

Head-Coverings and Long Hair

Description

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by Trent Wilde

On several occasions, I have been asked about the propriety of men wearing head-coverings while teaching or praying. Some think that such practices are contrary to the instructions of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. Some also take Paul, in this same passage, to be requiring women to wear head-coverings while praying and prophesying along with condemning long hair on men. In the Q&A below, I address all three aspects. The question is specifically about male head-coverings, but in order to answer it, it was necessary to also explain head-coverings for women and long hair on men. I hope it is helpful for you all.

QUESTION: Is it proper for men, while teaching and praying, to wear any sort of covering on their heads?

ANSWER: Good question! First I want to provide some of the scriptural basis for the practice of men wearing head-coverings while engaged in sacred tasks:

6 You are to put the turban on his head and put the holy crown on the turban. – Exodus 29:6

9 And he put the turban on his head and he put the hold plate, the holy crown to the front of the turban, as the Lord commanded Moses. – Leviticus 8:9

6 And Moses said to Aaron, and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his sons, “Do not uncover your heads and do not tear your clothes so that you do not die and so that wrath does not come upon the whole congregation; but let your brothers, the whole house of Israel, mourn the burning which the Lord has kindled. – Leviticus 10:6

10 He that is the high priest among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil was poured, and who is consecrated to put on the

garments, must not uncover his head, nor tear his clothes. – Leviticus 21:10

¹⁵ But the priests, the Levites, the children of Zadok, who kept the charge of my sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from me, they shall come near to me to minister to me, and they shall stand before me to offer to me the fat and the blood, says the Lord God: ¹⁶ They shall enter into my sanctuary, and they shall come near to my table, to minister to me; they will keep my charge.

¹⁷ And it will come to pass, that when they enter in at the gates of the inner court, they shall be clothed with linen garments; and no wool shall come upon them while they minister in the gates of the inner court, and within. ¹⁸ They shall have linen turbans on their heads, and linen undergarments on their loins; they must not bind themselves with any thing that causes sweat. – Ezekiel 44:15-18

There are several important points brought out in the above passages. First, it is plain to see that the priests were commanded to wear turbans on their heads. This applied even to the high priest who was commanded not to uncover his head. It does not seem that God would command this of his most honored people if the act were somehow inherently disgraceful. Also, the fact that uncovering one's head is associated with tearing one's garments in Lev. 10:6 and 21:10 shows that it was understood as being a similar sort of action. In other words, uncovering one's head was understood as expressing grief and a “woe is me” state of mind. The passage from Ezekiel 44 is included here to show that the image of men wearing head coverings is still a positive representation of God's people at the end times since that is the time concerning which Ezekiel there prophesied – the time of the premillennial kingdom.

It is not just priests who covered their heads either – other men of God did as well. Here are some statements to that effect:

When Elijah sought God in the mountains, a devouring fire swept by; but God was not in the flame. A tempest rose, the thunder rolled, and the lightnings flashed; but God was not in all this. Then there came a still, small voice, and the prophet covered his head before the presence of the Lord. – *Gospel Workers*, p. 266.

30 And David went up to the Mount of Olives and he wept as he went, and had his head covered, and he went barefoot: and all the people who were with him also had their heads covered, and they were weeping as they went up. 31 And one told David, “Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.” So David said, “O Lord, I ask you, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness.” – 2 Samuel 15:30

Our heavenly Father is never unmindful of those whom sorrow has touched. When David went up the Mount Olivet, “and wept as he went up, and had his head covered, and he went barefoot” (2 Samuel 15:30), the Lord was looking pityingly upon him. David was clothed in sackcloth, and his conscience was scourging him. The outward signs of humiliation testified of his contrition. In tearful, heartbroken utterances he presented his case to God, and the Lord did not forsake His servant. Never was David dearer to the heart of Infinite Love than when, conscience-smitten, he fled for his life from his enemies, who had been stirred to rebellion by his own son. The Lord says, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.” Revelation 3:19. Christ lifts up the contrite heart and refines the mourning soul until it becomes His abode. – *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessings*, p. 11

