

Women Who Pray or Prophecy

1 Corinthians 11:3-16

Preface by Joseph Tkach

One commentator wrote, “This passage is probably the most complex, controversial, and opaque of any text of comparable length in the New Testament.”¹ And he may well be right—but I observe that in our fellowship, we have had far less controversy about it. We have long agreed that women do not need to wear head coverings in church today—these specific instructions do not apply in our culture. Having “solved” that question, we felt little need to dig into the passage any deeper. In decades past, our main use of the passage was to say that men should have short hair and women should not (verses 14-15).

Recently, when we asked members to submit papers concerning the role of women in the church, few had anything to say about this passage. Almost no one disagreed with our previous conclusion about head coverings—nor did they disagree with the article we published in January 2001, which observed that the passage permitted women to speak in church.²

Nevertheless, this passage raises some important questions about how we interpret the Bible, and how to decide whether a particular command is based in culture, or in creation.³ Actually, I get the feeling that our old decision about head coverings was based more on what made “sense” to us than it was based on a study

¹ Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* (The NIV Application Commentary; Zondervan, 1994), 214. Another scholar writes, “Commentators vary widely in their understanding of the background of the problem” (Richard Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* [Eerdmans, 1984], 80). They are trying to guess what kind of situation, and what cultural background, would cause Paul to write what he did, and the variety of suggested solutions shows how hard it is to understand the background of the passage.

² Michael Morrison, “Women Who Spoke the Word of God,” *WN*, Jan. 2001, pp. 23-26. <http://www.gci.org/church/ministry/women>

³ Blomberg writes, “A passage such as 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 reveals the need for all believers to have a relatively sophisticated grasp of principles of biblical hermeneutics, so that they can sift through the historical-cultural background, understand the meaning of key terms and grammatical interrelationships within a passage, and fit this passage in with Paul’s other teaching on the topic” (226).

of the text. We did not have a good explanation for why head coverings were obsolete but hair lengths were not. We were unwittingly basing our beliefs on assumptions that were rooted in modern culture.

The following paper discusses numerous questions about this passage, but it cannot answer them all—nor does it need to. However, it does try to answer some key questions for us concerning the role of women in the church today.

Joseph Tkach

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul deals with several problems that the local church had. One of the issues he deals with is whether people should cover their heads when they pray or prophesy. Although he briefly addresses what men should do, most of his comments concern women.⁴ We will survey the chapter and examine certain questions in greater detail.

Verse 1 says: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (NIV throughout). This is Paul’s conclusion to his comments about meat in chapter 10—he encourages the Corinthians to do everything for the glory of God, to avoid causing offense, “even as I try to please everyone in every way” (10:33). In 11:1, he encourages them to follow this example. In chapter 11, too, he wants them to avoid causing unnecessary offense to the people around them.

Verse 2 says, “I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you.” This may be a concluding comment for the previous topic, or it may be a general introduction to Paul’s next topic, but either way, this verse does not seem to help us much in understanding what Paul writes in verses 3-16.

⁴ David E. Garland writes, “Paul oscillates back and forth with statements about men and women, but this pattern is broken in 11:13 with a statement about the woman but none about the man.” He also notes that Paul sometimes gives a supporting reason for his statements about women, without giving support for the corresponding statements about men—implying that he expects little resistance to his statements about men. “The best explanation for these breaks in the pattern is that the problem that Paul wishes to correct has to do with what the women were doing with their heads” (*1 Corinthians* [Baker, 2003], 507-8).

Women need a head covering

The next verse begins with “now,” indicating that Paul is addressing a new topic: “Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (v. 3). Paul is using “head” as a metaphor, but the meaning of this metaphor is debated. Traditional scholars say that Paul is using the word “head” (Greek *kephalē*) as a metaphor for authority: Christ has authority over the male, the male has authority over the female, and God has authority over Christ. Other scholars argue that the metaphor means “source”⁵ or “preeminence.”⁶ We will address this question in more detail later.

No matter what the meaning, the sequence of “heads” is odd, since it goes down at first, and then up: Christ, man, God.⁷ Also, some scholars suggest that “woman” means “wife” in this passage, and the verse addresses relationships *within marriage* and not between males and females in general.⁸

Paul then moves from his general principle to a more specific application: “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head” (v. 4). It is generally agreed that the second occurrence of “head” in this verse should be taken metaphorically: The covered man dishonors Christ.⁹ Paul has begun the

⁵ For example, Mary Evans writes: “‘Head’ used in this context is a metaphor and there is no reason to suppose that the first century use of this metaphor will be identical with its twentieth century use, particularly as in the first century it was the heart not the head that was seen as the source of thought and reason, the head at this time being seen rather as the source of life” (*Woman in the Bible* [InterVarsity, 1983], 65).

⁶ Garland, 516.

⁷ “The odd sequence reveals that Paul has no interest [or at least it is not his main purpose] in establishing some kind of ascending hierarchical order to show the inferiority of women.... His purpose is not to write a theology of gender but to correct an unbecoming practice in worship that will tarnish the church’s reputation” (Garland, 508, 514). Blomberg offers this suggestion: “Since the problem in Corinth involved men and women (but not Christ) dishonoring their heads, it is natural that he should refer to the heads of the man and of the woman first” (209).

⁸ The RSV and NRSV read, “the head of a woman is her husband.”

⁹ “What individuals do to their physical head in worship reflects negatively or positively on their metaphorical head” (Garland, 514). Linda Belleville writes, “A man praying or prophesying with his head covered...dishonored Christ (1 Cor. 11:3-4). We cannot know for certain why this was” (*Women Leaders and the Church* [Baker, 1999], 129).

discussion by speaking metaphorically in verse 3 so he can use the metaphorical meaning in verse 4.

What does Paul mean by saying “with his head covered”? Literally, the Greek words mean something like “having down from the head.” Is Paul referring to a hat, a turban,¹⁰ an Arabic *kaffiyeh*, a prayer shawl (such as those used by some Jewish men today when they pray¹¹), or something else? In some pagan religious rites, Roman men covered their heads with part of their toga,¹² and that may be what Paul is referring to—but he does not explain why this custom was dishonorable.¹³ Some symbolism was probably involved, but it is difficult for modern readers to know what it is.¹⁴ It is especially difficult for us to know why a

¹⁰ “The fact that Jewish priests officiating in the temple wore turbans makes Paul’s statement doubly surprising (Ezek. 44:18; cf. m. Yoma 7.5)” (Belleville, 129). We do not know why a turban would be appropriate for a priest but not for a man who is praying.

