



## Does 1 Corinthians 11 Require Women To Wear “Head Coverings”

### Description



Because the issue of whether 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

requires “head coverings” is such a contentious issue in the church, we’ll look at it in **great** detail in this article.

Six pieces of context are required to fully understand this passage. The Bible wasn’t written **to** modern audiences, though it was written **for** us (*as well as the original readers in the first century*). If we miss that, we often miss the intent of difficult passages.

**We need to understand the context before we can understand the content.**

Therefore, this article won’t be in the “proper order”, starting with the first verse and going through to the end. That’s because there’s a lot of context on different parts of the passage that must come together to make the whole thing make sense.

**We’ll look at the context first, and then go through the passage in an orderly fashion afterwards.**

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is a masterpiece of Biblical literature, and we’ll hopefully see just how brilliant it is by the end. ?

### Context First

As we saw in [our article about the book of Revelation](#), proper context is crucial to understanding a passage. There are several elements of context we must look at before we can fully understand this passage. We'll look at each in turn, and they are:

1. Chiastic literary structure
2. The Greek word "kata" (kata)
3. Greek words translated as "covering"
4. The Greek word "anti" (anti), translated as "for"
5. Isle of Lesbos cultural & historical context
6. Words added by translators for 'clarity'

We'll look at each in turn.

## Chiastic Literary Structure

A "chiasm" is a form of literary structure which was extremely popular in Biblical times but is virtually unknown nowadays. In a chiasm, the first point is related to the last point, the second point is related to the second-to-last-point, the third point is related to the third-to-last-point, etc. In a chiasm, the focal point is the center or apex of the chiasm.

I know, it sounds complicated, here's a super short example to make things clear.

### Matthew 23:12

- whoever [exalts](#) himself
  - will be [humbled](#); and
  - whoever [humbles](#) himself
- will be [exalted](#).

Notice the up > down structure, where the focus is on the center. In this case, being humble. Now, we'll look at a slightly longer chiasm.

### Amos 5:5

- [But do not resort to Bethel](#)
  - [And do not come to Gilgal,](#)
    - [Nor cross over to Beersheba;](#)
  - [For Gilgal will certainly go into captivity](#)
- [And Bethel will come to trouble.](#)

Notice the: up > up > center > down > down, symmetrical structure of the verse. The first and last both mention Bethel, the second and second-to-last both mention Gilgal. The center-point is about not

crossing over into Beersheba, and this is the focal point and most important part of the verse because it's the center of the chiasm.

### Now we'll look at a multi-verse chiasm in Psalms.

I've taken Psalm 1 and divided it up as a chiasm to make the structure clear. I've also added some words **(in bold, underlined parenthesis)** to make the parallelism clearer, **color-coded the different levels**, and also **bold and underlined** some words to make it even more clear.

Notice the structure:

### Psalm 1 – Chiastic Structure

- **1** How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
  - Nor stand in the path with sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
    - **2** But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.
    - **3** He (the righteous) will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
      - Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.
      - **4** The wicked are not so, But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.
  - **5** Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners (sit) in the assembly of the righteous.
- **6** For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the wicked will perish.

Here's a super-quick breakdown of the chiastic structure:

- The first and last verse in **blue** center on the idea of how we walk, especially righteously. (*not walking "in the counsel of the wicked" but walking in "the way of the righteous"*)
- The second and second-to-last verses in **purple** focus on not standing or sitting with sinners
- The **green** parts have a contrast, showing what the righteous and the wicked are like
- The **red** center point is the focus of the psalm, showing how the righteous will prosper

Notice how chiasm is used for both parallel ideas (*blue and purple*) and also to contrast ideas (*green*). This creates parallelism which helps with focus. Notice the **red** center point – which is the apex and most important part – is about how the righteous won't wither and will prosper.

**Perhaps most importantly, the mirroring in a chiasm can be used to help understand difficult passages.**

**This is because the linked units (*color-coded above*) are related to each other, and thus can be used to help understand each other if one part is unclear.**

There are chiasms all over the Bible. Many of the psalms are chiastic, many Bible passages are too, and even whole books are set up as a chiasm.

## Why do we care about Chiasms?

We care because 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is a chiasm. It has that same symmetrical “rise and fall” structure where the center is the apex and focal point. Lower down, we’ll look at it with the same indenting and color-coding as our examples up above to make it clear.

However, we’re not ready to look at it yet.

There’s a lot more context needed before we can make sense of it. For now, we’ll move on to the next bit of context needed to understand this passage.

## The Greek word “????” (*kata*)

We’ll look at verse 4 first.

### 1 Corinthians 11 (*NASB*)

4. Every man who has **something on** his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.

The words highlighted in red are how the NASB and many other translations translate the Greek word “????” (*kata*) here. It’s an extremely flexible word with a broader range of meanings than almost every other Greek word. However, the primary sense is “down from”, which you can see in the lexicon quote below.

**2596** *katá* (a preposition, governing two grammatical cases) – properly, “**down from, i.e. from a higher to a lower plane**, with special reference to the terminus (end-point)” (J. Thayer).

And from Thayer’s Greek lexicon:

1. properly,

**a. down from, down:** ????? ??? ????????, Matthew 8:32; Mark 5:13; Luke 8:33; ??????? ????? ??? ??????? (so that it flowed down from his head (cf. Winer’s Grammar, 381 (357) note); but it is more correct here to omit ??? with L T Tr WH; see ???????), Mark 14:3; hence ????? ??????? (a veil hanging down from his entry) ???, **1 Corinthians 11:4** (A. V. having his head covered) cf. ????????? (or rather ??????? (which see), but see ???, I. 1 b.).

