

Reasons Why 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 Means
Women Should Cover Their Heads
When Praying or Prophecy
In Public Worship

Reason 1:

This is the only way this passage has been taught until the feminist movement took hold of the culture just before the 1960's. It is not necessary to quote all the leading Christians who have interpreted the passage this way, but some will do. Let it be noted that the quotes here produced represent the fundamental and orthodox teaching on this passage. Any teaching other than that which is here represented is considered new to our era unless it can be demonstrated that others have long held this view. This will not happen. Therefore, any teaching that a woman does not need an artificial covering on her head must be a new teaching. To disprove this point one must show that an artificial covering for the woman was not the common and prevailing teaching of the church for 1,940 years and a different teaching at least paralleled this one. The following represent quotes to prove that the church has always and only taught that women should cover and men should not cover in church:

Dr. Harry Ironside (1938) from his Commentary on 1 Corinthians:

"If I stood in this pulpit preaching with my hat on, every one of you would rightfully say, "Has he no respect for the Master whom he professes to serve?" I come into the presence of God and Christ and of the angels who are learning the wisdom of God in the church, and I remove my hat. For the same reason when a woman comes into the church, she keeps her hat on. "Every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head." Who is her head? The man. She shows by uncovering her head that she wants to be like the man; she dishonors her head when she says, "I am not going to take any subject place, I have as much right to have my hat off in a public meeting as a man." It does not say that she dishonors the Lord Jesus Christ. She may be quite unconscious of dishonoring any one, but I am giving what the Word of God says."

"And now he goes back to nature and says, "Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? but if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering." Somebody says, "That settles the question. Her hair is her covering." But the apostle says that if she is not veiled she is to let her hair be shorn. She has that natural covering which distinguishes her from man and over that she puts a veil. Why? Because her hair is her glory. Is not that most striking? In the presence of God she covers her chief beauty in order that no mind may be turned from Christ to her beautiful hair. It is precious to think of Mary of Bethany and of the poor woman in Luke 7 who washed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with their hair. They cast their glory at His feet.

Preacher's Homiletic Commentary (1892):

"Verse 5 - In any case, whenever her praying is in any degree in public, let her not be "unveiled," unsexing herself and making herself "masculine," bearing herself like a short-haired man; she might as well go the whole length and be "cropped" [shorn] like a man. "Modesty is the conscience of the body." A Corinthian woman's veil would be the peplum, worn over the shoulders in the house, drawn over the face in public. [At Corinth a "shorn" woman would be a harlot.]"

Charles Spurgeon (1835-1892)

"Do you think you and I have sufficiently considered that we are always looked upon by angels, and that they desire to learn by us the wisdom of God? The reason why our sisters appear in the House of God with their heads covered is 'because of the angels'. The apostle says that a woman is to have a covering upon her head, because of the angels, since the angels are present in the assembly and they mark every act of indecorum, and therefore everything is to be conducted with decency and order in the presence of the angelic spirits." – (Spurgeon's Sermon on Angels, Kregel Publications, 1996)

Albert Barnes (1798 – 1870) –From Barnes Notes

"With her head uncovered. That is, with the veil removed which she usually wore."

"For that is even all one as if she were shaven. As if her long hair, which nature teaches her she should wear for a veil, {#1Co 11:15, margin,} should be cut off. Long hair is, by the custom of the times, and of nearly all countries, a mark of the sex, an ornament of the female, and judged to be beautiful and comely. To remove that is to appear, in this respect, like the other sex, and to lay aside the badge of her own. This, says Paul, all would judge to be improper. You yourselves would not allow it. And yet to lay aside the veil — the appropriate badge of the sex, and of her sense of subordination — would be an act of the same kind. It would indicate the same feeling, the same forgetfulness of the proper sense of subordination; and if that is laid aside, ALL the usual indications of modesty and subordination might be removed also."

"For if the woman be not covered. If her head be not covered with a veil."

"Let her also be shorn. Let her long hair be cut off. Let her lay aside all the usual and proper indications of her sex and rank in life. If it is done in one respect, it may with the same propriety be done in all."

Adam Clarke (1760-1832) – From his Commentary on the Whole Bible

"For if the woman be not covered. If she will not wear a veil in the public assemblies, let her be shorn- let her carry a public badge of infamy: but if it be a shame- if to be shorn or shaven would appear, as it must, a badge of infamy, then let her be covered- let her by all means wear a veil."

Matthew Henry (1662 – 1714) - From His Commentary:

“The woman, on the other hand, who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head, namely, the man, #1Co 11:3. She appears in the dress of her superior, and throws off the token of her subjection. She might, with equal decency, cut her hair short, or cut it close, which was the custom of the man in that age.”

