

An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 11:12-16

There has been in some circles much discussion on the matter of head coverings for sisters, and in other places very little concern for the passage in I Corinthians 11:2-16, probably because of relegating it to culture or passing custom. Whatever our present perspective, a thorough, scholarly approach toward this issue may very well be the proper method to take in coming to some unbiased conclusions. I simply trust that this exegetical study out of the Greek text will be considered with open Bible and open heart.

I Am Yours in Him,
Christopher P. Johnson
(An elder in North Miami, Florida)

One of the initial points we need to remember about the Apostle Paul is that he was a brother who never addressed “non-issues.” He never confronted issues which were unimportant, or pertinent on a temporary basis, but he spoke and wrote to issues which were problematic in future generations of the Body of Christ. In I Corinthians 14:37-38, Paul writes concerning his instructions given throughout the entire letter, “If anyone thinks he is a prophet, or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you ARE THE LORD’S COMMANDMENTS. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.” In light of that statement, we are ushered beyond the realm of options, into the realm of coming under, not Pauline opinion, but the Lord’s commandments. It is with this perspective which we must approach not only this issue, but all issues.

I Corinthians 11:2-16- This study will be done verse by verse with the key points being highlighted from each verse.

Verse Two: Paul’s introductory statement deals with their obedience to apostolic traditions (παραδοσεις-paradoseis), which by the very meaning of the word, were “commandments and teachings to be handed down from generation to generation.” Some of the obvious apostolic traditions would be: water baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It seems interesting that before Paul gives instructions on the more accepted and practiced “tradition” of breaking bread at the Lord’s Table, he introduces the section and immediately gives instruction on the veiling of women. Possibly, he was intending that the veiling of women be considered in the same light as the Lord’s Supper, namely, as an apostolic tradition, handed down from generation to generation.

Verse Three: There are three specific introductory points Paul wants us to intuitively know (ειδεναι-eidenai): 1. Christ is the head (κεφαλη-kephala) of EVERY man (ανδρος-andros), 2. the man is the head of woman (γυναικος-gunaikos), 3. God is the head of Christ. The three terms which need defining are:

1. (κεφαλη-kephala) - HEAD – May mean:
 - A. Literal physical head, as of a skull,
 - B. Metaphorically, as Christ spoken of as Head of the church,
 - C. Figuratively, to denote superiority of rank or order of rank, (Arnt & Gingrich-Lexicon of N.T.).

2. (ανδρος-andros) MAN – May mean:
 - A. any adult male (in a general sense),
 - B. A husband (in specific sense).

3. (γυναικος-gunaiikos) – WOMAN- May mean:
 - A. Any adult female,
 - B. A wife or bride.

Therefore, the meaning in the passage, of these three words must be seen in agreement with the accepted lexicological meanings. Obviously, the three “HEADS” of verse three are not physical, but rather figurative denoting superiority or order of rank (not superiority of being or essence necessarily). The Father in rank (but not in Person) is above the Son, therefore He is the head of Christ. Christ, being the Creator of the man, is his direct head or superior. And the woman is headed up by the man because her origin or source came out of his being, while also having been created by Christ.

Verse Four: Paul introduces the term “disgraces” into the discussion, which also appears in verse five. The Greek term is “καταισχυνει-kataischunei” in both verses. It appears in what is termed the “present tense,” which indicates “action in progress or a state of persistence...” Further, the “active voice” is used, which means that the subject “the man or the woman) is “directly performing the act affirmed.” Lastly, the “indicative mood” is employed which conveys simply that the statement is a “fact of reality in the mind of the writer” (Dana & Mantey - Manual Grammar of the Greek N.T.). In short, in both verse four and five, the person, be it the man or the woman is continually, persistently, willingly, actively, or directly, performing an act of public humiliation, shame, disgrace and embarrassment to his or her head, which to Paul at least, is an indisputable fact. It is not indicating necessarily that anyone on the human level is aware of the reality of what is happening, but just that in Paul’s apostolic perspective, a public disgrace is continually occurring either by a man covering his psychological head, or a woman not covering hers.