Notice, the lexicon specifically mentions 1 Cor 11:4 as a place where “down from” is the right understanding.

Now, the translated “something on” in the NASB is a rather loose translation. Not a *bad* one per se, but very loose, probably because of the difficulty of translating this passage. Like we saw, it literally means “down from”. Here’s the same verse in another translation that’s a little bit more literal/accurate. Please note: this translation *italicizes* words that were added by translators for clarity.

### 1 Corinthians 11 ([BOS Bible](#))

4. Every man who is praying or prophesying while having *something hanging* down from his head dishonors his head.

Here’s the footnote for that verse:

“*hanging* down from” is the Greek word “????” (kata), often translated “on” here. It primarily means “down” or “down from”, but it has many uses and one of the largest semantic ranges of any Greek word. Here it’s used in the sense of “*hanging* down from”, of which **there are two main interpretations. (1) Paul is referring to head coverings. In Rabbinic custom, men wore a prayer shawl called a “Tallit”, which they would drape over their heads while they prayed** out of reverence for God, to indicate they weren’t worthy to look on His face. **This shawl would thus “hang down” from their heads. (2) The second view says Paul is referring to hair which is long enough to “hang down”. This makes much more sense contextually because verses 2-16 have a chiasmic structure, and verse 4’s counterpart in verse 14 is clearly referencing long hair on men.**

This is our first clue about the verse. Notice that it’s possible – even likely given the chiasmic structure – that Paul wasn’t talking about wearing a hat or veil in this verse. Notice too that the footnote correctly points out that the chiasmic pair of verse 4 is verse 14. So we’ll look at verse 14

### 1 Corinthians 11 (NASB)

14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has **long hair**, it is a dishonor to him,

Remember how we said that a chiasm can be used to lend clarity by looking at the counterpart of the unclear verse? This is a great example. It doesn’t mean “absolutely for sure” that verse 4 is talking about hair that’s long enough to “hang down” from the head. However, it does give a strong indication that Paul was talking about long hair. It’s not perfectly certain, but it’s a strong indication.

### The Greek word for “covering” in verse 15

It’s a truism that something is always lost in translation. This isn’t always the fault of the translators though, and is often simply because languages are different. Very rarely will a word in one language have a perfect counterpart in another (*it happens, but not usually*). Such is the case with this next verse we will look at.

## 1 Corinthians 11

15 but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her long hair is given to her for a **covering**.

The word in **red** is the Greek word “????????????” ([peribolaion](#)). It means:

**Definition:** that which is thrown around, a covering

**Usage:** a wrapper, mantle, veil, cloak, covering.

Peribolaion (“*covering*” in verse 15) is the noun form of the Greek word “????????????” ([periballó](#)), which is a verb that means to “clothe yourself” (*or myself, himself, themselves, etc.*).

**This is important!**

**In verse 15, Paul wasn’t talking about any just kind of covering; he was specifically talking about a cloth/fabric covering.**

However, different words are everywhere else in this passage.

### “Covering” elsewhere in 1 Corinthians 11

There are a few other words used for “covering” in this passage. Fortunately, they all belong to the same “word family”. That is, they all have the same basic meaning and thus can be treated as a unit.

- There’s the adjective form “????????????????” ([akatakaluptos](#)), correctly translated “uncovered” and used in verses 5 and 13.
- There’s the verb form “????????????????” ([katakalupto](#)) translated “cover” and used in verses 6 and 7.

The words are almost the same and come from the same root. “Katakalupto” comes from “????” ([kata](#)) and “????????” ([kaluptó](#)). We’ve already looked at kata but didn’t mention it can function as an intensifying prefix (*one of its many functions*). More on that in a moment.

The Greek word kaluptó simply means to “cover” or to “conceal”. For example, it’s used in Luke:

### Luke 8 (NASB)

16 “Now no one after lighting a lamp **covers** it over with a container, or puts it under a bed; but he puts it on a lampstand, so that those who come in may see the light.

That’s kaluptó.

Now, the Greek word kata can be used as a prefix to intensify something. For example, kaluptó means “to cover”, kata-kaluptó means to “fully cover”.

In the adjective form used in this verse, a negative prefix is added (*like adding the letter “a” to the word “moral” to get the word “amoral”, which means “not moral”*) So in the adjective form, it’s a-kata-kaluptó, which means “fully uncovered”, in the sense of not being covered at all.

*(Note: some lexicons will say katakaluptó means to “wear a veil”. However, that’s not the primary meaning and is pulled from assumed context. A good lexicon will correctly say it means “to cover”, and then mention a veil as one possible type of covering.)*

**Notice that “peribolaion” (*clothe myself*) which is used in verse 15 is a different word – and from a different word family – than “katakaluptó” and “akatakaluptos”**

**This is vitally important!**

It’s crucial to properly understand the passage.

“Katakaluptó” and “akatakaluptos” mean **“to cover” with anything**. Anything at all. However, “peribolaion” specifically means **to “cover” with some type of garment/cloth**.

The difference is **very** important.

Unfortunately, most translations don’t render the difference properly, especially in verse 15. (*I only know of one that does.*) For now, we’ll look at the next Greek word that will lend clarity to our discussion.

**The Greek word “????” (anti), translated “for” in verse 15**

Here’s verse 15 again.

**1 Corinthians 11 (NASB)**

**15** but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her long hair is given to her **for** a covering.

The word highlighted in **red** is the Greek word “????” ([anti](#)). Here’s the definition from several different lexicons:

**Definition:** over against, opposite, **instead of**

**473** *antí* (a preposition) – properly, *opposite, corresponding to, off-setting (over-against)*; (figuratively) **“in place of,”** i.e. what **substitutes** (serves as an *equivalent*, what is proportional).

