

BIBLE INTERPRETATION: CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Must Christian Women Wear Head-Coverings Today?

(1 Corinthians 11:2-16)

by Tom Stegall

Must Christian women in North America today wear head-coverings as a necessary public sign of their honor and submission to the headship of their husbands, just like women did in the New Testament era or like they currently do in some foreign countries? As Westerners, we often associate head-covering with the abuse and oppression of women. We wonder how the apostle Paul could ever instruct first-century Corinthian women to cover their heads. Our perspective is shaped largely by a barrage of news stories from the Middle East with images of Muslim women draped in black burqas. Some of these veiled, “hidden” women were even kidnapped and forced to be ISIS brides, living without the basic rights and freedoms we enjoy in the West. The use of head-coverings under such conditions rightly causes us to recoil.

On the other hand, there are some professing Christians in the West who may not be as misogynistic but who are still legalistic in their attempt to merit the favor of God by requiring Christian women to practice head-covering, just like they do with other religious works and traditions, many of which are extra-biblical. Then there are many sincere Christians who simply want to be faithful to God and follow all the commands in the New Testament but are unsure how to interpret and apply 1 Corinthians 11. They read this chapter and often wonder whether Paul’s instructions on head-coverings, so seemingly foreign to our culture, are still for today. In the end, this type of Western Christian often errs on the side of caution, not wanting to violate any divine requirement, concluding that all Christian women must publicly wear head-coverings.¹ But do these views, some of them extreme, accurately represent

the truth about 1 Corinthians 11:2-16? How should we interpret and apply this controversial passage?²

To correctly interpret and apply 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, it is necessary first to distinguish Paul’s primary versus secondary points. His primary point is the wife’s public demonstration of honor and submission to her husband, which *is* still universally binding for all churches today. The secondary point is the particular expression of that honor and submission by the use of a head-covering, which *is not* universally binding for women in the church today since the particular form of public honor and submission may vary significantly from culture to culture and era to era. The normal, literal, grammatical, historical method of Bible interpretation supports this conclusion.

This method of interpretation views 1 Corinthians 11 in the light of its literary context, especially the immediately preceding chapters of 1 Corinthians 8–10 on the use of Christian liberties. These chapters deal largely with dietary choices; and this train of thought continues into chapter 11 with the proper use of liberty in the area of clothing choices. In addition, the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation accounts for the cultural background of female head-covering and veiling as the prevailing cultural norm of the first-century Mediterranean world surrounding Corinth. In the New Testament’s Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures, it was customary for married women to have their heads covered while in public or before unrelated men as a demonstration of respect for their husbands. Roy Zuck writes in his excellent book on biblical hermeneutics, “Archeologists have uncovered sketches and sculptures of this kind of head covering in the Greco-Roman world. In first-century Judaism and in the Greco-Roman world, wearing a head covering in public was in fact a sign of a woman’s sub-

1. Groups that have historically practiced head-covering include many Plymouth Brethren assemblies, Mennonites, Amish, German Hutterites, Jehovah’s Witnesses, some Pentecostals, Eastern Orthodox, traditional *Roman* Catholics and *Old* Catholics (those Catholics who broke from Roman Catholicism in 1870 over Papal Infallibility).

2. This article was originally written as a pastoral letter to help a local church in 1999. It has been revised for a class on Bible Interpretation in the Grace Institute of Biblical Studies to illustrate the importance of historical, cultural background for correct interpretation and application.

mission to her husband. Not to wear it was an indication of insubordination and rebellion.”³ An abundance of extant literary and archaeological sources confirms this claim.⁴ Interpreting 1 Corinthians 11 in light of its cultural and literary contexts leads to the conclusion that Christian women today are not obligated by God to wear head-coverings because they are no longer the cultural norm with the same symbolic meaning, and because we live under the economy or dispensation of grace (Rom. 6:14) rather than an economy of law or legalism.

CONTEXT OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11

One of the chief reasons people struggle to understand 1 Corinthians 11 is a failure to view it in light of its context within the flow of the epistle. Too often, this chapter is treated in isolation from the rest of 1 Corinthians. But is it any coincidence that the section on head-coverings in 1 Corinthians 11 immediately follows 1 Corinthians 8–10 which deals with the proper use of Christian liberty?

Paul has just taught in the immediately preceding context of chapters 8–10 that Christians should exercise individual liberty of conscience in areas that are neither explicitly commanded nor condemned in the Word of God. But believers must still be wise in the use of these liberties, which involves: seeking not to stumble others but instead to build them up (8:9, 13; 10:23, 32); not abusing liberties and thereby sinning against Christ Himself (8:12); enhancing rather than hindering our testimony to the unsaved (9:19-23; 10:32-33); and glorifying God rather than selfishly indulging our flesh (10:24, 31).

Paul continues with these same concerns in 1 Corinthians 11 in the context of head-covering. The glory of God was at stake when it came to either covering or not covering the head (11:3-7). Just as the use of personal liberty in the area of diet could directly impact the Corinthians’ fellowship with Christ (8:12), the Corinthians’ choice to uncover or cover their physical heads during times of public worship could also directly affect their fellowship with Christ (11:3-7). Although wearing or not wearing a head-covering is an area of personal clothing choice

and thus a Christian liberty,⁵ Paul instructed the Corinthian men not to cover their heads and the women to wear a head-covering. The apostle’s instruction was necessitated by the fact that head-covering was a culturally established symbol of the biblical truth that a wife should honor and submit to her husband. In that culture, for men to cover and women to uncover their heads during times of public worship would have sent a message that was not only countercultural but would contradict God’s created order of headship between a husband and wife. For a man to cover his head would picture femininity and submission to his wife. Conversely, for a woman to uncover her head would dishonor her husband by portraying masculinity and her authority as the spiritual head in marriage, if not even sexual infidelity. One author writes, “For women to have an uncovered head in public was conventionally seen as a sign of public shaming and humiliation. It was a symbol associated with masculinity, lesbianism, adultery or prostitution.”⁶ In the context of 1 Corinthians 8–11, Paul was willing to completely forego the use of his own personal liberty in the area of diet if it caused others to stumble: “if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble” (8:13). The Corinthians were instructed to do similarly in the area of dress or head-covering. The men were to forego wearing a covering in public worship and the women were to cover their heads lest other believers in the congregation stumble, or even worse, that the testimony of the gospel be hindered by causing the unsaved to stumble, who were probably also present sometimes during public worship (1 Cor. 14:22-25).

5. Some might question how wearing a head-covering can possibly be a liberty when Paul instructs all the Corinthian wives to wear one in 1 Corinthians 11. But a similar example exists with respect to diet and days in Romans 14:1-23, 1 Corinthians 8:4-13 and 10:25-33. In these passages, eating food that had been offered to idols is clearly regarded as an area of individual freedom of conscience. Yet in Acts 15:20-29, the Jerusalem council issues a general letter to all Gentile believers directing them not to eat food offered to idols (and to avoid fornication, which is not a liberty) since things associated with idols were offensive to Jews and would stumble them. This is another example of the early church necessarily refraining from the use of individual liberty out of deference to the current cultural sensitivities of their brethren, the saved Jews, and even to complement their witness to unbelieving Jews.

6. Mark Finney, “Honour, Head-coverings and Headship: 1 Corinthians 11.2-16 in its Social Context,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33.1 (2010): 36.

3. Roy B. Zuck. *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1991), 94.

4. See pages 12-22 of this article for the cultural background.

Paul summarized his own use of liberties toward both Jews and Gentiles, saying, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law” (1 Cor. 9:20-21). The apostle Paul was willing to “become all things to all men, that [he] might by all means save some” (9:22). Thus, he commands the Corinthians regarding the use of their liberties, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved. Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I have delivered them to you” (10:31–11:2). These verses form the transition to the subject of head-coverings in chapter 11, which was another area of liberty and “tradition” taught by Paul to the Corinthians. Now in this area, they were to “imitate” the apostle’s personal example of using his Christian liberty not to serve self but the Lord and others (Gal. 5:13).⁷ This church of Greek, Roman, and Jewish believers (Acts 18:1-8) in cosmopolitan Corinth was to dress appropriately “to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31) and to “give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:32).

OVERVIEW OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11:3-16

In 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, Paul’s primary point is that just as Christ honors and is submissive to His Head, the Father, so wives should demonstrate the same to their earthly heads, their husbands. Verse 3 says, “But I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.” This was God’s established order for marriage, and it must also be maintained in churches today (1 Tim. 2:9-

7. Regarding the context that follows 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Paul reproves the Corinthians for their selfishness as manifested by disunity at the Lord’s Supper. Not coincidentally, in chapters 12–14, he continues in a similar vein as chapters 8–11, admonishing them to use their spiritual gifts in love (13:1-13) to edify others rather than serve self (12:7; 14:4-5, 12, 17-19) and to support their testimony to unbelievers (14:22-25).

15). This universal order of authority likely explains the reference to angels in 1 Corinthians 11:10: “For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.” In contrast to the demons, the holy angels have always been submissive to the will of God, keeping the bounds of their habitation (Jude 6) and not transgressing their God-ordained roles or authority in the universe. Thus, the order and practice of authority in the local church’s public worship should emulate the holy angels rather than rebellious demons.

The principle of God-ordained authority and headship in verse 3 is foundational and precedes all discussion in the following verses about head-covering, hair, and a wife’s submission to her husband.⁸ Verse 3 makes clear that a wife’s submission to her husband does not mean she is inferior to him as a human being or she has less dignity and worth before God than her husband. Christ Himself is equal in deity to His Father, yet His role also requires submission to the will and headship of the Father. Therefore, submission to headship is strictly a *functional* role or responsibility for the purpose of maintaining order in God’s universe. The same is true in a marriage relationship. There must be a head and submission to that head, though both partners in the marriage relationship have equal worth and dignity before God as human beings made in His image (Gen. 9:6; Col. 3:10; Jam. 3:9),⁹ and in

8. Some interpret the woman’s head-covering in 1 Corinthians 11:5-6 as her own natural hair based on verse 15: “for her hair is given to her for a covering [*peribolaiou*].” But it is better to interpret the head-covering of verses 5-6 as a covering additional to the woman’s natural hair for two main reasons: (1) The woman without a head-covering in verses 5-6 is likened to being shorn or shaved. This would be tautologous and even nonsensical if it meant hair, as if Paul were saying, “If a woman is uncovered [i.e., without hair on her head] let her also be shorn or shaved.” (2) The meaning of a married woman’s physical, cloth head-covering would have been evident to the original Corinthian readers because it was their normal custom. In fact, the Greek words in verses 5-6 for covering one’s head [*katakalyptos/katakalyptomai*] were used in Greek literature *only* for a material covering rather than natural hair (Preston T. Massey, “Veiling among Men in Roman Corinth: 1 Corinthians 11:4 and the Potential Problem of East Meeting West,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137.2 [2018]: 504-5).