Verse Five: Paul opens with “every woman,” which if taken in its broadest meaning must mean “every adult female,” and if seen in its strictest sense may be interpreted “every wife or married woman.” The clearest point is that Paul is concerned with the continual, persistent, public disgracing which is taking place in the assembly by sisters being uncovered or unveiled while moving in the two most important practices occurring during public worship, namely, praying to God as the mouthpiece of the Church and prophesying unto the Church as the mouthpiece of God. Therefore, whether adult males, husbands, adult females, or wives, or all

of them were at fault, Paul wants the order of God in the Church to be honored, respected, and esteemed by all parties involved during public worship. Specifically, however, he states that every woman that is unveiled or uncovered during public worship is abiding in the same state with the woman who has razored her hair or shaved it to the skin, namely, a state of public humiliation.

Verse Six: Paul uses what is termed in Greek grammar a “first class condition,” two different times in this verse when he uses the word “if.” Basically, “this condition assumes the reality of the condition being stated” (A.T. Robertson and W. Hershey Davis- A NEW SHORT GRAMMAR OF THE N.T.). In other words, assuming that a woman is moving in prayer or the gifts of the Spirit without her head being veiled, let her be sheared. If it is shameful for a woman to shear (Gk. “closely crop”) or shave her hair, and Paul is ASSUMING THAT THE REALITY OF THAT THOUGHT IS TRUE, then let her cover her head. Paul is appealing to our sense of what is proper and becoming of a sister both naturally and spiritually. And if the spiritual sense of propriety is going to be neglected, then let her also take an active part in humiliating herself naturally by shaving her head or shearing herself closely.

The expression “let her cover her head” has caused some difficulty in various places. The word is “κατακαλυπτεσθω-katakaluptestho” which in simple verb form means to “hang a veil or covering down from the head.” This term is in the “middle voice” which describes “the subject (the woman) as participating in the results of the action” (Dana & Mantey – ibid). The woman, therefore, is to voluntarily participate in the veiling by yielding herself to the action in her own best interest. This is something which she herself must do, in relationship to her own physical head, for the sake of not disgracing her figurative head, the man, and therefore showing honor to the order which God Himself has ordained.

Verse Seven: Paul here elevates man and woman to their highest state in the creatorial scheme of things. Man, on the one hand, “actually exists as the image and glory of God.” He, initially, was the pinnacle of all God’s creation. Adam was God’s physical representative of dominion over all the natural realm. The woman “actually exists as the splendor, the majesty, the brightness, and the radiant expression of all that is the man.” Male and female are not unequal in person, being, or essential makeup, but are simply distinct in what they were created to represent. Man was created to represent God’s dominion. Woman, proceeding out of man, was made to reflect all of man’s splendor and radiant qualities. Because of this divine intention in creation, the man is obligated NOT to veil or cover his head.

Verses Eight & Nine: Paul lists two reasons why the woman is the radiant expression or glory of the man, and therefore two reasons why she should veil herself. The English word “for” is better rendered “BECAUSE,” indicating validation of the previous statements. The first reason has to do with “origin of source.” The man was created “out of” the dust of the earth (Gen. 2:7). The woman originated in or derives her source (ἐκ-ek) “OUT OF” the man (Gen. 2:21-22). Creatorially at least, the woman owes her very existence to the substance of the

man's being. As Watchman Nee states, "Nothing went into the making of the woman which was not in the man."

The second reason is the purpose in God's heart in creating the woman in the first place. The man was created "for God," and the woman was created (**διά-dia**) "on account of, because of, for the sake of" the man. God made the woman to be suitable for the man, and although the man is also suitable for the woman, his original creation was not "on account of, because of, or for the sake of" the woman, but for God (Gen. 2:7-25).