¹¹ Blomberg says that “the Jewish practice of covering a man’s head during worship did not become widespread before the fourth century A.D.” (221).

¹² “The statue from Corinth of a veiled Augustus—with his toga pulled over his head in preparation to offer a libation—may offer an important clue. . . . Wearing the toga over the head at pagan sacrifices was a familiar practice” (Garland, 517). Ben Witherington III points out that this was a Roman custom, not a Greek one (*Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 1995], 234). Corinth was in Greece, but a Roman colony, so it is not certain which culture predominated.

¹³ Garland surmises that Paul objects to “the associations of the headdress with pagan sacrifice” (518). However, the Corinthians do not seem to be so naturally opposed to pagan practices that they would automatically agree that this practice was dishonorable (and the fact that Paul does not explain his logic indicates that he expects his readers to agree with his point). Non-Christian Greeks apparently did not think that pagan priests dishonored the gods by covering the head. Rather, they probably assumed the opposite, that the custom honored the gods in some way. “It appears that such headcoverings were worn in Roman contexts to demonstrate respect and subservience to the gods” (Witherington, 234). In Garland’s view, Paul objected to covered men for religious reasons, but bare-headed women for sexual reasons. Blomberg writes, “What the Corinthians did with their heads mattered because of either the *sexual* or the *religious* implications of their appearance (or both)” (215).

¹⁴ Evans writes about customs of head coverings: “The evidence we do have seems to indicate that there was a great deal of variation in different regions and between town and country” (87). It difficult for us to know what the customs *were*; it is even more difficult to know what the customs meant to the people.

covering was considered dishonorable for a male but required for a female.¹⁵

Some scholars have suggested that the head covering is long hair pulled up and bound on the top of the head¹⁶; that when long hair was let down, it suggested rebellion or sexual availability.¹⁷ Support for this is seen in verse 15, which says that a woman's long hair is given to her *instead* of a veil.¹⁸ However, it is difficult to make this interpretation work in verse 4: If a man had hair long enough to pull onto the top of the head, it seems that Paul would begin by saying that the long hair was disgraceful in itself—he would not start by criticizing an attempt to pull it up onto the top of the head.¹⁹

Also, if the hair is pulled up, it would seem inappropriate for the Greek phrase to use the word *kata*, meaning down. And it would be odd to say that if the hair hung down loose, it might as well be cut off (v. 6).²⁰ Schreiner writes, “The verb translated as ‘cover’ in the NIV (*katakalypto*) occurs three times in verses 6-

¹⁵ Hurley argues that the symbol meant “being submissive to the authority of a man”—hence was appropriate for woman but not for a man (170). However, most men are under the authority of, and should submit to, male civil authorities. Women wore a head covering in public but male slaves did not; this suggests that the primary connotation was gender, not authority.

¹⁶ Belleville does not have this view, but she describes the custom: “The typical hairstyle shown in portraits of upper-class Greek and Roman women involved twisting the hair into a roll at the top of the head and then looping it to form a raised ridge” (*Women Leaders*, 128).

¹⁷ “For a Hebrew woman to go out uncovered was widely regarded as a disgrace...because a covered head was a sign of modesty.... To go out with loose hair in public...was a greater disgrace and considered grounds for divorce” (Garland 520, citing the Mishnah *Ketub.* 7:6; and Babylonian Talmud *Ned.* 30b, *Yoma* 47b, and *Ketub.* 72a).

¹⁸ Paul uses a different word in v. 15 than previous verses. Long hair is given to the woman instead of some sort of clothing (*peribolaion*), but she needs to be covered (*katakalypta*, from the words for *down* and *covered*, v. 6). The significance of these terms is debated.

¹⁹ “If an ‘uncovered’ head simply means ‘having her hair down,’ how is ‘the man’s not covering his head in v. 7...the opposite of this?’” (Keener 22, quoting Gordon Fee’s commentary). Witherington writes, “Plutarch uses the same phrase that Paul does, *kata kephalēs*, to refer to something resting on the head, not hair” (233).

²⁰ Robert Peterson writes, “In 1 Cor. 11:6, does it make sense to say a woman should have her hair cut short because her hair is already short? No” (“Women’s Roles in the Church, What Does the Bible Say?” <http://churchwomen.tripod.com/a/rpeterson.htm>, page 7 of 12).

7...most often refers to a covering of some kind.”²¹ On the other hand, if the hair was covered, there would be little need to specify its length.

In verses 5-6, Paul writes, “And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if²² it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head.” Again, it is not clear what type of head covering Paul is referring to—some say it is a woman’s long hair (cf. v. 15b); others say it is a shawl.²³

Paul does not say why it is shameful, and scholars have suggested several possibilities. Garland lists these: “somehow blurs gender distinctions, is a symptom of disorderly behavior, has links to pagan cultic activity, disavows the authority of the husband or paterfamilias, or is a cultural sign of immodesty.”²⁴

Paul apparently wrote this because some women in Corinth were breaking social custom and speaking without a head covering.²⁵ Why were they breaking social custom? Several reasons have been proposed: 1) They believed that gender-based restrictions did not apply in the church²⁶ or 2) They believed that when they

²¹ Schreiner, 126. He notes that Philo uses the word for “uncovered” to mean with a cloth removed.

²² The Greek word for “if” here (*ei*) implies a positive answer—that it is indeed a disgrace for a woman to have a shaved head. But it is not clear whether this disgrace falls on herself, on her metaphorical head, or both. Gordon Fee writes, “It has often been asserted that the shaved head was a sign of prostitution in Corinth; but there is not a known piece of evidence for such in the literature of antiquity” (*Listening to the Spirit in the Text* [Eerdmans, 2000], 63). He says that a shaved head was shameful because it indicated “the ‘male’ partner in a lesbian relationship.”

²³ In a few denominations today, a small piece of cloth is deemed sufficient even though it is not large enough to “cover” the head or hang “down” from it.

²⁴ Garland, 519. Richard Davidson writes, “The wearing of the head covering... was a sign of the wife’s submission to her husband’s leadership, not to the headship of all men” (in *Women in Ministry*, edited by Nancy Vyhmeister [Andrews University, 1998], 275).

²⁵ “That Paul is likewise upholding a firmly established social custom seems clear from terms like *shameful...proper...disgraceful...* Even so, Paul’s appeal to the creation order of Genesis 2 shows that something more than unbecoming behavior is at issue.... Some sort of sexual identity confusion lurks in the background” (Belleville, *Women Leaders*, 127-28).

