

Should Christian
Women Wear Head
Coverings Today?

A Brief Examination
of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16

by Dr. Robert Spinney

With a Prefatory Note by

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Prefatory Note

To all who in every place out of a pure heart call on the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ:

It is with much joy and satisfaction that I wish to recommend to the members and friends of Hope Assembly of Bible Christians, and indeed all who love our Lord Jesus in sincerity, the following discussion of head-covering in the worship and conduct of believers.

I made the acquaintance of Dr. and Mrs. Spinney in the spring of 2006 at the General Assembly of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America in Fayetteville, Georgia. On that occasion, Grace Baptist Church of Hartsville, TN (where Dr. Spinney serves as one of the pastors) was admitted to the Association as a sister congregation. Our own congregation had been welcomed into the Association's fellowship in 2004. Both from that personal acquaintance and from reading this and other of Dr. Spinney's Tulip Books pamphlets, I have found him a gracious, perceptive and thorough teacher of Holy Scripture, concerned to live out the truths of the Reformed faith in practical, Bible-centered godliness.

This easy-to-read booklet expresses perfectly the principles and practice to which our local Church has held since its inception in 1988. While I have met with a few small books which helpfully discuss this matter, I have not seen so much Biblical truth on the issue so well put in such a short space. I am convinced it will stand up to any thoughtful, prayerful and candid examination.

In a day of widespread confusion over the divine order of the sexes, and the abiding divine authority of the Bible as the rule of our faith and life, Dr. Spinney has well served the crown rights of King Jesus over His Blood-bought people in calling us anew to "trust and obey" His written Word. May the Comforter, the Holy Ghost, whom the Father and Son have sent as the Lord and Giver of life to believers, lead us into all the truth that sets us free.

Cordially, yours in our faithful Saviour,

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SHOULD CHRISTIAN WOMEN WEAR HEAD COVERINGS TODAY?

A Brief Examination of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16

Should Christian women wear head coverings? There is only one way to answer this question: examine what the Bible says about the subject.

1 Corinthians 11:1-16 (KJV)

¹ Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. ² Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you. ³ 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. ⁴ Every man praying or prophesying having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. ⁵ But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. ⁶ For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. ⁷ For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. ⁸ For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. ⁹ Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. ¹⁰ For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. ¹² For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God. ¹³ Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered? ¹⁴ Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? ¹⁵ But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering. ¹⁶ But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.

What did 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 command its original readers to do?

It instructed women to place a piece of cloth or fabric (a.k.a. head covering or veil) upon their heads when praying or prophesying. The size, shape, and color of the head covering is not specified. It is designed to cover the head (vv. 5, 6, 10) and has a function similar to that of hair (vv. 14-15).

This passage also instructed men to pray with their heads *uncovered*. Men should not pray or prophesy with hats, prayer shawls, skull caps, or other head coverings on their heads. The code of good manners in North America still reflects this tradition, which is why men remove their hats for prayer at sporting events, graduation ceremonies, etc.

When should women cover their heads and men not cover their heads?

Paul instructs women to wear head coverings whenever they pray or prophesy (v. 5). Similarly, men are instructed to keep their heads uncovered when praying or prophesying (v. 4). At a minimum, this means women should have their heads covered (and men should have their heads uncovered) when the Body of Christ is gathered corporately for prayer, edification, and/or worship.

However, women pray throughout the day and in many locations. Women often speak God's Word to children and friends outside of church settings. Thus 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 does not describe a situation that occurs only in public church meetings. For these reasons, some maintain that women should wear head coverings always and not only in church meetings. This is a reasonable and defensible position. Both Old Testament Hebrew women and Christian women throughout church history wore head coverings all the time and not at worship services only.

Other Christians point to the second half of 1 Corinthians 11 (which deals with the Lord's Supper) and argue that the context for both instructions seems to be formal public gatherings of the Body of Christ. Accordingly, these Christians conclude that the instructions in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 are applicable only in public meetings of the church. This also seems to be a reasonable and defensible position, although this second position (in my assessment) is weaker than the first.