9. Though 1 Corinthians 11:7 says man “is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man,” it must be noted what Paul does *not* say in the second clause, namely, that “woman is the *image and* glory of man.” Eve reflected the glory of Adam, being fashioned with a rib from his side, but God was still her Creator. Paul is careful not to

the case of men and women who are believers, as also sharing the same position and standing in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

In verse 4, Paul says that for the Corinthian men to pray with their heads covered would be dishonoring to their spiritual Head, Jesus Christ. Why? Because for a man to publicly wear a woman's cultural symbol of submission to her husband (the head-covering) would be a public statement that he had put himself under his wife's authority. This would seem as perverse to the first-century mind as an Arab or Iranian man today wearing a veil in public. The result would be an inverted (even perverted) picture of the headship order created by God. The man would be under the woman instead of directly under Christ, and thus, the man's spiritual Head (Jesus Christ) would not be honored.

Another interpretative issue in 1 Corinthians 11 is the identity of the "man" and "woman." The word for "man" (*anēr*) can be translated either "man" or "husband" since the same Greek word is used for both and the correct meaning depends on the context. Likewise, the word for "woman" (*gynē*) can be translated either as "woman" or "wife" since Greek also uses one word for both, with context determining which meaning is intended. In 1 Corinthians 11, though it is accurate to translate *anēr* and *gynē* with their broader meaning of "man" and "woman" as most translations do, it is likely that Paul has in mind the husband-wife relationship, since he writes elsewhere, "Wives, submit to your *own* [*idiois*] husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22) and "Wives, submit to your *own* [*idiois*, MT] husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" (Col. 3:18). Thus, a wife's head-covering was not intended to show that all women should submit to all men in general, but only that wives should be in submission to their own husbands according to God's design. For this reason, in many ancient cultures that practiced female head-

say woman was made in the image of man. In this, he agrees with the rest of Scripture where women also bear the image of God. In Genesis 9:6, the reference to God's image in "man" as the basis for capital punishment must be taken collectively to mean "mankind" since murder and capital punishment apply equally to men and women. Likewise, when James 3:9 says, "men, who have been made in the similitude of God," the word "men" is *anthrōpous* in reference to all mankind in general, not *andrōn* in reference to males only. Lastly, Colossians 3:10 includes women because they are also in Christ, have put on the "new man," and are renewed in the image of their Creator.

covering, women were only expected to cover their heads starting at marriage.

In verses 4-6, Paul says the Corinthian *men* should not pray or prophesy with their heads *covered*, and the *women* should not pray or prophesy with their heads *uncovered*. The occasion or reason for Paul addressing this subject is not stated explicitly in the chapter. Though 1 Corinthians 11 is often interpreted as correction or instruction only for women regarding the practice of head-covering, historical background informs us that Roman men of high social stature normally worshiped with their heads covered as a gesture of supposed humility and submission to their pagan gods (i.e., idols, 1 Cor. 10:19-21). There was even a larger-than-life sized statue of Caesar Augustus praying with his head covered on prominent display in a large civic building in Corinth, which Corinthian believers most likely saw.¹⁰ Since Corinth was a Roman colony with many Romans living or traveling there (Acts 18:1-2), and some even belonging to the church,¹¹ male believers in the Corinthian congregation may have been influenced by this pagan Roman practice.

Another possible reason for writing about head-coverings could be that the Corinthian women mistakenly thought their equal spiritual position in Christ removed their obligation to function under the headship order established by God at Creation (1 Cor. 11:3). Therefore, the Corinthian wives were perhaps seeking to publicly demonstrate an equality of headship with their husbands by uncovering their heads during church worship. Since the practice of public head-covering among upper-class Roman women was already becoming less consistent in the first century, this trend may have influenced some wives in the Corinthian church to follow suit. Regardless, Paul says that for a woman to publicly pray or prophesy in the church without her head covered was as equally disgraceful as a woman in

10. Finney, "Honour, Head-coverings and Headship: 1 Corinthians 11.2-16 in its Social Context," 36-37; David W. J. Gill, "The Importance of Roman Portraiture for Head-covering in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41:2 (1990): 246; and Cynthia L. Thompson, "Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth," *Biblical Archaeologist* 51 (June 1988): 100-01.

11. The epistle of Romans was most likely written from Corinth, as the reference to Gaius in Romans 16:23 and 1 Corinthians 1:14 appears to confirm. Romans 16:21-23 mentions several Latin names of believers with Paul in Corinth, as would be expected of Corinth as a Roman colony.

that day with a shaved head. One author explains further the significance of the shaved head:

The point is that it was indeed a disgrace for the woman to have her head uncovered. Examples of this disgrace ranged from temple prostitutes whose heads were uncovered to women who were found to be adulteresses. In that culture not wearing a head covering was an act of shame.... if a woman willfully refused to wear a head covering, then she should willingly submit to having her hair cut. For her to do this, however, would be to place herself among the dishonored. Therefore, since she would not be willing to be dishonored in that way, she should wear the head covering and not act as if she were dishonored.¹²

In our day, a woman with a shaved head often symbolizes a spirit of deliberate rebellion and nonconformity. In 1992, musician Sinéad O’Connor shaved her head and created quite a stir by tearing up a picture of the Pope on the television show *Saturday Night Live*. Though the cause of her protest may have had some merit, she chose a form of defiance that was almost universally recognizable. Many homosexual women today similarly express their opposition to the natural order of God the Creator by shaving their heads. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul says that for women in the church to transgress the societal norm of that day and worship publicly without a head-covering constituted in that culture an act of rebellion against God and against the divinely appointed headship of their husbands.

Next, in verses 7-12, Paul brings the Corinthians back to the original creation order of Genesis 1 and 2 to establish a logical point about submission. He says in effect, the husband has authority over the wife because man was created first. Adam was the head of the human race (1 Cor. 15:22, 45), not Eve. Because woman originally came from man, and not man from woman, married women are to submit to their spiritual heads—their husbands. The logic of this argument is identical to Paul’s argument in 1 Timothy 2:11-13 for women not teaching men: “Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to re-

main quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, then Eve” (NASB).

Finally, in 1 Corinthians 11:13-16, Paul concludes with some general statements about hair length. It is unnatural and shameful for men to have long hair and women to have shorter hair than men. Since the 1960s in North America, it has been characteristic of those who have rebelled against the traditional patriarchal Western culture to reverse the normal, natural tendency of women having longer hair and men having shorter hair. There are obvious exceptions to nature’s pattern, such as the biblical Nazirites (Num. 6; Judg. 13). Thus, not all exceptions to the general hair-length pattern of nature among men and women are necessarily signs of rebellion. Many women have short hair because of hair loss, aging, or chemotherapy. We must be careful not to rashly and self-righteously judge based on external appearance (Matt. 7:1-5; John 7:24) since we do not know the ultimate reasons for this or the motives of a person’s heart. As a pastor, I have seen men come to church with long hair and I have not made hair the focus of our conversation or basis of fellowship because the far greater issue is an internal, spiritual one of what is transpiring in their hearts and minds before the Lord (1 Sam. 16:7; Rom. 12:1-3). Furthermore, there are far more important biblical subjects for someone to learn first and grow in (Heb. 13:9; 2 Peter 3:18) than hair length. If a man simply cut his long hair because he thought it was expected by the church and without an accompanying understanding of true spirituality by grace and doing this as unto the Lord (Col. 3:23), then this would be legalism. But all of this aside, the main issue under discussion is headship and head-covering.

Verse 16 concludes by saying, “But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.” In essence, Paul teaches here that if anyone in the first-century church believed wives should not wear head-coverings, then they should remember female head-covering was the practice of all the churches where the gospel had spread and churches were planted. For the Corinthians not to wear head-coverings would mean they stood alone in the first-century Christian world. However, verse 16 is not a mandate for all Christian wives to wear a head-covering in every church across the globe, throughout all of church history, as some have claimed. While verse 16 shows that head-covering was the consistent

12. Kenneth T. Wilson, “Should Women Wear Headcoverings?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (October 1991): 448-49.

practice of all the churches when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, it must be kept in mind that the gospel had only spread to the Middle and Near East and around the Mediterranean where head-covering was already the societal norm.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR THE CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

If Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 11 for women to wear head-coverings were intended to reflect a timeless truth about the relationship of husbands and wives, then we should expect to find support for head-covering throughout the rest of Scripture. Some insist that Paul refers to the creation of Adam and Eve in 1 Corinthians 11:7-12 to show that mandatory female head-covering is permanent and universal. But remember the primary point of the passage is the wife's public expression of honor and submission to her husband. The main point is about *headship*, not *head-coverings*. This is why Paul goes back to Adam and Eve in verses 7-12—to show the order of their creation and Eve's submission to the headship of Adam—*not to show that Eve wore a head-covering*. We have no indication from Genesis that she wore a head-covering other than her own natural hair. In fact, we know that before God clothed Adam and Eve with animal skins (Gen. 3:21), Eve wore *no clothing at all* (Gen. 2:25). If God intended that all women wear head-coverings as a permanent, universal, transcultural symbol of honor and submission to their husbands, He would have given Eve a head-covering to wear from Creation onward.

Second, apart from 1 Corinthians 11 and an inferential statement in Numbers 5:18, there are no examples in Scripture of women wearing head-coverings regularly in public to demonstrate their spousal submission and honor. If the Old Testament Law never even prescribed head-covering for all wives, then why would a New Testament epistle of Paul introduce it as a law for all wives to follow under the dispensation of grace? The glaring omission of mandatory head-covering anywhere in the Old Testament speaks volumes against it being a universal and permanent requirement for women in the church today. But there is still a transdispensational principle to follow. A wife's public and private honor and submission to her husband *is* universally and permanently attested throughout the entire Bible. So, what is the applicable *transdispensational*

principle in 1 Corinthians 11? It is not the use of head-coverings; it is a wife's public demonstration of honor and submission to her husband. The head-covering was a temporary, external expression of these virtues. The head-covering is no longer required as such an expression because it has lost its culturally assigned meaning and symbolism.

