Q&A: Are Christian Women Required To Wear Head Coverings During Worship?

Ben Giselbach
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Reading Time: 7 minutes

To those unfamiliar with this topic – yes, this is a serious question. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 seems, at least at first glance, to command Christian women to cover their heads during worship.

Consider the passage in question:

2 Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. 4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, 5 but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. 6 For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. 7 For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. 9 Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10 That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; 12 for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. 13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. (1 Cor. 11:2-16, ESV).
I will not pretend that this is an easy passage to understand, nor will I deny that this passage is somewhat controversial (even within the Lord’s Body). **Yet I do believe, after careful study, that it is understandable and no longer needs to be mysterious to us.**

“Give No Offense To Jews Or To Greeks Or To The Church Of God”

The first mistake people make when studying this issue is by beginning with 1 Corinthians 11:2. To adequately understand the passage, we must know the context, which Paul begins in 10:23:

10:23 “All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. 24 Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. 25 Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. 26 For “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” 27 If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. 28 But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— 29 I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience? 30 If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? 31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32 **Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God,** 33 just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. 11:1 Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ (1 Cor. 10:23-11:1, ESV, emp. added).

Here we are introduced to an important principle. Paul begins in verse 23 by informing us that while all things have a legitimate use, they may be used illegitimately. More specifically (verse 24), even good things, if we are not careful, can be detrimental to the people around us. This principle is illustrated with the example of eating meat (verses 25-31). Under the Christian covenant, all meats are permissible to eat (cf. Mark 7:19, Acts 10:9-16; 1 Tim. 4:3), even if they have been offered as a sacrifice in a pagan temple. A sacrifice, after all,
doesn’t change the nature of meat; meat is meat. Yet, if a weaker Christian has a conscience problem with eating meat sacrificed to an idol, you should avoid consuming that meat in his presence. Why? Not because there is something wrong with the meat, but because you might hurt the conscience of the weaker brother. Doing so would be using something good in an illegitimate way (cf. verse 30).

The point is this: Christians need to be aware of how their actions could be perceived by other people. We must place a priority on protecting the name of Christ and building up His Church. (For further reading: “Is 1 Thessalonians 5:22 incorrectly translated?”)

The Principle Applied With Head Coverings

Paul further illuminates this principle for these early Corinthian Christians with the cultural practice of that day concerning women and head coverings (1 Corinthians 11:2-16).

The Corinthian Cultural Norm Of Women Wearing Veils

It was a cultural practice for women, at least in 1st century Corinth, to cover their heads. Unlike the modern ‘Christian-woman-must-cover-their-heads-with-a-small-handkerchief’ concept, these 1st century coverings probably more closely resembled the burkas (veils) worn by women in Muslim regions today.

Of significant note, Corinth boasted the temple of Aphrodite (the goddess of procreation). Evidence suggests that this temple had as many as 1,000 ‘priestesses’ (prostitutes) in its service. It also employed a large number of male ‘priests,’ some of which appealed to the homosexual variety of the populace who wished to pay homage to Aphrodite. Needless to say, Corinth was a deeply immoral city. These temple prostitutes reportedly walked around the city without their veils and often had their hair shorn. Additionally, the male prostitutes, at least some of them (mainly the passive partners), probably allowed their hair to grow out.

What was the significance of a woman’s public head covering? Roy Deaver made the following observations. It meant that:

- She was concerned about decency and wanted to be regarded as a pure woman; she did not desire to be identified with the ordinary prostitutes of Aphrodite.

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• She recognized and respected the sacred principle of a woman being in subjection to man – that this was a relationship divinely established.
• She desired to be in harmony with an inherently right, meaningful custom; she did not desire to be unnecessarily offensive to others.
• She did not want to bring reproach upon the Church of Christ.
• She did not want to be offensive to God or to His angels. [1] (Note: See 1 Peter 1:12 for a possible explanation of 1 Cor. 11:10)

**The Dilemma**

Evidently, some of these early Christian women were engaging in their religious duties and public interactions *without their veil/head-covering*. By violating this cultural norm, they were also violating the principle found in 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1. Why was this so bad?