I was instructed by the case of David who had through his own course of action forfeited the favor of God, and like a funeral procession the uncrowned and unsandaled king, with head covered and eyes dim with tears, with his little handful of adherents, was pursuing his way along the precipitous road by the Mount of Olives. Yet God had His eye upon him every moment. His own course of action had brought the sure result. He had lost his self-respect and self-control. The man was humbled and mournful, but in his humiliation David, before the whole universe of heaven, was never more tenderly regarded than in this hour of his adversity. Never does he stand greater with God than when wrestling with the storm. He was cut to the quick with the change that had taken place, suspicioned, and not only [had] to bear that of which he was guilty, but much more of the sayings and imputations of those who were ready to say, Report and we will report it. – *Letter 61*, 1890

We are also admonished to, at times, come before God with heads covered. Ellen White wrote the following to a man referred to as “Brother Church”:

Let those who suppose that they have penetrating minds seek to realize as they open the Word of God that they are in the presence of the Majesty of heaven; let them cover their heads before God, and bow their knees in admiration and awe; and with the docility of a little child, let their will be brought into entire submission to the will of God, and let them then come to the searching of the Scriptures. Let those who would know the truth realize that Christ is by their side. Let them come with a willingness to have their ideas corrected by the word of prophecy. Come with a determination to yield anything and everything that cannot be substantiated by the Holy Oracles. – *Letter 8a*, 1890

Now, all of this is positive testimony to the propriety of men wearing head coverings. There is, though, one passage in Scripture which has been used to counteract that idea. As I’m sure you know, it is 1 Corinthians 11:4, which says, “Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered disgraces his head.” There are several questions which must be asked about this passage in light of all the other Scriptures we have seen. Does this passage undo or discredit all the other passages which seem to paint the opposite picture? Are not the writings of Paul to be tested against the prophets before him rather than vice versa? Would conforming one’s actions and beliefs to the seemingly obvious meaning of this verse (as against the at least equally obvious meaning of the other verses) not be a violation of the principle to go with the weight of evidence?

There are some today who would reject the present message because it condones the wearing of head coverings by males, which they take to be in contradiction to the instructions given through a past prophet (Paul). Yet, they do not realize that if they were to operate by that same principle and interpret Paul as they do, they would have rejected him if they were around in his day because of his apparent contradiction with the example and instruction of the prophets before him on this very point.

One might think that they can avoid the apparent discrepancy between this statement by Paul and the passages in Leviticus and elsewhere by pointing out that 1 Corinthians specifies the restriction on male head coverings to be only while praying or prophesying. Interestingly though, all of the examples we have of the men of God covering their heads is while praying or prophesying. David and Elijah were both praying, and the priests both prayed and prophesied through enacting the types of the sanctuary service. To give a more specific example – no one acquainted with the truth for our time denies that the rituals on the Day of Atonement were prophetic of the final cleansing of the heavenly temple and of God’s people. Yet, the high priest was specifically commanded to have his head covered while performing those prophetic types, which

included confessing the iniquities of the children of Israel over the head of the live goat – an act which most would consider to be a form of “praying.”

4 He must put on the holy linen tunic, and he must have the linen leggings on his body, and is to wrap himself with a linen sash and wrap his head with a linen turban. These are holy garments, so he must wash his body in water and put them on. – Leviticus 16:4

21 Aaron is to lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, and thus he is to put them on the head of the goat, and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a fit man. – Leviticus 16:21

The law of Moses, the prophecies of Ezekiel, and the examples of David and Elijah all clearly condone, and even sometimes demand, the wearing of head-coverings by males while praying and prophesying, at least on certain occasions.

While we could just leave the matter at this and encourage people to go with the weight of evidence, we feel that the statement in 1 Corinthians requires a fuller explanation, especially seeing as we believe Paul to be an Inspired messenger.

At this point, it is worth reminding ourselves of a certain undeniable fact; namely, that there are certain things in Paul's letters which are hard to understand.