If Bible churches in North America were to reintroduce the practice of head-covering, I suspect it would only convey to the world that our wives were odd or even legalistic—not honorable and submissive to God and their husbands. Remember, Paul was instructing the Corinthian women to do what was *normal* in his day, not *abnormal*. Likewise, there was a cultural stigma attached to wives *not* wearing a head-covering (vv. 5-6). Today, the cultural stigma has been reversed so that women who do wear a head-covering are the ones who often feel public shame and embarrassment. Daniel Wallace describes this situation well:

In a similar way, the early church practice of requiring the women to wear a head covering when praying or prophesying would not have been viewed as an unusual request. In the cosmopolitan cities of Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, no one would feel out of place. Head coverings were everywhere. When a woman wore one in the church, she was showing her subordination to her husband, but was not out of place with society. One could easily imagine a woman walking down the street to the worship service with a head covering on without being noticed. Today, however, the situation is quite different, at least in the West. For a woman to wear a head covering would seem to be a distinctively humiliating experience. Many women—even biblically submissive wives—resist the notion precisely because they feel awkward and self-conscious. But the head covering in Paul's day was intended only to display the woman's subordination, not her humiliation. Today, ironically, to require a head covering for women in the worship service would be tantamount to asking them to shave their heads! The effect, therefore, would be just the opposite of what Paul intended.¹³

13. Daniel B. Wallace, "What is the Head Covering in 1 Cor 11:2-16 and Does it Apply to Us Today?" (Biblical Studies Press, 1997): 6.

Now some qualifications are necessary. There are many churches today that desire women to be pastors despite the clear biblical prohibition against women teaching men or exercising authority over them in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and the male-only qualifications of an overseer/elder in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. They argue that the command of 1 Timothy 2:12 for women not to teach men has been abrogated because it was only a “cultural accommodation” to the unique patriarchal society of Paul and Timothy’s day. They argue that such a prohibition is not transferable to modern times since we have become more egalitarian. However, by reasoning this way, they effectively set aside the commandment of God in 1 Timothy 2:12 to suit their own desire. They do the same with 1 Corinthians 11 and say that because head-coverings are no longer culturally relevant, therefore wives need not submit to their husbands. But this is an illegitimate deduction; and it is sheer “bait and switch.” The true “cultural” interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 agrees with the rest of Scripture and *is not* equivalent to the egalitarian position that compromises Scripture.

While we agree *on the one point* that the use of head-coverings was a temporary cultural application by the apostle Paul, the New Testament still upholds the principles of respect and submission to male headship as an abiding, transferable principle, and that a wife’s public honor and submission are still required, though the particular form or expression of that submission may change from generation to generation, culture to culture, and country to country. For example, in parts of India and Muslim Pakistan today, women still publicly wear a full head and neck covering to display fidelity and submission to their husbands. Christian women in these locations have a choice to make, and normally they abide by the cultural norm because to dress otherwise would only convey to the unsaved world deliberate insubordination. The damage to the cause of Christ and the church’s testimony would be enormous and tragic.

However, cultural norms may change drastically. If we went back in time 4,000 years ago to the era of Israel’s patriarchs, to wear a veil was a public symbol of an immoral woman—a prostitute (Gen. 38:14-19). How times and customs change! So, here is a helpful principle to keep in mind regarding these types of culturally loaded symbols. When and where an unambiguous example of public spousal

honor and submission exists in a culture, then the church should be willing to use its liberty for the greater cause of Christ and the good of others and abide by that cultural expression. When and where such an example does not exist, the church is not obligated to create one or reinstitute an ancient expression just for the sake of having such a physical symbol.¹⁴

SIMILAR NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

Besides head-coverings, there are many similar examples of culturally conditioned commands in Scripture whose temporal aspects we are not mandated to follow but whose permanent principles we are still obligated to follow. For example, the epistles command us (note the imperative mood verb, “greet”), “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). What impression would visitors get if they witnessed men kissing in North American churches today? Our modern culture would interpret such gestures as expressions of homosexuality.¹⁵ But if we were in Turkey or Southern European countries like Greece, Italy, France, Spain, or Portugal, kissing on the cheek still carries the same meaning as in New Testament times and culture. So, what is the transferable principle of the command to “greet one another with a holy kiss?” Believers should readily welcome and receive one another in Christ.

Another example occurs in John 13 where Christ commanded the disciples to wash one another’s feet as He had done to them. “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to

-
14. Here I disagree with the conclusion of Daniel Wallace from the previously quoted article (“What is the Head Covering in 1 Cor 11:2-16 and Does it Apply to Us Today?” 6-7). He concludes that a culturally equivalent symbol should be instituted where there isn’t one. But Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 11 is to abide by a cultural symbol of a biblical truth or principle where one already exists, not to manufacture or create new symbolic practices if none exist.
 15. In Roman Catholic seminary, my freshman roommate was from Vietnam. He and his fellow Vietnamese students would sometimes walk the seminary grounds together holding hands. He was shocked to learn that Americans might mistakenly interpret this not as a gesture of friendship but of homosexual affection. In other parts of the world, it is not uncommon for members of the same sex to hold hands in public without it signifying a homosexual relationship.

wash one another's feet" (v. 14). Should churches institute a foot-washing service like regularly practicing the Lord's Supper? After all, Christ did say, "you also ought to wash one another's feet." Some Grace Brethren congregations interpret John 13 this way. However, the New Testament nowhere else describes foot-washing as an ordinance practiced by the rest of the church as it describes Baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹⁶ In addition, the particular command of Christ to wash each other's feet is not transferable to North American churches since getting dusty feet from wearing sandals in dry desert climates is not our cultural environment. But all believers today must keep the transferable principle of John 13 that we should serve one another in humility as Christ did with the disciples.

Another example is 1 Peter 2:17, which commands us to "honor the king." In America we do not have kings. Does this mean the church should seek to create a monarchy in our country so we can begin to literally apply this first-century command? Or, should we simply seek to apply the transferable principle of the passage by honoring our governmental leaders? Obviously, it is the latter.

Similarly, 1 Peter 2:18 says servants/slaves are to obey their masters. Should we reinstitute slavery in America in order to literally follow this command? God forbid! Since we don't have slavery anymore, we should seek to follow the main point and obey our employers in everything that is biblical. This is the permanent, transferable principle.

Another example is Jesus saying in Luke 20:35, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Since Americans are not presently under the rule of the Roman Empire, does this command of Christ have no application today? Wouldn't that be nice; we would never have to pay taxes!

Another example is 1 Timothy 2:8: "I desire that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension." Is Paul commanding

here a particular posture or gesture for all prayer, everywhere, throughout the entire church age? No. He writes elsewhere that he prayed while bowing down on his knees (Eph. 3:14). Even under the dispensation of the Law and elsewhere in the Old Testament the physical form of prayer was never prescribed. Rather, people prayed in a variety of ways, including: smiting the breast (Luke 18:13); standing (Gen. 24:12-14; Judg. 20:28; 1 Sam. 1:26); sitting (2 Sam. 7:18); kneeling (Dan. 6:10); bowing prostrate on the ground (Gen. 17:3, 17-18; Exod. 34:8-9); and even lying down (1 Kings 1:47-48; Ps. 6:6-9). Though Jews often prayed with hands raised to Heaven or in the direction of the Holy of holies, this posture simply reflected submission to God and dependence on Him (Exod. 17:11-12). Thus, the abiding principle of 1 Timothy 2:8 is not to formalize a particular posture or gesture of prayer but to pray with a pure heart that is yielded to God and trusting Him. Furthermore, since upraised arms and hand-waving have become emblematic of the Pentecostal and Charismatic worship style in modern times, to standardize this practice in our Bible churches would likely give the mistaken impression that we embrace Pentecostal and Charismatic theology and practice when in fact we reject them.

Yet one more example will suffice. In 1 Timothy 2:9, Paul commands women to "adorn themselves ... not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; but with good works, as is fitting for women professing godliness." Should women in churches today *never* braid their hair? *Never* wear *any* gold or pearls? The Amish would likely say "yes," as would the "Jesus-Only" Pentecostals and some Seventh Day Adventists. In high school, a female friend of mine was Adventist and it was her church's policy for women not to wear any gold jewelry based on this passage. This carried over to their wedding practice. They were prohibited from exchanging gold wedding rings; so instead at the wedding ceremony they gave each other wrist watches. Besides being odd, such strictures today are just plain legalism. For North American Christians to begin meticulously forbidding all the items listed in 1 Timothy 2:9 would mean that couples must discard their gold wedding rings! What purpose would this practically serve except to give the wrong impression among friends, family, and society that Christian married couples were either being unfaithful, having serious marital problems, or perhaps already divorced?

16. The statement in 1 Timothy 5:10, "if she has washed the saints' feet" does not support foot-washing as a third church ordinance. The statement occurs in a list of qualifications for widows sixty and over to be financially supported by the church. Thus, it describes those women who have distinguished themselves by their service, not normal involvement in a worship service of the church.

Many additional examples could be given of biblical commands that were particular to first-century culture to which we are no longer bound to follow to the letter but whose permanent principles we still must obey for the Lord's sake. But for those who might insist that female head-covering is still required as a permanent, universal practice for the entire church age, they should consider the following problems with that view.

PROBLEMS WITH THE PERMANENT, UNIVERSAL INTERPRETATION

1. *Unique Passage:* 1 Corinthians 11 is the only passage in the New Testament that refers to the practice of head-covering. It was never commanded of women even in the Old Testament. If it was not even required under the Law, why would it be under grace? These facts alone make any obligation to practice head-covering today highly doubtful. Cults are notorious for building strange doctrines and practices on one obscure verse (e.g., Mormons referencing 1 Corinthians 15:29 for their practice of "baptism for the dead"; Seventh Day Adventist's citing Daniel 8:14 for their doctrine of the "investigative judgment").