²⁶ “Antoinette Wire’s reconstruction of the situation that generated Paul’s correctives has...gained a fair measure of acceptance and remains plausible. Some Christian women (and maybe some men!) were interpreting their freedom in Christ to mean that they could flout social

were in church, they were no longer in public, but in a family, and women did not need to wear head coverings when in their own homes.²⁷ Craig Keener writes, “Paul calls on them to submit to the head coverings so as not to cause offense”—Paul does not want the women to bring shame on their husbands.²⁸ Others suggest that the women were copying practices found in some other religions.

Prophesying in public

Paul is saying that it is shameful for a woman to pray or prophesy with an uncovered head. We might ask three questions at this point: 1) What does it mean to prophesy? 2) Is this praying and prophesying done in public, or in private? 3) Should the church today require women to wear a head covering?²⁹

To understand what Paul means by “prophesy,” we do not need to refer to Old Testament customs (which are of debatable significance), for Paul himself tells us what he understands the word to mean. In chapter 12, Paul lists prophecy as one of the gifts of the Spirit. In chapter 14, Paul describes what he means: “Everyone who prophesies speaks to men³⁰ for their strengthening, encouragement and

convention concerning public appearance” (Blomberg, in *Two Views*, 341; see also Hurley, 170). Evans suggests that women thought they had to dress like a man in order to prophesy, and Paul explains to them that women did not have to dress or act like men in order to be free, but that they were free to pray and prophesy *as women* (Evans, 90).

²⁷ “Christian women may not have thought of themselves as going out in public when they worshiped in homes and called one another ‘brother’ and ‘sister’” (Garland 521, citing Fee and Winter). Against this view it can be noted that the Corinthians were not treating one another like family in other respects.

²⁸ Craig Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Hendrickson, 1992), 21. He notes that Paul used himself “as an example of sacrificing one’s own rights in chapter 9.... The principle he articulates could be applied to any of us. If our dressing a certain way in public will cause discomfort to our spouse, we ought not to do it. Paul is clearly less concerned with the particular apparel worn in a given culture than he is with its effects” (pp. 21, 36).

²⁹ If we took verse 6 literally, the church should give haircuts to women who speak without a head covering—but it seems clear that Paul does not intend this literally. “Paul is using here the ancient debating principle of *reductio ad absurdum*: reducing the position of his opponents to the absurd. If they want to bare their heads so badly, why don’t they bare them altogether by removing their hair, thus exposing themselves to public shame?” (Keener, 35).

³⁰ The Greek word here (*anthrōpōs*) refers to both men and women. The NRSV accurately avoids the impression that only men are intended: “Those who prophesy speak to other people

comfort... He who prophesies edifies the church” (14:3-4).

Throughout chapter 14, Paul contrasts tongues and prophesying, and he concludes, “in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct [*katecheō*]³¹ others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (14:19). In this verse, he implies that someone who prophesies instructs the church. In verse 24 he says that if people are prophesying, an unbeliever can learn something: “He will be convinced by all that he is a sinner... So he will fall down and worship God.” In verse 31 Paul says that people learn as a result of prophecy. Although prophecy is not exactly the same as teaching,³² it has similar results.

According to Paul’s definition, prophesying helps people in the church learn.³³ In Corinth, the Holy Spirit was inspiring both men and women to speak edifying messages during worship services. If the words were inspired by God, then they had authority.³⁴

Women were speaking in a church meeting—there would be little need for Paul to address proper attire for something done in private. Blomberg gives seven lines of evidence that indicate that the passage is about a public setting: 1) Verses 2 and 17 are paired in content, suggesting that a similar setting is in view throughout, 2) The concern for appearance suggests a public setting, 3) The best analogies

for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation... Those who prophesy build up the church.” At least in Antioch, prophets were part of the leadership of the church (Acts 13:1).

³¹ From the Greek word *katecheō*, we get the English word *catechism*, which refers to an organized system of instruction.

³² Paul lists prophecy and teaching as separate gifts (Rom 12:6-7; 1 Cor 12:29; 14:6; Eph 4:11). One possible difference in the gifts is that teaching may involve advance planning, whereas prophecy is spontaneous. As mentioned in previous papers, there are biblical examples of female prophets.

³³ Blomberg gives this description: “the proclamation of a message given by God to a Christian speaker for the benefit of a particular congregation. It may include both spontaneous utterances and carefully thought-out communication, so long as the prophet is convinced that God has led him or her to preach a certain message” (210). However, Grudem argues that prophecy is always spontaneous, and is not an exposition of Scripture (*Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* [Multnomah, 2004], 229).

³⁴ People should not assume that every utterance *claimed* to be prophecy is actually inspired by God. Paul instructs the church to “weigh carefully what is said” (14:29; cf. 1 Thess 5:20-21). Some theologians believe that God does not give the gift of prophecy to anyone in this era, but the example in Corinth still shows that God allows women to speak in worship services.

about men covering their heads are in a setting of (pagan) worship, 4) Paul discusses spiritual gifts primarily in a church setting, 5) Women had little opportunity to minister to men in private, 6) The mention of angels in v. 10 makes sense in a worship setting, and 7) Verse 16 refers to the practice of other churches, which suggests a setting within church.³⁵ Thomas Schreiner gives four slightly different reasons: 1) The subsequent topics concern worship, 2) Prophecy is supposed to edify the community, 3) Meetings in a home would count as a church meeting, and 4) 1 Cor 14:34 is not intended to be a complete prohibition.³⁶ Paul had to address the issue in this letter because some Corinthian women had been speaking in church without a head covering.³⁷

In some societies, a head covering is a sign of submission or modesty; in

³⁵ Blomberg, 219.

³⁶ Thomas Schreiner, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Crossway, 1991), 132. That 1 Cor. 11:3-16 concerns worship settings is the consensus of most traditional and egalitarian scholars. James Hurley says that the “women were praying and prophesying, to some sort of meeting of the church” (180). John Piper and Wayne Grudem say that v. 5 addresses “women prophesying in church” (*Recovering*, 69, 85). Walter Neuer also accepts “the church” as the setting for this passage, though he later qualifies it to say it was “small house groups,” not the “whole church” (*Man and Woman in Christian Perspective* [Crossway, 1991], 112, 118). Of course, in many cities, a small house group *was* the whole church, and it is artificial to try to distinguish them. As Schreiner says, “the distinction between public and private meetings of the church is a modern invention” (*Two Views*, 228).

