

Head Covering & Uncovering

God's unchanging Word transcending every age and culture



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NOTE - Throughout this study...

- Church (capital 'C') denotes the One 'Universal' Body of Christ.
- church (small 'c') denotes a local church/assembly.

1 Corinthians 11: 1-16...

"Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you. But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels. Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God. Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered? Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering. But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God."

INTRODUCTION

There are some passages of Scripture that are so seldom used for preaching and teaching that some Christians who are less given to personal study are hardly aware of them. The above has become for many in our age and culture a topic to avoid at all costs! It is not only here, in the first half of the eleventh chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthian church, but elsewhere, in both Old and New Testaments that we find many other portions of Holy Scripture that speak of male and female being different. What a shock to those who have been constantly told that there is no difference betwixt the two genders, or at least, that there is no differentiation in our roles. For some who are perhaps new brothers and sisters in Christ, if they have heard of this passage of Scripture it was only as a matter of controversy and a comment or two about it not being relevant to us today quickly dealt with it.

The purpose of this study is to look at the passage in hand and see what is actually being taught. Like so many great themes of Scripture there is beauty, wonder and sheer simplicity if we are simply willing to receive the truth. However, just as it was in the times when New Testament Scripture was being written there are still many today that are either ignorant of, or, more seriously, directly oppose some of the New Testament teachings. Therefore, it is not always possible to simply gaze on the sheer beauty of God in the revelation of Him in His Word, along the way we have to address the arguments put forward by those who object to, or simply misunderstand, the doctrines of His holy apostles. This dual approach of expounding God's Word while at the same time addressing the

heresies, which abound in opposition to it, is in fact the common method of apostolic teaching we find in the New Testament. It is part revelation of truth and part refutation of circulating teachings that oppose the truth. So, along the way in this study we shall address the four (that I know of) commonly used arguments for not adhering to this ordinance today. By the end of this study the reader will then be in a much better position to judge whether or not this does hold any relevance to the Church today. We will take the whole passage verse by verse and we shall see.

The Foundation

Before we come to that however, it is of the utmost importance that we understand that there are a multitude of other topics that underlie this one. This of course is true of virtually any serious Bible study. There is always a lot of ground gone before, which we really need to understand first. However, if we forever keep going over the ground that comes before we will never progress to anything further on in God's Word. I shall simply state in brief some of the important topics, which in terms of progressive understanding, come before the subject in hand. Of most relevance they are:

1. **'Inspiration of Scripture'**

You must first believe that the Bible is God's Word, especially 'inspired' (God-breathed) in a way that makes it relevant to ALL Christians & ALL churches, in ALL cultures, in ALL places, at ALL times. (See statement on 'Inspiration of Scripture' on this site)

2. **Male and female generally**

"Male and female made He them." The purpose and role of male and female is as old as creation itself. It is a fundamental theme of God's dealings with mankind. The Scripture is full of references to this subject in both Old and New Testaments. This is not a study of male and female generally. We are only focussing on the ordinance in question. However, as will be seen, we will cover a lot of ground on that topic, but not all. There is a small section on 'Women and Authority' in the study entitled 'His Church' on this site. You may find the small amount of information there useful.

3. **This is not a lone 'ordinance'**

Whilst the Old Testament is full of 'ordinances' (we'll come to that word), there are only a very select few in the New. It is important to realise that this topic is part and parcel of the more general theme of 'ordinances'.

4. **Our approach to God's Word**

This partly fits in with the subject of 'Inspiration of Scripture'. It is worth mentioning this just in case there is anyone who thinks that this ordinance can be simply written off as being peripheral or unimportant. I would like to remind you that Jesus did not consider any topic to be of such little importance as to not be worthy of careful attention. I personally doubt that there is such a thing as 'essentials and non-essentials' in the things of God. Obedience is essential in all. Jesus did ascribe to some issues the definition of being 'weightier' than others but neither He nor any of His apostles used the 'weightier' to destroy the 'lesser'. Read again the Lord's words in Matthew 23:23:

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith:

these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”

Neither Jesus nor any of His apostles ever said, “Make sure you do the things you consider to be important and the rest is comparatively unimportant.” On the contrary, Jesus was saying: “set in order not only the big issues but make sure that you don’t leave anything undone.” In the light of that, as to whether any issue is actually ‘great’ or ‘small’, it really makes no difference because Jesus tells us He wants it ALL done.

Four arguments against

It is not surprising that when we come up against something in God’s Word that cuts across the popular culture of the day, that many are in a serious dilemma as to which way to go. The honest approach of those who feel the burden of being marked as ‘different’ is too much to bear should be to simply state: “I acknowledge what is being taught but I am not prepared to act so differently from the rest of society.” Not a good attitude to the things of Almighty God, but at least it’s honest. Far more disgraceful though, we hear excuses, and they really are little more than that I am sorry to say. I know that they are mere excuses because the people who use them don’t usually say, “It would be absolutely no problem to me whatsoever to do this. I am perfectly willing, but I have seriously studied it and come to the conclusion that... etc.” In acknowledgement of such people who do hold to such a position in the absolute integrity of their heart, I apologise for my use of the term ‘excuses’. I do however urge such a one to read on and I believe that you can only reach the conclusion that is reached in this study. For the sake of these ones who may have genuinely misunderstood this passage I shall henceforth out of courtesy use the term ‘arguments’. There are four I know of. We shall be dealing with three of these as the study progresses and I shall make the briefest of references to the fourth one now. The four arguments are:

1. **It was only a local/cultural practice.**

It belonged either to Corinth only and/or it was simply to do with the culture they lived in. We shall deal with this one throughout the study. We shall see that the whole point of Scripture is to reveal spiritual truth.