“It was the common usage of the churches for women to appear in public assemblies, and join in public worship, veiled; and it was manifestly decent that they should do so. Those must be very contentious indeed who would quarrel with this, or lay it aside.”

Many quotes could be multiplied in like manner, but this is not necessary. Many others have recorded for us this same interpretation, a few names include John Wesley, John Calvin, John Gill, Charles Hodge, also the Jamiesson Fausset Brown Commentary, John Knox (1505-1572), Peter Martyr (1500-1562), Martin Luther, Augustine (A.D. 354-430), Jerome (A.D. 345-429), Chrysostom (A.D. 344-407), Tertullian (ca. A.D. 160-215), Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-220).

The testimony of Tertullian (ca. A.D. 160-215) is particularly interesting. He wrote the *Veiling of Women* and in it refers to the Corinthian church. His testimony informs us that this church understood Paul to be speaking of a veil and that 150 years later they still practiced what Paul and all the apostles taught.

"So, too, did the Corinthians understand him" (the apostle Paul - that unmarried girls as well as married women should be veiled.). "In fact, at this day the Corinthians do veil their virgins. What the apostles taught, their disciples approve."

In Tertullian's argument, he defends this position against opponents. These opponents were not teaching that hair was a sufficient covering, but that only married women should be veiled not non-married women. He claims it was not the custom, or the region, or the times that demanded it, but Scripture truth.

"I will show in Latin also that it behooves our virgins to be veiled from the time that they have passed the turning-point of their age: that this observance is exacted by truth, on which no one can impose prescription-no space of times, no influence of persons, no privilege of regions. For these, for the most part are the sources whence, from some ignorance or simplicity, custom finds its beginning; and then it is successfully confirmed by usage, and thus is maintained in opposition to truth. But our Lord Christ surnamed Himself Truth, not custom."

We also can gain some insight by looking at the paintings in the Catacombs. There are many depictions of bare-headed men and veiled women in the act of worship. The earliest catacomb art is from about A.D. 100 and spans several hundred years. The women are always veiled and the men are always bare-headed. This is noted by Marvin R. Vincent (1834-1922) in his *New Testament Word*

Pictures, “verse 16. ‘Custom.’ Not the custom of contentiousness, but that of women speaking unveiled. The testimonies of Tertullian and Chrysostom show that these injunctions of Paul prevailed in the churches. In the sculptures of the catacombs the women have a close-fitting head-dress, while the men have the hair short.”

So to conclude this first reason, the unanimous testimony of the church is that women are to have a head covering over their hair during public worship. Any other interpretation would not only stand against the entire history of the church, but would need ample proof from the passage. This proof would need to be overwhelming and then, as great as this proof is, one would have to explain how all the previous generations of Christians did not notice such ample proof. This is a tall order for a new interpretation.

Reason 2:

The passage does not allow for another interpretation. In 1 Corinthians 11:4, Paul commands men not to cover their heads. The word used for “covered” is *κατα* (*kata*). This literally means “something hanging down from the head.” The Jews wore something on their heads when they worshipped as Lightfoot is quoted, “None might pray with their heads uncovered but the wise men and the scholars added a veil for distinction’s sake and the priests because they always wore their linen bonnets while they served did not consider them as sufficient and therefore when they prayed they added another covering. It was this practice of praying with the head covered that he condemns in 1 Corinthians xi 4 and 5 and his injunction is that men in the Christian church shall reverse the practice in the Jewish church and pray with their heads uncovered but that the women should continue as formerly to have their heads covered” (*Antiquities of the Jews: Carefully Compiled from Authentic Sources, Volume 1, By William Brown 1802*). This Greek word used in verse 4 is ambiguous so that it means anything hanging off the head. It includes but does not limit the meaning to veil. Had the word for veil been used, then other things hanging off the head might be seen as acceptable. The man’s head was to be bare of everything except hair.

In verse 5 Paul writes that the women are not to be uncovered (*ακατακαλυπτος*, *akatakaluptos*). This is the negative of the word he uses when he tells the women they must be “covered” (*κατακαλυπτω*, *katakalupto*). This word means to cover up or veil. Literally, it means “the act of covering down or over.” This is the only place it is used in the New Testament. However, this word is used often in the Greek Septuagint to translate Hebrew words into Greek. This word is used in Genesis 38:15 to describe Tamar covering her face with a veil. It is used in Esther 6:12 for Haman covering his head as he hurried home. It is only used of a head covering and is never used for long hair or natural coverings. The negative form is used in Leviticus 13:45 for the leper that was to uncover his head. Since this word is consistently used with a veil or an external covering, those reading Paul’s letter would already understand that he is speaking of a head covering that is added to the hair, not the hair itself.

