

Let me begin by explaining my purpose in writing this booklet on the woman's head covering, which is also referred to as "the veiling" by some. My purpose is to show that there is more than one way to faithfully interpret the scripture passage of the veiling as found in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16.

I write primarily to those who have come out of a church where they were required to wear the veiling and are now reconsidering their position on this teaching. I encourage you to take a fresh look at the scriptures and decide for yourself what God is asking of you. For those in a church where this is required for membership, I encourage you to respect the position of the church as long as you are a member of that group. There are some church groups that encourage women to wear it but make it a matter of personal conviction, because they understand there is more than one way to understand this scriptural teaching.

I carry a deep respect for those who choose to wear a veiling because of their understanding of scripture. My mother has worn a veiling all her life, and I have relatives who wear the head covering.

I grew up in a conservative Mennonite church where the wearing of the veiling was strongly taught. When a young girl or woman was baptized and joined the church, she was required to begin wearing the veiling. I remember when the controversy about the veiling was not whether it *should* be worn but what size and style should it be to be a proper head covering. This was usually decided by the bishop.

Today, in the religious community of Lancaster County, PA, you can tell which church group a woman belongs to by the size and style of her covering. Some even wear covering strings which once served a practical purpose but have now become a sign of conservatism and church-group identity.

I have known some women who feel so strongly, and are sometimes fearful, about not wearing the covering that they wear it to bed when they sleep. They don't want to be uncovered if Jesus were to come back during the night, or they may feel they need it for angelic protection. I have found for some it has become religious bondage. Others wear it joyfully, and it has special meaning for them. For some it is simply the tradition of their church, and that is the primary reason they wear it. For others it is a personal conviction.

One thing I want to state clearly before going any further is that salvation is based on faith alone and not our works. The veiling is not a matter of salvation. If it were, then our religion would be based on works, which is contrary to the teaching of scripture. If you choose to not wear a head covering, it does not affect your salvation or your standing with God.

Before we look at the passage of scripture where this teaching and practice are drawn from, let me first clarify a few things. I approach all scripture with full conviction of its inspiration and authority in our lives.

*2Ti 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,*

I also understand the importance of following proper principles of interpretation to arrive at an accurate understanding of scripture and its application to my life today. Failing to understand and follow these principles can lead to faulty interpretation and erroneous teaching. Without clear principles of interpretation, our own biases, cultural lenses, traditions, and experiences can cause us to misinterpret what God intended when the scriptures were received by the people in that culture and time.

But I should also say that following these principles can still lead people to differing convictions about certain passages. Paul recognizes this in Romans 14 when he appeals to us to respect each other's personal convictions without judging each other.

Let's make sure we are using sound principles of interpretation which help us distinguish between tradition and the requirements of scripture. Tradition is not necessarily a bad thing, but it should not be on par with scripture.

Biblical interpretation has to do not only with understanding and developing the skills of Biblical interpretation but also the heart posture of the interpreter. There needs to be humility and an openness to the Holy Spirit, who is the master interpreter helping us to understand the Word and the Spirit of the Word.

As the Scriptures say, we are to handle the Word of Truth with care and reverence.

*2Ti 2:15 **Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.***

There are many things I could say about good, sound biblical interpretation, but for the matter at hand, I will just mention the importance of **culture, context, and original language** in properly understanding Paul's writing on the veiling.

## **CULTURE**

One needs to understand the difference between a basic biblical principle and the cultural applications to that principle. For instance, teaching our children about God is a biblical principle. However, Sunday School is a cultural application of that principle. Sunday School began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, Sunday School has become a tradition and an accepted way of teaching our children about God; Sunday school is a cultural adaptation of the principle. We could do away with Sunday School and come up with some other ways of teaching our children and still be faithful to the principle. We also see various cultural expressions of other principles, such as modesty and worship. The application and expressions vary in different parts of the world based on culture.

Principles don't change but applications do with culture and time. The veiling is an application of a principle that we will explore further.