3:15 And regard the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as also our dear brother Paul wrote to you, according to the wisdom given to him, 3:16 speaking of these things in all his letters. Some things in these letters are hard to understand, things the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they also do to the rest of the Scriptures. – 2 Peter 3:15-16

Perhaps the most common way to misconstrue the letters of Paul is to take them as speaking against the teachings of the other Scriptures. This is done both by those who want to disregard the law of God and upload their interpretation of the letters of Paul in its place and also by those who reject the Inspiration of Paul, asserting that he contradicted the teachings of Moses, the prophets, and even of Jesus. Since the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11 which takes Paul to be speaking against male head coverings is just such a case, we ought to be all the more diligent to question whether that interpretation is correct.

To be clear, we do not assert that the words, “Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered disgraces his head,” mean anything other than what they plainly say. We do, however, believe that they are not an expression of the teachings of Paul. Among all the letters of Paul, 1 Corinthians is perhaps the most difficult to understand. One reason for this is that 1 Corinthians is a reply to a letter from people at Corinth (1 Cor. 7:1) – a letter which we do not have. Since we do not have the letter, we are unaware of all the issues going on among the believers in Corinth at the time. Our situation is not that different from one trying to understand a telephone conversation while only hearing one side.

From time to time throughout the letter, Paul refers to the statements and understandings of those whom he is replying to and then responds to their teachings. For example,

Now concerning the things you wrote to me about: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” 2 Nevertheless, to avoid immorality, every man should have relations with his own wife, and every woman with her own husband. – 1 Corinthians 7:1-2

The fact that the phrase, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman," occurs in this letter of Paul, does not mean it represents his view. Since he responds to that view in the next verse, beginning with the word, "Nevertheless," it is apparent that it is one with which he did not wholly agree. This formula of quote-response can be found throughout 1 Corinthians. In the case where a thesis is stated being immediately followed by a responding antithesis, it is plain that the thesis is the view of someone else and that the antithesis is Paul's response. Most relevant for our purposes here is the fact that this formula is evident in 1 Corinthians 11.

In 1 Corinthians 11:5 we find the statement, "any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered disgraces her head." Later in this same letter, we find the statement that, "women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak. Rather, let them be in submission, as in fact the law says. If they want to find out about something, they should ask their husbands at home, because it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church" (1 Corinthians 14:34-35). One might reasonably ask, "Which is it? Are women not permitted to speak in the church, or are they permitted to speak so long as they wear a head covering?" What is evident is that it would be entirely self-contradictory for Paul to be promoting both ideas. The more reasonable conclusion is that, in at least one of these passages, Paul is replying to the ideas of others. We believe that the evidence heavily weighs toward the conclusion that Paul is replying to the thoughts of others in both passages. For evidence that this is the case in the 1 Corinthians 14 passage, please see our videos *Is it a Shame for Women to Speak? 1 Cor. 14:34-35* and *Oral Law Silencing Women 1 Cor. 14:34-35* and also our article *God Ordains Women*, pp. 27-29.

Now, to focus on 1 Corinthians 11 itself – there are several indications that this passage includes the ideas of others followed by a response from Paul. Starting in verse 3, we find the beginning of a thesis, followed by an antithesis starting in verse 11.

Thesis

11:3 But I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. 11:4 Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered disgraces his head. 11:5 But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered disgraces her head, for it is one and the same thing as having a shaved head. 11:6 For if a woman will not cover her head, she should cut off her hair. But if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, she should cover her head. 11:7 For a man should not have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God. But the woman is the glory of the man. 11:8 For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. 11:9 Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for man. 11:10 For this reason a woman should have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

Antithesis

11:11 *Nevertheless*, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 11:12 For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman. But all things come from God. 11:13 Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 11:14 Does not nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace for him, 11:15 but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 11:16 If anyone intends to quarrel about this, we have no other practice, nor do the churches of God.

This formula itself, marked by the transition "Nevertheless" is strong evidence that the section from verses 3-10 does not represent the teaching of Paul. Added to this is the fact that that section contains elements which contradict the "Old Testament" Scriptures and which are immediately contradicted by Paul in verses 11-16.

