

# Understanding the Covering

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As we've all heard before, one of the most important things that we must do in our study of the Bible is to consider the context. In fact, every Scripture has not just one but several contexts: the context of the verses immediately around it, the context of its book of the Bible, the context of the entire Bible, and the context of the time in which it was written. If we wish to understand this last context, we must often bring in information from outside of Scripture.

One of the places where this is most relevant is in our study of foot-washing. After all, in John 13, Jesus seems quite direct when He tells His disciples that they need to wash one another's feet as He washed their feet. However, I don't think that anyone here believes that we should wash each other's feet today, and we don't hold that belief because we understand that Jesus was addressing the circumstances of a particular time. During our Lord's ministry, practically everyone wore sandals, and the streets of the towns where He preached were uniformly filthy. As a result, it was customary for the master of a house to order one of his slaves to wash the feet of his guests. Jesus, then, wasn't setting up some arcane ritual. He was instructing His disciples to care for one another's needs, even when that care involved tasks that were disgusting or demeaning. Today, we obey Jesus' command by doing the same thing in a different way.

It's equally important to remember the historical context when we come to the subject of the covering. As is true in the case of foot-washing, the Scripture contains what appears to be a clear instruction on the subject. 1 Corinthians 11 says that women ought to pray with their heads covered, so our women today ought to pray with their heads covered, right? However, what this approach to the covering possesses in simplicity, it lacks in accuracy. The context of the passage leads us to a very different conclusion. Let's see how this works as we try to understand the covering.

## God's Rule and Its Application.

Let's begin our study of this issue with Paul's general statement of **GOD'S RULE**. We find this in 1 Corinthians 11:1-3. The third verse here is the one that gets to the heart of the matter. Here, Paul lays out a hierarchy, a God-given definition of different roles in life. At the top of the hierarchy comes God the Father, then Christ, then the husband, and finally, the wife. In the family, women are not supposed to contest the leadership role of their husbands.

In Scripture, Paul often makes statements like this, whether they concern husbands and wives, masters and servants, or parents and children, and he was compelled to do so by the revolutionary nature of Christianity. Once Christians learned that they were freed from their sins and could share in a new relationship with God, many of them naturally began to think that Christ had abolished all of the old rules. They wanted to turn the spiritual revolution into a physical revolution. However, that sort of rebellion was displeasing to God and dangerous to those who engaged in it. Instead, Paul affirms that all the old social relationships continue, and even today, we must not rebel against our situation.

We see **PAUL'S APPLICATION** of this rule in 1 Corinthians 11:4-6. In order that everyone would be reminded of the Christian's responsibility to live within the social order, Paul gives two commands. Men must not pray or prophesy with their heads covered, and women must not pray or prophesy with their heads uncovered. First of all, we must recognize that this passage speaks of an artificial covering, not a natural covering. All her life, my mother never wore the covering, and when I asked her about it once, she said that she believed her hair was given to her for a covering, as in v. 15 a little further down in the chapter. As much as I respect my mother's Scriptural scholarship, she was wrong about that one. In vs. 5-6 here, Paul describes not two possible alternatives for a woman's head, but three. The first is to be covered, the second is to be shaved, and the third is not to be shaved, but still to be uncovered. In other words, it was possible for a woman to have long hair and still be uncovered, so the passage is about something more than just hair.

Before we go on, let's note the emergence of something that's going to be a theme. Paul says that if a woman is to be uncovered, then she might as well be shaved, and he expects his readers to understand that because a shaven-headed woman is a disgraceful thing, so is an uncovered woman. Today, we don't naturally get that. If we want to make sense out of it, we have to turn to the historical record, which tells us that in first-century Corinth, female slaves were required to have their heads shaved. It was a sign of their dishonor and their social ranking as the lowest of the low. What Paul is telling his readers is that if they're going to break convention, they might as well identify themselves as slaves too. The point here, though, is that if the women of Corinth wanted to be decent, they needed to artificially cover themselves.

## The Historical Context.

The rule for the women of that first-century church could not be clearer. However, the question remains whether that rule should govern Christian women today, and we can only answer that question by learning from **THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT**. As we said earlier, the rule that Paul is enforcing here is that the husband is the head of the wife. This has been the rule for mankind from the beginning, since Genesis 3. The question is whether that rule has

led God to require men in all times and places to pray with their heads uncovered, and women to pray with their heads covered. If we don't see people throughout the Scripture following Paul's rule in 1 Corinthians 11, we can safely conclude that Paul was writing to people in a particular social context. He was not laying down a law that applies to everyone.