In this sense, before man and woman ever fell, man was the head of the woman and Christ was the head of the man, and God the Father was the Head of Christ. The order of God prescribed by Paul has nothing to do with the fall or with man's sinful state, but with God's INITIAL, intended order of His creation. Those who say that man is the head of the woman because of the fall have not understood God's original design of reflective glory whereby the Son reflects the Father, the man reflects the Son of God, and the woman reflects all that is glorious in the man.

Verse Ten: This verse traditionally has proven very problematic to most translators and interpreters because of all its possible meanings. The opening prepositional phrase (**διά TOUTO- dia touto**) is to be translated "on account of this," "because of this," "therefore," or interpretively "for the previously stated reason." The antecedent of this phrase (which means "a preceding event, condition or cause") refers back to the two previous points on the source and purpose of woman's creation. The primary reasons for the veiling of women are in relationship to the original creation and secondarily "on account of" (**διά-dia**) the angels. That which is honored is the recognition of God's creatorial order in man and woman, which is being observed by the angelic world.

Next, we come to the phrase "the woman ought to..." The word "ought" comes from the Greek verb "ὀφείλει-opheilei" It is the same word used in I John 3:16 ("We ought to lay down our lives") and Romans 13:8 ("Owe no one anything"). Some people have viewed this term, because of the English translation "ought," to carry with it the idea of option or choice. However, the lexicons translate "ὀφείλω" to mean, "to owe, to be indebted, to be bound by debt, to be obligated, to be MORALLY OBLIGATED," (Arndt & Gingrich and Thayers Gk. Lexicon). To take these meanings and apply them to the text would read, "on account of the previously stated reasons (of source and purpose of woman's creation) the woman therefore is indebted, bound by a sense of debt, and morally obligated "to have authority upon the head..." Choice is not in view. The fall is not in view. Custom is not in view. But moral obligation to the created order of God is in view.

The KJV continues with "the woman ought to have POWER on the head..." while the NASV reads, "ought to have a symbol of AUTHORITY on her head..." The Greek text states "...the woman is morally obligated to have AUTHORITY upon the head on account of the angels." The term "authority" is "ἐξουσία-exousia" and means "authority, right, liberty, ability or capability." The text says nothing about "a symbol or a sign," which Paul very simply could

have stated by using the word “*sêmeion*” which means a “sign or symbol of something.” The veil or covering on a woman’s head has been seen by many to be “a sign of her subjection to man or her husband.” If we take Paul literally here, without adding to the text, or becoming guilty of eisegesis, reading into the text, then he is stating something quite different here. He says, “the woman is to have (possess) AUTHORITY upon her head.” The head covering, then, is not a sign of subjection to man, as much as it is the possession of her authority, right and liberty to speak in the public gatherings. The veil secures for the woman the right and authority to speak, to pray, to prophesy, to act as the very mouthpiece of the church, or even of God, and all this in the presence of the holy angels, because she is honoring and publically manifesting respect for the order of God. If the veil is any sign, it is a sign of a woman’s right to publically contribute in a corporate gathering. One writer (Ramsay) states, “With the veil the woman is supreme in the crowd...But without the veil the woman is a thing of nought, whom anyone might insult...A woman’s authority and dignity vanish along with the all-covering veil which she discards.” Leon Morris comments, “Paul’s meaning then, is that by covering her head the woman SECURES her own place of dignity and authority. At the same time she recognizes her subordination.”

The watchful presence of the angelic world is far from a reality to most twentieth-century believers. Their peering into, inquiring into our lives both individually and corporately, however, was a definite reality in the minds of both Old Testament and New Testament writers. Daniel and John stand as primary examples of angelic involvement in the personal lives of the saints. Angels are mentioned as:

1. Messengers of God’s revelation (Dan. 8-10).
2. Continually worshipping God (Isa. 6, Luke 1).
3. Ministers to the heirs of salvation (Heb. 1).
4. Being learners through the Church of the grace and wisdom of God (Eph. 3).
5. Exceeding man in strength, power and rank (Heb. 2).
6. Occasionally being recipients of our hospitality (Heb. 13).
7. Inquiring into our salvation (I Peter 1).
8. Warring on our behalf (Dan. 8-10, Rev. 12).
9. Executors of God’s judgment (Rev.).
10. Fellow-servants of ours (Rev. 19), and much more.

