



10
QUESTIONS
ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN'S HAIR

10 Frequently Asked Questions

About the Christian's Hair

Paul's teaching on the hair in 1 Corinthians 11 is a highly contested subject. There are generally four different schools of interpretation— 1) Paul's teaching is limited to the 1st century, 2) by covering, Paul was referencing an artificial veil worn on the head, 3) Paul was commanding long hair for women, not to exclude trimming the hair, and 4) Paul was commanding long, uncut hair for women. What follows is a question and answer format intended to address the most frequently asked questions on this subject. The goal is to be concise, comprehensive, honest, and faithful to the word of God.

Q1— Is Paul's teaching about head coverings in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 a culture issue? It's no longer applicable, right?

Many counter cultural teachings in scripture are freely labeled as out of date, irrelevant, limited to the first century, culturally relative, etc. There is no real standard given to determine when Paul or any of the other New Testament writers teach something that is quote, unquote "limited to the first century." However, one thing we can trust in an ever changing world is the unchanging word of God. Isaiah says as much— "The grass withers, the flower

fades, but the word of God stands forever,” (Is. 40:8). It seems Paul combatted the same type of people in his day, people that wanted to write off these sensitive issues. In no other place does he put a stamp of authority on his teachings as he does when writing about men and women’s roles in the church. After commanding that women are to remain silent in the assemblies of the church, he states, “If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of God,” (1 Cor. 14:37). He does something quite similar at 1 Cor. 11:16. “But if anyone wants to argue about this, we have no other custom, nor do the churches of God,” (HCSB). This verse is made simple by reading its parallel verse in 1 Cor. 11:2. The Holy Spirit would not waste precious space within scripture to detail something that is a non-issue. Summing up, the answer is no. Paul’s teachings in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 are not culturally relative or to be left up to the conscience and opinions of each individual.

Q2— When Paul says that a woman is not supposed to pray or prophesy with her head uncovered in 1 Cor. 11:5, is he saying that a woman must wear a cloth, veil, hat, or something similar on her head when worshiping?

1 Corinthians 11:5 (NKJV)

5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved.

It is commonly taught in commentaries of v. 5-6 that when Paul says “let her be covered” he is referring to an artificial covering placed on the head of a woman during worship. This cannot be the intention of this phrase for two reasons.

First, while many commentaries insinuate that the word “veil” is in the text, it is nowhere to be found. Here is what James Burton Coffman says in his commentary on 1 Cor. 11:5:

To suppose that Paul here meant "mantle" or "veil" or any such thing is to import into this text what is not in it. We have seen that he was speaking of "hair" in 1 Corinthians 11:4; and that is exactly what he is speaking of here.

Second, many, many questions about scripture can be solved by a simple word of wisdom, “Keep on reading.” 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is a single unit or block of teaching. Within this unit of teaching, later verses can help explain earlier verses. The following outline of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 should help identify parallels within the unit, and these parallels will help clarify confusing words and verses.

Traditions (v. 2)

Authority & the Godhead (v. 3)

Hair, What to Do With it, and
Consequences (v. 4-6)

Authority & the Godhead (v. 7-12)

Hair, What to Do With it, and
Consequences (v. 13-15)

Traditions (v. 16)

Notice, v. 5 is parallel to v. 15. In v. 5 we learn that a woman should have some kind of covering on her head when she prays or prophesies. When we keep on reading we learn that the specific covering God has in mind is the natural, physical hair on her head,

1 Corinthians 11:15 (NKJV)

15 “But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering.”

God has given every woman a covering: hair. Therefore, she does not need to go to Dollar General and buy a handkerchief to place on her head during worship. At the same time, a woman can affect her hair covering in such a way that it is deemed inadequate by God. This will be revealed in the following questions and answers.

Q3— Is it okay for a woman to trim her hair as long as it remains long?

1 Corinthians 11:14-15 (NKJV)

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 a covering.

This question is often asked due to the common English translation of the phrase “has long hair.” From this rendering, it is sensible to ask what “long” hair means. Is 12 inches considered long? How about waist length hair? Here are a few observations that hopefully make simple what Paul meant by “long hair.”

