God the Father is over Christ who is over the man who is over the woman. Looking at this from the opposite perspective, the woman is to submit herself to the authority of the man who is to submit himself to the authority of Christ who has submitted Himself, as our example to God the Father (Philippians 2:5–8). If we look to the larger context, we see Paul addressing the proper use of our liberty in light of other believers. Many read this passage with the understanding that Paul is giving us a "law" to live by, even though in the last chapter (1 Corinthians 10:23) Paul tells us that all things are lawful. This indicates that we have the liberty to wear a head covering or not to wear one.

This whole section must be interpreted in terms of cultural norms. A woman who covered her head in Corinth was acknowledging that she had willingly put herself under her husband's authority. Today we do that same thing with a ring. 1 Corinthians 11:5 states that the woman who does not cover her head is disgracing her head. This is a disgrace to her husband, not to the area above her shoulders. In today's society, there is no disgrace in not wearing a head covering (although we do see this in certain people groups); the disgrace would be manifested if the woman were acting as if she were not married by removing her ring. The head covering meant much more to the Corinthians than it does today in our culture.

I believe the key to this whole section of Scripture is found in 1 Corinthians 11:16:

But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.

Here, Paul states that it is not a custom of his for women to wear a head covering, neither is it a custom of the churches of God. The same Greek word is found in John 18:39 where Pilot calls the tradition of releasing a prisoner at Passover a custom. Paul is not telling them to stop doing it, only that it is not a commandment of God's that women should wear head coverings. They had the liberty

to wear a head covering, and because of their customs and society norms, it would be expected for the woman to wear a head covering, but they also had the liberty to not wear a head covering. It was their symbol that the woman had put herself under the man, but it was not commanded that she do so.

Because of the angels (verse 10)

Here is another confusing statement made by Paul, one that is often misunderstood. He told the Corinthian church that the woman should wear a covering “because of the angels.” It is often understood that they were to do this because of the Jewish tradition that angels were present when they gathered together to worship God. Angels were often shown as mediators between God and Israel (Revelation 8:2–4). This idea has also been expanded upon to include Christians in the church in a number of extra-biblical documents including the apocrypha, early church fathers’ writings, and documents ascribed to the Essenes. The Essenes are often given credit for the preservation, or even the production, of the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were trying to get away from the world in order to become pure, and to do that, they lived in communes. Eternal life could be gained through good works. They could, perhaps, be called humble Pharisees, trying to please God by following the God-given Mosaic Law, plus many other man-made laws that they thought would please God.

Others understand this head covering passage to be a warning by Paul not to be like the fallen angels, but instead to be submissive to God. Another viewpoint is that these “messengers” are human and not angels. The Greek word for angel is *aggello* and literally means *messenger*, which is why some would understand the messenger to be a man instead of a spirit being. The message was written to women to dress appropriately because of human messengers who were visiting Corinth. Still others interpret that as the angels (seraphim) covered their face before God, women should also cover themselves in humbleness and submission (Isaiah 6:2).

The above ideas are very creative, but have little to no biblical grounds. I believe the best way to understand how the angels are related to head covering is to understand that we are being watched by spirit beings as an example to them (1 Corinthians 4:9; Ephesians 3:9–11). They are observing us as they try to understand how God deals with us in this “Mystery” age. Angels were once used by God as messengers to Israel, but now they have no such role. They are observing the people (the Church, the Body of Christ) who will be ruling over them in eternity (1 Corinthians 6:3). Angels are said to be curious about why God is doing what He is doing, and how that all relates to the human race (1 Peter 1:12). In the case of the Corinthians, angels were watching and learning about the God-given chain of command. The Father was over the Son, the Son was over the man, and the man was over the woman. A woman in the Corinthian church would show her submission in her God-given role (Genesis 3:16) by wearing the head covering.

The woman who submits is not giving up her life as a servant to her husband, but she is accepting the role she was put in. The submission is her choice, not her husband’s demand. The husband is to love his wife, and the wife is to submit to her husband (Ephesians 5:22–33; Colossians 3:18). A loving husband is not going to demand that his wife submit to him. Even Christ does not demand that we submit to Him, although it is expected that we do. God has actually given believers the liberty not to submit to Him as evidenced by Him allowing us to sin. However, if we understand the greatness of His love for us, we will desire, and even be compelled, to submit ourselves to Him (2 Corinthians 5:14). The same can be said of the husband and wife relationship.

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