2. *Unclear Passage:* Interpreters and commentators on the Bible usually find 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 to be one of the more difficult sections of the Bible to interpret. While some may argue that many other passages of Scripture are also difficult and debated, this passage in particular is subject to a myriad of interpretations even among doctrinally sound, Bible-believing commentators. Nearly every verse in the passage contains an exegetical challenge. In verse 2, there is debate about the meaning of "traditions." Are these inspired teachings of Paul (2 Thess. 2:15), his own personal examples to follow (2 Thess. 3:6), or traditions followed even by secular culture? In verse 3, there is debate about the meaning of *kephalē*, the Greek word for "head." Does this mean source or authority or both? There is also debate about the meaning of "head" in verses 4-5. Is this the physical head of the man and woman or their spiritual heads (i.e., Christ for the man, man for the woman)? In verses 4-5, there is debate on a few other matters, such as the precise nature of the woman's head-covering, when she should have worn it, and whether or not women were actually permitted to pray and prophesy in the assembly at all, even with a head-covering. In verse 6, there is

some debate on why there was cultural shame attached to a woman's uncovered head. Was it associated with temple prostitutes, adultery, both, or some other reason? In verse 7, there is debate about man being uniquely made in the image of God and the meaning of the word "glory." Verse 10a is variously translated in English Bibles because it is obscure if translated literally, "the woman ought to have authority on head." Similarly, the reference to "angels" in verse 10b is interpreted in several different ways as either messengers in the churches, pastors, elect angels, fallen angels, or both fallen and elect angels. These types of interpretative challenges continue all the way through verse 16. If all the interpretative possibilities in these verses were calculated, it would result in a very large number of varying interpretations. Therefore, it is wise to base our doctrine and practice on the abiding *principle* of the passage and not to dogmatize over many of the *details*.

3. *Three Basic Questions Unanswered:* Exactly *who* should or shouldn't wear a head-covering? *What* should be worn? And *when* should the covering be worn? None of these questions can be answered satisfactorily from the passage because the cultural practice was already mutually understood between Paul and the Corinthians, but not by us. This is further confirmation that the practice of head-covering was a temporary custom for the early church and not a permanent, obligatory practice for the entire church age.

Regarding the question of *who* should wear the head-covering in verse 5, the word for "woman" is the general term *gynē* in Greek. It can mean a female of any age. Should only married women have their heads covered? Engaged women? Widowed women? Young girls? If so, starting how young? Should only saved women wear a head-covering, or even unbelievers?

Regarding, *what* should be worn, should it be a shawl? A hood? A scarf wrapped around the head? A headband? Should it be a simple unadorned piece of cloth held on by barrettes? Can it be a doily? What about a lacy mantilla made of thin, transparent silk? Or, must it be plain and opaque? Is a fashionable hat acceptable? A wig? Must all the hair be covered, or can some still be showing? These are the types of questions that those who require head-coverings today debate among themselves.

Furthermore, *when* should the head-covering be worn? The impossibility of answering this question stems from the fact that verse 5 only tells us when the Corinthian women may *not* have been wearing their head-coverings, not when they *were* wearing them. Should it be worn only during the meeting of the whole assembly? Should it be worn whenever “two or three are gathered?”¹⁷ Should it be worn only when there is formal teaching? When someone is giving a testimony? When someone is praying? Since some songs are direct prayers to God, what about during singing?

When such foundational questions cannot be answered clearly from the passage or the rest of Scripture, implementing the practice of head-covering becomes practically impossible. The fact that the fundamental questions of *who?* *what?* and *when?* cannot be answered satisfactorily is another indication that the practice of head-covering was culturally determined and intended to be only temporary, not to be a permanent and universal command. The Corinthians were able to fill in the gaps of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 based on already existing societal conventions. But many of these unstated details are largely unknown to us today. It comes as no surprise that the issues of *who?* *what?* and *when?* are commonly debated among those who require head-covering.¹⁸ Unfortunately, those who mandate head-covering today often prescribe for their congregations many of these unanswerable details, and in the process they add extra-biblical requirements and traditions that their churches must follow. This is a classic characteristic of legalism—commanding what even God Himself has not commanded in His Word. If the Holy Spirit had intended to institutionalize head-covering for all Christians in all cultures throughout the entire church age, He certainly would have left a more detailed description of this practice for us to follow in Scripture, just as He did for Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

17. Surprisingly, two of the most famous Plymouth Brethren writers of the past believed 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 was addressing the informal, smaller meetings of the saints, not the whole assembly. See, John N. Darby, *Notes of Readings on the Epistles to the Corinthians* (London: Morrish, n.d.), 85-87; W. E. Vine, *1 Corinthians* (London: Oliphants, 1951), 147.

18. J. Boyd Nicholson, *The Head Covering: A Biblical Perspective* (Ontario: Clarion, 1983), 15-16. See also, Stephen Hulshizer, *The Truth of Headship and Its Symbolic Practice* (York, PA: Spread the Word, 1992), 40-45.

4. *Three Church Ordinances?* Those who practice head-covering today believe that God instituted this practice as an ordinance for the church to keep in addition to Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They reason that just as water baptism and the Lord’s Supper symbolize spiritual truths, so does head-covering. While it is true that head-covering in the first century pictured the spiritual truth of a woman’s honor and submission to the headship of her husband, it is not true that this was a third church ordinance. Both water baptism and communion were instituted by Christ shortly before His crucifixion and ascension (Matt. 28:19; 26:26-29). We are commanded to keep these “until the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20) and “until He comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). The same cannot be said of head-covering.

Moreover, both water baptism and communion are referred to repeatedly throughout the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles, precisely because they were practiced as church ordinances, unlike head-covering. We can also answer from Scripture rather than culture or church tradition the most basic questions about Baptism and the Lord’s Supper; but we cannot do the same with head-covering. *Who* may participate in water baptism? Believers of any age (Acts 8:37; 16:33-34). *Who* may participate in the Lord’s Supper? Believers who have examined themselves (1 Cor. 11:28). *When* should a person get baptized with water? Only once and after salvation since this pictures a believer’s once-for-all union with Christ (Rom. 6:3-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-13). *When* should we have the Lord’s Supper? Repeatedly and “as often as” we choose (1 Cor. 11:25-26). *What* are we to use in baptizing someone? “Water” (Acts 8:36, 38, 39). *What* are we to use for the Lord’s Supper? “Bread” and the “fruit of the vine” (Matt. 26:26, 29). The answers to the most basic questions about the two divinely instituted ordinances are sufficiently stated in the New Testament. We need not look to tradition or first-century culture for further details to regulate our practice of these ordinances. But, by comparison, when we cannot answer the most fundamental questions about head-coverings, it is plain that the Spirit of God did not intend 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 to be a virtual third church ordinance.

5. *Creation or Church?* Some who require head-covering today are also dispensationalists, such as the Plymouth Brethren. They believe, as Scripture teaches, that Israel and the church are distinct peo-

ple groups under different dispensations, namely, law versus grace. But many also claim that the practice of wives covering their heads was newly instituted with the church age to be a symbolic picture of the church's submission to Christ. They believe this explains why there are no Old Testament passages that command the practice of head-covering. But 1 Corinthians 11 says the women at Corinth were to wear a head-covering because of the *creation* order, not because of a new *church* order. In verses 7-9, Paul refers to male headship based on the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2. Then in verse 10, he says "*For this reason* a woman ought to have authority on her head." For what reason? For the reason just stated in verses 7-9, namely, creation. Why is this significant? The fact that Paul goes back to the Old Testament to command the Corinthians to wear head-coverings, coupled with the fact that the Old Testament does not require women to wear head-coverings as a daily, public practice, shows that Paul's point was not the permanency of *head-covering*, but the permanency of honor and submission to *headship*. The particular expression of this honor and submission to headship changes from culture to culture and era to era, and in the New Testament period, the cultural expression was clearly head-covering. Paul goes back to Adam and Eve to show that the wife's submission to her husband's headship has been God's permanent design from the beginning. As previously stated, Eve wore no covering at all; nor is there any evidence that the godly women of the Old Testament were ever required by God to wear a head-covering. All of this speaks strongly against this practice being a permanent, divine ordinance for the church today.

6. *Submission Without a Head-Covering?* Conspicuously, in every other passage in the New Testament that refers to a woman's submission to her husband, there is no mention of head-covering (Eph. 5:21-33; Col. 3:18; 1 Tim. 2:9-15; Titus 2:3-5; 1 Peter 3:1-6). If head-covering is *the* universal and permanent symbol of submission for women in the church, then why is it *never* mentioned in *any* of these submission passages?

7. *Liberty or Legalism?* Head-covering is *not* a matter of individual liberty according to virtually all of those who practice it today. I have yet to meet a proponent of head-covering in North America who does not believe that *all* Christian women *should*

wear a head-covering if they are seeking to be truly obedient to the Lord. They do not allow for the possibility that women could choose *not* to wear a head-covering after faithfully studying 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and *still* be in submission to the Lord. They claim that if a woman does not wear a head-covering, it is because she is either still *ignorant* of what 1 Corinthians 11 really teaches or she is in willful *disobedience* against God. There is virtually no middle ground with them.

One author writing on this subject says, "If after receiving proper teaching on the order of Headship, and its symbolic practice, what if a brother or sister refuses to symbolically practice this truth? Very simply put, it would be an expression of rebellion against God's government."¹⁹ Thus, most who practice head-covering today do not give a woman the liberty not to wear a head-covering. Simply put, this is legalism; and legalism is opposed to liberty (2 Cor. 3:17). This is far different from saying, "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5). This same author instructs churches in dealing with those who choose *not* to practice head-covering, writing, "While the symbolic practice of the truth of Headship cannot be forced, this does not mean that church leadership is without recourse in such cases. The oversight could restrict the participation of such an individual in the spiritual activities of the assembly. . . . This restriction could be in such areas as: oversight, public ministry, teaching Sunday School, and public service in a variety of areas."²⁰ This is far different from saying, "Let us not therefore judge one another" (Rom. 14:13) or "Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves" (Rom. 14:22).