Harold R. Holmyard argues, based largely on 1 Cor 14:34, that the women were not speaking in a church meeting (“Does 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Refer to Women Praying and Prophesying in Church?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 [Oct. 1997]: 462-73). He agrees that a public setting is meant, but not church: “The issue of head coverings implies a public setting, not prayer in private” (472). He does not address the above lines of evidence. In our own fellowship, Peterson claims that church settings are not discussed until v. 17, but he does not address the evidence given above for a public setting. He also argues that women still need to wear a shawl when praying. We reject that, and believe that the evidence favors a church setting.

³⁷ “While it not likely that the Corinthian men were in fact putting coverings on, it would seem quite likely that the Corinthian women had concluded that, having been raised with Christ (1 Cor. 4:8-10), their new position in Christ and their resultant freedom to participate in the worship by prayer and prophecy was incompatible with wearing a sign of submission to their husbands” (Hurley, 170). They thought that something in the gospel had liberated them from gender-based social conventions. However, Witherington speculates that some men were following Roman custom and wearing a headcovering, while women were following Greek practice, and the variations were causing controversy (Witherington, 238).

others (e.g., Saudi Arabia) even the king wears a head covering in public. No matter what the head coverings symbolized in Corinth, it is clear that they do not symbolize the same thing in all cultures, and we conclude that they are not required as a sign of submission for all Christian men and women in all regions and centuries. There seems to be a consensus³⁸ that Paul's instruction here was based primarily on culture—he was applying a general principle to a specific situation, and although the principle is still valid, the specific application is not. But what *is* that “general principle”? Scholars debate whether it is to maintain a distinction in *authority* between males and females, to maintain a distinction in *appearance* between the sexes, or simply to avoid doing something the surrounding culture considered scandalous.

The glory of man

Paul now gives a reason for men to uncover their heads: “A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man” (v. 7). Unfortunately, we do not understand Paul's reasoning here. We note the following questions:

- If being in the image and glory of God means that a man should not cover his head, then this would apply to *all* situations, not just speaking in church. In other words, the reason given here proves more than Paul intended, and we cannot make the same argument today. We do not know why it would be inappropriate for “the image and glory of God” to wear a hat, whether on the job or in the church.
- Further, we do not know what Paul means by woman being “the glory of man.”³⁹ Paul's next verse says that the female came from the male, but the

³⁸ Hurley concludes that “her hair is a sufficient sign; no shawls are needed” (184). Neuer likewise does not advocate coverings today, although he notes that women who “think that they should follow Paul's instruction about covering the head...should not be made fun of, but respected for their stand” (114). Piper, Grudem, and Schreiner all conclude that Paul commanded head-coverings for the culture he was in, but that they are not required today (75, 138). They see a timeless principle behind Paul's teaching: a requirement to “use culturally appropriate expressions of masculinity and femininity.”

³⁹ Schreiner says that “the focus here is on the word *glory*... Paul's point is that one should always honor and respect the source from which one came” (133). Garland suggests that “if a woman were to appear in worship with her head uncovered, the splendor of her tresses (11:15)

male's role in her creation was totally unlike God's role in the creation of the male. Is man the "pride and joy" of God, and woman the "pride and joy" of man? Perhaps that is what Paul means, but that would not explain why one must cover the head and the other must not. Blomberg notes that "in verses 14-15 'glory' is the opposite of 'disgrace,' so in both places it probably carries the sense of 'honor.'"⁴⁰

- Last, we note that women are also made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), a point that Paul did not mention. It seems clear that he is using the evidence from Genesis selectively, not in a comprehensive way. He is not trying to present a theology of gender behavior—he is simply dealing with one particular practice.⁴¹ But it is not clear why he brought the word "image" into the argument at all.

In verses 8-9, Paul appears to explain the way in which woman is the glory of man: "For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man." The man was the source of the woman, and the woman was created for the man.⁴² Is woman the glory of man

should bring honor to her husband" (523). The idea is that each gender brings honor to the metaphorical head, but in worship it would be inappropriate for a woman to bring glory to her head, man. So by wearing a head covering, she can point to God rather than man. However, others argue that the problem with her tresses is lust, not misdirected glory. William Webb writes, "This proposition related to the question of how much of a woman's beauty/glory should be visible in a worship setting—an issue of modesty" (*Slaves, Women, and Homosexuality*, 274).

Hurley suggests that "the glory of a thing is...that which points to or manifests its dignity, honour, or station. Man is relationally the glory of God when he is in an appropriate relation to him: under God, thereby pointing to God's dominion" (174). He suggests that a man gives God glory "as he exercises his leadership role and the woman is the glory of the man as she appropriately responds" (206). But this definition of "glory" seems to be tailored for Hurley's interpretation of this passage, rather than being based on the way the word is used elsewhere.

⁴⁰ Blomberg, 211.

⁴¹ Hurley suggests a narrow context: "The woman is not called to image God or Christ *in the relation which she sustains to her husband*. She images instead the response of the church to God.... There need be no implication whatsoever that women are not the image of God in *other senses*" (173, italics in original).

⁴² As we covered in a previous paper, the woman was made for the man because he was alone and did not have a mate, unlike all the animals. She was made to be his companion, not his servant. The man did not lack for creatures to have authority over—what he needed was someone who was like himself.

because she *came* from man? If so, then all of creation, including the woman, would be the glory of God, for everything came from him. Paul seems to be reasoning on the basis of which sex was created first, but we do not understand how he goes from his reason to his conclusion. Moreover, in verses 11-12 Paul seems to modify the argument (just as he clarified his statement in 1 Cor 1:14⁴³), perhaps because the evidence does not say as much as his first comment might imply.

In the next verse, Paul goes back to his main topic—the need for women to have a head covering. “For this reason [because woman was created from man and for man], and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a *sign* of authority on her head” (v. 10). Scholars do not know what the angels have to do with this subject. Paul is alluding to something, but we do not know what it is.⁴⁴

The word “sign” in the last part of the verse is a traditional translation, and the traditional interpretation is that the covering is a sign that she is *under* authority, but the Greek literally says “the woman ought to have authority on her head.” In all other uses, *exousia* means having authority; it never means “a sign of being *under* authority.”⁴⁵ If we take the verse literally, it means that the head covering *gives* the woman authority to speak—that by putting on the appropriate attire, she is permitted to pray and prophesy.⁴⁶ Because she was created from and

⁴³ Paul says one thing in 1 Cor 1:14 but retracts it in v. 16. He is thinking out loud, and his secretary wrote it down, and rather than delete the incorrect statement, Paul added a correction. It would be a mistake for us to focus on the first statement and not on the correction.