2. **The ‘hair’ is her covering. It says so in verse 15.**

We’ll deal with this one when we come to verse 15.

3. **“We have no such custom.” Paul says, “if it causes you any problems just forget about it!”**

We’ll deal with this one when we arrive at verse 16

4. **“It was Paul’s personal prejudice, he had a ‘down’ on women!”**

This last will not be given any special attention in the study, as it is not even based on anything said or written about Paul in Scripture. We have testimonies of his being “called from his mother’s womb,” being “a chosen vessel unto God” and Peter tells us that writings by Paul are considered to be “Scripture” (2 Pet. 3:16). Paul was a man who did nothing less than suffer and die as a result of his faithfulness to the truth of the Gospel. He is called “an apostle”, which means that he is chosen by God to be a representative of Jesus Christ. This question particularly, but really all four of the ‘arguments’ are answered when we understand that it is God who ‘inspired’ ALL of the Scripture. Therefore in the context of the

New Testament/Covenant period (or, the 'Church age') ALL Scripture must bear relevance to ALL generations or there wouldn't have been any point in 'preserving' it as 'Holy Writ'.

Verse by Verse

We will now consider every thought and phrase in this passage of Scripture verse by verse...

Verse1 – Follow Good Examples

"Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ."

Take note of people who really do follow Christ, those who seek only the praises of God and not the praises of men. Follow their example and think seriously about the things that such people say.

Verse 2 - An Ordinance

"Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances (*PARADOSEIS – see below), as I delivered them to you."

The word 'ordinance'

Before we proceed any further I have to make something plain concerning the translation of this word (PARADOSEIS). Elsewhere in the New Testament (A.V.) this word is translated as 'tradition'. In other Bible versions I think this is the more usual word. Why the Authorized translation committee chose 'ordinance' instead I do not know for sure. Maybe they were trying to make the point I am about to make? Although the word has a meaning of 'tradition' it is clear, to my mind at least, that what Paul is talking about here is neither a local 'custom' nor a 'vain tradition of men'. So, if we do read a translation that says, 'tradition', we must bear in mind that it is talking about an apostolic tradition, a precedent being set for the churches. I trust that the universal nature of this practice will become clear as we progress through the study.

I shall continue with the A.V. term 'ordinance' throughout the study, but you may prefer to think of this, in this instance, as standing for 'an authoritative apostolic instruction/tradition' (which has been handed down to the churches). 'Ordinance' may not be technically the best word for this (?) but it does however, whether inadvertently, or by design, open to us the so obvious association with other symbolic practices in the Bible. For it is evident that symbolism is what we are dealing with in this subject. I trust that the associations that this particular word, 'ordinance', has with 'symbolism' will actually make certain elements of this topic easier to understand.

What is an 'ordinance'?

The word 'ordinance' commonly means a 'statute,' a 'decree'. Looking at the various instances where this word occurs in the Old Testament we find that it is often used in relation to feasts, ceremonial rites and priesthood matters. In view of this you could say, in simple terms, that: an ordinance is: "an outward act that demonstrates an 'inward' (or, spiritual) reality." Such would be my best attempt to summarise this in a way that relates to the topic in hand.

For example, the first instance in the Authorized Version of the Bible where the word 'ordinance' occurs is in reference to the feast of Passover (Ex. 12:14). As you will probably know, both the original event and the annual feast of Passover were full of symbolic meaning. It was, as all of the Old Testament feasts and rituals were, a foreshadowing of Christ and His work (see Colossians 2:17 & Hebrews 8:5). Such was the seriousness of failure to observe (and that correctly) the ordinances of the Old Testament, that a person could be 'cut-off' from the nation if he/she did not participate in the prescribed manner (see Exodus 12:15 as just one example). Suffice it to say that whatever 'cut-off' means in all its implications, none who fear God would want that to happen to them!

God takes pleasure in those who keep His ordinances

"Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel among them that call upon his name; they called upon the LORD, and he answered them. He spake unto them in the cloudy pillar: they kept his testimonies, and the ordinance that he gave them." (Psalm 99:6 & 7)

"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." (Luke 1:6)

Along with the many other rebukes given to a backsliding nation in the book of Malachi, the Lord also points out His displeasure in those who forsake His ordinances:

"Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts..." (Malachi 3:7)

New Testament ordinances

It has already been mentioned that the Old Testament (i.e. the Old Covenant period) was full of ordinances (symbolic acts). It was God's good pleasure and plan to show-forth the Gospel through all of these beautiful illustrations. In the New Testament Christ fulfilled all of these illustrative pictures from Old Testament times and at the same time therefore did away with them (see Eph 2:15, Col 2:14, Heb 9:1-10). However, it was God's good pleasure and will to institute a very select few new ones for the purposes of the New Covenant era. Compared with the Old Testament the number of them really is minimal. The main difference between Old and New ordinances is that the Old 'looked forward' to the spiritual work of Christ and the New simply expresses what is now a living, spiritual reality for the children of God. If my simple definition of an ordinance is accepted (an outward sign of an inward/spiritual reality) then there are at least three, and possibly four or five in place in the New Covenant period. We shall not be considering all these in this study we are only concerned with the one at present.