**over against, opposite, hence instead of**, in comp. denotes contrast, requital, **substitution**, correspondence

2. **indicating exchange**, succession, for, **instead of**, in place of (something).

a. **universally, instead of**: ????? ?????? ?????, Luke 11:11; ????? ?????????????? to serve as a covering, **1 Corinthians 11:15**; ????? ??? ??????, James 4:15 (???? ??? with the infinitive often in Greek writings (Winers Grammar, 329 (309); Buttmann, 263 (226))).

A primary particle; **opposite, i.e. instead** or because of (rarely in addition to) — for, in the room of. **Often used in composition to denote** contrast, requital, **substitution**, correspondence, etc.

Hmm, it seems like translating it “for” is slightly misleading.

Now, I want to be clear that translating *anti* as “for” isn’t wrong in many cases because “for” can indicate exchange/substitution. For example, it’s used in Matthew 5:38 where Jesus is quoting the law which says “an eye for an eye”, meaning “an eye in exchange for an eye”. Our English word “for” can certainly have the same idea of substitution... but the way it’s translated in verse 15 doesn’t sound like that at all.

**To be clear, “????” (anti) always means “in exchange for” or “instead of”** (*except when it’s used as a causative and means “because”*), and you can double-check that statement by looking at [all 22 places anti is used in the Bible](#). In every single one, it’s either used for exchange/substitution (“*in exchange for*” or “*instead of*”) or as a causative (“*because*”).

There is **no** exception to this.

None.

**Not even one.**



So we'll look at verse 15 again with all the understanding we've accrued.

### 1 Corinthians 11 (NASB)

15 but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her long hair is given to her **instead of a cloth covering**.

Boy, that makes a lot more sense, doesn't it? However, as they say on TV: "**But wait, there's more!**" Seriously, there is.

A lot more.

### Who is "the woman whose head is shaved?"

Verse 5 says this:

### 1 Corinthians 11 (NASB)

5 But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as **the woman whose head is shaved**.

So that verse begs the question: "who is the woman whose head is shaved?" Without answering that question, the whole purpose of verses 5-6 – and consequently the whole passage – becomes very confusing. But if you know who "*the woman whose head is shaved*" is, the whole passage – verses 2-16 – becomes much clearer.

**Not too far from Corinth in the Aegean Sea, there is an island named Lesbos.** It has retained the name Lesbos from ancient times, and its name is believed to be the origin of our word "lesbian". A very famous lyrical poet from the sixth century BC was referred to as "**Sappho of Lesbos**". Her name (*Sappho*) is the root of our English word "sapphic", which is an adjective referring to female homosexual acts.

So, guess what often happened there...

(And BTW, we have a separate [article here on Berean Patriot about homosexuality](#) and the Bible's position on it. Yes, we go every bit as deep in that article as in this one.)

Anyways...

[Lucian](#), a second-century author, wrote in his [Dialogues of the Courtesans: section 5: Leaena and Clonarium](#):

**(Note:** in the quote below “Lesbian” means “from the isle of Lesbos”, not a female homosexual. Also, Clonarium is speaking to a woman, Leaena.)

**CLONARIUM:** We’ve been hearing strange things about you Leaena. **They say that Megilla, the rich Lesbian woman, is in love with you just like a man**, that you live with each other, and do goodness knows what together...

...They say **there are women like that in Lesbos, with faces like men**, and unwilling to consort with men, but only with women, **as though they themselves were men**.

At one point, Clonarium asks Leaena to describe how Megilla made her first advances.

**LEAENA:** She herself and **another rich woman**, with the same accomplishments, **Demonassa from Corinth** were organizing a drinking party, and had taken me along to provide them with music.

...

Eventually **Megilla**, being now rather heated, pulled off her wig, which was very realistic and fitted very closely, and **revealed the skin of her head which was shaved close**, just as on the most energetic of athletes.

As you can see, some of the women from the Isle of Lesbos behaved as modern-day lesbians. Among their customs was shaving their hair off or cutting it short in an attempt to look more like men.

**This is a very important point: They weren’t behaving like women; they were behaving like men.**

To again quote [Dialogues of the Courtesans: section 5: Leaena and Clonarium](#): (*this is Megilla the Lesbian speaking*)

“I was born a woman like the rest of you, but **I have the mind and the desires and everything else of a man.**”

**Now here’s the crucial part: the women from the Isle of Lesbos refused ALL forms of male authority.**

All.

Without exception.

They tried to act like men in everything, and part of that was refusing to be under any man’s authority. **As a symbolic rejection of male authority, these women would cut off their hair or shave their heads.**

Starting to make sense?

Long hair is associated with being a woman in virtually every culture across the world. Long, lustrous hair is one of the primary things that men find attractive in women. Therefore, Lesbian women – both then and incidentally now too – tend to cut their hair off. (*A modern “pixie cut” is one such example*) This is very symbolic of the idea that the woman doesn’t want male authority because men almost universally love long hair.

**As we’ll see soon, Paul uses this as part of his argument in this passage.**

There are only two more bits of context we need before we look at the passage in full.

### **Words added by translators for clarity**

We need to look at the words that translators *must* add to make a passage make sense. It’s not adding to the Bible; it’s part of translation. Greek is a different language than ours and it’s actually more flexible than English in many ways. Sometimes translators must add words in English to get the Greek ideas across.