⁴⁴ Scholars have made a variety of suggestions, such as 1) angels attend worship meetings and are sensitive to misbehavior in the worship service, 2) some angels are sexually attracted to women and the head coverings keep the angels in line, 3) the head covering is a sign that woman has authority over angels, or 4) angels are an example of beings who refused to submit to their place in creation. The Corinthians might have known what Paul meant, but we do not.

⁴⁵ Hurley writes, “The term does not mean ‘sign of (someone else’s) authority.’ It has instead an active sense and, apart from the context, would be taken as pointing to the authority of the woman herself” (176). He suggests that the appropriate hairstyle “marked her as one possessing authority, as viceregent of creation, one who would join in the judgment of rebellious angels” (177). However, Schreiner gives a vigorous defense of the traditional view, saying that the word “ought” signals “an obligation, not a freedom” (135).

⁴⁶ Neuer writes, “If the women pray or prophesy before other members of the church, then they possess the spiritual authority to do so only if they do it obediently, accepting the position assigned to them at creation” (115). Richards writes, “The most natural meaning would be that a

for the man, she needs this head covering to authorize her to speak in the worship assembly.⁴⁷ Another possible interpretation is that the phrase means “to have authority over”—that she is “to have control over her head” by wearing the customary covering.⁴⁸

In verses 11-12, Paul appears to qualify or clarify⁴⁹ part of his previous argument: “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” Just as the original man was the source of the first woman, all subsequent men have come from women, and God is the source of everything. This verse seems to reduce the strength of the argument from priority or source.

Why does Paul say that this interdependence is “in the Lord”? Why does he begin the sentence with the contrastive word “however”? This seems to imply that aspects of the previous argument were *not* based “in the Lord.”⁵⁰ Belleville draws this conclusion: “In the final analysis, whatever meaning we attach to the man is ‘the head of the woman’ (1 Cor. 11:3), this state of affairs does not hold true ‘in the Lord.’ Mutual dependence is what should characterize life in community, for ‘in the Lord’ a ‘woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman’

woman has ‘authority,’ that is, the freedom to act or to worship, simply by following proper decorum” (320). A point against this view is that Paul tells the woman what she “ought” to have; it does not appear that he is extolling her freedom.

⁴⁷ Against this view, Garland notes, “The introductory phrase ‘because of this’ means that Paul is drawing a conclusion from what has been argued in 11:3-9, and these verses emphasize the woman’s secondary place as the glory of man, not her authority to pray and prophesy” (525).

⁴⁸ Blomberg, 212, and Garland, 525. A similar thought may be in 14:32, where Paul uses different Greek words to say that prophets should control their spirits.

⁴⁹ “He backtracks lest the Corinthians become confused and think that he implies that women are inferior to men” (Garland, 508). “These two verses clearly form a tension on a theoretical level with his previous arguments” (Webb, 87).

⁵⁰ Blomberg suggests that the contrast is between Christ and creation: “‘In the Lord,’ that is, among Christians, the nature of creation is substantially qualified but never erased altogether” (216). But it seems problematic to posit a large difference between creation and Christ, as if Christ changed God’s original design for humanity. This may instead be a hint that Paul’s argument, although it alludes to creation, is actually based in culture. The word “however” in v. 11 implies that he is giving a contrast or correction, not reinforcing the previous point.

(1 Cor. 11:11).”⁵¹

After this, Paul gives another reason for his instruction that women should wear a head covering when they speak in church: “Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering” (vv. 13-15).

Paul apparently believes that he has given the Corinthians enough information to make the answer obvious. Even though Corinth was saturated with sin, he appeals to the Corinthians’ own sense of propriety, as if they would all sense the disgrace of a woman speaking without anything on her head.⁵²

When Paul writes “the nature of things,” he uses the word *physis*, which usually referred to the way the physical and biological world was, but sometimes referred to social custom.⁵³ Paul apparently uses it in the latter meaning here, for biological facts do not teach people that long hair is a “disgrace” for one sex and a “glory” for the other.⁵⁴ Rather, our physiological nature teaches us that a man’s

⁵¹ Belleville, *Women Leaders*, 131. Webb writes, “Not only do his ‘in the Lord’ comments take the abrasive edge off of the patriarchy of Paul’s day, but resident within them are seed ideas for future development” (278).

⁵² Paul’s purpose throughout this passage, Neuer notes, is to preserve female honor, not to demean her. “The woman upholds her dignity and glory by preserving her womanly character and her position in the creation” (Neuer, 115).

⁵³ The BDAG lexicon lists four meanings: “1) condition or circumstance as determined by birth.... 2) the natural character of an entity.... 3) the regular or established order of things.... 4) an entity as a product of nature” (Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition [University of Chicago Press, 2000], 1069-70).

⁵⁴ Hurley says that it means “God’s design for nature rather than simply the way things happen to be” (178). By defining the word as “God’s purpose,” Hurley can then say it means whatever he wants it to mean. Schreiner says that Paul “is referring to the natural and instinctive sense of right and wrong that God has planted in us” (137)—but it is doubtful that gender-based hair lengths are an instinct found in all cultures. Cultures do have concepts of right and wrong, and of “masculine” and “feminine” behavior and attire, but discrimination by hair length is an illustration of how the instinct is *applied* in some societies; it is not an instinct in itself. Hair does not grow very long in either sex in some ethnic groups, and there is nothing “feminine” about the long braids of early Native American warriors.

hair grows as much as a woman's. The word "disgrace" indicates a social stigma and a cultural convention.⁵⁵ Paul is not trying to say that men who took a Nazirite vow were a disgrace—he was writing to the Corinthian situation and not trying to make a universal, timeless statement.⁵⁶

Since Paul can appeal to the Corinthians' own sense of what is proper and natural, it is apparent that he is asking for behavior in conformity to normal custom⁵⁷—for women to have their heads covered while speaking in the church, and for men to avoid the custom that was appropriate to females. Although some of the Corinthian women had apparently concluded that the gospel freed them from gender-based restrictions, Paul says that they should conform to this particular custom.⁵⁸

In verse 16, he gives one more reason: "If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God." None of the churches threw social custom to the wind and encouraged women to act like men, and vice versa, so the Corinthians should not, either. Garland writes, "His comment has the same force as that of Josephus's conclusion to an argument: 'None but the most contentious of critics, I imagine, could fail to be content with the arguments already adduced.'"⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Blomberg takes the word *physis* to refer to a "long-established custom" (213). Keener is not sure, saying that Paul may have believed that "women's hair naturally grows longer than men's" (43). He finally concludes, "Whether Paul's argument is that women by virtue of creation have longer hair than men, or that the social norms of his day demand women's hair to be longer under normal circumstances, does not in the end need to be decided. In either case, Paul would seem to be making an argument that addresses symbolic gender distinctions, and requiring men and women to recognize those differences between them" (45).