We know that there must be a minimum of three that are considered 'ordinances' because Paul praises the Corinthians for keeping the ordinances (plural – must be minimum of two) and then goes immediately on to explain this one, hence there are at least three. I will just list the three that are obvious, but it may be possible to add to this list depending on one's exact definition of an ordinance:

Water Baptism – signifying a person’s new birth by immersion (the word ‘baptize’ means ‘to immerse’) into God’s Spirit. At the same time showing a picture of death (of the ‘old man’), burial (of him and all our sins) and resurrection (into the newness of life in Christ Jesus).

Head Covering/Uncovering – showing the nature, authority and order of the Godhead and that we, His Church, are restored to our proper place in God’s creation.

The Lord’s Supper (also called in Scripture ‘The Lord’s Table’ and ‘Communion’) – signifying that as believers, restored to our proper order in Christ and walking in His Spirit, we constantly eat and drink of His life. Without this we cannot live as Christians.

So we have:

1. Regeneration, bringing us into the life of God.
2. We are restored to the proper order, which crumbled at the fall.*
3. We may now (indeed must) partake of the life of God’s Son continually in order to live aright.

* [In actual fact, we are more than ‘restored’ in Christ. We have been brought further on, spiritually speaking, as Adam did not partake of the tree of life and was therefore not ‘indwelt’ of God.]

Verse 3 - Headship and Pictorial Roles

“But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.”

Note: (This section is the big one in our study. There is a lot to consider here and it is very difficult to even limit the comments and explanations to what follows. Once you have grasped the fundamental picture(s) in this section you will sail through the rest of the study and all should be quite simple. If necessary I would recommend a rereading of this section before moving on.)

Head or head?

The word translated as ‘head’ (Gk. KEPHALE) is used both figuratively and literally. Perhaps there are some modern translations that make this distinction clearer. I know from my attempts at reading the French Bible (Louis Segond Version) that it distinguishes between ‘la tete’ (physical head) and ‘le chef’ (head, as in, ‘one in charge’, ‘leader’). However, a careful reading of the A.V. should make it quite clear by slowly following the context.

Who is in the picture?

Some simple arithmetic should tell us that there are four ‘persons’ to start with (if one can call God a person) and three times we read of someone being the ‘Head’ (le chef) of someone else. It is therefore clear from this verse that one, namely the woman is not placed in a position of ‘Headship’ over anyone else. Already we can see that this ordinance is to do with God, Christ, man & woman – so far. A little further on we shall see that it also involves angels (verse 10) and Adam and Eve (we will see this when we come to verses 7, 8 & 9). In a moment we’ll branch out a little further to look at an associated passage of Scripture in the letter to the Ephesian church where we will see also that

there is a picture of the Church in this too. So to give a simple breakdown of who is involved by the time we come to the end of the study we shall be encountering:

1. God (when used in a passage with Christ, this denotes God The Father).
2. Christ (the Son, also 'Husband' to The Church).
3. Man (men generally).
4. Woman (women generally).
5. Adam (the first man).
6. Eve (the first woman).
7. Angels (rebellious and non rebellious).
8. The Church (which is the Bride of Christ).

This is most definitely not a localised/cultural teaching!

A similar picture

Let's see where this picture of the Church fits into this. It should not be difficult to recognise in the Scripture passage below that here we have a very similar analogy.

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband."

(Ephesians 5:22 – 33)

This allegory used in Ephesians 5 shows a beautiful picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church and is important to our study. Here we are told, that in marriage, the man represents Christ and the woman, the Church. Isn't that lovely? So, as Christ is to the Church so should the Husband be to his Wife and as the Church should be to Christ so should the Wife be to her Husband. This is an end to EVERY marital breakdown for Christians if both partners take their respective roles seriously. God does, and any attempt to live outside of these roles will never allow the fullness of our Father's blessing on the marriage.

Before we go on to talk about headship and authority let's make one thing clear, as the passage above does. Men must love, nourish and cherish their wives. To behave in any lesser way than this would be to completely fail in our first purpose of being men - that of being a reflection of the nature of God. Show me a man who does not so care for and consider his wife and you have before you a man of flesh who walks not after the Spirit of Christ. We cannot stop and examine all the aspects of husband and wife relationships because we are in many ways ahead of that in this study. The ordinance of head covering and uncovering is the final icing on the cake of that much bigger study.