**However, sometimes these additions go beyond translating the words and veer into interpretation.**

There is one place in this passage where almost every translation commits this translation ‘sin’. It’s the apex of the chiasm, and thus the most important part of the passage: verse 10. (*We’ll look at the chiasmic structure soon after we’ve looked at all the necessary context.*)

It’s very important to note that the NASB *italicizes* words that were added by translators for clarity. I’ve gone a step further and made them *red* so they’re impossible to miss.

### **1 Corinthians 11 (NASB)**

**10** Therefore the woman ought to have *a symbol of* authority on her head, because of the angels.

The phrase “a symbol of” isn’t in the Greek. Go ahead and [double-check me in an interlinear Bible](#) if you like. It’s simply not there at all. Nowhere. The idea of a “head covering” isn’t contained anywhere in this verse. There’s not even a hint of it in Greek.

None.

Now, there’s just one more piece of context that we need before we can look at the passage in full and understand it properly.

## The Greek word translated “ought” in verse 10

Fair warning, there are places where the Bible is very counter-cultural. This is one of them. If this idea bothers you, I recommend you read my article: [How Crucial are Women to a Biblical Household? Very!](#) for a balanced view of the topic.

### 1 Corinthians 11 (NASB)

10 Therefore the woman **ought** to have *a symbol of* authority on her head, because of the angels.

The Greek word translated “ought” here is “??????” ([opheiló](#)), and it means:

3784 *opheíl?* (a primitive verb, NAS dictionary) – **to owe, be indebted, i.e. obliged to rectify a debt** (“ought”).

3784 /*opheíl?* (“owe”) **refers to being morally obligated** (or *legally required*) **to meet an obligation, i.e. to pay off a legitimate debt.**

3784 (*opheíl?*) “originally belonged to the *legal* sphere; it expressed initially one’s legal and economic, and then later **one’s moral, duties and responsibilities to the gods and to men**, or to their sacrosanct regulations. . . . *opheíl?* expresses human and ethical responsibility in the NT” (*DNTT*, 2, 662.663).

Matthew uses this word of debt in the parable of the unrighteous servant in Matthew 18, verses 28, 30, and 34. Now you may be wondering where this “moral obligation” comes from. We’ll look at that in a moment. **It’s also worth noting that this same word is used in verse 7**, where it says that man is “morally obligated” not to cover his head. More on that in a bit.

Now, we’ll finally look at this passage in full.

## 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 – Putting it all together

I’ll now quote the entire passage with the chiastic structure indicated like in the examples above. I’ve also added some notes in **(Bold underlined Parenthesis)** to make things clearer, I’ve also ~~grayed and lined out~~ a few things we’ve talked about, and added the meaning in underlined text so you can see what I added. (*trying to be transparent.*)

### 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Chiastic Structure

- **2** Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. **3** But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

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- 4. Every man who has *something* ~~or~~ *hanging* down from his head (**Long Hair?**) while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. 5. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. (**The Lesbian women, who rejected male authority**) 6. For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. 7. For a man ~~ought~~ *is morally obligated* not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.
    - 8. *For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man;*
      - 9. for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake..
        - 10. **Therefore the woman ~~ought~~ *is morally obligated to have* ~~a symbol of~~ **authority on her head, because of the angels.****
      - 11 However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.
        - 12. *For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man **has his birth** through the woman; and all things originate from God.*
  - 13. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God ~~with her head~~ uncovered? 14. Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, 15. but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her ~~for~~ instead of a cloth covering.
  - 16. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

Now, we'll go through the passage, taking it one section at a time.

## The Introductory Verses (2-3)

### 1 Corinthians 11:2-3

2. Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

3. But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and **the man is the head of a woman**, and God is the head of Christ..

Now, some say that "head" here should be understood as "source", not in the sense of authority. To answer this, first, we'll look at the Greek word, then we'll look at usage, and finally a parallel passage.

## The Greek word for “head”

It’s “???????” ([kephalé](#)), which truly does mean “head”, as in the part of a physical body that sits atop the neck. However – just like in English today – it can metaphorically also mean a ruler or authority. (*The “head” of a company/group/household etc.*)

(Note: “met” in the definition below is short for “metaphorically”)

**Definition:** the head

**Usage:** (a) the head, (b) **met:** a corner stone, uniting two walls; head, **ruler, lord.**

??????, ????????, ?, the Sept. for ??????; the head,

...

**Metaphorically, anything supreme, chief, prominent; of persons, master, lord:** ?????, of a husband in relation to his wife, 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:23; of Christ, the lord of the husband, 1 Corinthians 11:3 (cf. Buttman, 124f (109)); of the church, Ephesians 4:15; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 2:19

Kephalé means “head”. Some want to say in this passage it should be understood as “source”, **but that does not work.** To show why I’ll replace the word “head” with the word “source” in verse 3 and you’ll see how it falls apart quickly

### 1 Corinthians 11 (NASB – edited)

3. But I want you to understand that Christ is the **source** of every man, and the man is the **source** of a woman, and **God is the source of Christ.**

**As you can see, “source” doesn’t work.**

Certainly, Christ is the source of man because He created man. You could say that man is the “source” of woman because God made woman from Adam’s rib. It’s a stretch – a long stretch – but not *quite* an impossible one. **But you can’t say that God (*the Father*) is the “source” of Christ.** It just doesn’t work, because that would make Jesus a created being, and thus not God.

**The Bible is very clear that [Jesus is God](#), and thus is uncreated and has no “source”.**

So no, “source” doesn’t work and Ephesians confirms this. Paul uses the same Greek word (*kephalé* = *head*) in Ephesians to talk about authority.