Because of their INTIMATE INVOLVEMENT with the Church and the purposes of God, their presence is to be honored and even acknowledged in part by the veiling of the women. By this, the sisters actually make a statement of respect to the unseen but present angelic army of God which serves us.

The angels are also mentioned because of their creatorial relationship to humanity. They are “above man” in rank, strength and power (Heb. 2). However, some of them also broke from the created order of God as did mankind. In God’s redemptive plan, He intends to “head up again all beings in Christ (Eph. 1:10).” God wants to restore the original order of things and

we can play an active role by giving honor to the angelic host of God by honoring that ordained order. Therefore, on account of their intimate involvement with us and their creatorial place, the veiling of the women is a means of stating to them that we as the earthly parts of His restored Kingdom are seeking to honor as they are, God's created order and scheme of things. Kenneth Wuest states, "...angels present in worship would be shocked at the conduct of the (unveiled) women since the angels themselves veil their faces before Jehovah (Isa. 6:2)."

In the Lord, male and female are interdependent upon one another even as in the natural realm for being fruitful and multiplying. Paul states, "And everything is out of God" or "originated in God." The point very simply is that Paul was not chauvinistically laying down this instruction on the veiling of women, but that God Himself was the Originator, the Source of the entire arrangement between man and woman, and therefore if anyone has difficulty with this arrangement, his problem is with God and His design.

Verse 13: The summation begins with what actually is a rhetorical question, which has an answer which Paul assumes, based on all the preceding evidence, is obvious. Paul is saying, "Based on all the evidence thus far, is it BECOMING and PROPER for a woman to pray to the God Who originated this entire arrangement, with her head uncovered?" The obvious, anticipated, based-on-the-evidence answer is, "No, Paul, it is not becoming." It is unbecoming of a Christian woman because of:

1. God's created order of Headship (v.3).
2. The public humiliation of man in the presence of angels (v.5).
3. The fact that an uncovered woman is viewed as being the same as a shaved woman, a shameful person (v. 6).
4. The fact that the unveiled woman is commanded to shave her head if she chooses to be unveiled (v. 6).
5. The fact that woman originated in the man (v. 8).
6. The fact that the woman was created for the man (v. 9).
7. The offense given to the angels by uncovered women (v. 10).
8. The fact that woman derives her right to act as a mouthpiece for God and Church by veiling her head (v. 10).
9. The fact that God is the Originator of the order (v. 12).

Verses 14 & 15: The natural sense of what is appropriate teaches us that men and women are to be distinguished by hair length. Paul does not define for us how long is "long hair." But the point can easily be seen that the man's hair is not to be long enough for him to be undistinguishable from the woman. The woman on the other hand, has been ornamented with hair to be her glory (Luke 7) after she poured herself out on Him. Peter mentions the outward beauty of women and refers to "braided hair." Hair which can be braided or hair which can be used as a towel is long hair and is to be considered as a woman's chief physical beauty...her glory. (Personally speaking, I feel it is a shame that our 20th century, liberated

mentality has succeeded in robbing women of their God-given beauty by the hair styles of American women so closely resembling those of men).

Probably the most controversial statement of the passage is: “For her hair is given to her for a cover.” A very careful look at the text will help us tremendously here. First of all, Paul is validating the fact that a woman’s hair is her chief natural beauty, her most outstanding, noticeable outward ornament. Paul employs the Greek word “hoti,” which should be translated “BECAUSE.” In other words long hair is the glory of a woman BECAUSE of its purpose in God’s creating it as a covering for her. This simple conjunction or connective particle may not seem important but if it is not understood, we will miss the very point Paul is trying to make, namely, of validating why a woman’s hair is her glory. Greek grammarians state, “A correct understanding of the uses and meaning of Greek conjunctions is of fundamental importance for N.T. interpretation. The turning point or direction of a thought is usually indicated by a conjunction. The meaning of sentence following a conjunction, and oftentimes of a whole paragraph, is suggested or colored by the connective.” Such is the case here.