⁵⁶ "When he speaks explicitly of length of hair, he grounds his arguments in what is proper (v. 13), normal practice (vv. 14-15) and contemporary custom (v. 16). None of these verses...implies a timeless, transcultural mandate" (Blomberg, 215).

⁵⁷ Witherington concludes that it is "unlikely that Paul would impose any foreign or specifically Jewish custom on the ethnically mixed *ekklēsia* in Corinth" (235).

⁵⁸ "When a wife converts to Christianity and learns that she is set free in Christ so that she can pray and prophesy in public, it does not mean that she can disregard social conventions" (Garland, 509). She is not free to bring shame and dishonor on her husband.

⁵⁹ Garland, 532, citing *Against Apion*, 1:21.

Conclusion

Paul has given six reasons for women to wear a head covering:

1. The head of the woman is man (v. 3).
2. Speaking without a covering is as dishonorable as shaving the head (v. 5).
3. Woman was made from and for man, so she should wear a head covering (v. 9).
4. Because of the angels (v. 10).
5. It is not socially proper for a woman to speak uncovered (v. 13).
6. The church has no precedent for breaking this tradition (v. 16).

Today, we cannot confidently use any of these reasons. Even if we could agree about the meaning of “head,” we cannot explain why it has to be symbolized by a head covering in one case but the lack of a head covering in another case. In most modern societies, there is little or no stigma attached to women speaking without a head covering, and we cannot say that it is as shameful as shaving the head. Third, we cannot offer any reason why the priority of creation should be forever symbolized by a head covering. Fourth, the presence of angels in this list makes it obvious that we do not have a complete understanding of the context in which Paul was working. Fifth, what is “socially proper” is different today than in first-century Greece. And today, there are many precedents against this tradition.

Paul’s arguments do not make sense to us primarily because his reasons are based in beliefs found in first-century Corinth; they are not designed for cultures like ours that do not share those same beliefs.⁶⁰ Although Paul cites biblical evidence and spirit beings, it appears that the real basis of his argument is cultural—he was explaining the attire that was appropriate for women and men *in that culture*. We further suspect that if Paul knew of a reason that would apply in all cultures and all ages, then he would have used it, rather than ending up with social custom and “we’ve never done it that way before.”⁶¹

Our doctrinal review team concludes that women are permitted to speak in

⁶⁰ “Paul, a pastor and a missionary, is concerned about getting his point across to his people, not with impressing modern Western readers with arguments that would work transculturally. Paul employs a transcultural argument only when he is making a transcultural point” (Keener, 31-32).

⁶¹ “Had any one of his arguments here been an absolute, unambiguous, universal proof, Paul could have settled for one argument instead of four” (Keener, 22).

church without head coverings.⁶² Paul apparently believed that men and women should respect social conventions about gender-specific attire.⁶³ Men should not try to look like women, nor should women try to look like men. God created male and female different, and he declared that to be good, but the Bible does not specify (nor will we) the characteristics of masculine and feminine attire. That changes from one nation to another, from one culture to another, and from one century to another. In Paul's day, it meant that women should wear head coverings when speaking in public, but it does not mean that today.

In conjunction with this conclusion, we also make the following observations about the *reasons* that Paul offered:

- Someone might argue that we should accept Paul's arguments even though we do not understand them. Angels are the same today as when Paul wrote, so we should accept his argument as valid today, and women should be covered by cloth when they speak in church. We reject that approach to Scripture. Paul gave *reasons* for his directive; he did not demand obedience without understanding.
- The fact that Paul's arguments do not make sense to us is a hint that he was basing his arguments on cultural customs. Even in a city renowned for sin, he appeals to the readers' sense of propriety and disgrace. His argument from "nature" in v. 14 is actually an argument from custom; the "glory" that Paul speaks of in v. 15 is also a cultural matter.
- Whether Paul uses *kephalē* in the sense of authority, or to refer to source,

⁶² In making this decision, it was not necessary for us to rule on the exact meaning of *kephale*, the precise nature of the head covering, or the significance of "authority" in v. 10. We do not have the expertise in Greek literature and language to provide conclusive answers to those questions. We also note that this passage is not about ordination or appointing people to church leadership. We want to base our policies on scriptures that are clear, and this passage is *not* clear.

⁶³ "Most interpreters agree that one timeless principle that may be deduced from this passage is that Christians should not try to blur all distinctions between the sexes" (Blomberg, 214). "The fundamental principle is that the sexes, although equal, are also different" (Schreiner, 138). "Paul takes issue not with *what* women are doing but with *how* they are doing it. Women (and men for that matter) can pray and prophesy in the church, but they must not flaunt the social conventions of the day in so doing" (Belleville, *Women Leaders*, 153). "Paul's view is that the creation order should be properly manifested, not obliterated, in Christian worship.... Male-female differentiation is part of what God intends to redeem, not transcend or supersede" (Witherington, 236-37).

either way, women are allowed to pray and prophesy in church. Whether she has a sign of authority on her head, or has a sign of being under authority (everyone is under *some* authority), the most significant part of this passage is that women *do* have the authority to speak spiritual words in public worship. This passage does not restrict her words in any way; it is only a matter of attire.