We conclude that the Bible clearly commands that women's heads be covered in public church meetings, while it is less clear (but probable) that women should wear head coverings all the time.

But isn't a woman's hair given to her to serve as a head covering (v. 15)? Does not a woman's long hair qualify as a head covering?

No. Much of the argument here is superfluous and even irrelevant if all the apostle meant to teach was that women should have long hair.

The Bible is referring to a piece of cloth or fabric when it commands women to wear head coverings (and commands men not to do so). Beginning in the late nineteenth century, some argued (based on verse 15b) that Paul is instructing women to have long hair and that the so-called head covering is nothing more than long hair. If this "long hair equals head covering" interpretation is true, then we should be able to substitute the phrase *long hair* for the word *covering* in this passage (and *short hair* for *no covering*) and retain the passage's meaning. However, this substitution of phrases (and thus this interpretation) does not make sense. For example, if *covering* means *long hair*, then verse 6 would be arguing that those women with short hair should cut their hair short—which is a logical absurdity. Likewise, verse 5

would then mean that a woman with short hair is one and the same with women who have no hair—again, a logical absurdity.

This is why the Greek word used in verse 15 for the covering of a woman's hair (*peribolaion*) is different from the Greek word used in verses 6 and 7 for the covering of cloth (*katakalypto*, which is derived from *kalumma*, a word that means "a covering, a hood, or veil"). The two Greek words are not interchangeable.

When Paul says in verse 15b that a woman's long hair is given her as a covering, he is not defining the nature of the covering. By the time he reaches verse 15, the inspired apostle has already presented his argument at length. His readers know what he is talking about, viz. a piece of cloth called a head covering or veil. He is now bringing to bear additional considerations for his listeners to weigh. One such consideration is how our innate sensibilities tell us that women's heads ought to appear different than men's heads. Our own natural sensibilities, says Paul, tell us that women's heads should be more covered than men's. This is what Paul means by his reference to hair in verse 15b.

It is only in the past century that some commentators have attempted to make this "hair equals head covering" argument. Whether we look at Hebrew women in the Old Testament or Christian women through the ages (and in a variety of different cultures), God's people have always understood that the head covering is a piece of cloth or clothing worn upon the head and *not* merely a woman's long hair.

Is this command applicable today? Is headcovering a *cultural commandment* and an instruction given only to the Corinthians (due to their particular cultural conditions) and therefore *not* applicable today? Or is the wearing of head coverings a *transcultural commandment* given to all of God's people at all times and in all places?

Perhaps the most commonly heard explanation of this passage today is that it is merely a cultural commandment. (*Cultural* means *applicable only in a specific culture and a specific time period*.) According to this view, these instructions do not apply to Christians today. This view of the passage understands it as a culturally-specific response to a prostitution problem in 60 A.D. Corinth; female prostitutes there were easily identified by their uncovered heads. Unlike virtuous Corinthian women (the explanation goes), prostitutes did not wear head coverings. Paul therefore tells the Christian women at Corinth to wear head coverings because it is scandalous to look like prostitutes. The head covering (according to this view) served to distinguish Christian women in Corinth from ungodly prostitutes.

Understanding 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 in this manner results in regarding the head covering as a culturally-specific commandment (i.e., a commandment that applies only to a specific culture due to local factors). If head coverings were prescribed as a specific response to a specific Corinthian cultural problem (i.e., bare-headed female Corinthian prostitutes and the equation of bare heads with prostitution), then head coverings need not be worn in North America in the twenty-first century. Women who do not wear head coverings in America today are not necessarily thought to be prostitutes; therefore (as this line of thinking goes), our different cultural situation makes this cultural commandment unnecessary and non-applicable today.

We do not doubt that ancient Corinth had a prostitution problem. Nor do we disagree with the logic that says that Christian women ought not to look like prostitutes! However, this understanding of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 rests upon a weak exegesis of the text.