The first apparent contradiction between the passage from verse 3-10 and the Hebrew Scriptures is the teaching against males wearing head coverings in verse 4. Verses 5-6 teach that women are not to pray to God without having their heads covered. While I don't know of any pre-Pauline Scripture which commands women to pray uncovered, and in that sense those verses do not directly contradict prior Scripture, there is also nothing in prior Scripture which hints at the idea that women should have their heads covered. I doubt any

would think that Eve had to pray to God with her head covered, especially since the passages in Genesis say they were naked (Gen. 3:7). We mention this to say that there doesn't seem to be inherent shame in a woman praying with her head uncovered. It evidently wasn't important enough for God to bring up from the time of Eve until the time of Paul, for we have no record of such an instruction during that time. Moreover, Paul didn't teach that such a thing is necessary, either, as we are in the process of seeing. Matters become even more apparent when we consider the idea set forth in verses 7-9. To quote those verses again:

1:7 For a man should not have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God. But the woman is the glory of the man. 11:8 For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. 11:9 Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for man. 11:10 For this reason a woman should have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

Notice that the purpose of these verses is to argue men are not to cover their heads and women are to cover their heads *because* men are the image and glory of God, *but* women (in contrast with men) are evidently not – they are only the glory of the man. This argument is bolstered by emphasizing that men came first and that thus women were made for men – not the other way around. Not only does this passage directly contradict Genesis, but it is also immediately contradicted by Paul. First, the passage in Genesis:

1:26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth." 1:27 God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. – Genesis 1:26-27

This declares not that men alone were made in the image of God, but that both men and women were made in God's image. Women were not made for men, they were made to be representatives of God in the world and to have dominion over the earth and everything in it just as were men – they are equal, not one being lower than the other. This is essentially Paul's thrust at the beginning of his response:

11:11 *Nevertheless*, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 11:12 For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman. But all things come from God.

Paul here argues that even though it is true, in a sense, that women came from men, it is equally true that men come from women and we are thus dependent on each other. Further, he argues that it doesn't really matter who came from who anyway, since we all come from God.

The next few verses suffer badly from mistranslation. The way it stands in most traditional translations is as follows:

11:13 Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 11:14 Does not nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace for him, 11:15 but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

The supposed logic of this translation appears quite odd. The way the sentences are structured makes it appear that the answer to the first question is supposed to be, "No." But, is there anything in nature or in Scripture which would lead one to believe that it is not proper for women to pray to God with their heads uncovered? Also odd, is the idea that Paul would actually ask this question to people who, according to the traditional view, he is having to convince that it is not proper for women to pray uncovered. In other words, if he is having to convince them, it doesn't seem they would naturally answer, "No." Odder still is the second question of this translation. What in nature teaches that it is a shame for men to have long hair? Certainly not lions and horses, or males of other sorts of animals. The nature of humanity also does not teach this since men's hair naturally grows just as long as does women's hair. Many cultures, including Chinese, Native American, Corinthian, and even Jewish, actually considered long hair on males to be an honor. Here are some passages of Scripture which speak positively of male long hair:

6:5 " 'All the days of the vow of his separation no razor may be used on his head until the time is fulfilled for which he separated himself to the Lord. He will be holy, and he must let the locks of hair on his head grow long.

6:6 " 'All the days that he separates himself to the Lord he must not contact a dead body. 6:7 He must not defile himself even for his father or his mother or his brother or his sister if they die, because the separation for his God is on his head. 6:8 All the days of his separation he must be holy to the Lord.

6:9 " 'If anyone dies very suddenly beside him and he defiles his consecrated head, then he must shave his head on the day of his purification—on the seventh day he must shave it.

6:18 " 'Then the Nazarite must shave his consecrated head at the entrance to the tent of meeting and must take the hair from his consecrated head and put it on the fire where the peace offering is burning. – Numbers 6:5-9, 18

13:5 Look, you will conceive and have a son. You must never cut his hair, for the child will be dedicated to God from birth. He will begin to deliver Israel from the power of the Philistines."