So we need to understand who Paul was writing to and what their culture was like in order to

understand his teaching on the veiling.

## **CONTEXT**

Discovering the original intent of the Scripture as the original hearers would have heard it in their context is important to properly interpret the text of scripture. Why did the writer write this? What was happening? What was his concern? What was the issue that Paul was addressing? What parts are for all times and what parts are culturally specific? One cannot properly interpret this text without understanding the context and culture.

## **ORIGINAL LANGUAGE**

Paul's letter to the Corinthian church was written in the Greek language. So understanding the Greek words Paul used helps us to understand what he was trying to say.

When you combine culture, context, and the meaning of the text in its original language, you are in a much better position to interpret the text for today.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT**

Corinth was a cosmopolitan, wealthy city. It had at least 26 temples and shrines to the gods and was known for its sensuality. It was a Gentile city, and the church there was made up of mostly recently-converted Gentiles from this pagan city.

Corinth was full of prostitutes. The temple of Aphrodite alone is thought to have had over a thousand of them. They were dedicated to the goddess of sensuality. They advertised themselves by walking around with uncovered shorn or shaved heads.

It was the custom of respectable women in Corinth to cover their heads in public and to wear their hair long.

From Paul's instructions, it seems like the Christian women of that day were enjoying their new freedom in Christ and were discarding their veils in public, which in that culture was considered a disgrace.

Because of this cultural issue, Paul is appealing to the women to keep wearing the veil out of respect to their husbands. The husband was dishonored if his wife was seen as permissive.

From the culture and context of this passage it seems as if Paul is saying that if in your culture it is considered a disgrace for a woman to be unveiled or to shave her head, then you are to wear a veiling.

Paul is also dealing with another cultural issue, and that is the lack of freedom for women to minister alongside men. The Corinthian men were not releasing the women to serve alongside them. He is appealing for the men to recognize the calling and authority that rests on women as well as men. He is also instructing the women to use their gifts in the church in a way that is honoring to their husbands.

Now, using the interpretation principles of culture, context, and original language let's interpret I Corinthians 11:1-16.

<sup>1Co 11:1</sup> **Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.**

<sup>1Co 11:2</sup> **I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you.**

<sup>1Co 11:3</sup> **Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.**

There are two valid ways to interpret these verses. One is that Paul is attempting to help us see the interconnectedness of man, woman, Christ, and God so that we would all work together in an honoring way.

The Greek word translated *“head of”* can also mean *“origin”* or *“source of.”* The origin of Christ through the incarnation was God, the origin of man is Christ, and the origin of woman is man. We are all interconnected, and this is the way it should be in how we treat each other and serve in the church. Paul comes back to this thought in verses 11 and 12, when he says we are not independent of each other.

The other view is that Paul is referring to a principle of headship as seen in the Trinity with God and man and men and women. Not in an authoritarian way, because that is not how the Trinity relates to each other, but in an interconnected way that honors roles of leadership.

In many cultures headship is often used in a controlling way, and this was the case in Corinth in regard to the treatment of women.

Paul is calling us to practice the principle of headship the way the Trinity does. God the Father is the head of Christ. He freely releases Jesus to function fully in his gifting and calling. He exalts him above all others. They serve as a united team. That's what the relationship between men and women is to look like in the church.

Headship is serving. It is calling the other up to their full potential. Headship shares the decision making responsibility and, when needed, has the responsibility to make a final decision dependant on the best interest of those being served.

Headship is honoring. In the divine order there is an honoring of roles. Jesus shows honor to God as his father. Men show honor to Jesus and women show honor to men and in return receive honor. In this circle of mutual honor we advance God's kingdom together with our gifts, abilities, and callings.

<sup>1Co 11:4</sup> **Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head.**

The Greek word for *“man”* here is the word *“aner”* which is the word for husband, not men in general. So Paul is dealing with husband and wife relationships specifically in this passage.

It was the custom of some men to cover their heads when they came to pray. Jews still do this.