In fact, nowhere else in Scripture but 1 Corinthians 11 do we see the righteous following the 1 Corinthians 11 rule. To illustrate this point, let's look first of all at men who prayed with a covering on their heads. We find a clear example of this in 2 Samuel 15:30-31. David is traveling along with his head covered in mourning, he asks God to defeat the counsel of Ahithophel, and God later responds favorably to that prayer even though David prayed it with his head covered. We see another instance of this in 1 Kings 19:13-14. When God's presence appears before Elijah, Elijah wraps his face, and so necessarily his whole head, in his mantle. God doesn't strike him down for his presumption. Instead, the two of them have a conversation. Clearly, Old Testament men did not feel required to pray with their head uncovered.

There are a couple of places in Scripture where we see Old Testament women covering their heads. However, they don't do it in preparation for prayer. They do it in preparation for sex. The first place where this appears is in Genesis 24:64-67. Rebekah has had no problems with riding with Abraham's servant for hundreds of miles with her face uncovered, but as soon as she sees Isaac, she veils herself. Immediately after this, Isaac takes her into his mother's tent and claims her as his wife by having relations with her. We see an even clearer example of veiling as a signal of sexual readiness in Genesis 38:14-15. Tamar veils herself, and as soon as Judah sees that she has veiled herself, he assumes that she is a prostitute. This seems very strange to us because women in our culture signal sexual availability by removing clothing, not by putting it on, but that is definitely the way they did things 4000 years ago. Now, if that's the cultural message that Rebekah and Tamar sent by putting on a covering, there's no way in the world that they put on a covering before they worshiped God. That would have been wildly inappropriate, to say the least. When we consider the activities of these Biblical men and women, it becomes clear that Paul is writing to a particular setting, not expressing a general rule.

Paul's reasons for handing down this rule to the Corinthians become clearer when we consider the cult of **DIONYSUS**. Dionysus was the Greek god of wine, and he and his worship had a lot of surface similarities to Christ and Christianity. Dionysus cultists believed that Dionysus had died and been raised from the dead, that his spirit inspired them, and that he wanted them to share in a ritual meal of bread and wine. These similarities would have made it easy for worshipers of Dionysus to become Christians, and Paul likely converted many of them in Corinth.

However, just like new Christians who come from other religious backgrounds bring baggage with them today, those Dionysus followers of 2000 years ago would have showed up with a lot of baggage too. Christ did not stand for the overturning of the social order, but Dionysus did. Dionysus himself was often described as "womanish", and female devotees, called maenads, played the leading part in his worship. When these maenads were possessed by the god, they lost all self-control, killed and ate animals with their bare hands, and engaged in orgiastic sex. The way that they signified they entered this crazed, god-controlled state was by removing their head covering and unbinding their hair.

So, then, when women came out of Dionysus worship, became Christians, and uncovered their heads when praying or prophesying, it wasn't some random act. Instead, they were importing the worship of their old god into the worship of their new one. By throwing off the covering, they were throwing off every social convention too. It's obvious why Paul would have had a problem with that. These women were taking Christ, who stands for decency and order, and turning Him into a symbol of chaos and licentiousness. All through 1 Corinthians, from the problems with the Lord's Supper to the chaotic assemblies of 1 Corinthians 14, we see Paul's struggles with these problems, and the first part of 1 Corinthians 11 is just another symptom of the same spiritual disease. Paul forbade the Corinthian women to remove their coverings because of all that covering removal stood for to them. They needed to follow the social order, not reject it.

### **Our Application.**

From this rather involved study, there are several **APPLICATIONS** that we need to make. First of all, each one of us must **FOLLOW OUR CONSCIENCE**. I don't believe that there is anything in Scripture that requires women to wear the covering, but if there are women here who disagree, I encourage them to wear it. By and large, most women here don't, but if you believe that you ought to, don't let anyone else deter you. God expects us not only to be faithful to His word, but to be faithful to our own consciences, and if we believe something is wrong, to us it is indeed sin.

Second, so far as we are able, we should **OBEY SOCIETY'S RULES**. Christianity is not about acting out in ways that will shock those around us. It's about love and joy and peace in the name of Jesus. Many times, our faith prevents us from following the world, but that's no call to go around raising a stink that Christ doesn't require.

Finally, we should **ACCEPT OUR PLACE**. In Paul's day, it wasn't appropriate for wives to rebel against their husbands, or for servants to rise up against their masters, or for children to throw off the yoke of their parents. All of those things are still inappropriate today. Even if the feminist movement tells us that the family should have two heads like an animal in a roadside freak show, God's expectations have not changed. He has already defined the roles that we must play, and we cannot reject those roles without rejecting Him. He is not a God of conflict, but a God of peace.