16:17 Finally he told her his secret. He said to her, "My hair has never been cut, for I have been dedicated to God from the time I was conceived. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me; I would become weak, and be just like all other men." – Judges 13:5; 16:17

1:11 She made a vow saying, "O Lord of hosts, if you will look with compassion on the suffering of your female servant, remembering me and not forgetting your servant, and give a male child to your servant, then I will dedicate him to the Lord all the days of his life. His hair will never be cut." – 1 Samuel 1:11

14:25 Now in all Israel everyone acknowledged that there was no man as handsome as Absalom. From the sole of his feet to the top of his head he was perfect in appearance. 14:26 When he would shave his head—at the end of every year he used to shave his head, for it grew heavy upon him and he would shave it—he used to weigh the hair of his head at three pounds according to the king's weight. – 2 Samuel 14:25-26

Absalom had long hair and was considered, "perfect in appearance" "from the sole of his feet to the top of his head." Samuel and Samson were Nazarites, which Numbers reveals to be a high honor. Nazarites were the only non-priests who were given the privilege of directly interacting with the altar of burnt offering. What they were permitted to do was to put their hair on the altar, signifying that it was acceptable in the eyes of the Lord. The head of the Nazarite, with its long hair, was considered consecrated to God. Surely, Paul was familiar with these Scriptures. In fact, we know he was, for he himself took a Nazarite vow and thus had long hair, if even for a time.

18:18 Paul, after staying many more days in Corinth, said farewell to the brothers and sailed away to Syria accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrrea because he had made a vow. – Acts 18:18

The only Scriptural vow with hair cutting involved is the Nazarite vow. That vow requires the individual to grow their hair long, only cutting it at the end of their vow. Paul's participation in this vow, along with the other pro-long hair Scriptures, makes it highly unlikely that he would ever say something like, "Does not nature itself teach you that it is a shame for a man to have long hair?" The fact is, nature does not teach any such thing, nor does Scripture, and neither did Paul. This all goes to show that there is something wrong with how these verses in 1 Corinthians 11 have commonly been translated and understood.

So, what is Paul really saying here? Well, one of the most important things to realize is that the translation of these verses as questions is not something that has been determined by the Greek text. It is not that it is grammatically impossible to translate them as questions, but that is not the only option, nor is it the most likely. Some scholars, such as Katherine Bushnell and William Welty, have noted that the sentences are not really questions and have offered better translations which avoid the illogic of the more popular translations. The translation below is more in line with their translations:

11:11 *Nevertheless*, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 11:12 For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman, but all things come from God – judge this matter among yourselves. 11:13 It is perfectly fine for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered. 11:14 And there is not anything in the nature of hair which teaches you that if a man wears it long, it is a disgrace for him, 11:15 while if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her, for her hair is given to her instead of a veil. 11:16 If anyone intends to quarrel about this, let him know that we have no such custom, neither do the churches of God.

This translation is far more internally consistent, more logical in its flow, and makes better sense of Paul's teaching and practice in the light of other information known about him, including his attitude toward the Scriptures which came before him.

While the question was only about male head-coverings, answering it necessarily involves answering questions about head-coverings for women and long hair on men since they are all part of the same discussion in 1 Corinthians 11. In light of all the above information, we can see that the idea that Paul was against (1) men wearing head-coverings while praying and/or prophesying, (2) women not wearing head-coverings while praying and/or prophesying, and (3) men having long hair, is simply not true. Long hair on men and male head-coverings both have an overwhelming and positive Scriptural basis, though neither are commanded for all men in all circumstances. There is likewise no command for women to either wear, or to not wear, head-coverings, though it is an idea which Paul addressed, but concerning which he said, "we have no such custom."

Regardless of how different this information may be from how you may have understood this subject in the past, we ask that our readers ever remember to consider the weight of evidence and to be willing to follow the truth, judging all things according to reality rather than by our preconceptions.

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