Paul is discouraging this practice because in Jewish custom it was a sign of guilt and condemnation. Christ has removed that from us so we should not cover ourselves. To do so dishonors our head (Jesus) because it does not acknowledge his atoning grace.

**1Co 11:5 And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved.**

**1Co 11:6 If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head.**

Paul first affirms the role of women ministering in the church through prayer and the prophetic. The prophetic was considered a role of teaching, admonishing, and speaking the counsel of God to the congregation. The religious culture of Corinth did not permit women to do this. But in Christ they received the same salvation, empowerment, and gifting as men to minister in the church. Paul affirmed this but wanted it done in a respectful way.

*Gal 3:27-28 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

*Ac 2:16-18 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.”*

It seems that Paul was addressing an issue of women being out of order in church with their new-found freedom in Christ. He was asking them to show deference to the men by wearing the veiling, which in that culture was a fitting display of respect. At the same time he was asking the men to release women to minister in the church.

Paul may have only been referring to the use of the veiling when women would pray or prophesy in public, they would not need to wear a veiling all the time. *“Every woman who prays or prophesies.”* He seems to use the veiling as a sign that women have authority to speak.

In that culture it was honoring to their husbands for women to cover their heads in public. To be uncovered in that culture was in bad taste since the temple prostitutes would advertise themselves by going unveiled and walk around with shorn or shaved heads. In that culture, to be unveiled was the same as having the shorn look of a prostitute. To honor their husbands they were to remain veiled. Even though they had the freedom in Christ not to wear a veil, it was honoring to their husbands to do so. Paul is saying that for the sake of propriety in their culture, it was good to wear the veiling.

**1Co 11:7 A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.**

**1Co 11:8 For man did not come from woman, but woman from man;**

**1Co 11:9 neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.**

Paul is not suggesting that the woman is not made in the image and glory of God because

Genesis is very clear they were both created in God's likeness and image. Not only is a woman the glory of God but she also is the glory of man. She was created for man to serve alongside him. Paul is saying women are the glorious peers alongside men and should be treated with honor, respect, and great value.

There is a divine order of headship that we can see in creation, but God called men and women to rule together side by side. (Genesis 1:27-28)

*Ge 1:27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

*Ge 1:28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."*

Paul is dealing with both a cultural issue of the veiling and also a universal principle that women have been given authority by God alongside man. The veiling is the application of this principle.

Paul is dealing with a bias against women in the church and he is using the veiling not to make women subservient but to release women to serve alongside men. By wearing the veil in that culture, women could minister alongside men in the church. The veiling made it culturally acceptable.

**1Co 11:10 For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.**

No one knows for sure what Paul meant when he referred to the angels. He may have been referring back to chapter 6:3 when he says we will judge angels. He may have been saying that since you are going to judge angels someday you can surely begin using your God-given authority to serve alongside men now.

In Hebrews 1:4 Paul says angels are ministering spirits sent to serve us. Maybe he was referring to this and encouraging women to get involved in leading and serving since the angels had been assigned to help them just as they had to men.

Even the angels recognize the authority given to women in the New Covenant, so the veiling signifies this authority alongside men in that cultural setting.

There is no indication from this passage that a veiling provides special angelic protection for women, as some have taught.

An understanding of how this verse was originally written in the Greek is helpful here. In verse 10, "**sign of**" is not in the Greek text and "**on**" is better translated "**over**." So this verse should read. . . the woman ought to have authority over her head. The phrase "**authority over**" – is "**exousia epi**" in the Greek. The word means authority possessed by someone, the right to act, authority, freedom, and decision-making ability.

Paul is saying a woman ought to have "authority over" her own head -- the authority and

freedom to make decisions and to serve alongside the man. Paul is saying that in that culture women should wear the veiling for the reasons already mentioned. At the same time, he gave a new understanding of the veiling so that women could enjoy their freedom in Christ.