## Ephesians 5

22. **Wives must submit themselves to their own husbands as *they do to the Lord,***

23. **because *the husband is head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church.*** (He *Himself being the body's savior.*)

24. But *just* as the church submits itself to Christ, in this way also, wives *should submit themselves* to their husbands in everything.

Here, the idea of being “the head” is clearly connected with authority/submission. It’s connected in the same way in 1 Corinthians, and thus “authority” is clearly intended. It’s even clearer later in our 1 Corinthians passage.

## The Theological Verses (4-7 & 13-15)

### 1 Corinthians 11

4. Every man who has *something ~~on~~ hanging down from his head (Long Hair? as we saw earlier) while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.*

5. But **every woman who has her head uncovered** while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. (*The Lesbian women, who we’ve already talked about*)

6. For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head.

7. For a man ~~ought~~ is morally obligated not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.

Now, these verses make a lot more sense when paired with their chiasmic mirror, so we’ll look at those verses too.

## 1 Corinthians 11:13-15

13. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God *with her head* uncovered?

14. Does not even nature itself teach you that **if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him,**

15. **but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her?** For her hair is given to her ~~for~~ instead of a cloth covering.

Please notice the parallels and contrasts in the chiasm.

- First part (*verses 4-5*)
  - Long hair on men = disgrace/shame
  - Short hair on women = disgrace/shame
- Second part (*verses 13-15*)
  - Long hair on men = disgrace/shame
  - Long hair on women = glory

Since the whole passage is a chiasm, we can reasonably look at the first half in light of the second half. **I don't see anything about hats/veils here. Nothing at all.**

**It appears – especially given the context of the women from the Isle of Lesbos – that Paul is being clever.**

That's *almost* unfortunate.

Why?

Because Paul's very clever first-century (*Greek*) wordplay is lost on modern (*English*) audiences. While it would've been very clear to first-century readers, it's lost on modern ones.

Here's the point:

**Paul is drawing an analogy about “long hair = under (male) authority” because the “covering” of hair is symbolic of the “covering” of male authority.**

Make sense?

His point at the center of the chiasm – which means it's the most important part of the passage – is about *authority*, **not** “covering the head” with a bit of cloth. Paul is using the women from Lesbos as an example because **they rejected male authority and symbolized this by cutting off their hair.**



We'll start by looking at verse 5.

## 1 Corinthians 11

5. But every woman who has her head uncovered (*by her husbands authority*) while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. (*The women of the Isle of Lesbos, who symbolized their rejection of male authority by cutting off their hair or shaving their heads*)

Do you see the symbolism and parallel Paul is drawing here?

**If a woman won't be under male authority (*she has her head "uncovered"*) then she's "one and the same as" the women of the Isle of Lesbos, who shaved their heads to show they rejected male authority.**

That's what verse 5 is talking about.

Verse 6 continues this theme, making the symbolism between long hair and being under male authority clearer. We'll look at it in two sections.

## 1 Corinthians 11

6a. For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off;

Remember, Paul is using long hair as an analog to, and symbol of male authority. So Paul says that: **If a woman won't "cover her head" (*be under male authority*) let her also cut off her hair (*the symbol of male authority*).** He's saying that if a woman won't have the reality of being under male authority, why would she have the symbol of it?

Paul looks at it from the reverse angle in the second half of the verse.

## 1 Corinthians 11

6b. but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head.

Again, long hair is symbolic of male authority. So Paul says that since it's shameful for a woman to cut off the symbol of male authority (*long hair*) then she should live up to the symbol and be under the reality of male authority. Therefore, if a woman accepts the symbol of male authority (*long hair*) then she should also accept the reality of male authority by being under it.

Make sense?

Conversely, men aren't supposed to be under authority the way women are. So when a man has long

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hair, he's wearing a symbol of being under authority the way a woman is. That's **not** what God intended. He intended for men and women to be different.

That's God's design and intention.

That's the point of verse 7

## 1 Corinthians 11

7. For a man ~~ought~~ **is morally obligated not to have his head covered**, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.

**A man shouldn't "cover his head", either symbolically with long hair or in reality by being under authority the way a woman is.**

In fact, man is "morally obligated" not to be under authority that way because that's the role God gave to women, not men. For a man to take up a woman's role is directly contrary to the way God designed the world.

That's sinful.

Man shows God's glory by being in authority over woman the same way that Christ is in authority over man. Woman shows God's glory by being in submission to man the same way the church should be in submission to Christ. (*That's why Paul starts with the hierarchy of headship in verse 3: God > Christ > man > woman*)

Again, the implication is that a woman should "have her head covered" in her husband's authority and symbolize this by having long hair.

**Thus, a woman "dishonors her head" if she rejects her husband's authority and/or symbolizes a rejection of that authority by cutting off her hair.**

If you are wondering why, Paul addresses that soon.

*(And BTW, I'm sure God understands if a woman needs chemotherapy or there's another good medical reason her hair needs to be short temporarily. Though in such cases a wig would be advisable to keep the symbolism intact. )*

### Paul's clever wordplay

Notice Paul's clever wordplay here.

The phrase "dishonors her head" could refer to the woman's own head = herself. That is, she dishonors herself by rejecting male authority and/or symbolizing a rejection of male authority by cutting

off her hair. **But the phrase “dishonors her head” could also refer to her “authority head”, which is her husband.** That is, she not only dishonors herself, but she also dishonors her husband by rejecting his authority and/or symbolizing a rejection of his authority by cutting off her hair.

Clever, no?

The brilliance of Paul’s writing (*and Jesus’ teaching too*) is often lost in translation (*which isn’t the translator’s fault*). Both Paul and Jesus frequently made use of these “double allusions”, where they used a word or phrase in two senses **at the same time**. Unfortunately, other examples require a long explanation of Greek words to make sense, and we don’t have space for that here.