There is no indication in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 that this instruction is given because of the bare-headed prostitute problem. There is no suggestion in Paul's words that cultural factors in Corinth motivated his instructions. Nor is there any indication that this commandment is only for the Corinthian people in their specific cultural setting.

On the contrary—and this is extremely critical—the Bible provides *transcultural* rationales for the practice of head covering. (*Transcultural* means *applicable in all cultures and in all time periods*.) Transcultural rationales indicate that women's head coverings is a *transcultural commandment*, or a commandment based upon permanent and universal theological principle and not temporary local customs or conditions. In 1 Corinthians 11, the inspired apostle does not merely tell the church at Corinth how to behave; he goes further and gives five reasons *why* women should cover their heads. Each of the five reasons refers to timeless spiritual realities (i.e., transcultural realities) and *not* local Corinthian cultural practices. It is critical that we appreciate the importance of this aspect of the 1 Corinthians 11 passage. By providing eternal and transcultural rationales for head coverings, the Bible makes it clear that wearing head coverings is applicable to all Christians at all times.

What five reasons does the Bible give for wearing head coverings?

First, the apostle refers to the created order that God established at the beginning of the world. In 1 Corinthians 11:7-9, Paul says women should wear head coverings because they were created subordinate to men. This references Genesis 2 and the creation of Adam and Eve. When the Bible grounds a command/practice in God's creation ordinances (i.e., God's principles that He articulated at creation and recorded in the early chapters of

Genesis), we know the command/practice is applicable to all cultures and all peoples. Reference to the created order indicates a timeless principle. The head covering is an outward sign that testifies to God's created order.

Second, Paul refers to the angels. All admit that 1 Corinthians 11:10 ("because of the angels") is a difficult verse. However, the important thing for our consideration is clear: angels are not cultural phenomena particular to Corinth. Angels are spiritual and transcultural. Women should wear head coverings "because of the angels," and angels are as real in Atlanta or Paris or Montreal today as they were in Corinth in 60 A.D.

Third, the inspired apostle appeals to nature or the natural order of creation. 1 Corinthians 11:13-15 says that the natural order of human existence confirms that women should cover their heads. The main point in these verses is not that a woman's hair serves as her head covering, but rather that humans know intuitively that women's heads are to be covered in a way that men's heads are not. In making this argument, is the apostle appealing to specific cultural conditions in Corinth, or is he appealing to timeless values that are rooted within the very fabric of humanity? He is doing the latter, which again attests to the transcultural character of this command.

Fourth, the apostle concludes his instructions by informing the Corinthian church that all the churches have their women wear head coverings. Note that in verse 16, the word *churches* is plural. The church at Corinth is instructed to adopt a practice that is uniform throughout the Christian churches at this time. Churches in a variety of locations and in a variety of ethnic and cultural settings all practiced the wearing of head coverings. A contentious man (writes Paul) may reject the church's universal practice and attempt to establish a new custom (that is, the practice of women *not* wearing head coverings); however, no churches have a "no head covering custom."

Fifth, the head covering is an external symbol of a truth taught throughout the Bible: the headship of a husband over his wife, and the wife's corresponding duty to honor her husband's leadership. (The head covering is not a symbol of female moral purity, which is an assumption often made in the Corinthian prostitute argument.) Just as God is the head of Christ and Christ is the head of man, so the man is the head of the woman (v. 3). This principle—that the husband must take primary responsibility for Christlike leadership, protection, and provision of his wife—is applicable in all ages, in all places, and in all cultures. The principle that is being signified is applicable today, so the external sign of that principle (i.e., the head covering) is applicable today as well.

When considering these five rationales, the important point is not whether we like the apostle's reasons, or whether we find his reasons compelling, or

even whether we fully understand his reasons. The important point is that the Bible gives transcultural, eternal, and spiritual reasons to justify the wearing of head coverings. The Bible does not justify head coverings in terms of local customs; it justifies them in terms of theological principles.