Once head-covering is interpreted to be a permanent, transdispensational command for the universal church, believers lose the liberty *not* to wear a head-covering. The requirement for women to wear head-coverings today in parts of the world, such as North America, where the symbol has lost its meaning, usually leads to judging, spiritual elitism, and division among believers. It often leads to the spiritual "haves" and "have nots." Those who practice head-covering often pridefully think they are the ones truly obeying God while perceiving those with un-

19. Ibid., Hulshizer, 46.

20. Ibid.

covered heads as either ignorant or willfully carnal or worldly. While the head-coverers may temporarily tolerate women with uncovered heads, eventually the women without head-coverings *must* arrive at the same conclusion in order to be “fully obedient” to God’s will. This is a sure recipe for division within Christ’s body. Another common characteristic of legalism is unnecessary separation, which has been the tendency of many sects that practice head-covering today.

For this reason, the apostle Paul dealt strongly with the legalism in the churches of Galatia. While the Galatians sincerely thought they were just obeying God by practicing circumcision, the grace-oriented apostle saw that they were actually practicing legalism. Therefore, he warned them strongly:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law (Gal. 5:1-3).

For believers to think they must wear a head-covering today in cultures where it does not symbolize a wife’s fidelity and submission to her husband is to slip on the “yoke of bondage” and allow themselves to be led into other forms of legalism. Head-covering is usually just the first step toward doing “the whole law.” It is the tip of the iceberg. As with an ox, once the yoke is accepted, the ox is under bondage to be led about wherever its master wishes. It is not too strong to say that head-covering in American churches today is a form of legalism. C. I. Scofield agreed, stating over 100 years ago:

Nothing could be more contrary to the whole spirit of this dispensation than to use the casual mention of an ancient custom in a Greek city as fastening a legal and, so to speak, Levitical ceremony upon Christians in all ages. The point is that “the head of the woman is the man.” It is the divine order.²¹

21. C. I. Scofield, as quoted in Paul R. Van Gorder, *Cracks in the Superstructure: Solutions for Today's Church Problems from 1 Corinthians* (n.p.: Paul R. Van Gorder, 1997), 57.

The practice of head-covering has all the earmarks of legalism in contrast to grace. Legalism always legislates something that God has not explicitly commanded in His Word. Under legalism, believers do not need to walk by faith, because they are seeking to meet a visible and external human standard as they walk by sight rather than by faith in what God has revealed in His Word (2 Cor. 5:7). Meanwhile, God is looking for faith in the heart (1 Sam. 16:9; Heb. 11:6). Legalism also measures one’s own spirituality and that of others by external, manmade standards of righteousness (Matt. 23:5, 28), resulting in prideful judging and condemnation (Rom. 14:3-4, 10, 13; Gal. 5:15). I have personally known women who have worn a head-covering and those who do not. In my opinion, the head-covering has made no difference at all in a woman’s submission to the Lord and her husband. But many an unsubmitive and domineering wife has put a piece of cloth on her head only to utterly rebel in her heart (if not even publicly and visibly at times too). Conversely, many a sweetly submissive Christian wife has *never* worn a head-covering. So, what makes the difference? It is the internal attitude of heart before God, not a piece of external cloth. As twenty-first century North American believers in Christ who are saved and sanctified by God’s grace alone, let us continue to “stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free” (Gal. 5:1) and continue to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). ■

ADDENDUM ON CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Those who teach that Christian women in Western churches must wear head-coverings today often deny that Paul issued his instructions in 1 Corinthians 11 because female head-covering was already the *culturally established symbol* of a wife’s submissive, respectful relationship toward her husband. They attempt to justify head-covering as a modern, universal obligation by denying the clear historical evidence showing that female head-covering was a pervasive practice in first-century Greece. Frequently in books, tracts, internet articles and blogs, and on YouTube videos, proponents of mandatory head-covering mischaracterize the cultural environment of Corinth as one in which female head-covering was really not the norm and therefore Paul’s expectations in 1 Corinthians 11 must have been counter-cultural and distinctively Christian. To create this historical fiction, proponents of the “mandatory”

view often pick a few favorable quotes from credible scholars who acknowledge that head-covering was not practiced *everywhere* by *all* women in the Roman Empire (especially Roman women) and that there were no explicit governmental laws requiring it of all women in Italy or Greece. But in so doing, they conveniently ignore the overwhelming body of evidence showing that the Near Eastern and Mediterranean world of the first century most definitely expected married women to wear a head-covering in public as one of its longstanding social mores—one of its fixed, morally binding customs.

This addendum on the cultural, historical background of 1 Corinthians provides a small sampling and survey of this evidence, moving geographically from East to West. In the East, the practice of wives covering themselves was certainly stricter than in the West closer to Rome,²² as Craig Keener writes, “In general, the further east one went the more of their skin men expected women to cover.”²³ Thus, in Persia, Arabia, Assyria, Syria, and some of Asia Minor, married women were expected not only to have their heads covered but also the rest of their bodies, including the veiling of their faces.²⁴ Veiling or covering the head is a very ancient tradition. Modern Westerners may find it surprising that the Middle Eastern custom of women covering themselves did not originate with Islam in the seventh century A.D. but over 2,000 years earlier. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones has conducted a thorough study of this subject within Greek culture, and he concludes:

Greek veiling ideology was part of a widespread tradition of female veiling located throughout the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds. The earliest prototypes of the Greek veil were to be found in a number of successive civilizations of the Near East, where it was worn by the women of Sumer, the Hittites, and Neo-Hittites, the Hebrews, the Persians, and the Assyrians, from whom

we get the earliest known law code on veiling.²⁵

ASSYRIANS

Among the Assyrians, clear evidence exists for the great antiquity of female head-covering, in addition to its strong associations with women’s moral character and virtue. One researcher writes:

In a Middle Assyrian literary text, approximately 1600–1000 BC, there is an incantation comparing childbirth to a warrior in battle. It contains a telling line, which translates as: “She wears no veil and has no shame.” This is a clear reference that veiling is linked to a woman’s virtue.²⁶

The Middle Assyrian Law Code is found on a well-preserved clay tablet in Akkadian script, dating to 1100 B.C., and it sets forth strict laws (and barbaric punishments²⁷) concerning women’s head-covering and veiling. It declares:

Married women, widows, and Assyrian women must not have their heads uncovered when they go out into the street. Daughters of status must be veiled, whether by a veil, a robe, or a [mantle]; they must not have their heads uncovered. . . . A concubine on the street with her mistress is to be veiled. A hierodule [temple servant or prostitute] who has gotten married must be veiled on the street, but a single hierodule must have her head uncovered; she may not be veiled. A harlot is not to be veiled; her head must be uncovered. Any man who sees a veiled harlot is to apprehend her, pro-

22. Thompson, “Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth,” 113.

23. Craig S. Keener, “Head Coverings” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 444.

24. *Ibid.*, 442. See also, Diodorus Seculus (90–30 B.C.), *Library of History*, 17.35.5.

25. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite’s Tortoise: The Veiled Woman of Ancient Greece* (Swansea, Wales: Classical Press of Wales, 2003), 6. Llewellyn-Jones’s research of Greek veiling and head-covering is currently considered the definitive work on the subject, covering roughly 1100 years of Greek history, from 900 B.C. to A.D. 200. Not surprisingly, this book and its thorough documentation are rarely mentioned by those who argue against the cultural interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11.

26. Khairunessa Dossani, “Virtue and Veiling: Perspectives from Ancient to Abbasid Times” (M.A. thesis, San Jose State University, 2013), 15.

27. Even in later centuries, the Assyrians were infamous for their barbarism and cruelty as attested by the Hebrew prophets who prophesied against the capital city of Nineveh in roughly 760–660 B.C. (Jonah 3:8; Nahum 3:1-3). God is certainly against such mistreatment and violence.

duce witnesses and bring her to the palace entrance. . . . Slave-girls are not to be veiled either. Any man who sees a veiled slave-girl is to apprehend her and bring her to the palace entrance.²⁸

This portion of the law code distinguishes different treatment for different classes of women based on marital status. A primary reason married women were to be veiled in public but single women were not was that married women were no longer available as potential brides and were “off limits” to the wanton eyes of other men, but single women and prostitutes were still potential prospects for marriage. This distinction between married women being covered and unmarried women remaining uncovered is observed in another portion of the same law code. It states:

If a man wants to veil his concubine, he must assemble five or six of his neighbors and veil her in front of them, and say, “She is my wife.” In this way she becomes his wife. A concubine who has not been veiled in front of witnesses, or whose husband has not said, “She is my wife,” is not a wife; she is still a concubine.²⁹

Among the Assyrians, head-covering and veiling clearly signified an elevated social status for women, with connotations of a virtuous character of sexual chastity and fidelity to their husbands. The practice of head-covering carried essentially the same significance later for the Jews, Greeks, and Romans.

JEWES

Head-covering among the Jews evolved over time. Consequently, tracing its development must start with Scripture and move to Jewish tradition. The Old Testament surprisingly says very little about head-covering or veiling. Genesis 24:65 contains the first reference in its description of Rebekah veiling herself just before she meets her husband Isaac for the first time. This event occurs in a clear bridal context. Thus, Rebekah’s veil was probably associated somehow with marital virtue as in other Middle Eastern, Near Eastern, and Mediterranean cultures.

Next, Genesis 38 tells us that Tamar put on a veil to publicly advertise herself as a prostitute and was “hired” by her father-in-law Judah, through whom she conceived twins. The passage explicitly associates face-veiling with prostitution: “When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, because she had covered her face” (Gen. 38:15). The significance of the veil in this instance had exactly the opposite meaning assigned to it than in Rebekah’s wedding and in the Middle Assyrian Law Code 800 years later.