Two allegories in one

Returning now to our passage in 1 Co 11 we can actually see two pictures, not just one. Firstly, we see the same picture that we just saw in Ephesians 5. Look, as Christ is to the man so is the man to the woman and vice versa. That is, Christ is the 'Head' of the man and man is the 'Head' of the woman. In this picture we see headship ONLY. But look again, there is a second picture – As God (the Father) is to Christ (His Head) so is the man to the woman and again vice versa. So what's different in this picture? Although it again reflects headship it also shows us an extra aspect in those relationships - equality.

In this second picture, the man represents God (The Father) and the woman represents Christ. Yes, that's right. Just because Jesus is called 'The Son' it doesn't mean that a woman cannot somehow reflect something of His Nature. I am a man and yet I am a part of the Bride of Christ. Though the woman mirrors something of the Church in Ephesians 5 and something of Christ in 1 Corinthians 11, in the creation story we can see that she reflected an aspect of the Holy Spirit. "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved (fluttered, brooded) upon the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2). It is indeed true to say that there is an aspect of the nature of God that is Motherly (never carry this farther than Scripture actually shows). Remember also the words of the Lord Jesus: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not!" (Luke 13:34). Jesus did not seem to shun the idea of portraying Himself as having an element of Motherly caring. This is a lesson to any Christian man who wishes to express the true life of Christ. It most certainly involves caring sensitivity.

Authority with Equality (Is that possible?)

The short answer to our sub-heading here is: Of course it is! Don't you know the triune God?

In this second picture where we are looking at the relationship between God and Christ, we have a clear statement of authority. Any who know the Lord will know that Jesus is none other than God Himself. Many a time Jesus confirmed His position as being 'sent' and 'under' His Father's instruction. But there is no doubt about the fact that Jesus was co-equal with the Father. The following is just one simple statement on the matter:

"Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:" (Phil 2:6)

How can this be? How can someone be equal and at the same time under/over in authority? Welcome to the Kingdom of God! Things are not like they are in this fallen world. In this very

ordinance we are considering it is God's great master plan in dealing with men and angels to show them the principles of the Kingdom of Heaven. Such will be demonstrated in the lives of humble men and women who will obey His statutes and be a 'living' testimony (in picture form) of the Nature of the Godhead. Later I will use an analogy of my own to try to illustrate the principle of Headship and Equality in harmony.

In summary of the above...

If this all seems confusing, I'm sorry. But think of it as the most amazing 'family' in the universe, because that is what you belong to if you are a child of God. There are books written on the Trinity. No doubt some say some very good and useful things but at the end of the day we can't rationalize God to a point of being able to say "I completely understand Him." Here we are in the realms of the things of God where it does not always make immediate sense to our 'natural' thinking. I love the portions of John 14 & 16 where Jesus is talking of Himself, His Father and The Holy Spirit. The Three just become so 'merged' that it is impossible to separate them. 'Intertwined' would perhaps be the better way of expressing this *. We shall see that in 1 Cor 11 we have a scenario where God and God, and man and God, and man and woman are intertwined in an inseparable family.

* (A friend suggested to me the analogy of a rainbow. The colours of a rainbow are each distinct yet also merge into one another with no lines of separation).

There's so much involved here! There are so many pictures all going on at once. Let's bring this back to the most fundamental and simple facts now:

- In God there is order (albeit with equality too).
- When He created man and woman, in His image, He set them in order too.
- God (the Father) is the Head of Christ.
- Christ is the Head of the man and the Head of the church.
- The man is the Head of the woman.
- God has ordained that there should be a 'sign' of this order.

Verse 4 (part 1) - A Man's Responsibility

"Every man praying or prophesying, having his head (la tete) covered, dishonoureth his head (le chef)."

A man's responsibilities for himself

You must realise that this ordinance has as much to do with men as it does with women. Let's first look at the man's responsibility for himself.

It just so happens that we live in a culture where it is not common for men to wear headdress. If it were the norm for a man to wear a hat or some form of covering on his head, then he would be under obligation to remove it before he "prays or prophesies." A good example of this is a man named Rees Howells. He lived at the beginning of the 1900's and he was a man given to much

prayer. In those days it was common for a man to wear a hat in England. In fact in most parts, particularly London, it was unthinkable that a man should be seen without his 'covering'. He broke all the social customs by not wearing his hat because he considered himself to be in 'a constant state of prayer'. It caused both Mr Howells, and at times, his hosts, acute embarrassment, but he walked according to what God had spoken to him without regard for man might say or think. I mention this to illustrate a point. Let's not get sidetracked on the question of the life of Rees Howells or his 'constant state of prayer'. Scripture is clear, when a man engages in prayer if he does not uncover his head, he dishonours Christ. Think also for a moment of some Eastern and Middle Eastern countries where it is still common for both men and women to wear head attire of some sort as the daily norm. The onus is much more on the men to 'uncover', the women may continue as they are. We'll come to the meaning of what covering/uncovering the head symbolically represents in the next section.