If Paul had cited culturally-specific reasons for wearing head coverings (e.g., do this so you won't look like prostitutes, do this because it is what the Jews expect, do this because the Greeks expect religious women to cover their heads), then we would conclude that the head covering practice was culturally-specific and does not apply to Christians today. If Paul had provided no rationale for the practice (i.e., if Paul had simply commanded the wearing of head coverings without explaining why they should be worn), then we would have to do our best to construct Paul's probable rationale. Lacking clear biblical data, our conclusions would be tenuous and speculative. But neither of these situations exist here. The Bible does not merely provide an explanation—it provides five of them. All five reasons are transcultural. Thus we may conclude (with a high degree of confidence) that wearing head coverings is a transcultural command that applies to all peoples, all cultures, all places, and all ages.

Is this a minor and non-essential item that really isn't important?

Godly women are taught to wear head coverings not only in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 but implicitly throughout the Old Testament. All Hebrew women wore veils. (In passages like Isaiah 47:1-3 where God pronounces judgment, He likens a wicked nation to a woman and speaks of "removing the veil" as an act of judgment and humiliation. Such language would make no sense unless the women in Isaiah's audience wore head coverings routinely.) Paul is reaffirming in 1 Corinthians 11 something that God's people have always done. This is why the apostle begins this discussion by referring to "the ordinances" or "the traditions" to which we should "keep" or "hold firmly" (v. 2). Indeed, both verses 2 and 16 in 1 Corinthians 11 imply that *all* the early Christian churches practiced head covering. Paul was bringing the Corinthian church in line with universal church practice.

It is noteworthy that the inspired apostle devotes fifteen verses—a sizeable piece of Scripture—to head coverings. Many important Scriptural issues (e.g., baptism, the Trinity, the eternal destiny of babies who die in infancy) do not receive this kind of sustained and intentional treatment. We often piece together a verse here and a verse there to arrive at positions or practices that we regard as important. However, we do not need to do that with head coverings. A sovereign God ordained that the subject receive an extended discussion, a discussion that includes the behavior prescribed and five reasons for that behavior.

Is the wearing of head coverings important? This subject is discussed in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16; notice that the very next passage (1 Corinthians 11:17-34) deals with the Lord's Supper. Does anyone argue that 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is unimportant? Does anyone maintain that 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 expresses a "cultural commandment" that was relevant only to the Corinthian church and is not applicable today? What reasonable hermeneutic principle allows us to dismiss 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 as unimportant and somewhat eccentric, and yet enables us to exalt 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 as one of the most important and ever-relevant portions of the Bible? Should we not exegete the second half of 1 Corinthians 11 like we do the first half?

We need to reconsider the belief that something declared in God's Word can be minimized as unimportant, non-essential, or minor. All agree that the wearing of head coverings is not necessary for salvation, and all agree that women's head coverings are not on the list of the first five things we teach new believers. But if God has said something—indeed, if God goes so far as to devote half of a chapter in the Bible to the matter—do we dare undermine Jehovah's own words by calling the matter unimportant? How can we dismiss God's own words by declaring them non-essential?

What has the church historically believed regarding head coverings?

Virtually all Christians practiced head covering until the late 1800s. Tertullian (160-220), the Apostolic Constitutions (325), Chrysostom (347-407), and Augustine (354-430) confirm that Paul's teachings regarding head coverings prevailed throughout the early church. Women during the Middle Ages, Reformation-era women, Puritan women, Revolutionary War-era women in America, and nineteenth-century women all wore head coverings. As late as the mid-1800s, American theologian Robert Lewis Dabney wrote, "[F]or a woman to appear or to perform any public religious function in a Christian assembly *unveiled* is a glaring impropriety."

Only in the last 130 years has the Western European and American church abandoned this practice. Veiling still continues in many Eastern European countries. Up until the late 1950s, most Roman Catholic churches (even in North America) requested that women wear head coverings (in the form of small top-of-the-head veils) during worship services.