First, translating from Greek to English can present difficulties. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians originally in Greek and it was translated into English for the first time by William Tyndale in the 1500’s. Even then, the English language has changed tremendously in the last 500 years, and new translations of the Bible continue to be produced every decade to keep the Bible’s language current and understandable. Perhaps you can see how this might make translating 1 Corinthians 11 into English while maintaining the intended meaning of Paul a difficult task.

Second, the phrase “has long hair” in 1 Cor. 11:14 is actually one single word in the Greek (*komao*). That’s right, three English words for one Greek word. Again, this makes translation difficult.

Third, the Greek word translated “has long hair” (*komao*) is a verb rather than a noun. Verbs express action, something you do; nouns express persons, places, things, or ideas. In 1 Cor. 11:14 Paul is talking about what the man *does* with the hair on his head, and in 1 Cor. 11:15 he is talking about what the woman *does* with the hair on her head. Man *is not* supposed to let his hair grow while a woman *is* supposed to let her hair grow. If the woman lets the hair grow like she is supposed to, she will naturally have long hair. Thus, almost all Bible translations say “has long hair” in 1 Cor. 11:14, as this is the usual result of letting the hair grow.

Fourth, the exact phrasing of the word *komao* in 1 Cor. 11:14-15 conveys ongoing action. If 1 Cor. 11:15 was translated as literally as possible it would say this, “But if a woman *keeps on growing the hair long*, it is a glory to her.” One Greek dictionary makes the definition of *komao* as simple as possible for translating into other languages by saying, “In a number of languages it may be necessary to translate *komao* as 'to let one's hair grow long' or 'not to cut one's hair,’” (Louw & Nida’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament). So, in 1 Cor. 11:14 the man is told to

get regular hair cuts, and the woman is told to refrain from getting haircuts. By way of example, my lawn borders a hay field. Throughout the spring, summer, and fall, I cut my lawn once a week. However, during that same time, the hayfield never gets cut until harvest when it gets buzzed you might say. Paul is basically saying the man is the lawn and the woman is the hayfield. This analogy also helps explain what Paul says in 1 Cor. 11:6, “For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered.” Certainly the man who owns the hayfield would be upset if he came to harvest the hay and saw I had trimmed it. He might say, “If you are going to trim it, you might as well cut it right down to the nub!” I believe this captures Paul’s thrust in v. 6.

Fifth, there is no magic ruler to define when a woman’s hair is “long” enough. Those who say a woman can trim her hair as long as it remains “long” have never been able to define what is long hair. A typical response to this problem goes something like, “Well God will have to be the judge of that,” insinuating it is up to the woman’s decision as to how long her hair must remain. In turn I would ask, why would God spend 16 verses instructing men and women how to care for the hair on their head and leave them with no clue as to how long is long, especially if their prayers depend on this matter (see 1 Cor. 11:13). This does not seem logical.

Q4— If Paul is saying a woman must have a covering on her head when she prays (v. 5), and the covering is her natural hair, then what about women who don't have long hair because they cut it off or lost it to chemotherapy? Will their prayers not be heard according to v. 13?

Review the third and fourth points from the previous question. There you will be reminded that “having long hair” is something you do, not something you possess. According to the words of Paul, when a woman keeps on letting the natural hair of her head grow unhindered, she has the covering that God desires. A cancer patient who has lost her hair due to chemotherapy is not normative, though an African woman's hair that won't grow past her shoulders is normative. In either case, if the woman is allowing the hair of her head to keep on growing as much as it can, she is glorifying God. The woman who has cut her hair must realize her sin, repent, ask forgiveness, and then let the hair grow unhindered. God's willingness to hear the woman's prayer is not predicated on how much hair she possesses. It is predicated on what she does with the hair that she does have, whether little or much. Will she keep on letting it grow or will she keep cutting it?

Q5— If a woman must keep on letting her hair grow, then how long can a man’s hair get before he needs to get a haircut?

This is a good question and is answered by Paul in v. 4.

1 Corinthians 11:4 (NKJV)

4 “Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head.”