The verb “is given” is in the Greek “δέδοται-dedotai,” and is what is called a “perfect passive indicative.” The “indicative mood” as covered in verses four and five is the mood which asserts a state of reality in the writer’s mind. The “passive voice” is extremely important here because it indicates “the subject as receiving the action.” The subject has nothing to do with the action because it is being acted upon by an outside agent. In this case God is the One Who gave the woman her hair. The woman had nothing to do with it. She passively received the action of God covering her with a mantle of hair. Furthermore, the verb tense is “perfect” which conveys “the idea of COMPLETED ACTION WITH ABIDING RESULTS” (Light from the Greek New Testament by Blackwelder). Dana and Mantey state, “The perfect is the tense of complete action. Its basal significance is the progress of an act or state to a point of culmination and the existence of its finished results.” All of this means that God permanently has given to the woman her hair, and she (the woman) passively received that gift from God, to be for her a covering. This verb is important when compared with the verb in verse six, which says, “Let her cover FOR HERSELF her head.” The “middle voice” indicates that this covering of verse six is something which the woman must voluntarily, actively do for herself, in relationship to her own physical head. The woman has passively received her hair as a covering but she must actively participate in veiling herself.

The word for “covering” in verse fifteen is “περιβολαίου-peribolaiou.” It comes from two words, “perf” meaning “around” and “ballo” meaning “to throw or cast.” The word literally means “to throw around” like a mantle or a cloak. Therefore, the woman’s hair is her “throw around” her “mantle,” her “cloak” her natural covering. On the other hand, the term used for “covering or veiling” in the other verses is “κατακαλύπτω-katakalypto” which means to hang a veil “down” from the head. The hair permanently “thrown around” the woman by God Himself as a mantle or covering of glory, whereas the veil is “hung down” from the head by the woman herself.

The final difficulty is with the preposition “ἀντί-anti” which the NIV translates “...as” a covering. The NASV translates “...for” a covering. KJV says “...for” a covering also. Some translators have translated it to mean “instead of” or “in the place of” a covering. Grammatically, any of these is impossible. But in keeping with the spirit of the passage, we must dig a little deeper to find the original intent of the preposition. Every preposition has a root or basal meaning which captures the most simple understanding of the term. A. T. Robertson wrote that “ἀντί” means “at the end or facing one from one end of an imaginary line. Two men face each other when each is at one end of a log. Every usage must be explained from the etymological idea of FACING.” Bruce Metzger, one of the leading Greek scholars in the world writes that the “root meaning is that of being OPPOSITE, AGAINST, or OVER AGAINST.” Dana & Mantey place the root meaning as being “face to face with something.”

It is true that the most common meaning in its 22 appearances in the New Testament is “instead of” or “in exchange for.” However, the basal root meaning is that of something which is “answering to” something else, something which is “opposite” or “over against” something else. The term must be considered in light of the entire passage and its context and not taken isolatedly on its own. It would make no sense at all for Paul to have made all those points as to why a woman should veil her head only to negate them by saying, “But don’t worry about it sisters, instead of wearing a veil, in exchange for, as a substitute for a veil, just wear your hair.” If a woman’s natural mantle, her hair, could accomplish what Paul was saying, and all women wear hair, why would he even bother dedicating fifteen verses of inspired text to the subject of covering. It doesn’t even make good logical sense to translate this preposition by its usual meaning.

