



The Covering of Women's Heads in Modern Christianity: Implications for Worship and Discipleship

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Abstract

This paper examined the practice of women's head covering in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and explored its implications for Christian worship and discipleship in contemporary contexts. Drawing on biblical, historical and extra-biblical sources, the study demonstrates that veiling practices in the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds were primarily socio-cultural rather than theological in nature. Paul's instructions, therefore, addressed culturally specific symbols of honour and shame rather than establishing a universal or timeless mandate for all Christian women. Imposing head coverings as a requirement for participation in worship, preaching or leadership risks misrepresenting Paul's original intent, creating unnecessary barriers to women's discipleship and limiting their engagement in ministry. Furthermore, strict enforcement of such practices may alienate congregants, particularly in cross-cultural or multicultural settings, and hinder the church's inclusive mission. This study concludes that head covering should not function as a doctrinal test of faithfulness or as a prerequisite for participation in the Great Commission. Instead, churches are encouraged to emphasize broader biblical principles of modesty, respect and propriety while cultivating inclusive worship environments that enable both women and men to participate fully in discipleship and ministry.

Keywords: Women; veil; covering; head; discipleship; implication.

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Introduction

The question of women's head covering in Christian worship as addressed by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 continues to generate considerable debates among scholars, pastors and Christian communities (Blomberg, 2021; Bock, 2006). While some demonstrations maintain strict adherence to veiling practices, others interpret Paul's instructions as culturally specific and no longer obligatory for contemporary believers (Payne, 2019; Ciampa & Rosner, 2010). This divergence reflects broader tensions between historical-cultural fidelity and the application of biblical principles in modern contexts (Rodriguez et al., 2024). The discussion is not merely theoretical; it has direct implications for women's participation in worship, ministry and discipleship. In some church communities, particularly within parts of Sub-

Saharan Africa, such as Greater Equatoria Field of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Sudan, women are discouraged or prohibited from public ministry, praying, preaching or leading unless they wear a head covering (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist, 2005). Such cultural expectations can create barriers to participation, marginalize women and undermine the legitimacy of female ministry.

The controversy surrounding women's head coverings in Corinth emerged from the intersection of diverse cultural expectations in a cosmopolitan society (Winter, 2003). Corinth was a port city and a commercial hub; it attracted people from varied cultural, religious and social backgrounds. The influx of Greco-Roman, Jewish and local traditions created a complex milieu where social norms regarding honor, shame and propriety were highly visible and

influential (Achtemeier et al., 2001a; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1973-79). Paul's letters addressed practical questions regarding the life and witness of the Christian community. His counsel regarding women's head covering was situated within these socio-cultural dynamics rather than representing a universal theological mandate (Blomberg, 2021; Payne, 2019). Scholars argue that Paul's emphasis on head coverings primarily aimed to maintain social respectability and communal cohesion, reflecting sensitivity to local custom rather than prescribing a timeless rule (Ciampa & Rosner, 2010; Bock, 2006).

Discipleship, the process of growing in faith and actively participating in the mission of the church, can be profoundly affected by how communities interpret and enforce head covering practices. When veiling becomes a litmus test for spiritual authenticity or access to leadership opportunities, it may discourage women from pursuing ministry, attending church consistently or fully engaging in spiritual formation (Ciampa & Rosner, 2010). Rodriguez et al. (2024) note that some congregants perceived the absence of a head covering as a sign of irreverence or moral laxity, reinforcing social pressures that can alienate believers and hinder community cohesion. Conversely, understanding Paul's instructions in their original cultural context allows contemporary churches to distinguish between culturally conditioned practices and enduring principles relevant to Christian life today (Blomberg, 2021; Payne, 2019).

This study examines the biblical, historical and cultural dimensions of women's head covering in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and explores its implications for contemporary Christian worship and discipleship. Using a multi-disciplinary approach, it integrates exegetical analysis of Pauline text, historical research on Greco-Roman and Near Eastern dress customs and contemporary theological perspectives on gender and ministry (Bock, 2006; Blomberg, 2021). The study addresses three core questions:

Covering of the Head in the Old Testament

The earliest explicit references to veiling in the Old Testament occur in patriarchal narratives, where women's use of coverings appears primarily as a sign of modesty and marital propriety rather than religious observance. For example, in Genesis 24:65, Rebekah veils herself upon meeting Isaac, signalling her modesty and recognition of her marital roles (Nichol et al., 1978). Similarly, Tamar uses a veil to

conceal her identity when confronting Judah (Gen. 38:14-15), a gesture that is more strategic and social than devotional. These examples indicate that veiling functions in a particular social and cultural context, reflecting family honour, social decorum and gender roles rather than expressing a theological mandate imposed by God (Sarna, 1989). Scholars emphasize that these narratives demonstrate the socio-cultural flexibility of dress codes and underscore the significance of the context in interpreting ancient practices (Fleming, 2004).

Head coverings appear more formally in priestly and ceremonial regulations. In Exodus 39: 28, priests wore turbans as part of their sacred attire, which symbolized honour and sanctity in the service of the temple. These coverings served a functional and symbolic purpose within ritual contexts, distinguishing sacred personnel from the general populace and underscoring the importance of visible markers of divine service (Levine, 2000). Likewise, prophets and leaders occasionally covered their heads to express mourning or shame, as seen in 2 Samuel 15:30 and Jeremiah 14:4. In these instances, as argued by Walton (2001), head covering communicate specific social or emotional meanings, demonstrating that attire in the Old Testaments could carry symbolic weight beyond mere practicality, but such symbolism was situational and not universally applied to all women.