The phrase “having his head covered” comes from two Greek words which literally mean “to hang down from the head.” This isn’t a magic ruler, but neither does it leave the individual up to his opinion. Paul later says, “Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?” (v. 14). It is not unreasonable to state that nature tells us what “to hang down from the head” means. Our culture has made long hair on men popular today. Long hairstyles on men range from the hipster man-bun to Bob Marley’s dreadlocks to the redneck mullet. Natural observation tells any onlooker that these hair lengths are unnatural on men and qualify as “hanging from the head.” Coincidentally, this Greek phrase is only used of the man in 1 Corinthians 11.

Q6— Is the praying and prophesying in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 referring to public praying and teaching in worship only?

Many writers isolate the head covering commands of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 strictly to assemblies of worship. However, the motivation for doing this is the same motivation that would restrict this teaching about head coverings to simply a 1st century custom no longer to be followed. Some general references are made to early Greek and Jewish customs wherein women wore veils in worship and men did not. However, rarely is direct evidence cited for this by any author, and whenever evidence is cited, it is far from overwhelming. Even if overwhelming evidence were given for such a custom in 1st century worship, there is nothing in Paul's words where he appeals to any local customs. Rather, the reasons for his teaching are grounded in the God ordained chain of authority which goes back to creation (see v. 3, 7-12).

1 Corinthians 11:3 (NKJV)

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

Furthermore, putting 1st century worship customs aside, there is nothing within the immediate context that would warrant restricting the head coverings to worship only. In

fact, since women are forbidden to speak in the assemblies of the church (1 Cor. 14:34), it makes very little sense why Paul would tell the woman to have a covering on her head when teaching (i.e., prophesying; 1 Cor. 11:5). And why would Paul go on to say in the very next section of teaching on the Lord's supper, "For first of all, when you come together as a church..." (v. 18)? Why would Paul say this in v. 18 if the assembly of the church was already the focus of discussion in the first 16 verses? If the woman's covering is uncut hair as we have proven in the questions leading up to now, then the question, "Does 1 Cor. 11:2-16 pertain only to worship?" becomes pointless. In order to have uncut hair in worship she would have to have it all day every day. The same goes for the man and his cut hair; he must remain uncovered all the time.

Q7— If Paul is teaching that men must have cut hair and women must have uncut hair, then all the Greek-English experts are either wrong or dishonest. True or False?

This statement is usually made by those who believe Paul simply requires women to have "long" hair as opposed to uncut hair. They read the definition of the Greek word *komaō*, translated "has long hair" in 1 Cor. 11:14-15, placing emphasis on the word "long" in these definitions. Here is an example of the Greek word's definition as given by three different Greek scholars:

“to let the hair grow, have long hair” (*Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon*)

“to let one’s hair grow long” (*Arndt & Gingrich’s Greek-English Lexicon*)

“to let the hair grow long, to wear long hair” (*W. E. Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*)

Again, emphasis is placed on the word “long” in these definitions. Why is emphasis given to this part of the definition? There is no good reason. As was made clear in the answer to question three above, “long” hair (adjective + noun) is what results from continuing to grow the hair long (verb), which is the proper rendering of *komao* as it appears in 1 Cor. 11:14-15. The following quote from Jim Crouch on the proper use of lexicons explains how the “experts” can easily be misrepresented, particularly in the verses under consideration.

Lexicographers do not delineate the meanings of verbs in all tenses and moods. They present the basic definition of the word and then show how it is used within various contexts. That is why Thayer or Liddell or Gingrich can say that the meaning of KOMAO is, “to have or wear long hair.” Rick (Cutter), and others, can say, “But it does not say to

continually grow long hair.” True. That is because this is emphasized by the tense and mood of the verb-it is not inherent in the verb’s definition. I believe this an [sic] important point to stress. Many people are unwittingly led down the wrong road in their use of Greek lexicons because (1) they do not know how to use them properly, and (2) though they may come up with a proper definition, they do not know how to properly apply that definition to a specific context because they know nothing about Greek grammar. This is especially true in respect to Greek verbs.*

Looking at the basic definition of a word, as illustrated above, is one step in the multi-step process of finding the proper definition of a Greek word used in a specific Bible verse. You might compare all this to a foreigner who listens to a crude recipe for making waffles. He might think, “Wow! Waffles are just a bunch of eggs, flour, and milk thrown together? I don’t think I want any of that!” But after he sees the finished product, pours on some warmed syrup, and bites in, his appreciation for waffles is delightfully transformed. Like so, the basic definition of a Greek word contains a crude recipe. Cook, add syrup, and voila! The definition takes on a new shade of meaning.