After this, Numbers 5:18 addresses the case of a wife suspected of adultery who was to be taken before the priest: “Then the priest shall stand the woman before the Lord, [and] uncover the woman’s head.” The implication of the Hebrew word for “uncovered” in this context “seems to be that going about with one’s head uncovered was out of the ordinary and gave one a distressed, vulnerable appearance.”³⁰ We also see from this verse that a woman’s uncovered head is associated with marital infidelity, which is the same negative connotation seen later in Jewish tradition and Greek and Roman cultures. As an example of Jewish tradition and interpretation, Philo of Alexandria, Egypt (c. 20 B.C. – c. A.D. 50) comments on Numbers 5:18. He says a wife suspected of adultery should appear with her husband before a priest and the priest “shall take away from her the head-dress on her head, that she may be judged with her head bare, and deprived of the symbol of modesty, which all those women are accustomed to wear who are completely blameless.”³¹ Less than a century later, Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37–100), being a Jew and native to the land of Israel, writes in his capacity as an official Roman historian, and he echoes Philo’s interpretation of Numbers 5:18 to the effect that a Jewish wife’s head-covering is associated with her fidelity to her husband.³²

These examples from the literary history of the Jews show that an entire tradition and theology of head-covering was already in place for Jews, whether in the land of Israel or the Diaspora, by the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. Keener cites further evidence that Jewish orthodoxy and orthopraxy on female

28. Middle Assyrian Law Code, Tablet A40, translated by G. R. Driver, J. C. Miles, and Theophile Meek.

29. *Ibid.*, Tablet A41.

30. Alan D. Ingalls, “Headcoverings in the Old Testament,” *Journal of Ministry & Theology* 4 (Fall 2000): 44.

31. Philo, *Special Laws*, 3.10.56.

32. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 3.11.6.

head-covering was consistent with Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 11.

Uncovering and loosing a woman's hair publicly revealed her beauty (Chariton *Chaer.* 1.14.1). Thus later rabbis warned that a woman uncovering her head could lead to a man's seduction (ARN 14 §35; cf. *Num. Rab.* 18:20), and the priests must beware when loosing the hair of a suspected adulteress (*Sipre Num.* 11.2.1-3; *y. Sanh.* 6:4 §1). A wife going in public with loosed hair appears in a list of promiscuous behaviors warranting divorce without repayment of the marriage settlement (*m. Ketub.* 7:6; even more explicitly in *Num. Rab.* 9:12). This was why married women in particular were expected to cover their hair. Women normally covered their heads after marriage, so being taken away "unveiled" (*akalyptos*) indicated the loss of their marriage (3 Maccabees 4:6).³³

The evidence for the practice of head-covering among Jewish wives still abounds in the centuries after the New Testament was complete—the second to fifth centuries. The Septuagint version of the book of Daniel, edited about A.D. 150 by the Hellenistic Jew Theodotion, contains an apocryphal chapter about the beautiful and virtuous Susanna appearing veiled before her judges.³⁴ A half-century later, the Christian apologist Tertullian writes about A.D. 200 from Carthage concerning the Jews: "So sacred, among the Jews, is the head covering of the women that by this they are recognizable."³⁵ This statement reveals that while head-covering was standard practice among the Jewish communities of North Africa, it also implies that public head-covering among Gentiles there was no longer consistent. Moving forward another 50 years or so, we see evidence of female Jewish head-covering from a synagogue in Dura-Europos, Syria, which dates no later than A.D. 256. There, wall paintings depict stories from the Old Testament. Conspicuously, the heads of all the men in the paintings are uncovered and the women's heads are covered. Finally, returning to literary evidence from Jewish tradition, the Mishnah was edited early in the third century (though it reflects much older traditions), and it re-

fers to the practice of female head-covering in *Baba Qamma* 8:6 and *Ketubot* 7:6. Likewise, the Babylonian Talmud was written around A.D. 500 (also reflecting much earlier Jewish practice), and it speaks of head-covering in *Berakot*, 24a; *Ketubot*, 72a; *Nedarim*, 30b; and *Yoma*, 47b.

Though a strong tradition of female head-covering developed within Judaism, it must be noted that the Old Testament never prescribes the practice of head-covering for ordinary Jewish men or women.³⁶ Regarding a few men, God commanded the priests in Israel to wear special caps or hats while they ministered as prescribed in the Law (Exod. 28:40; 29:9; 39:28; Lev. 8:13), but the sons of Aaron represent an exceptional case to the spirit of Paul's head-covering prohibition for men in 1 Corinthians 11:4, just as Nazarite men (Num. 6:2-5; Judg. 13:5-7; 16:17) were exceptions to nature's teaching that men should have shorter hair than women (1 Cor. 11:14). Regarding Jewish women, Numbers 5:18 implies that they normally covered their heads as early as Moses's day (15th century B.C.). In the British Museum in London, there is an Assyrian palace relief from Lachish dated approximately 745–725 B.C., showing Hebrew women being led into exile with their heads (but not faces) covered.³⁷ Ezekiel 27:17 and 23 also imply that by the time of Ezekiel living near Babylon in the sixth century B.C., Jewish men wearing turbans was normal. This probably refers to men covering their heads as a matter of everyday attire or fashion rather than during specific times of religious observance, so these few examples present no contradiction to Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:4 about men praying or prophesying with heads uncovered. Samuel Krauss reviews the history and tradition of Jews and agrees with Rabbi J. Z. Lauterbach in concluding: "There is no law in Bible or Talmud prescribing the covering of the head for men entering a sanctuary, when participating in the religious service or when performing any religious ceremony."³⁸ Cynthia Thompson relates this back to 1 Corinthians 11:4: "Paul, with his Jewish background, would have experienced no conflict at men's bareheadedness in prayer; the custom of head-covering by Jewish men, seen in its minimal form in the yarmulke (skull cap)

33. Keener, "Head Coverings," 446.

34. Theodotion, *Susanna*, v. 32.

35. Tertullian, *De Corona*, 4.

36. Samuel Krauss, "The Jewish Rite of Covering the Head," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 19 (1945-46): 122.

37. Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite's Tortoise*, 8-9.

38. Lauterbach as quoted in Krauss, "The Jewish Rite of Covering the Head," 121-22.

worn by men of the modern orthodox faith, did not develop until long after Paul's time."³⁹

TARSIANS, CYPRIANS, & GERMANS

Moving westward from the regions of Israel, Assyria, and Syria, we see next that head-covering among married women (and head-shaving) had the same cultural significance for those living on the Island of Cyprus, in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), and even among the northern Germanic tribes.

Greek biographer and essayist Plutarch (A.D. 46–120) describes brides taking a veil upon marriage,⁴⁰ and he says that for the women of Asia Minor, veiling their faces (and thus their heads) was customary, and even a “shame” for them to go about unveiled in public.⁴¹ Similarly, in an oration to the people of Paul's hometown of Tarsus (Acts 21:39; 22:3), Dio Chrysostom (A.D. 40–112) reproves the Tarsians for the degeneration of their city since the time of Emperor Augustus (63 B.C.–A.D. 14), but while doing so he also commends them for continuing the custom of their women being completely covered in public:

Take Athenodorus, who became governor of Tarsus, whom Augustus held in honor—had he known your city to be what it is today, would he, do you suppose, have preferred being here to living with the emperor? In days gone by, therefore, your city was renowned for orderliness and sobriety, and the men it produced were of like character; but now I fear that it may be rated just the opposite and so be classed with this or that other city I might name. And yet many of the customs still in force reveal in one way or another the sobriety and severity of deportment of those earlier days. Among these is the convention regarding feminine attire, a convention which prescribes that women should be so arrayed and should so deport themselves when in the street that nobody could see any part of them, neither of the face nor of the rest of the body, and that they themselves might not see anything off the road.⁴²

39. Thompson, “Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth,” 104.

40. Plutarch, *Moralia*, 138d.

41. *Ibid.*, 302e–303a.

42. Dio Chrysostom, *First Tarsic Discourse*, 48-49.

The Island of Cyprus sits just southwest of Tarsus in the Mediterranean Sea and was heavily influenced by Greek culture (Hellenized) in the centuries prior to Christ. Not long after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, Dio Chrysostom states that according to Cyprian law “a woman guilty of adultery shall have her hair cut off and be a harlot.”⁴³ This statement confirms the clear, culturally understood comments by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:5-6: “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. 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.” Even as far north as Germania, wives guilty of adultery had their heads shaved as an act of public shame and humiliation. In A.D. 98, Tacitus reports about the Germanic tribes:

Their marriage code, however, is strict, and indeed no part of their manners is more praiseworthy. Almost alone among barbarians they are content with one wife, except a very few among them, and these not from sensuality, but because their noble birth procures for them many offers of alliance. . . . Thus with their virtue protected they live uncorrupted by the allurements of public shows or the stimulant of feasting. Clandestine correspondence is equally unknown to men and women. Very rare for so numerous a population is adultery, the punishment for which is prompt, and in the husband's power. Having cut off the hair of the adulteress and stripped her naked, he expels her from the house in the presence of her kinsfolk, and then flogs her through the whole village. The loss of chastity meets with no indulgence; neither beauty, youth, nor wealth will procure the culprit a [new] husband. No one in Germany laughs at vice, nor do they call it the fashion to corrupt and to be corrupted.⁴⁴

GREEKS

The sanctity of marriage as expressed through the physical heads of husbands and wives was well understood and widely accepted by both Jewish and Gentile cultures in Paul's day. Greek culture was no

43. Dio Chrysostom, *Orations*, 64.3.

44. Tacitus, *Germania*, 19.

exception. A wealth of source material still exists from Greek literature, iconography, sculpture and statuary, allowing us a window into the first-century world of Paul's original readers of 1 Corinthians, who were mainly Greek Gentiles. Taken together, these sources demonstrate conclusively that women covering their heads was a centuries-old custom among the Greeks whose symbolic meaning was the same as neighboring Eastern people groups.