- Paul is apparently applying a general principle to the situation in Corinth. However, from the passage, it is not clear what the principle is. Here are some possibilities:
 - All women are under the authority of all men, because woman was created from and for man. Women should therefore wear a symbol of submission, which in Corinth was a head covering, but in other cultures may be something else. However, this does not explain why it is wrong for men to wear a head covering, because they are also under authority. Nor do we believe that all women are under the authority of all men.
 - Married women are under the authority of their husbands, because woman was created from and for man. Therefore all women, married or not, should wear a symbol that they are submissive to that principle.⁶⁴ Again, this does not explain why it would be disgraceful for men under authority to wear a head covering, and it does not explain why Paul is concerned about head coverings only when people pray and prophesy. The head coverings apparently had significance in public worship, but not in a woman's private relationship to God.
 - Men and women should dress in ways appropriate to their gender in that culture, and when they are speaking in public, they should not dress in such a way that distracts from the

⁶⁴ Keener responds to this by saying, "Nothing in this passage suggests wives' subordination. The only indicator that *could* be taken to mean that is the statement that man is woman's 'head,' but 'head' in those days was capable of a variety of meanings, and nothing in the text indicates that it means subordination.... The only clear affirmations here, besides that men and women are different and should not conceal that fact, is the equality and mutual dependence of men and women" (47).

words they speak. This would explain why Paul is concerned about attire of both men and women *when speaking*.⁶⁵ We conclude that this suggestion has the most merit.

- Since we conclude that women do not have to wear head coverings in church today (a conclusion we have held for decades), we also conclude that Paul has alluded to evidence from Genesis to support a cultural custom. The fact that Paul is selective in his use of the evidence from Genesis shows that he is not starting with Genesis and trying to explain its application in Greco-Roman society. Rather, he is starting with a custom in his culture and trying to find as many lines of support as he can think of for the people he was writing to. Since he was a rabbi steeped in Scripture, he begins with an illustration from Scripture, but he later has to qualify it, and he gives several comments based on what society considers honorable or disgraceful.

The important point is that women are permitted to pray and prophesy in church. Women may speak about spiritual topics and instruct the church as God leads them. Even if we use the most restrictive meaning of prophecy,⁶⁶ and even if it rarely if ever happens today, the precedent is still set that God allows women to instruct and edify the church according to their gifts.

However, the mutual dependence of males and females does not mean that they must behave in identical ways. Paul made restrictions on *how* women prophesied in church—he required them to wear attire appropriate to women. We uphold this principle today, acknowledging that in most nations today, this does not mean a headcovering, but means that women should not try to look like men. The authority of their words does not rest in external appearance, but in conformity with the gospel of God.

⁶⁵ Keener concludes, “We can notice some transcultural points in his argument: one should not bring reproach upon one’s family or upon the Christian gospel; one should not seek to destroy symbolic gender distinctions by pioneering unisex clothing styles; one should respect custom and do one’s best to avoid causing someone to stumble” (46).

⁶⁶ That is, infallibly inspired words.

Appendix A: The meaning of *kephalē*

Garland writes: “Three views commend themselves. First, ‘head’ has been traditionally understood to designate hierarchy and to imply authoritative headship.”⁶⁷ In support of this view, Hurley writes, “The Greek versions of the Bible used *kephalē* (head) to translate the Hebrew word *r’osh*, which also means ‘head.’ The Hebrew word, however, was used to indicate one in a position of authority or command as well as origin or ‘priority.’”⁶⁸ Hurley argues that although *kephalē* may mean origin in some contexts (e.g., Col. 1:15-20), it does not mean that in marital contexts. “If ‘head’ means ‘source’ in 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul’s parallelism is poor and he virtually teaches that God made Christ.”⁶⁹ Blomberg agrees: “Its two main [metaphorical] meanings were either ‘source’ or ‘authority.’... The other passage in which Paul calls a man ‘head’ over a woman refers as well to wives’ subordination to their husbands (Eph. 5:22-24), so ‘authority’ seems somewhat more likely here too.”⁷⁰ Egalitarian W. Larry Richards admits that although the meaning of “source” is attractive, Paul elsewhere uses *kephalē* “in the sense of authority, not source.”⁷¹

⁶⁷ Garland, 514.

⁶⁸ Hurley, 164. Unfortunately, Hurley left out an important point. Keener writes, “The Septuagint rarely translates *ros* (in the sense of leader) literally as ‘head’; most often it uses other Greek words that mean ‘leader.’ It retains ‘head’ for leader less than one tenth of the time, despite the Hebrew usage” (32). Alan Redmond, pastor in Winnipeg, has studied the words in some depth. He writes, “There are 547 occurrences of *ros* that I found in a Hebrew (BHS) search with Gramcord.... The instances where *ros* has the meaning of chief or ruler are of special interest to us. These number about 180. The majority are translated as *archē*.... I found 9% of the time that *ros* has the sense of chief or ruler where it is translated by *kephalē*.” Although it is not a common meaning, it is a possible meaning of *kephalē*, and he concludes: “The sense of authority could not likely have been excluded from the metaphor without special comment from Paul.”

⁶⁹ Hurley, 166. Schreiner argues strongly for the meaning of “authority” (127-28).

⁷⁰ Blomberg, 208-9.

⁷¹ Richards, in *Women in Ministry*, 318. He limits that authority to marriage. “Paul never, here or elsewhere, widens the wife’s subordination to her husband within the family circle to a general subordination of women to men’s authority, in the church or in society” (319). Witherington has a similar view: “Paul does not simply equate the family structure, which in the household codes is somewhat patriarchal, with the structure of the family of faith” (238, n. 26). He argues that *kephalē* probably connotes authority, but notes: “Paul’s vision of headship or leadership involves the leader in being the head servant.... It is difficult to come to grips with a Paul who is neither a

Part of the difficulty in the discussion is that commentators who support the meaning of “authority” generally conclude that the male has authority because he is the *source* of, or is prior to, the woman. “Source” and “authority” are related concepts, so “source” often makes sense. However, they argue that the primary connotation of *kephalē* is authority (the result) rather than source (the cause). Blomberg says that no one has shown that *kephalē* can mean source “without simultaneously implying some dimension of authority.”⁷²

However, Perriman questions the logic, “The question of authority is irrelevant to a discussion of the proper manner in which men and women should pray and prophesy; nor is it a valid deduction from the idea that man has authority over the woman that she should veil herself in worship.”⁷³ It is not clear why the woman must honor the man by being covered, when the man has to do the exact opposite in order to honor Christ. The passage is not about authority *per se*, and although v. 10 uses the word “authority,” the meaning there is not clear.

The second suggestion is that *kephalē* means “source.” Mary Evans writes, “In Colossians 1:18 Christ is spoken of as ‘the head’ of the church in the context of his being before all things and the source of creation.”⁷⁴ However, “the ‘paucity of lexicographic evidence’—no Greek lexicon offers this as an option... makes this meaning for ‘head’ highly suspect.... Although the idea of source may fit the account of the woman’s creation from the man’s rib, it does not fit God as the source of Christ.”⁷⁵ Some egalitarians respond that God is indeed the source of Christ in his messianic role, and Paul is speaking only of a function, not the source of being.⁷⁶ They also point out that “source” is clearly part of the context (see vv.

radical feminist nor an ardent patriarchalist.... Paul, like Jesus, was a man who was not and is not easily pigeonholed” (240).