Q8– If Paul is teaching that men must have cut hair and women must have uncut hair, then why do all the experts who write commentaries say otherwise? Are we to assume all the experts are wrong on these verses?

The term “experts” is used very generically and freely in this question. It is very carefully chosen vocabulary to sway the hearts of the simple. Yes, there are many commentaries written by very intelligent men, well studied in philosophy, theology, Greek, Hebrew, and everything else, who disagree with the interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11 presented in this article. Many of the same experts will also say that baptism is not for remission of sins even though Peter said to be baptized for the remission of sin (Acts 2:38). Many of the same experts will also say that an elder of the church doesn’t have to be married or have children even though Paul said, “If a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children...” (Titus 1:6). Many of the same experts will say a woman can speak in the assemblies of the church even though Paul said, “Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak...” (1 Cor. 14:34). Again, many of the same experts say that it is perfectly acceptable to use multiple cup and multiple loaves when observing the Lord’s supper, even though they will admit that Jesus used one cup and one loaf in all the New Testament accounts. We could go on for days with what all the experts say

contrary to the truth of scripture, but this should suffice to show that just because a quote, unquote “expert” says something doesn’t mean you should put your hat on it for that reason alone. Furthermore, there are plenty of writers, well-studied in the scriptures who understand Paul to be teaching that a woman should not cut her hair and a man should not let his hair keep on growing uncut. The appeal in this question is simply misleading.

Q9— Is Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 directed to men and women generally or to husbands and wives?

The ESV translation shows the bias of the translators in 1 Cor. 11:2-16. Wherever possible, they have translated the word “woman” as “wife” without good reason. Again, the teaching of these verses is established on the divinely ordained chain of authority in creation generally. This was emphasized under question six and is applicable here as well. According to 1 Cor. 11:3, Christ answers to the Father without exception. Men, whether married or otherwise, answer to Christ without exception. Women, whether married or otherwise, answer to the male authority in their lives without exception. Also, when Paul says in v. 8, “For man is not from woman, but woman from man,” he certainly means that every single man went through the birth canal and not just those who are married. A parallel sentiment is made in reference to all women and why they were created in v. 9. This concept is like fingernails on a

chalkboard to secular culture and the innovative evangelical world, but the word of God cannot be changed to fit culture.

Q10— What do angels have anything to do with what Paul is talking about?

1 Corinthians 11:10 (NKJV)

10 For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

The best we can do to interpret “because of the angels” here is to use context clues. We know very little about the history of angels in eternity past besides the fact that they were created by God (Psalms 104:4) and some were cast out of the presence of God according to Peter: “For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness...” (2 Peter 2:4). From this we do know that those cast out of heaven rebelled against God, and in 1 Cor 11:2-16 Paul is talking about submission to authority (see v. 3, 7-12). The most logical conclusion seems to be that God assigned long, uncut hair as a symbol to the woman, a symbol of submission to the man God placed over her. Whenever the woman cares for her glorious hair, she is reminded of her submission to man and in turn, God. Whenever she is tempted to cut her hair, she is reminded why she lets it

keep on growing— because of what happened to the angels. If this interpretation is wrong, we know of no other interpretation which better harmonizes the immediate context of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 with what the Bible reveals about the history and nature of angels.

Conclusion

There are certainly more questions that arise when discussing these verses. For further study of this subject, consider the following online resources.

**The “Hair” Question – a Critical Study of 1 Cor. 11:2-16* by George Battey

<https://willofthelord.com/2008/10/07/the-hair-question-a-critical-study-of-1-cor-112-16/>

Prayers God Will Not Hear – Irreverent Hair by Aaron Battey

<https://www.tncgchurchofchrist.com/articles/prayersgodwillnohear-irreverenthair-aaronbattey.pdf>



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