Anyway...

This clever double allusion is used twice.

Remember that verse 4 says the man “dishonors his head” if he has “*something hanging* down from his head”. **That means a man who’s under authority the same way a woman is – and/or symbolizes being under that authority by having long hair – is not only dishonoring/shaming himself, he’s also dishonoring/shaming Jesus Christ Himself** (*who is the man’s “authority head”, as verse 3 says*).

**Men, don’t be “under your wife’s authority” the way she’s supposed to be under yours.**

If you allow her to be in authority over you like that, you are bringing dishonor and shame to Christ Himself. He doesn’t take kindly to that.

It’s a sin.

**Wives, don’t try to be your husband’s “head” the way he’s supposed to be yours.**

This is also a sin.

Doing this – wives being in authority over husbands – destroys God’s chosen picture for Christ’s relationship with the church: marriage. Just like Ephesians says, wives must submit to their husbands in the same way that the church submits to Christ. By doing that, the picture is complete. By not doing that, the picture is ruined and you bring dishonor to God Himself.

*(That’s a bad idea.)*

Now, just because the woman should be under authority doesn’t mean God hasn’t given her a crucial role to play. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, my article [How Crucial are Women to a Biblical Household? Very!](#) makes this very clear. God must indeed have a high opinion of women or He wouldn’t have given them the lofty role that the Bible describes, which I explain in that article.

Moving on...

**The second half of the “theological” verses**

We've already looked at verses 14-15, but verse 13 warrants more attention.

## 1 Corinthians 11

13. Judge for yourselves: **is it proper for a woman to pray to God *with her head uncovered?***

14. Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him,

15. but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for instead of a cloth covering.

The obvious question is: "what kind of covering are we talking about here?" **Are we talking about the "covering" of long hair or the "covering" of male authority?**

The obvious answer is **both**.

"Covering" is used in both senses here because – as we've already seen – the Greek words for "covering" can mean any kind of covering (*except in verse 15*). Paul uses them interchangeably throughout the passage because the one (*long hair*) symbolizes the other (*male authority*).

**Now, verse 13 is a rhetorical question.**

Paul isn't expecting an answer because the answer is supposed to be obvious. (*Rather like asking "is water wet?"*) **Phrased as a statement, Paul says: "it's not proper for an uncovered woman to pray to God."**

No joke.

God is so serious about a wife being under her husband's authority that according to God – who inspired Paul when He wrote this passage – it's not even proper for a woman to pray unless her head is "covered", ostensibly by both male authority and long hair.

We'll get a better understanding of how important this is to God in a bit.

(*And again, God would almost certainly understand if there were some good medical reason for a woman to temporarily have short/shaved hair.*)

**And interlude: Just in Church services?**

I realize the vast majority of Christians believe that this passage (*1 Cor 11:2-16*) refers to in church services, and not outside church services. Hopefully you see how wrong that is because a husband isn't only the head of his wife in a church service but not the other 167 hours of the week.

However, I'll tackle that just to be complete.

**Again, some say 1 Cor 11:2-16 refers to women praying and/or prophesying during a church service, and use that as a justification to ignore 1 Cor 14. That's clearly wrong according to 1 Cor 14.**

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*(How anyone makes this mistake is beyond me \*shakes head\*)*

Later in the same letter Paul specifically addresses women speaking in the church services:

### 1 Corinthians 14

**34. The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says.**

**35. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.**

That's pretty clear.

100% clear in fact.

Paul is specifically talking about women in the context of a church service, and says they aren't to speak, but both praying and prophesying require speaking. (*I'd argue that "speaking" here refers to a woman "having the floor" btw.*) Further, the preceding verses all use masculine substantives when talking about people (*men*) doing things in the service.

Clear and specific instructions always take precedence over vague and general instructions. **Thus, the clear and specific instruction in 1 Cor 14 about women not speaking in church services would override 1 Cor 11 even if I was wrong about everything else in this article.**

That's just good hermeneutics.

**So please, let's have no more of this nonsense about 1 Cor 11 being about women praying and/or prophesying during church services when 1 Cor 14 specifically says they can't speak. (which I take as "having the floor")**

People need to stop asserting that 1 Cor 11 refers to church services when there's absolutely nothing in the chapter to indicate that. They also need to stop asserting that 1 Cor 11 overrides the clear and specific instruction in 1 Cor 14.

You're twisting the Bible when you say that.

Please stop.

Moving on.

### The 'Interdependence' Verses (8 & 12)

Again, we'll look at these as a chiasmic pair.

### 1 Corinthians 11

8. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man;

...

12. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man *has his birth* through the woman; and all things originate from God.

Notice the parallels here. The first half alludes to the fact that the original man (*Adam*) didn't come from woman. The second half completes the thought by reminding man that he is born through woman. **While there is authority between the genders, there's also interdependence... just like in the Trinity.** To miss this is to miss (*part of*) the glory of being a woman.

Don't miss this!

*(It's stated in verse 3.)*

**A woman brings glory to God by being under the authority of her husband the same way that Christ is under the authority of God.**

That is a vital role God gave to women.

Women are supposed to imitate Christ's submission to the Father and thus bring God glory through this imitation. But even as Christ submits to the Father in the Trinity, there is also interdependence and unity in the Trinity. **Likewise, even though man has authority over woman, he is also dependent on woman because he is born through a woman.**

And of course, Paul makes it clear that while man and woman are interdependent, God isn't dependent on either of them but instead is the source of everything.