In North America, women in the late 1800s replaced the simple cloth head covering (or bonnet) with a hat. In time, the woman's hat became a fashion accessory rather than a religious statement. Even as the religious rationale for head covering was lost, however, women's hats were normative in North America until the 1950s. Regardless of Christian denomination, most women attended public worship services wearing some kind of hat.

Do any prominent Christians teach that Christian women should wear head coverings today?

R. C. Sproul, Sr. teaches that headcovering is applicable today. He has expressed this in both his audio tape ministry (Ligonier Ministries, Tape #675, “Hard Sayings of the Apostles,” Side B: “To Cover or Not to Cover?”) and his *Coram Deo* daily devotional magazine. In June 1996, *Coram Deo* exegeted 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 as part of its systematic Bible teaching for devotional purposes. Here are quotations from Sproul in *Coram Deo*.

Head Coverings Are Required for Women: “One’s dress reflects the principles that one lives by . . . even our exterior must conform to the order that God has established, especially in matters pertaining to public worship. The apostle makes the point that the veil [a.k.a. head covering], as a symbol of authority, is inconsistent with the position of the man, but it is required for women, who are subordinate to men.” (18 June 1996)

The Woman’s Hair Does Not Qualify As the Head Covering: “It is obvious from this comparison between men having their heads uncovered and women having their heads covered, that the covering is not hair. For if the covering in this context were hair, verse 6 would make no sense in the context of this passage.” (18 June 1996; cf. 19 June 1996)

The Head Covering Command Is Binding Upon All Cultures: “Nowhere does [Paul] give cultural reasons for his teaching, i.e., abusive practices of a pagan society that placed prostitutes with shorn heads in the temples. Paul points us back to God’s established order in nature. Whenever a teaching in Scripture refers to ‘creation ordinances,’ that teaching is binding for all cultures in all ages.” (20 June 1996)

The Head Covering Is God’s Command: “While [Charles] Hodge says that women should conform to the ‘rules of decorum,’ it must be maintained that these rules, regarding the worship of God, are established by God Himself not by the whims of culture. It is proper for a woman to have a symbol of authority upon her head; what that symbol consists of does not matter, but the necessity of the symbol remains fixed even as the authority of man remains fixed. . . . As in all things regarding worship, we must strive to be conformed to God’s regulations in all things, no matter how seemingly insignificant.” (21 June 1996)

What should I do if I am unsure of the Bible’s teaching regarding head coverings? What if I am partially but not wholly persuaded?

These words from R. C. Sproul, Sr. are helpful: “What if, after careful consideration of a Biblical mandate, we remain uncertain as to its character as principle or custom? If we must decide to treat it one way or the other but have no conclusive means to make the decision, what can we do? Here the

biblical principle of humility can be helpful. The issue is simple. Would it be better to treat a possible custom as a principle and be guilty of being over scrupulous in our design to obey God? Or would it be better to treat a possible principle as a custom and be guilty of being unscrupulous in demoting a transcendent requirement of God to the level of a mere human convention? I hope the answer is obvious.” (*Knowing Scripture*, pp. 11-12)

Addenda

A. Hermeneutics and Interpreting Biblical Instructions

When we consider any teaching text in the Bible, we interpret it with one of two initial presuppositions (or assumptions).

Presupposition A: We assume the passage under consideration does *not* apply to Christians today and was binding only upon its original listeners. We place the burden of proof upon the position that claims this instruction *is* binding upon us (or *is* applicable) today. In other words, we *assume* the rationale for the instruction is *cultural* in nature or is dictated by peculiar cultural factors, which means it is binding only upon its original listeners. When we approach a commandment or instruction with this presupposition, we must be convinced by strong evidence before we decide this instruction *is* binding upon (or *is* applicable to) Christians today.