Now let us look at verse 5: “But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.” To see the ease of interpretation in this verse we will try to substitute two different interpretations for the word “uncovered” and see which naturally fits and which does not. “But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head *UNVEILED* dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were

shaven.” If she is unveiled, then it is just like being shaved. The shame attached to being shaved is attached to being unveiled. Now we will try another interpretation. “But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her *LONG HAIR CUT OFF* dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.” Now this is not an acceptable use of the language. It is not as though or like or as if she were shaven, it is shaven. This is a very difficult way to explain this text.

The same is true of verse 6: “For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.” Again, try each interpretation and see the absurdity of one and the naturalness of the other. “For if the woman be not *VEILED*, let her also be shorn.” If she is not veiled, then why not cut her hair like a man? If that is a shame, then so too is being unveiled. Here is the other interpretation, “For if the woman *HAVE NOT LONG HAIR*, let her also be shorn.” If she has no hair, then go ahead and cut off her hair. This is not possible. If she is uncovered because she cut off her hair, then no hair can be cut off. She cannot be shorn like a man unless she has hair like a woman. Unless the woman has long hair already, no one can cut it off.

So according to these verses being uncovered is as if she were shaved; and if she is not covered then she could just as well cut her hair like a man because the same shame is attached to both. Now since the Greek word is only used with an external covering and never the natural covering of hair, and since the context does not allow for the hair to be the covering, then the covering must be something that hangs down over the head on the hair.

Note these few quotes from Greek scholars:

Robertson New Testament Word Pictures – “For a covering (αντι περιβολαιου). Old word from περιβαλλω to fling around, as a mantle (Heb. 1:12) or a covering or veil as here. It is not in the place of a veil, but answering to (αντι, in the sense of αντι in John 1:16), as a permanent endowment (δεδοται, perfect passive indicative).”

This is how **Kenneth Wuest** expresses it in his *Expanded Translation of Greek*: “Every man while praying or prophesying...having a shawl hanging down over his head...dishonors his head. But every woman while praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for this would be one and the same thing as if she has her head shaved. For, assuming that a woman is uncovered, let her also cut her hair close. But since it is dishonorable for a woman to be shaven or have her hair cropped close, let her put a shawl down over her head.”

The context proves the women of Corinth already had long hair. That is why he is comparing the shame of being unveiled to cutting off the hair which they would have been offended in. So why does verse 15 say that hair is a covering? It is part of the arguments given by Paul for wearing a head covering. He states that women must wear a veil when at public worship for the following reasons. First, it shows the headship of man over woman. So failure to correctly display the symbol is as shameful as shaving the head of a woman. Second, because the created order proves that women should show the sign of submission. She is out of man. Third, the angels are viewing and this consideration is enough to motivate the women to cover. Fourth, nature has given women a natural covering (meaning a “wrap around the perimeter”) thereby proving that it is not unnatural for a woman to put on a covering (that is, a veil that hangs down over her natural covering) to cover her hair. Finally, all the churches have the same custom of veiling the woman. Any that would be contentious are going against all the churches. So Paul argues for the veil all the way through the passage completing his argument by saying to those who would still be contentious that every other church is in order. This

also explains why he does not write about this to other churches. No other churches were having a problem with it. Just like they were not having a problem with the Lord's Supper so he wrote to no other churches about that either.

In conclusion, there is not overwhelming evidence in the text to demand that long hair is the covering of which he speaks. There is not precedence in the Greek wording to do so. The opposite is true. The context requires us to compare being uncovered to being shorn or shaven. This is a comparison meaning the head must be covered by anything but hair. Also, the Greek word is consistently used for a veil. So to read that the covering in verses 5 and 6 are the same covering as the natural one of hair given in verse 15 is an unhappy contortion of the text that is easily remedied and set at ease by the simple word veil.

Reason 3:

All the symbolism is beautified with the veil, but it is strained with the use of the hair as the symbol. The covering represents these symbols. It represents the headship of Christ over the man. It represents the man's headship over the woman. It represents the submission of the woman to the man and man's submission to Christ. The covering is over the head.

The veil over the head represents a covering over what God calls a woman's glory. She is the glory of man according to verse 7 and her chief glory is her hair (vs 15). To cover this is to cover man's glory. So, in God's presence in worship a man pictures Christ as fully revealed and a woman pictures man with his glory covered so as to prevent his vanity and pride. When coming into the presence of God, a man shows his respect by wilfully removing his hat. A woman shows her respect for the presence of God by wilfully covering her head. He shows he has no authority over him by removing his cap, and she shows she is under authority by adding a veil to her hair. All this is symbolically fluid and the depth increases with the study.