### The 'Why' Verses (9 & 11)

These two verses – especially verse 9 – provide the “why”; the reason for the crescendo, the apex of the chiasm in verse 10.

### 1 Corinthians 11

9. for indeed **man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.**

...

11 However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.

This is a good example of a contrasting chiasm. Verse 9 says that woman was created for man, but then verse 11 tells men not to “*get too big for their britches*” because they aren’t separate from women. In effect saying, “*Yes she was created for you, but you also need her.*”

Verse 9 perfectly sets up verse 10 – the focus point of the whole passage – by providing a reason why. Verse 11 switches tracks slightly after the apex.

Now we’ll look at that apex.

### The Apex and focal point of the Chiasm (10)

Remember, the most important part of a chiasm is always the center, the apex. As the center of the chiasm, **this is Paul’s main point**. I’ve included verse 9 too so we can see the “why” next to the instruction.

#### 1 Corinthians 10

9. for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake.

**10. Therefore the woman ought is morally obligated to have *a symbol of* authority on her head, because of the angels.**

11. However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.

Paul makes it 100% clear why women are “morally obligated” to have male authority over them: **because woman was created for man**. Lest anyone forget the story, we’ll look at it.

#### Genesis 2 (NASB)

18. Then the LORD God said, “**It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.**”

19. Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought *them* to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man

called a living creature, that was its name.

20. The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found **a helper suitable for him**.

21. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then **He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place**.

22. **The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.**

### God created woman to help man and to ensure he wasn't alone.

Therefore: *"because of this, the woman is morally obligated to have authority on her head"* – as Paul says. **God created woman for a specific task, and thus she is obligated to fulfill that task.** (*Just as man is obligated to fulfill the tasks he was given.*) This is the whole point and purpose of the passage.

**As the apex of the chiasm, this is the part that's supposed to stay with you. It's arguably the whole reason Paul wrote the verses around it.**

That's how a chiasm works.

One of the articles in my marriage series – [The "Why" Behind God Telling Wives to Submit to their Husbands in Marriage](#) – goes into this idea in some depth. I recommend reading it.

### But what about the angels?

Many people are immediately confused by the phrase "because of the angels" at the end of verse 10. One Bible has this footnote, which I like because it provides all the explanations I've seen in a neat/succinct summary:

"because of the angels" These three Greek words (??? ????? ??????????) are among the most confusing, and therefore most commented on in the whole Bible. **The most common interpretations are:** **(1.)** The early church believed that angels were present during their gatherings. Thus this could be either an example for them showing the women were under authority, or because it was fitting because of the angelic presence. **(2.) Paul is using an analogy/example as a warning, and the angels referred to here are the fallen angels before they fell. They fell because they rebelled by refusing to observe their place in God's created order. (Jude 1:6) This theory says Paul is saying women must observe their place in God's order (under male authority) or else they are rebelling like the angels did.** **(3.)** This theory says "???" (*dia*, here translated "because of") should be translated "through" which is another one of its primary meanings. The idea is the authority is conveyed or applied through the angels somehow. **(4.)** This refers to head coverings, and that women should have their heads covered like the angels covered their faces in Isaiah 6:2.



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Contextually speaking, **explanation #2 makes the most sense** and it fits with Paul's point. As we've already seen, wives being in authority over husbands brings dishonor/shame to God. Further, intentionally not obeying a legitimate authority is rebellion, *by definition*. God isn't fond of rebellion against Him, or any against the other authorities that He established.

### **1 Samuel 15** (*NASB, this is Samuel rebuking King Saul*)

**23.** "For **rebellion** is as the sin of **divination**, And **insubordination** is as iniquity and **idolatry**. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from being king."

Rebellion is like divination, and insubordination is like idolatry. Given that fact, we'll look at the penalties that God attaches to those sins, which tell us something about the penalties He might attach to rebellion/insubordination.

### **Deuteronomy 18** (*NASB*)

**10.** "There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who **uses divination**, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a **sorcerer**,

**11.** or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead.

**12.** "For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you.

And idolaters are in the same category as divination/sorcery.

### **Revelation 21** (*NASB*)

**8.** "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and **sorcerers and idolaters** and all liars, **their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.**"

Rebellion is a serious sin.

Very serious.

That applies to whether the rebellion is against God Himself, or against the authorities that He established... like a husband's authority over his wife.

## Conclusion and Universal Application (verse 16)

Just as the first part of the chiasm opens with some sweeping universal statements, the conclusion does too.

### 1 Corinthians 11

**16.** But if one is inclined to be contentious, **we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.**

While the opening focused on *them* (*the Corinthians*) following the customs handed down, the closing focuses on *all believers* following this custom. While the opening showed the universality of God's created order, the closing says none-too-subtly that *only* the churches who follow this custom are churches *of God*.

Emphasis on "of God".

**There's a not-so-subtle point there that if you don't have this custom** (*women being under their husband's authority which is symbolized by having long hair, as the apex of the chiasm dictates*) **then it's not a church of God.**

**There's a parallel passage that supports this too.**

Just a few chapters later, Paul touches on this topic again. (*authority and submission between the sexes*) Notice the parallelism between 11:16's "*we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God*" and 14:33's "*As in all the churches of the saints*".

### 1 Corinthians 14 (ESV)

**33.** For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. **As in all the churches of the saints, 34. the women** should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but **should be in submission, as the Law also says.**

**35.** If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

**36.** Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?

**37.** If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that **the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.**

**38.** If anyone does not recognize *this*, he is not **recognized**.

It says “he is not recognized”. The question then is: “he isn’t recognized **by who?**”

Who doesn’t recognize the man?