Therefore, the hair naturally answers to or is opposite of the veil. The head covering, the veil answers spiritually to, is opposite the hair. They are face to face with one another. They are not one and the same, they are opposite or facing one another. The one is “thrown around” the woman as a mantle, the other is “hung down” from the head by the woman herself. In this light the continuity of Paul’s argument is maintained. Her hair is permanently given to her by God for a mantle of covering to answer to and be facing her veil or covering.

Verse Sixteen: In closing, Paul says, “If anyone is a lover of strife, we have no such custom nor have the churches of God.” The literal Greek reads, “If anyone seems to be fond of strife, we ourselves are not having a habit of manner (a custom) such as this, neither are the churches of God.” Some have taken this to mean, “If anyone has a problem with this teaching we don’t practice the custom of head covering anyway, so just forget about it.” Actually the “custom” or “habit of manner” which Paul is talking about, is that of being habitually contentious as seen in the noun “Φιλόνεικος-philoneikos”. A “philoneikos” is someone who has strong affectionate ties to strife. If anyone wants to contend with us on this matter, Paul says, we ourselves and the churches have no habit or custom of striving concerning this matter. Therefore, he was also saying, “We have no other custom in all the churches than this

tradition which I have elucidated on here.” To Paul, it was not a point of contention. To Paul, it was not limited to Corinth. To Paul, it was not cultural. The order of God stood in his day as it does in ours. The same angels who worshipped with and ministered to the Church in Paul’s day worship with us and serve us as well today.

CONCLUSIONS, OBSERVATIONS & PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS: In having spent many hour both studying this issue and writing this treatise I have personally become convinced of several conclusions. First of all, the Apostle Paul and his apostolic company along with the other churches of God practiced as a tradition the veiling of Christian women. In light of the context being that of upholding apostolic tradition, I feel Paul’s intention was that we consider the veiling of women in the same light as other apostolic traditions which are being practiced today.

Secondly, although culture was certainly involved in Paul’s thinking, let us be aware that the culture of the Kingdom of God is not American culture nor really Middle East culture. The Kingdom of God which includes the church of our Lord, has culture all its own. Therefore, let us be committed to the culture of the Kingdom which spans the generations and is to touch us today in the midst of a lawless, perverted and undisciplined society.

Thirdly, in light of the many-faceted involvement of the angels with the church, we must be aware though not completely understanding, the angels are literally in our midst both personally and corporately. Paul’s references to the angelic host, though not easily understood, was not something that was cultural, neither to Corinth nor the churches of his day. But instead, the very angels who peered into and participated in first century church life are present with us today. And for whatever reasons Paul mentions them, those same reasons are valid for us today.

Fourthly, in light of the ten reasons listed under verse thirteen and the seriousness of those reasons, let us not be guilty of ignorantly winking at this passage any further but let us with humility of mind, without mandating law, instruct the church of God.

Finally, I encourage you to uphold the beauty of the principles Paul is laying out here. For example, the principle of God’s original created order, which does not demean our beloved sisters. For if the order which God originated is looked upon as demeaning, then God is guilty more than Paul. Let us also cherish the principle of reflecting the glory of God and the glory of man without despising it or relegating it to something which came into existence because of the fall. Let us also teach our sisters and our wives about how beautiful a natural covering their hair really is. Again, without condemning, let us encourage the women to wear their natural mantle of hair in a way that it becomes their most striking physical beauty, which God intended it to be.

Whether Paul intended for every adult woman to veil herself or every married woman to cover herself, I am not sure. But I am certain that at least every married woman who wants to

honor her husband, the angels, and mostly God Himself, should cover her head with a veil or a shawl or a scarf, etc. In the broadest sense, however, Paul intends for every believing adult woman to have her head covered in the public gatherings.

This study I submit to my brothers and sisters in the Lord's Body for careful study on your part. I also welcome critiques and responses. I trust that as we endeavor to guard the unity of the Spirit in the fetters of peace, that He will lead us point by point into the unity of the faith and on to the unity of the full and accurate knowledge of the Son of God...unto a mature man, even Christ.

I Am Yours In Him,
Brother Christopher
CPJ/bm