If these are symbolized by long hair then we must say that long hair covers the woman and shows she is under submission to the man. Long hair is her glory according to the text, so her glory shows she is under submission. The conflicts emerge immediately. A man always has short hair, so he still must remove his cap to demonstrate that he is respecting the presence of God. A woman always has her hair long so she does nothing to show respect for the presence of God. The activity of doing something when entering into God's presence is lost on the women. It was the women to whom the bulk of the instruction to cover was given. Next, the symbolism is that man's glory is the woman and the woman's glory is her hair. So in God's presence woman's glory is on display. That is, in God's presence, where even the angels cover their faces with their wings so as to not compete with God's glory, the woman's glory is uncovered. This means man's glory is commanded to be long and open in God's presence. Remember Ironside's quote, "her hair is her glory. Is not that most striking? In the presence of God she covers her chief beauty in order that no mind may be turned from Christ to her beautiful hair." Here her chief beauty is to be long and displayed. The folly of this behavior is illustrated in Ezekiel 28 where the anointed cherub was lifted up to pride. He is confronted by God with this condemnation, "every precious stone was thy covering" (vs. 13), "Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God" (vs. 14), "Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee." (vs. 15), "and I will destroy thee, O covering cherub" (vs. 16), "Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy

wisdom by reason of thy brightness” (vs. 17). So the beautiful covering cherub left off his business of covering and went to the business of admiring his own beauty. With a lifted up heart and uncovered beauty, his brightness was exposed, admired, offended God and here is what God did to him. “I will bring thee to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all them that behold thee” (vs. 18). So he became divested of his beauty and a shame to all publicly. God is showing us that leaving off the business of covering in in God’s presence and showing off your own glory instead of humility is worthy of having your natural beauty removed and made a shame and disgrace to all who look upon you.

To further confound things, the Scripture teaches that our glory is now hidden but shall be revealed at the coming of Christ. This is a wonderful picture of a veiled woman’s head as man’s glory will only be truly seen when we have been fully redeemed and are changed into His image. Then there will be no more veils, but we will know as we are known. Man’s glory will be Christ’s glory for we shall be like Him. Now if the hair is a covering, then when Christ comes and the veil is removed and we are no longer in marriages, but are like the angels in heaven, then the symbol teaches us that the covering is removed so the hair must be removed. This is not an attractive picture for the ladies, nor is it a comfort when looking for Christ’s return. A woman would much rather remove her veil than her hair.

To conclude, the church has universally translated this passage as a veil. Christian woman have universally covered their heads in worship services. The passage in verses 5 and 6 cannot stand to be translated that long hair is a covering without making a redundancy and an impossible comparison between one thing and itself. Short hair is compared to short hair. The symbolism is sweeter and grander as a veil, but strained and awkward as hair. Finally, this new interpretation of hair as a covering has arrived to the church almost as universally as the veil was worn by Christian woman. How do we account for this? Let us hear from one of those who helped bring about this complete change. Lena Williams writes these very interesting insights in the New York Times from May 12, 1996 in an article entitled *In Defense Of the Church Hat*,

“For all their special flair, church hats weren't viewed as fashion statements. In many religious denominations, women must cover their heads during worship. Although a simple kerchief or Kleenex could suffice, and often did in a pinch, few God-fearing Christians ever entered a church with anything less than a proper hat. Hats were a crowning glory to God, our mothers and grandmothers told those of us too young to understand a tradition that required us to cover well-primped hairdos that took hours of hot combing and curling.”

“Then came the radical 1960's and I, a self-avowed black power militant with a new Afro hairstyle that matched my new anti-establishment attitude, rebelled against the strictures of God, church and country. Hats were dismissed as symbols of oppression for women and status symbols of the black bourgeoisie. Church hats I once wore with pride and from which I painstakingly plucked every speck of lint were covered in tissues and stored in my mother's attic.”

“Call me a walking contradiction: a liberated woman tied to a symbol of submissive womanhood. But with custom comes assurance that grows with affirmation. After the furor of the 1960's and fickleness of the 70's, I came to see the wisdom of our elders' beliefs -- that wearing fine clothes, from head to toe, was how mortals showed reverence to God.”

Could it be that the interpretation held by the whole church since its inception has just become unpopular and women are unwilling to wear a veil because they know full well it symbolizes submission to men? Would they rather worship without it? How this new interpretation became the standard must be explained not from our rich church history, because it stands opposed to it. It cannot come from the passage because it cannot sustain it. It cannot be from the symbolism because it distorts it. It must come from society. Our culture has changed the Scripture. For all those who claim that the veil was a cultural necessity only in Corinth, it appears that the veil is now a disgrace to be avoided. We are told the veil symbolizes nothing, yet apparently it symbolizes everything the Bible claims it does.