• It sent a message that they did not recognize or respect the headship of a man.
• It sent a message that they did not respect the fact of creation – that woman was created from man.
• It sent a message that they did not care about what the angels witnessed.
• It sent a message that they did not care about society’s standards and customs.
• It sent a message that they were being rebellious to the regular practice of the churches and Paul’s instructions.[2]

**How Corinthian Christians Were To Apply The Principle Taught In 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1**

Paul told these early Christians they needed to *stop violating the cultural norms of appearance* (cf. 11:4-6, 13). Corinthian Christian women were to start covering their heads when in public. Christian men were to look like men, and Christian women were to look like women. In so doing, they would *stop hurting the image of the Church and offending the consciences of weaker Christians*.

**Why The ‘Head-Covering As A Universal Command’ Argument Is Wrong**

Several well-intentioned Christians teach that, because of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, women in 21st century America need to cover their heads when they attend church services. *This teaching is flawed for several reasons:*

Paul was not referring to the congregational worship assembly in 1

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Corinthians 11:2-16.

Isn’t it interesting that today’s ‘head covering’ proponents teach that women only need to cover their heads during worship? Yet, Paul was not specifically talking about the worship assembly. How can we know this?

1. The context of the passage (10:23-11:16) is about how Christians need to interact with society as a whole. Remember, Paul’s point is this: “Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God” (10:32). Paul is not limiting this discussion to Christian worship.

2. The ‘worship assembly’ is not specifically addressed until 11:17 (“...when you come together...”).

3. The last thing Paul could be talking about is the worship assembly. In 11:5, Paul mentions wives who are “praying or prophesying” – something which Paul explicitly forbade in the congregational worship assembly in no uncertain terms (14:33-35, cf. 1 Tim. 2:11-12).

To those who believe Paul is binding this universally on all Christian women today, I make this appeal: please be consistent. If Paul is commanding women to wear head-coverings in worship, then he is definitely commanding women to wear head-coverings whenever they are in public.

The Corinthian church was not violating a specific doctrine taught by the apostles.

If these 1st century Corinthian women were violating a command taught universally by the Holy Spirit, then Paul would not have praised these early Christians for “keeping the traditions just as [he] delivered them” (11:2). They were simply violating culture, which in turn violated the principle Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1.

The veil does not mean the same thing today as it did in 1st century Corinth.

Note some differences between 21st century American culture and 1st century Corinthian culture:

- Women ordinarily or customarily do not wear a veil.

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- Veils do not automatically declare a woman’s concern about purity and decency.
- The absence of a veil does not automatically brand a woman as a prostitute.
- Veils do not automatically indicate that the wearer recognizes and respects the principle of being in subjection to man.
- Veils do not automatically indicate that the wearer does not desire to be offensive to others.
- Veils do not indicate that the wearer does not want to bring reproach upon the Lord’s church.
- Veils do not indicate that the wearer does not want to be offensive to God or to His angels. [3]

The simple fact of the matter is this: Head coverings in 21st century America have nothing to do with the principle set forth in 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1 and therefore cannot be bound on Christians today. To teach otherwise would be to bind where God has not bound.

Conclusion

Are Christian women commanded to wear head-coverings today? A careful study of 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:16 says “no.” If it is a command, and not merely a 1st century reflection of an important principle, then Christian women must don head-coverings the moment they leave the house.

This study would not be complete without adding this point: if a woman’s conscience demands that she wear a head covering to worship, then by all means, she must wear a head-covering. A Christian must be careful not to do anything that will jeopardize her conscience (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-2). Is there anything wrong with wearing a veil? Certainly not! But is it false doctrine to bind head coverings on others? Yes.

[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.