A man's responsibilities overall

A man not only has to account for his own proper behaviour in this but, in the case of a married man or an elder in a church, he will also have to give account for his instruction, or lack of it, to those in his charge. Adam clearly failed in this responsibility and did not pass on to the woman the fullness of instruction, which he had received from God. As a result she was deceived and transgressed (1 Tim 2:14) and yet we read "by one man sin entered into the world" (Rom 5:12). As with all spiritual matters, failure to comply with God's instructions will not only bring God's displeasure on the individual who doesn't comply but also, perhaps more so, on any man who has neglected his responsibility to instruct those entrusted to him. Remember, with all authority there is responsibility and accountability. In Christian marriage and in the Church the man is the one that God has placed in charge whether he wishes it or not.

Verse 4 (part 2) - Questions On Context

For those who wish to please God in every detail there will naturally arise two small enquiries at some point. Is this ordinance only relevant in the context of prayer and prophecy specifically? And does this only apply to a church meeting, or is it relevant to any situation where we find ourselves in 'prayer and prophecy'? Perhaps these questions would have been best saved until after we have explored all of the significance of head covering/uncovering, but they do naturally arise at this point because we have just read the verse in this passage that simply says, "every man praying or prophesying..."

Question re 'prayer and prophecy'

Is Paul being very specific in singling out these two activities in particular? Or, is he using these in a representative way just meaning when we engage in obvious, outward spiritual activities? Could we add to this list and say, when you speak in tongues or interpret, or when you sing and praise the Lord? What about if someone else is praying verbally and you are silently joining with them?

I think we can see from the above questions that we could be entering a minefield if we attempt to take these two points as being the literal only situations where this applies. In view of the things we have already covered, i.e. men and women being created with representative roles etc. it would seem strange if the ordinance were to be only employed for some of our spiritual activities and not

all. Just think for a moment about a 'proper' New Testament gathering of God's people. We are told precisely the nature and form that a normal church meeting should take: "How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying" (1Cor 14:26). I think it would be rather odd looking if in an assembly meeting all the sisters covered their heads while prayer was taking place while all the brothers were uncovered and then, someone begins to speak in an unknown tongue (or give a word of exhortation or whatever), and so all the ladies think, "oh, this is just a message in tongues now, I may as well remove my covering," and the men say, "we might as well put our hats back on now." Next, and quite without warning, an elder asks everyone to join him in praying for something. There's a flurry of activity and... oops!... one lady has inadvertently picked up her husband's headdress! Point taken I trust! Whilst I would have full respect for anyone who in the integrity of his or her heart takes this very pedantic view I do not think that this would be very consistent with the overall picture and meaning of this ordinance. Not to mention the highly impracticable arrangements that could easily build up around such a view.

Question re the context/environment

Is this ordinance reserved for the gathering together of a church or should it be employed on any occasion where we 'pray and prophesy'?

Paul didn't state explicitly that the context of this was if someone were present at a church gathering. The whole of the letter to the Corinthian believers contains matters that relate to both 'gathering together' and many parts that obviously apply to Christian life in general. Some have taken the view that this only relates to occasions when there is a church gathering. I cannot agree with that. For a number of reasons:

The overall 'pictorial' roles of male and female are the same whether we are in a meeting of the whole church, having fellowship with just a few friends, praying with our husband or wife or even on our own. We shall later see how that a woman's hair is considered to be "her glory." This doesn't change dependant on whether or not she is in a church gathering. Again later we shall read of 'Angels' being present with us. This is true whether we are in a local church meeting or fellowshiping with a few somewhere or alone. Thank God they are our ministers in many situations not only when we gather together with the saints where we already have one another for support.

Once again, I can respect the person who only practices this ordinance in a church meeting if it is their considered opinion that that is what is being taught. However, I would ask such a one to please meditate prayerfully on the above three points. Besides those, you are also left with the difficult situations where it must be very hard to decide whether or not a particular gathering constitutes a 'church meeting' or not. Remember, there is no such place as 'a church' (i.e. a building) so we cannot use that as our determining factor. That is, when we're in the 'church' (meaning a building) we practise head covering and when we pray in our homes then we don't. In the New Testament, all church meetings were held in homes so there was no dividing line there.

A personal testimony

In respect of this latter issue of 'where and when' to cover/uncover I would like to finish with this small testimony from my wife.

She was a member of a church where head covering was the normal practise for the women there. She adopted this practise in obedience to God as soon as she was shown this passage of Scripture. However, it was not taught at that church that this should be our practise at all times – only at a ‘church meeting’. One day while alone with the Lord in prayer, she suddenly felt very ‘naked’ without her covering. When she wondered why, the Lord spoke to her in her heart from this passage of Scripture – the part that says, “a woman’s hair is her glory.” Her understanding was quickened and she realised that if she covered her hair in the meetings in order to give glory to God then shouldn’t she always want to give God all of the glory in this way? Also, being aware of this passage of Scripture, the thought came to her regarding the angels. Is their presence not as much a reality when we are alone as when we are gathered with a church? In simple response to this prompting of the Holy Spirit she covered her head and continued in prayer. A short while after, two other young ladies from that church testified that God had also spoken to them quite separately on the same thing.

A testimony alone is not sufficient to form into a doctrine, but where it is borne out “In the mouth of two or three witnesses” we really should look again to see what God’s Word has to say on the matter. That this ordinance should be our practise at all times is completely consistent with all of the revelation of its meaning.