The veiling is not a sign or symbol of being under authority but of having authority. Paul was not limiting women but was actually promoting them to rule and reign with men as God had originally designed them to function. Paul is using the local practice of women wearing the veiling to say it represents God-given authority for women to function in the church.

In some cultures and religions around the world, such as Islam, women still wear the veil but in a completely opposite spirit of Paul's teachings. It is used to keep women subservient and under the control of men. That is not biblical.

**1Co 11:11 In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.**

**1Co 11:12 For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.**

In case anyone misunderstood what Paul was trying to say about headship and the creation order, he makes it clear here. In creation we have interdependent origins. The bottom line is that everything comes from God. God is equally the source of man and woman.

We are to serve together and honor each other. That is the principle – the veiling was the application in that culture to help them understand that a woman has God-given authority resting on her head just as a man does.

He reminds them that all God-given rights and authority need to function in cooperation with each other, not in independence. Paul was writing in the context of public worship. Men were not to exclude women in the function of the worship service. Ministry was to be shared.

If churches are going to require women to wear a veiling, then to be biblical they need to release women to serve equally alongside men in leadership roles.

**1Co 11:13 Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?**

In the Greek this verse is not presented as a question but as a statement. Paul is saying, if it is considered a shame in your culture for a woman to pray without her head covered, then let her be covered.

Paul, being aware that the practice of wearing a veiling varied with the various people groups he ministered to, asks us to make our own judgment for each situation we are in. If in your context and culture it is deemed improper for a woman to pray with her head uncovered, then respect that culture and wear a veiling. In our broader North American culture it is not deemed improper, so that requirement would not apply here.

**1Co 11:14 Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him,**

Nature does not teach that long hair is a disgrace. Some cultures do, but not nature. Nature enables men to grow long hair and in some cultures it is normal and seen as masculine. It seems as if he was referring to a cultural understanding of what was natural. In Corinth long hair on men was looked down on just as short hair on women was looked down on.

**1Co 11:15 but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.**

In that culture long hair on women was considered feminine and her glory.

In the Greek the phrase “**Her hair is given to her ‘as a’ covering**” can be read “**Her hair is given to her ‘instead of’ a covering**”.

Paul seems to indicate here that a women’s hair is her glory and covering. She really does not need anything else. Before God she is already covered. A veiling is only necessary if the bias of a culture requires it so as not to offend.

**1Co 11:16 If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.**

Paul most likely is not referring to the veiling with this statement but to the larger context of his letter, which speaks to men and women working and serving together in the kingdom. He is defining the rights of women that the Corinthian culture was denying. He is speaking to contentious men who were suppressing the gifts and callings of women. He is saying the principle of men and women serving together in the church is the practice he is teaching in all the churches.

Another interpretation some give to this verse is that Paul is saying we have no such universal custom or practice of requiring women to wear a veiling though we may have to make allowances for it out of regard for the welfare of women in some situations.

So Paul is saying he permits the veiling but does not universally require it.

Paul’s encouragement to women to use their gifts in the church is helpful in understanding what he was trying say in a later passage where he says he forbids women to speak in the church. (*1Ti 2:12*) This passage is often misunderstood to limit women in ministry.

Again Culture, Context, and Original Text are important in interpreting this passage. He already has said women can publically pray and prophesy in the church. Paul was dealing with a local issue between husbands and wives who were out of order in their relationship. He was saying that until the wives learn to respect their husbands at home, they should not be speaking in the church. That is still good advice today.

## **IN SUMMARY**

One author summarizes the passage this way: “Paul says to respect the culture but that in reality God has given women their hair as a covering and they really do not need another covering. He allows us to judge for ourselves if this is a cultural issue or not. If it is, and it will bring disgrace to husbands, then wear it. If that is not the prevailing view of the culture, a woman's hair is a sufficient covering and glory that can be revealed. In our North American culture an unveiled woman is not viewed as a prostitute nor disrespectful of her husband.

God has already covered his daughters. They don't have to live in shame. They don't need a covering or prayer shawl to enter his presence, and neither do men.”