Other passages further illustrate the cultural and social dimensions of veiling. Numbers 5:18 describes a ritual in which the hair of a suspected adulteress is loosened or uncovered to symbolize dishonour. This practice indicates that hair exposure could serve as a sign of shame whereas covering the head might signify propriety or respect. Importantly, this context demonstrates that the regulation of hair and veiling was deeply intertwined with social conventions, honour and communal perception rather than serving as a direct command for worship (Sarna, 1989; Brueggemann, 1997). The implication is that head coverings were markers of social status, marital fidelity and communal respectability rather than theological obligations imposed uniformly upon women in worship settings.

Generally, the Old Testament portrays head coverings as versatile symbols with multiple layers of meaning, including modesty, marital propriety, honour, mourning and ritual purity. While the use of veils and turbans conveyed social and religious

significance in specific contexts, there is no evidence of a universal, binding requirement for women to cover their heads in worship. The examples of Rebekah, Tamar and the priestly regulations collectively indicate that head coverings were primarily socio-cultural practices, shaped by community norms, gender roles and ritual propriety. Consequently, any application of the Old Testament veiling practices to contemporary Christian worship must carefully consider the historical and cultural context rather than assuming a timeless theological mandate (Nichol et al., 1978; Brueggemann, 1997; Sarna, 1989).

Covering Heads in Greco-Roman Culture

The Church at Corinth existed within a deeply complex Greco-Roman environment in which outward appearance, including head-covering practices, carried powerful social meaning rooted in honour, shame, gender and marital status. In the Roman Empire, it was customary for married women to cover their heads or wear veils when appearing in public, often as a visible sign of modesty and chastity (Winter, 2003). For a married woman to appear unveiled could signal sexual availability or immodesty, potentially damaging her social reputation and that of her husband. The veil thus functioned as a public marker distinguishing married women from single women or prostitutes.

In the Greek component of this culture milieu, the situation was more varied about equally meaningful. Across different periods, the outward appearance and hair practices of women changed according to fashion, status and social conventions. Many women wore their hair in ribbons, coils or braids and used outer garments as shawls or mantles that could be drawn over the head when outside or in the presence of unrelated men. The himation served a dual function: as ordinary clothing for warmth, modesty and when drawn over the head, as a makeshift veil, offering a flexible head-covering that underscored social respectability and separation from the male public sphere (Llewellyn-Jones, 2003).

In Roman Religion and ritual, too, head covering veils mantles or capes, operated as markers of status, piety or ritual propriety, distinguishing between sacred and profane spaces or activities (Achte-meier et al., 2001b). Jewish and early Christian believers in such contexts also navigated overlapping cultural expectations: while some Jewish men prayed with covered heads, Christian

women in cosmopolitan centres like Corinth came from mixed backgrounds often blending Greco-Roman and Jewish customs (cf. historical-sociological reconstructions of Corinth).

Given Corinth's multicultural character—shaped by Roman colonial values, Greek social conventions, Jewish religious traditions and the presence of freed slaves and immigrants, norms surrounding veiling and head covering were neither uniform nor uncontested. Head coverings functioned as socially coded symbols whose meanings varied across ethnic, religious and class boundaries, signalling issues of honour, sexual propriety, marital status and social respectability. In such a context, the act of veiling or unveiling could be interpreted in conflicting ways, making practices of dress a site of negotiation and dispute within the Corinthian community.

In this context, a woman's decision to cover or uncover her head signified far more than personal preference; it communicated marital status, moral respectability, social class and communal honour. As one sociocultural study of the ancient Mediterranean notes, the female veil functioned as a social mechanism to restrict female visibility, regulate gesture, and underscore distinctions between genders within a male-defined social order (Levine, 2000).

Thus, when apostle Paul addressed head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, his counsel must be read against this backdrop: a world where clothing and head coverings were socially loaded, symbolic and variable across ethnic, cultural and status lines. To interpret Paul's instructions as a universal or timeless rule, divorced from the social context, risks ignoring the significance that veiling held in terms of honour, shame and social identity in the first-century Mediterranean culture. In short, head covering was a culturally conditioned social marker; its meaning was shaped by local conventions rather than fixed theological principles.

Implications in Contemporary Christianity

The practice of head covering in contemporary Christianity can hinder women's participation in worship and discipleship when it is treated as a mandatory requirement. First, making head coverings a prerequisite for women's participation risks marginalizing women, limiting their involvement in discipleship and misrepresenting Paul's pastoral intent. Second, in multicultural congregations, enforcing veiling practices may

isolate those unfamiliar with their historical or cultural significance, thereby restricting full and rightful participation in ministry. Third, contemporary young Christian women who have not been formed within traditions of head covering may experience such enforcement as alienating, perceiving it as a test of faithfulness rather than an expression of worship. Therefore, Paul's counsel on head covering should be understood as a call to balance enduring biblical principles with cultural awareness, ensuring that women's participation in worship and discipleship remains unrestricted and impartial.

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