Verses 5 & 6 - A Woman’s Responsibility

“But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head (la tete) uncovered dishonoureth her head (le chef – the man vs.3): for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.”

So it is simply the other way round for the woman. She is told to cover her head, as opposed to the man who is instructed to uncover.

What does this signify?

Why cover/uncover the head though? Remember we are looking at a symbolic ordinance here. In the Old Testament a priest or king was anointed with oil (poured on his head) to signify his authority. The ‘oil’ speaks of the Holy Spirit and the ‘head’ speaks of authority.

In this New Testament picture of order and authority, we symbolise the fact that Christ has redeemed us all back to the proper order of creation. I don’t mean just solely male and female order, but everything is brought back into its proper subjection to God. So, the man removes any covering from his head to signify that he is in authority (he is ‘the Head’) and, a very important ‘and’, is taking responsibility for the situation. Yes, we’re back to Adam in the garden who failed to use the authority God had given him as he stood by and said nothing while his wife was being seduced by the wicked one. The woman places a covering upon her head in order to signify the reverse; she is under the authority of the man thus representing the subjection of the Church to Christ.

The second part of this verse simply means: “if she won’t do it, then she might as well cut her hair short and look like a man!” I don’t think for one minute that the apostle was advocating pinning a woman down and force-shaving her! I suspect this is more of an idiomatic expression of exasperation like – “if he won’t listen to this he might as well chop off his ears!” Under the Old

Covenant and in many societies and cultures it has been the practise at times to shave a woman as a punishment for infidelity. As I say, I don't believe this is mentioned here as an instruction to do such, however, it is very relevant to note that it was obviously considered to be an extremely serious misconduct to not obey this ordinance. Soon we'll look at how precious a woman's hair is.

Verses 7,8 & 9 - Back To Creation

"For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man."

This is all simple Genesis 1 & 2 teaching here. Adam was the original creation of God, made in His (God's) image. The woman (woman means: 'out of man') was created from him, as his perfect partner. She was the complementary creation. He directly reflected God's image (this of course is not a physical thing) and she directly reflected the man's image. Also it is important to know that combined together they reflected the image of God too. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Gen 1:27). As human beings in a normal family set-up Father, Mother and child/children (three entities yet one family) are a reflection of the triune God. Yet again, we are not in the realms of culture here but in realms of heavenly things. Just as with God, Christ and the Angels I mentioned earlier, Adam and Eve are not cultural fantasies. They are bedrocks of Christian belief.

Verse 10 – Power & Angels

"For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels."

"Power on her head" is I grant you a strange sounding phrase. Other renderings are along the lines of "a sign of authority" or similar. The word translated as 'power' (EXOUSIA) can be also translated as 'authority'. Amazingly, in view of many men and women's hatred of this teaching, part of the meaning of EXOUSIA is 'privilege'. It is her privilege to bear the 'sign' of God's order of creation, and one very important reason is: "because of the angels."

This latter expression could lead us to think in two ways:

It is a sign directly to angelic beings. Because angels have been sent forth to minister to the human children of God: "But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool? Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" (Heb 1:13,14). Also, fallen angelic beings (known as demons) plainly wander this world seeking whom they may inhabit or trouble in some way. (See Luke 11:24 for example). It could simply be taken to mean: "because of what happened to the angels." You will have no doubt discovered by now that the Bible speaks of an angelic revolt. It doesn't say that much about it, but it is alluded to in a number of places.

In the two points above there exists a common link, which is the fact that there once was an angelic rebellion against God's order and authority. This is most definitely one reason for the institution of an ordinance in God's Church that signifies order and authority. We'll consider this angelic rebellion just briefly:

Jude 1:6 “And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation” - (they rebelled against God’s heavenly order).

There are several other references to this subject; but we will not attempt a full research of this now. Suffice it to say that once already God’s creation had rebelled before Adam sinned on earth. Now the fallen one’s from that rebellion look at us hopeful of seeing mankind on their side in their ‘war against God’. In ‘the world’ they’re winning hands down of course. Not only in realms of male and female relationships but in everything. Even though there are cultures that still recognise male authority, often it’s confused with the belief that women are somehow inferior beings. Female submission is only half the picture of course. Remember again our Ephesians passage: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph 5:25). If a man does not love, cherish, honour and lay down his life for her then he mars the image of Christ – he indeed dishonours his Head.

Satan (who is an angelic being) is the god (small ‘g’) of this world and all the while a man or woman lives according to the fashions of this world, in whatever culture they’re found, the devil is not concerned with them. The issue in hand is, will the Church continue in God’s ways? Or can the wicked one distract, corrupt, malign, anything to keep us from obedience to Christ? We, Christian Men and Women together, have the privilege and responsibility of showing rebellious angels (who are made “a little higher than man”) that WE are the children of God. We love Him, we fear Him, we obey His order.

Verses 11 & 12 – Our Interdependence

“Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.”