Presupposition B: We assume the passage under consideration *does* apply to Christians today and was binding upon both its original listeners and all future listeners. We place the burden of proof upon the position that claims this instruction *is not* binding upon us (or *is not* applicable) today. In other words, we *assume* the rationale for the instruction is *transcultural* in nature or is dictated by timeless and eternal principles, which means it is binding upon all men everywhere. When we approach a commandment or instruction with this presupposition, we must be convinced by strong evidence before we decide this instruction *is not* binding upon Christians today.

Presupposition B is more sound. This is the assumption we normally use when we interpret the Bible. For example, pastors do not begin sermons on “children obey your parents in the Lord” by proving that such instruction is applicable to Christians today. We all assume (correctly) that such teaching passages are applicable unless we have strong biblical reasons for believing otherwise.

Regarding 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, this means that we must see solid evidence that we are *not* supposed to do this today before we reject the instruction. The burden of proof rests upon the man who says we do *not* have to obey this biblical command.

Unfortunately, we don't treat the issue of head coverings in this manner. We place the burden of proof upon those people who maintain that we *should* obey the Bible's instructions in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. We would never do this with other instructions in the Word of God. Why the double standard? Perhaps because obeying this particular instruction might mark one as peculiar. Our strong desire to fit in with our prevailing culture may well influence how we interpret the Bible. Surely this is a danger that we must guard against.

B. What about Paul's command to "greet one another with a brotherly kiss"? If we conclude that the woman's head covering is a transcultural commandment, then is the brotherly kiss a transcultural command as well? Is this command to greet brothers with a kiss a command that is binding upon us today?

In several instances, inspired apostles instruct Christians to greet one another with a kiss (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26, 1 Peter 5:14). It is interesting to note that the Bible handles this subject very differently from the command for women to wear head coverings.

1. Paul gives explicitly theological reasons for wearing head coverings. However, the Bible gives no reasons whatsoever (theological or otherwise) for greeting with a brotherly kiss.

2. The Bible never explains to us what the brotherly kiss symbolizes or accomplishes. We are told quite clearly, however, that the head covering symbolizes a timeless and transcultural spiritual reality, namely woman's submission to man.

3. Paul discusses head coverings in the middle of a lengthy letter to the church at Corinth and in the midst of a clearly didactic section of this epistle. He is correcting disorders in the Corinthian church and teaching preemptively so that other disorders will not appear. Part of his remedy for Corinthian problems are substantive issues like head coverings, the Lord's Supper, a proper understanding of spiritual gifts, and agape love. On the other hand, the brotherly kiss phrases only occur at the very end of several epistles in what are clearly the concluding "farewell" portions of those letters. It is only when biblical writers conclude their didactic teaching and write personal farewells that we encounter the brotherly kiss.

4. The brotherly kiss was not universally practiced in the nation of Israel. Israelites and Jews did not greet one another with a kiss for theological reasons. When apostles mention the brotherly kiss in the New Testament, they are not continuing and reinforcing a long-established Biblical practice. The opposite is true of head coverings: Israelite and Jewish women always wore head coverings.

5. Head coverings have been worn by Christian women for the past two thousand years in various places and in different denominations. However, the brotherly kiss has not been practiced throughout church history.

Notice that the Word of God addresses the head covering issue quite differently. We can make a sound case that the brotherly kiss was never intended as (and thus does not appear in Scripture as) a transcultural command. Scripture itself gives no rationale for the practice, and the concept is not communicated in the teaching (or didactic) portions of the New Testament epistles. Church history suggests that the church did not deem the practice to be applicable in all generations. But unlike the brotherly kiss, Paul goes to great lengths to establish a theological and transcultural rationale for wearing head coverings. The instruction is located in the didactic sections of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church. In addition, the Christian church has always enjoined the wearing of head coverings (at least until recently).

The brotherly kiss is a good example of how a cultural practice appears in Scripture but is *not* mandated by Scripture. The woman's head covering is a good example of how a transcultural practice appears in Scripture and *is* mandated by Scripture.