I think verse 37 might have the answer. Remember that the preceding verses (*including the submission part*) are specifically identified as “the Lord’s commandment”, and **the one who won’t recognize the Lord’s commandment isn’t recognized by someone... could it be the Lord Himself who won’t recognize him?**

Perhaps?

That makes sense from the context. Remember, if rebellion and insubordination are as bad as sorcery and idolatry – both of which are punished in the lake of fire – then refusing to recognize God’s commands about submission might be bad enough to make God not recognize someone at the judgement.

**Not saying it is, but it’s hard to deny the possibility.**

This “he is not recognized” phrasing also puts me in mind of another passage:

### **Matthew 7**

**23.** “And then I will declare to them, ‘**I never knew you**; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’”

So yes, **there’s a chance that submission in marriage is actually a salvation issue because rebellion and insubordination are salvation issues.**

I’m not saying it is, but it’s certainly possible.

Chapter 11 says: “*we have no other custom; nor do the churches of God*”, and chapter 14 says: “*As in all the churches of the saints, the women... ..must submit themselves*” (NASB). God seems **very** serious about this. A likely reason that He’s so serious about this is that marriage is the picture between Christ and the church. If you change the authority dynamic, you change the picture and effectively destroy it, thus bringing dishonor/shame to God by violating His created order.

It’s also possible that God is so serious because of the consequences. If you want to know more about those consequences, check out my article series on marriage, starting with the first one: [How Getting Marriage ‘Wrong’ Destroyed Every Great Civilization in World History.](#)

## **Conclusion**

1 Corinthians 11 has a chiasmic structure, with verse 10 being the apex of the chiasm, and thus the

central focus of the passage. The Greek word “????” (*kata*) in verse 4 could refer to a “head covering” – but given the chiasmic structure and its mirror in verse 14, it more likely refers to long hair. The word translated “covering” in verse 15 specifically refers to a cloth covering, and the Greek word preceding it means “instead of”, not “for”. **So women have long hair “instead of a cloth covering”.**

Nearby to Corinth on the Isle of Lesbos were women who refused all male authority, and symbolized this by cutting off their hair or shaving their heads. Once you eliminate the few words in verse 10 which translators added for ‘clarity’, the support for this passage being about a hat/veil/cloth “head covering” completely disappears.

Verse 15 makes this abundantly clear by saying that a woman’s long hair is given to her “instead of a cloth covering”.

**So no, Paul doesn’t say women need to wear a hat/veil/“head covering”.**

**Paul is drawing an analogy about “long hair = under male authority” because the “covering” of hair is symbolic of the “covering” of male authority.**

With a proper understanding, this passage says that:

1. **Women have are “morally obligated” to be under male authority because women were created for men. They’re also required to symbolize this by having long hair.**
2. **Conversely, men are “morally obligated” to not “cover their head”, either symbolically by having long hair or in reality by being under authority the way a woman is supposed to be.**

Part of the reason for this is that marriage is a picture of Christ and His church. The church should submit to God in everything. Likewise, wives should submit to their husbands in everything (as *Ephesians 5* says). Men imitate God and thus bring glory to Him by being in authority over their wife as Christ is in authority over the church. Likewise, wives bring glory to God by submitting to their husbands the same way the church submits to Christ.

Yes, it’s counter-cultural, but it’s also Biblical.

The Bible is so serious about this that there are definite hints that “not recognizing” authority/submission in marriage might mean you won’t “be recognized” by the Lord at the judgement. They aren’t perfectly clear hints, but rebellion and insubordination are ‘lake of fire worthy’ sins, so tread carefully when flirting with them.

Better yet, don’t flirt with sin at all.

It also says that it’s not proper for an “uncovered” woman to pray to God. Taking the broadest possible sense of the word “pray”, God says it’s not proper for a woman to even speak to Him without being “covered”. (*Because then she’s in rebellion.*)

**I realize this isn’t a popular idea.**

I realize many people will hate it, but don't hate the messenger. I didn't write 1 Corinthians, God did (*through Paul*). If you have a problem with its content, I suggest you take it up with the Almighty God and Creator of Heaven and Earth Himself...

**But remember, He is God and you're not.**

If you *still* think men having authority over women in marriage is a bad idea, then I recommend you read my series on marriage here on Berean Patriot. The first article is entitled: [How Getting Marriage 'Wrong' Destroyed Every Great Civilization in World History](#).

Yes, it's that serious.

### Marriage Series Index:

- a. [How Crucial are Women to a Biblical Household? Very!](#) (*This article was written later, but serves as an excellent, balanced intro to gender roles in marriage. I **highly** recommend reading this article before the others.*)
1. [How Getting Marriage 'Wrong' Destroyed Every Great Civilization in World History](#)
2. [Gender Differences and the Biology of leadership](#)
3. [The "Why" Behind God Telling Wives to Submit to their Husbands in Marriage](#)
  - a. [Does 1 Corinthians 11 Require Women To Wear "Head Coverings"](#)
4. [The Bible on Authority & Submission in Marriage](#)
5. [Does God View Women as the \(Social/Political\) Equals of Men?](#)
6. [Biblically, What's the Role of Women in Society and Marriage?](#)
7. [Gender and Attraction: What Men vs Women REALLY Want](#)
8. [Biblically, What's the Role of Men in Society and Marriage? \(still writing it...\)](#)
9. [Is Polygamy \(Polygyny\) Biblical? Does God Allow it?](#)
10. Follow up articles coming...
  - o Appendix A: [Biblical Reasons for Divorce, When Remarriage is Allowed, and How Adultery Figures In](#)