Here, the apostle is very careful to emphasise the mutual dependency and equality of value and worth of male and female, just in case there are imbalanced men who start getting the idea that headship somehow makes them superior. I’ve already stated that men and women are equal in their ‘value and worth’ to God but we have differing roles. This is consistent with the whole of biblical revelation not just Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Just to express this again I’ll use one more analogy:

An analogy of equality and order

Let’s say you work in an office. You have a manager over you. You are no less a person than that manager; you are equal in your worth to God. Let’s just say your employers consider you both to be of equal value to them. Your manager may have more skills than you or you may possess more skills than him/her. That’s not the point; your employers have given the role of manager to one and not the other. That’s their decision and prerogative. Let’s say you have a good manager, he will treat you with courtesy, even though he is the officially ‘in charge’ one. He will listen to you knowing that often you come up with solutions and suggestions that are good, yet, your manager still takes the decision whether or not to implement your ideas, that’s his privilege ... BUT... it is, at the same, time his responsibility. If it all goes wrong he is to blame from the employers standpoint. Do you see the picture? The two are equal in their value and worth and yet, at the same time, one has been given

responsibilities that the other hasn't. Just because headship is often abused, that does not make it any less the truth of God.

Interdependence does not replace individual fellowship with God

There is one more point which must be made clear here, just in case there is any doubt or confusion over this. Just because a man is the 'head' in a marriage it does not mean that the woman has no personal and direct communion with God; on the contrary. We see the same principle in the local church. The elders have collective responsibility for all matters that relate to that assembly but that does not mean that the individual Christians who meet together in that assembly do not continue in their own daily walk of fellowship with God. The elders must take responsibility before God for all things in that church. The others in that church should pray to God to guide them. It does not necessarily follow that God's Word for that church will always come directly to the elders. It may come from any God-given source, and most certainly it will, at times, come from the other members of that congregation. Even so, in marriage, the woman should pray for the husband to receive God's Word and guidance in all matters that relate to their lives. Also the same principle applies that God may not always speak directly to the man; He may at times speak through the wife. Here we are back to our office analogy again. Though the Word may come through the wife, the husband must make the decision as to whether it is God's voice or not. If it is and he rejects it he is in sin. If it isn't and he follows it he (not she) is yet again the one held accountable. That's the negative side, but really God wants the 'two' (husband and wife) to be so 'one' that He can speak to whom He wishes knowing that they will both agree and that all things will be done in their proper order – God takes pleasure in order.

Verse 13 - Now Make Your own Assessment

"Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?"

In view of all that's been said – no. Nor would it be comely for a man to pray with his head covered.

Verses 14 & 15 - A Lesson From Nature

"Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering."

We need to deal with argument '2' here (do you remember in the introduction?) - "the hair is the covering" – let's see.

This argument as I've heard it says: "It (these 16 verses of Scripture) doesn't mean a scarf or hat or anything like that. It says the hair is the covering*." O.K. please cross out (figuratively, I'm not asking you to ruin your Bible!) the word 'cover' and all its derivatives in this passage and replace it with the word, or sense of 'hair'. Now reread the whole passage. Come on, admit it, that does sound rather odd, e.g. especially verse 4, "Every man praying or prophesying with hair on his head...!"

There is a subtler and less funny version of 'the hair is the covering' argument. The argument being that long hair (with the emphasis on 'long') is the covering. Therefore: "Every man praying or prophesying with long hair dishonours his head." This seems a little more sensible until we read the part about the woman having short hair being "shaven" or "shorn:"

“For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven...”

In the above instance if “not covered” means having short hair then why on earth would Paul say: “any woman praying with short hair should have her hair shaved off or cut short!” Even if one of these words (‘shaven’ and ‘shorn’) was to mean complete baldness (and I don’t know that either of them do mean that?) the other one can only at best mean ‘cut short’. This would not make any sense at all.

* [It is perhaps also of relevance to note that the Greek word for ‘covering’ here in verse 15 (PERIBOLAION) is a different one than that used elsewhere in the passage where a ‘covering’ is being spoken of – (KATAKALUPTO).]

In these two verses (14 & 15) we simply have, as my title in this section suggests, ‘a lesson from nature’. It is common throughout the whole of the Bible for spiritual instruction to be backed up/illustrated by principles from the natural world. However, this does further make clear though that it is God’s intention that a woman’s hair be long and a man’s short.+ I don’t think that it would be chosen as an illustration of this if this were not the case. As to the question of, how long? Or how short? It is like asking, “how long is acceptable as a length for a Christian woman’s skirt?” The answer is not found in a tape measure, but by the HOLY Spirit who resides within us. The principles of the matter are plain. Any God-fearing Christian woman should look feminine and be holy unto the Lord. Any God-fearing Christian man should look masculine and be holy unto the Lord. “Without holiness we shall not see the Lord” (Heb 12:14).

+ [I read in a short publication on this topic that the word ‘long’ more implies the style of the hair as opposed to purely the length. I am unable to verify this at the present moment but this would explain the apparent anomaly of the Nazarite being instructed to not cut his hair.]

What type of covering?