Women's head-covering among the Greeks was an ancient practice that had become deeply ingrained in their social consciousness by the time of the New Testament. Female head-covering in Greece can be traced at least as far back as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, about 800 years before Christ.⁴⁵ Full veiling of the head and face among honorable women evolved over time and was a fixture of Greek culture for four centuries before Paul wrote 1 Corinthians.⁴⁶ The most complete and authoritative study to date on this subject concludes, "women of varying social strata in the ancient Greek world were habitually veiled, especially for public appearances or before unrelated men."⁴⁷

But aside from its normalcy, what did female head-covering symbolize to the Greeks? Its significance was related to its function of distinguishing virtuous married women.⁴⁸ In both Greek and Roman society, a wife's head-covering was "closely related to marital fidelity. Married women were obligated to wear some form of head-covering when they went out into the public arena. . . . Additionally, it was a

symbol of a husband's authority and the removal in public of the head-covering was to withdraw from marriage."⁴⁹ Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones states further: "In ancient Greece the women who attract the most notoriety are those who are conspicuously uncovered to the public view: lower-class prostitutes who are at the call of all men and do not enjoy the protection of a husband or guardian come in for particular attack. These street girls stand outdoors, half-naked, in the sun; they are women it is permitted to look at. . . . As one comic fragment attests, 'Their door is open' (Athenaeus xiii 569 f)."⁵⁰

The veil or covering was a social symbol closely associated with a woman's modesty, faithfulness, and submission to her husband's headship. This is clearly demonstrated in cases where an unrelated male walks into a home or entryway where the women are unveiled and, being greatly embarrassed by their uncovered heads or faces, the women quickly attempt to veil themselves.⁵¹ Consistent with these accounts, Tertullian, the second-century Christian apologist from Carthage, North Africa, describes one female character, Achamoth, covering "herself with a veil, moved at first with a dutiful feeling of veneration and modesty."⁵² This shows again that the action of women veiling themselves symbolized respect for their husbands and personal humility. In Greek literature and art, head-coverings are frequently mentioned in the same contexts as the Greek word *aidōs*, which carries the meaning of modesty, reverence, or respect.⁵³ It should be noted that although there are examples of men veiling themselves in certain contexts in Greek culture, this was not the norm. For married women, head-

45. Keener, "Head Coverings," 445; Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite's Tortoise*, 41-83.

46. Llewellyn-Jones writes, "The introduction of the *tegidion* [face veil] into the Greek world at the close of the fourth century BC is a facet of female life that has passed virtually unnoticed in scholarship, but one which must have had a profound and fundamental influence upon the lives of Greek women. It is very difficult to tell just how widespread this fashion was, but, as suggested above, widely disseminated textual references, coupled with findings of statuettes of women wearing the *tegidion* scattered throughout northern Greece, Asia Minor and Egypt, suggest that the garment was commonplace among upper-class women in these regions by the late Classical period, and increasingly throughout the early Hellenistic era; it has even been suggested, judging again from the terracotta evidence, that the *tegidion* may have been worn in Attica" (Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, "House and Veil in Ancient Greece," *British School at Athens Studies* 15 [2007]: 256).

47. Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite's Tortoise*, 3.

48. Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 530.

49. Benjamin Marx, "'Wifely Submission' and 'Husbandly Authority' in Plutarch's *Moralia* and the *Corpus Paulinum*: A Comparison," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 14 (2018): 71.

50. Llewellyn-Jones, "House and Veil in Ancient Greece," 255.

51. Menander (c. 300 B.C.), *Perikeiromene*, 311-312; Plutarch, *Moralia*, 516e-f.

52. Tertullian, *Against the Valentines*, 16.

53. Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 25-26; Douglas L. Cairns, "The Meaning of the Veil in Ancient Greek Culture," in *Women's Dress in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones (London: Duckworth, 2002), 73; Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite's Tortoise*, 15, 156-188.

covering in public was a matter of daily propriety and honor.⁵⁴

Besides the meaning or symbolic significance of Greek head-covering and veiling, it is helpful for our understanding of 1 Corinthians 11 to see just how common and pervasive this practice really was. Greek literature and iconography are filled with descriptions and depictions of women with covered heads and faces, so much so that “the custom of head-covering is presupposed” for married Greek women in public.⁵⁵ Greek dramatist Menander (c. 342–291 B.C.) writes, “She’ll be embarrassed when we go in, that’s clear, and she’ll veil herself, for that’s what women do.”⁵⁶ Menander’s statement was meant only as an insignificant, off-handed remark, but it “speaks volumes about the routine nature of veiling” in Greek culture.⁵⁷ Writing about the Spartans, Greek biographer and essayist Plutarch (A.D. 46–120) says, “When someone inquired why they took their girls into public places unveiled, but their married women veiled, he said, ‘Because the girls have to find husbands, and the married women have to keep to those who have them.’”⁵⁸ This statement connects head-covering to the marriage relationship, not just to being female. But it also underscores that this practice was truly normative. In fact, Plutarch says as much in another place: “Why do sons cover their heads when they escort their parents to the grave, while daughters go with uncovered heads and hair unbound?... is it that the unusual is proper in mourning, and it is more usual for women to go forth in public with their heads covered and men with their heads uncovered? So in Greece, whenever any misfortune comes, the women cut off their hair and the men let it grow, for it is usual for men to have their hair cut and for women to let it grow.”⁵⁹

Plutarch’s statements reveal that women wearing head-coverings in public was customary, as well as them having longer hair than men. In Greek culture, a woman’s shaved head was a culturally shameful, humiliating condition that signified the loss of her

54. Ibid., Cairns, 73-93.

55. Marx, “‘Wifely Submission’ and ‘Husbandly Authority’ in Plutarch’s *Moralia* and the *Corpus Paulinum*,” 72.

56. Menander, *Perikeiromene*, 311-12.

57. Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite’s Tortoise*, 1.

58. Plutarch, *Moralia*, 232c.

59. Ibid., 267a.

natural covering and glory.⁶⁰ This is consistent with 1 Corinthians 11 and occasions of head-shaving in other cultures as stated previously. Times of mourning, such as funerals, were considered exceptional occasions where grief would be expressed by men and women doing the opposite of the societal norm. Llewellyn-Jones summarizes this irregularity based on cases found throughout Greek literature:

Adult Greek men veil themselves with their garments at times of crisis. They veil, for example, at the moment of death (their own impending death or at the death of others); they veil to hide emotions (especially despair, grief, and anger) and they veil to hide shame and loss of honor. In other words, Greek men veil themselves when their masculinity is compromised. It is then that they indulge in an essentially female gesture and veil themselves in accordance with the male ideology of veiling. The veil acts as a symbolic barrier and separates the emotional man from the rest of his society. . . . But because the act is out of the ordinary, masculine veiling draws attention to a dilemma and solicits an immediate response from other men who will often coax, persuade, or goad the veiled man to unveil. Men only veil temporarily before normality is restored, then they unveil. However, it is a woman’s lot to stay resolutely beneath her veil.⁶¹

At this point, protagonists of head-covering for all Christian women or wives today object that head-covering does not appear to have been a legal requirement among the Greeks. Sometimes an article from over 50 years ago by German scholar Albrecht Oepke is quoted to support this objection:

It used to be asserted by theologians that Paul was simply endorsing the unwritten law of Hellenic and Hellenistic feeling for what was proper. But this view is untenable. To be sure, the veil was not unknown in Greece. It was worn partly as adornment and partly on such special occasions as match-making and marriage, mourning, and the worship of chthonic

60. Aristophanes (411 B.C.), *The Smophoriazusae*, 837.

61. Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite’s Tortoise*, 17. See also, Cairns, “The Meaning of the Veil in Ancient Greek Culture,” 73-93.

deities (in the form of a garment drawn over the head). But it is quite wrong that Greek women were under some kind of compulsion to wear a veil in public.⁶²

Actually, it is Oepke who has been proven quite wrong, as the extensive research by Llewellyn-Jones and others has demonstrated since Oepke. In opposition to Oepke, Elif Aynaci explains how cultural norms and mores can still apply social pressure without an explicit law.

To wear a veil was not compulsory. We know of no clothing-related law demanding that married women (or any women for that matter) wear a particular garment, but this does not make its meaning any less important. Sometimes unwritten traditions could be more demanding than written laws. . . . The veil was a symbol of what marriage brought to a woman—i.e. her virtuous identity. It acted as a symbol of marriage itself; like a wedding ring, it was something which enabled people to recognize a married and honorable woman. Therefore, the absence of the veil from a married woman could lead people to imagine that the wife did not care about being recognized as virtuous, or that she did not recognize her husband's authority.⁶³

Another objection often raised against the cultural custom view of 1 Corinthians 11 is that there really was no head-covering norm in Greece or in the city of Corinth in particular. Often the article by Cynthia Thompson is cited for support since she studied the representation of women in extant Corinthian artwork and concluded: "Because most of the women's portraits presented here portray women with uncovered heads, one may infer that bareheadedness in itself was not a sign of a socially disapproved lifestyle. These women certainly wished to be seen as respectable. The wall-paintings of Pompeii buried in 79 C.E., suggest that for Hellenistic

and Roman women a veil was a possible choice but not a requirement."⁶⁴

In response, a few key points should be kept in mind. First, assuming that the practice of head-covering in the city of Corinth was more lax than other Greek cities, this still would not provide a valid basis for the Christian women of Corinthian to go uncovered in church or public since head-covering was still being practiced in that city and throughout the rest of Greece and the Mediterranean world. Therefore, going uncovered in the Corinthian congregation would have sent the wrong message to the surrounding ancient world that still practiced head-covering. Second, the surviving portraits and marble busts representing a higher percentage of uncovered women's heads may represent only the elite or upper-class woman rather than the common Corinthian woman.⁶⁵ Marble and artwork were luxuries reserved for "wealthy dignitaries seeking attention, honor, and remembrance."⁶⁶ Keener specifically addresses this possibility:

Literary sources testify abundantly to women's head coverings in the eastern Mediterranean, but mosaics usually depict women with their heads uncovered. Naturally mosaics and busts, which represent upper-class women, reveal fashionable hairstyles rather than head coverings; who would pay to have a bust sculpted with her hair covered? Upper-class women, imitating fashion changes dictated by the imperial women and concerned to display their expensive and stylish hair arrangements, probably frequently went uncovered, in contrast to their lower-class counterparts (1 Tim. 2:9). In the Corinthian house churches, where many people of lower status [1 Cor. 1:26] met in more well-to-do homes [Rom. 16:23], such a culture clash could have created tension. . . . Women of greater means and status may have disdained the confinement of such coverings, but head coverings appear to have been popular among women of lower social status.⁶⁷

62. Albrecht Oepke, "καλύπτω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich and Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 562.

63. Elif H. Aynaci, "A Change in Perspective: A Comparison between Early Christian Literature and Greco-Roman Evidence on the Lives of Ephesian Women" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 2015), 148.

64. Thompson, "Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth," 112.

65. Gill, "The Importance of Roman Portraiture for Head-covering in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16," 245-60.