⁷² Blomberg, *Two Views*, 342.

⁷³ A. C. Perriman, “The Head of a Woman: The Meaning of *Kephalē* in 1 Cor. 11:3” (*Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1994): 620).

⁷⁴ Evans, 66. She also points out that earlier in this letter, Paul has balanced the authority of the husband and the wife (1 Cor 7:4, using the verb form of *exousia*); he does not seem to be combating a problem of women trying to exert authority over men.

⁷⁵ Garland, 515-16.

⁷⁶ “This objection fails if the text refers to Jesus’ source as the Father from whom he proceeded at his incarnation as a human being” (Keener, 33-34). Keener also makes a suggestion about the unusual order in v. 3: “If the incarnation is in view, then 11:3 is in chronological sequence.”

8-9).

Garland agrees with Perriman in supporting a third view: “The best option understands *kephalē* to mean ‘that which is most prominent, foremost, uppermost, pre-eminent’ (Perriman 1994). . . . The ‘head’ denotes one who is preeminent, and though it may result in authority and leadership, that is not its basic denotation. It is not linked to ideas of obedience or submission.”⁷⁷ But Blomberg notes, “It is unclear if an entity can be most or even more prominent without implying some functional superiority.”⁷⁸ Although Paul does give a requirement for men, the emphasis of this passage is to give a requirement for women, to stop women from doing something they had begun to do, and that requirement is based on the fact that the male is the *kephalē* of the female.

In short, it seems that most interpreters choose a meaning for *kephalē* based primarily on their beliefs about what *other* verses say about male authority. The interpreters are influenced by their own culture, either in assumptions about what it means to be a “head,” or in beliefs about what it means to be “equal.”

⁷⁷ Garland, 516. Belleville agrees: “*Kephalē* is rarely used to describe the relationship of one individual to another. . . . *Prominent* is by far the most common [metaphorical] usage. . . . *Source* and *leader*, on the other hand, are quite rare—although examples can be found. . . . What all this means is that Paul’s uses of *kephalē* must be decided on a case-by-case basis” (*Women Leaders*, 123). She also notes that “Now I want you to know that” is the way that Paul introduces *new* information (130). We cannot assume prior knowledge on the part of the Corinthians of man being the head of the woman. And since the metaphor had several possible meanings, the original readers would have to use the context to tell them which meaning was intended—and the context is *not* about authority and submission.

⁷⁸ Blomberg, *Two Views*, 343.

Appendix B: Head coverings in the Greco-Roman world

Craig Keener gives some detailed information about head coverings in the ancient world: “The practice of women covering their heads in public may be related to the old Greek tradition that restricted women in many ways to the domestic sphere. In theory, at least, women in fourth century BCE Athens could not go to the market and were not to be seen by men who were not their relatives.... This ideal seems to have continued to some degree in conservative parts of the Greek-speaking Mediterranean world [which would probably not include Corinth]....

“Roman women were, however, much less secluded, although some moralists wished them to be more secluded than they were. It was reported that in an earlier period a husband might have divorced his wife for going into public unveiled, or disciplined his wife or daughter for conversing publicly with another man.... Plutarch goes on to explain that a woman’s talk should also be kept private within the home...she ‘ought to do her talking either to her husband or through her husband.’... We cannot suppose that all levels of society hearkened to the moralists (the moralists themselves were well aware that this was the case)....

“Why would the Corinthian Christian women’s uncovered heads have caused offense? One recurrent suggestion is that an uncovered head was the traditional garb of prostitutes. Dress could indeed sometimes indicate that a woman was a prostitute.... But the evidence for *head coverings* distinguishing wives from prostitutes is slender.... Head coverings typified married women in general in Jewish Palestine, so that an uncovered head could indicate a virgin seeking a husband as easily as it could connote a prostitute....

“Others...have suggested instead that Paul may have been thinking of the ‘uncovered and disheveled heads’ of pagan prophetesses.... In most Greek religious activities women uncovered their heads, and this may be significant. But it is doubtful that Paul or the Corinthians would have thought specifically about pagan prophetesses’ hairstyles; such prophetesses...were generally secluded from public view....

“In general, Greek women were expected to participate in worship with their heads uncovered.... Men were also to worship bareheaded. In contrast, Roman women had to cover their heads when offering sacrifices.... Roman men would also pull the toga over their head at sacrifices. Corinth was a Roman ‘colony’ in

Greece during this period....

“Covering one’s head was sometimes associated with mourning; the practice was a standard sign of grief, for both men and women.... During the funeral procession itself, Roman sons would cover their heads, while daughters would ‘go with uncovered heads and hair unbound.’... ”

“It is unlikely that most Palestinian Jews viewed the head covering as a symbol of women’s *humiliation*, but at the least a head covering was a necessary sign of public *modesty* for all Palestinian Jewish women who could afford it. One story tells of a woman so destitute that she could not afford a head covering, so she had to cover her head with her hair before going to speak with Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai.... A Jewish woman who ventured into public with her hair down and exposed to view, or who otherwise could be accused of flirtatious behavior, could be divorced.... Jewish teachers permitted loosing a woman’s hair only in the case of an adulterous woman, who was publicly shamed by exposure to the sight of men.... ”

“Veiling customs varied geographically. Veiling seems to have prevailed in parts of the eastern Mediterranean.... Evidence for this custom in Greek life, however, is sparse.... ”

“It is probable that some well-to-do women thought such restrictions on their public apparel ridiculous, especially if they were from parts of the Mediterranean world where head coverings were not considered necessary. But to other observers, these women’s uncovered heads connoted an invitation to lust. The issue in the Corinthian church may thus have been a clash of [class-related] cultural values concerning modesty, and Paul wants the more [wealthy] liberated elements within the church to care enough about their more conservative colleagues [the poor] not to offend them in this dramatic way.... Most women in Greco-Roman statues and other artwork from this period [generally the wealthy] have uncovered heads.... Nothing in 1 Cor. 11 suggests a practice that requires women’s heads to be covered all day long.”⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Keener, 22-30; see also Cynthia L. Thompson, “Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth,” *Biblical Archaeologist*, June 1988, 99-113.