Whilst we are on the topic of ‘precise measurements’, we should just pause for a moment and consider a practical aspect of this. We have just read that a woman’s hair should be long, and that her hair is her glory. In the earlier parts of this passage we read of a woman’s head being covered; the various derivatives of ‘covered’ (KATAKALUPTO) mean ‘veiled’. In view of both of these two points I think it is pretty clear that what is in view here is some kind of fairly full covering of the head and the hair. Once again, I do not think the precise details of this can be determined by a tape measure, but if a woman wishes to practice this ordinance in the manner that properly portrays the intended meanings, then a hat or miniature hair adornment does not entirely fulfil it. Many would not doubt that water baptism should be by a full immersion. Why? Because that is what Scripture teaches and the reason is, because that is what properly fulfils the picture of our immersion (baptism) into God. In the case of this ordinance, which we are now considering, a veiling/full covering is what is in view. I emphasise ‘head’ and ‘hair’, I do not think that this in any way implies the face too.

Verse 16 - Never Argue With A Genuine Apostle

“But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.”

So we come to the end, but not without one last fight. Argument '3' says: "He said (that's Paul) that if it was going to cause any problem that we needn't do it." Such is the interpretation of, "we have no such custom."

First of all, I have already abundantly emphasised that this passage of God's Word speaks of God, Christ, angels and alludes to Adam and Eve and the Church. Such beliefs are not the unique idea of one little local church. These are facts of the whole biblical revelation. The word 'custom' here is not the same as the word translated as 'ordinance' at the outset of the passage. It is clear that the subject in hand is an ordinance not a social custom. It is sandwiched between Paul's teachings on the Lord's Supper (chapter 10 and the rest of chapter 11). There is no doubt that he is on the subject of ordinances.

This verse is quite self-explanatory if it is read without prejudice and simply in the order it is written: "if any man seem to be contentious - we have no such custom." 'Custom' does not refer to the ordinance that the writer has just spent 15 verses carefully explaining - he is referring to people being 'contentious' about it. It should not be the custom (the manner, the habit) of humble children of God to argue about something that His apostles have stated as being God's will and good pleasure. By the by - the word 'custom' isn't even used in some translations. It just means - "its not our habit to argue about these things."

Conclusion

It is of great relevance to mention that in many Eastern countries the ordinance of head covering is still common practice today and indeed, there are still a few groups who practice this in the West. When looked at like that it is comforting to know that those who still obey the ordinance of head covering/uncovering are probably still in the majority when the whole of the last 2000 years are taken into consideration. Not that any child of God should ever be motivated by whether or not he or she is in a majority or minority. However, it is good to know that this ordinance has not always been rejected by those who profess to know Him.

Many in our day have taken the line that this ordinance is now irrelevant. Why? Because we have a better understanding of the Word than previous generations? Not at all. The objections have arisen and gathered pace in Western society only in the last 80 -90 years (approx.). Two World Wars and the need for women, at those times, to take on what were traditionally considered male responsibilities has something to do with it.

I have heard that during the Second World War the C of E declared that it was acceptable for women to attend church without a covering in recognition of the shortage of clothing coupons etc. I somehow doubt that the shortage of material was so extreme that something couldn't be improvised in such a case. Anyhow, to my knowledge this was never subsequently rescinded. It seems as though adversity was used as an excuse to discontinue something that had started to become unfashionable in society. I've never heard of a case of a christening being cancelled during a time of national water shortage!

The reason why people (men and women) in our present age do not like this ordinance is because it is a statement of differing male and female roles. This clashes with the philosophies of the culture

we now live in (partly influenced by those difficult times but also by many other factors). Far from being something cultural, which belonged to a forgotten era, the ordinance of head covering, just like the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, is a permanent feature of the New Testament Church. The sad truth of the matter is that people have to make a choice whether to flow with the tide of society or obey the Word of God.

The conclusion here is really quite simple:

"Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?" (Further to this: is it appropriate that a man pray to God covered?)

Well, Paul says, "You now make the judgement." So long as you 'judge' (weigh up the evidence) from the position of wanting nothing except the will of God you will be 'caused' to judge aright:

"I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me." (John 5:30). Don't think that not understanding any of it is any excuse either because:

"If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." (John 7:17)

And if you think you can just 'skip over' this one little thing (if you view it as insignificant), remember the words of James:

"For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." (James 2:10)

In this day, probably more so than ever before, this simple little ordinance has now become a symbol of so much more. Not that the practice of any ordinance can ever alone be taken to reflect the spiritual condition of a church, but wherever this is not observed, it is one sure sign of a church that refuses to obey the one it calls "Lord."

"But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak."

I have sought in this study to highlight clearly the fact that this is not a women's issue. It is as much to do with men individually, and even more to do with men who are in some position of authority, be it in marriage or in the Church. However, the bottom line for our current situation in Western society is that it is the woman who will 'stand out' in many situations as being in the minority of those who cover themselves before the Lord. Take courage my sister, who obeys this word for "God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." The issue of authority and responsibility lies with the man, but it is the woman who bears the sign outwardly. Be not afraid of what man may think or say for IT IS THE SIGN OF GOD'S POWER AND AUTHORITY and it is your privilege to bear it for your Lord.