66. Thompson, "Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth," 100.

67. Keener, "Head Coverings," 446.

Lastly, it is worth recalling the history of the city of Corinth prior to Paul writing his two Corinthian epistles. The Greek city of Corinth was conquered and decimated by the Romans in 146 B.C. and remained virtually uninhabited until 44 B.C. when Julius Caesar rebuilt the city as a Roman colony. Consequently, by the time of the New Testament, Corinth was a Greek city with a strong Roman flavor. Since head-covering was not as consistently practiced by the cosmopolitan women of Rome, the upper-class women of Corinth may have followed this trend, or at least may have been inclined to do so. This leads Llewellyn-Jones to more accurately conclude: “While Greek women were expected to be veiled in public, the rule was not so strongly endorsed for Roman women, although Roman women in the Greek East may have felt compelled to comply with local custom. If, however, Greek women wanted to appear more Roman and imitate fashions at the Imperial court, then they may have unveiled (if they were permitted to do so). The evidence is patchy.”⁶⁸

ROMANS

Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 11:4 for men not to cover their heads while praying or prophesying stands in direct opposition to the practice of elite Roman males. It was customary among Roman men of the highest social standing (emperors and priests) to cover their heads specifically during religious worship involving prayer and sacrifice.⁶⁹ However, we should not infer from this that typical Roman males routinely covered their heads during worship. The Romans used dress distinctions to signify honor and special social status.⁷⁰ Preston Massey explains:

Roman head coverings were often purple, signifying authority and wealth. . . . What was accepted and honored in Rome could be offensive in subjugated Greece. Such portraits could be construed as symbolic monuments to foreign rule and oppression. Since the Roman toga of elite men was often bordered by the color purple, this was a color of prestige and prominence. This elegant color may have signaled additional notions of rank and status.⁷¹

Richard Oster agrees but adds how head-covering practices differed between Greeks and Romans:

The Greeks’ self-identity arose most from their speech and education, while a Roman often distinguished himself by what he wore. It was not that Greeks eschewed head apparel. Rather it was clear to them and Romans that the habitual propensity of Romans to wear head apparel in liturgical settings stood in sharp contrast to the practice of others.⁷²

The fact that elite Roman men worshiped regularly with head-coverings does not mean this was the general custom of Corinthian males. This clarification is vital because proponents of mandatory head-covering for women today reject the cultural interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11, often claiming Paul instituted an entirely new, countercultural command for men not to cover their heads and conversely for women to cover theirs. Examples of elite Roman men wearing head-coverings during worship are often exaggerated to portray a cultural setting at Corinth where head-covering was the prevailing custom for Roman, Greek, and Jewish men, so that Paul’s expectation of men to pray or prophesy uncovered must have radically distinguished Christian churches from their surrounding culture. But this grossly mishandles the historical evidence of male head-covering at Corinth and throughout the Roman Empire. While it appears true that regions east of Rome felt the influence of its customs and culture, extant historical evidence shows that centuries of tradition were not overthrown in Greece by the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

Regarding the cultural practices of Roman women, these were more consistent with Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 than the head-covering of elite Roman men of that era. The head-covering (*palla*) of Italian women had the same cultural significance and meaning as it did among the Greeks, Jews, Tarsians, Cyprians, Syrians, North Africans, and Assyrians. The *palla* displayed the feminine virtue of humility and submission to male headship. For example, Roman author Claudius Aelianus (c. 175 – c. 235 A.D.) praises his wife for her resourcefulness and frugality in using whatever modest fabrics were

68. Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite’s Tortoise*, 280.

69. Massey, “Veiling among Men in Roman Corinth,” 502.

70. Finney, “Honour, Head-Coverings and Headship,” 37.

71. Massey, “Veiling among Men in Roman Corinth,” 512-13.

72. Richard E. Oster, “When Men Wore Veils to Worship: The Historical Context of 1 Corinthians 11.4,” *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 494.

available to clothe herself without concern for extravagant fashion. Speaking of her character, he writes, “She dressed first in humility, and secondly with what she had available.”⁷³ Besides humility being associated with women’s head-covering in Roman society, Kelly Olson adds, “The *palla* was supposed to announce the social and moral status of the woman, and was a mark of honor, dignity, and sexual modesty.”⁷⁴ Olson goes on to say, rather than the *stola*, the *palla* “was the more important symbol of position. The enveloping cloak served to mark the woman as one who does not engage in manual labor, and also as one who is sexually upright” and an “honest woman.”⁷⁵ Another Roman scholar concludes regarding Roman wives:

The costume of the matron signified her modesty and chastity. . . the woolen *palla* or mantle . . . was used to veil her head when she went out in public. While to modern women of Western countries, the Middle Eastern custom of veiling women seems to signify social inequality and even inferiority, to modern women of the East it is a symbol of their honor and of the sanctity and privacy of their family life. In Islamic society today, respectable women veil to protect their honor and to signify their respectability. If a man does not show them respect, their kinship group will feel shamed and will likely take serious steps to avenge the collective family honor. . . . There are some indications that the Romans viewed veiling in a general way like modern Islamic society.⁷⁶

In the earlier era of the Roman Republic, it was considered a virtuous trait of married women to cover their heads, a sentiment that continued into the time of the Roman Empire.⁷⁷ This is reflected in the abundance of coins and statues from the first two centuries. Large brass coins known as *dupondius* (Latin, “two-pounder”) contain images of the

feminine figures Fortuna and Pudicitia with heads covered. A prime example from the time of Christ is the Roman Empress, Livia Drusilla (58 B.C. – A.D. 29), who is shown on a “two-pounder” with a head-covering as piety personified (*Pietas*). She is also portrayed with a head-covering in two statues next to her son Tiberius and as Ops. Other empresses and noblewomen of the first two centuries appear frequently, but not always, in full statuary with head-coverings.⁷⁸ It appears this practice was not merely traditional, but it represented the Roman ideals of modesty and chastity for married Roman women of the empire.⁷⁹

While the symbolic meaning of the head-covering among first-century women in the West was the same as it was in the East, there is evidence that the frequency of women wearing head-coverings in public was beginning to decline. Olson explains the evidence for this conclusion.

Modern authors have stated that the covered head was part of the everyday costume of the Roman *matrona* [wife of an honorable man]. But again, we note a disjunction between literary and artistic evidence. The vast majority of female portrait busts we possess show the woman with an unveiled head, probably in order to display her elaborate hairstyle to the viewer. . . . It is difficult to see how some of these architectural hairstyles could have withstood a mantle being laid on top without crushing the rows of curls and braids. And I can find no certain evidence that these are meant to be “indoor” portraits, which would therefore not “require” the woman to be veiled. . . . Even in the Ara Pacis procession, an outdoor and public scene and one of Augustan date, where we would expect to find all the women with the *palla* drawn up around their heads, some are veiled, and some are not. The paintings of public life in the *praedium* of Julia Felix at Pompeii also show women in the Forum with unveiled heads. Sculptures of women with veiled heads do of course exist,

73. Aelianus, *Varia Historia*, 7.9.

74. Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman: Self-Presentation and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 34.

75. *Ibid.*, 36.

76. Judith Lynn Sebesta, “Symbolism in the Costume of the Roman Woman,” in *The World of Roman Costume*, ed. Judith Lynn Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 48.

77. Thompson, “Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth,” 112.

78. E.g., Valeria Messalina, Vibia Sabina, Faustina the Elder, Plancia Magna, Lucilla, Julia Domna, Aurelia Paulina, and others.

79. Keener, “Head Coverings,” 443; Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 80.

especially if the woman is shown sacrificing or in a similar religious context. But it is evident that veiling the head every time one went out of doors was strictly prescriptive behavior, and up to the decision of the woman (or perhaps her family members).⁸⁰

There are several pieces of solid evidence to suggest that women's head-covering was becoming less frequent in the Western Roman Empire in the first century. Particularly, it "came to be less common among women of higher classes in the Western Empire . . . than in the East because of the influence of the imperial court. Nonetheless, a number of statues exist showing an empress veiling her head with a *palla*."⁸¹

Having surveyed the meaning and extent of head-covering from East to West in the ancient world of the Old and New Testaments, it is clear that the head-covering of married women was both pervasive and firmly established for several centuries by the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. Regarding this, some scholars of the past should not be deemed reliable on this topic because of their inaccuracy. One such scholar is Albrecht Oepke who wrote in the standard reference work *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: "Hence, veiling was not a general custom; it was Jewish."⁸² Oepke also grossly missed the mark regarding 1 Corinthians 11 by concluding: "Paul is thus attempting to introduce into congregations on Greek soil a custom which corresponds to oriental and especially Jewish sensibility rather than Greek."⁸³ These claims are completely at odds with the large body of surviving literary and archaeological evidence from Greece attesting that men normally did not practice public head-covering and women normally did. Additionally, Oepke's claims conflict with Paul's prior teaching on liberties in the context of 1 Corinthians 8–10 where he did not seek to impose a distinctly Eastern or Jewish custom on the mainly Greek congregation in Corinth. Rather, he personally modeled and taught the Corinthians how to use their liberties to become all

things to all people (9:22), even adopting current cultural clothing customs that harmonized with biblical headship in marriage in order to win people of that culture to Christ (9:20-21). Thus, recent scholars have been more balanced and accurate in their conclusions. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones is one such example. He provides a fitting closing statement about the scandal that would have been created by the Corinthian women *not* wearing a head-covering in public: "So whatever the make-up of the women of the Christian assembly at Korinth—Greek, Roman, or even Jewish—their uncovered heads would have broken with a number of social conventions and appeared as anathema to Paul."⁸⁴

Most assuredly, the reason Paul taught the Corinthian women to wear head-coverings was that this practice had a long and well-established cultural significance throughout the entire first-century Near Eastern and Mediterranean world that reflected the biblical order of headship. But this collective meaning and practice no longer exists in North America and Western cultures today. Therefore, Christian women are not obligated before God to wear head-coverings in public worship. ■

Tom Stegall currently serves as an associate pastor at Duluth Bible Church, the director of Grace Gospel Press, and a teacher and administrator in the Grace Institute of Biblical Studies.

80. Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 34-35.

81. Sebesta, "Symbolism in the Costume of the Roman Woman," 52. See also, Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 81-82; Valerius Maximus (c. A.D. 14-37), *Memorable Sayings and Doings*, 6.3.10.

82. Albrecht Oepke, "καλύπτω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:562.

83. *Ibid.*, 3:563.

84. Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite's Tortoise*, 280.