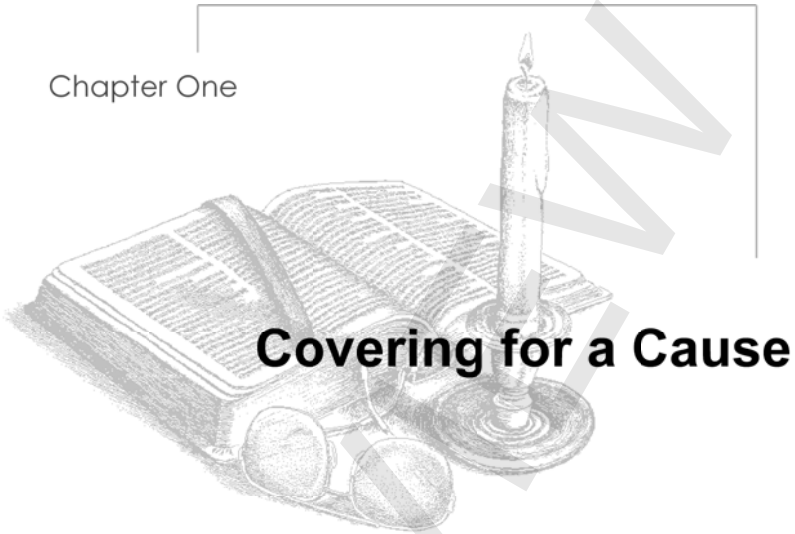


Chapter One



Covering for a Cause

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul spells out some of the clearest guides to practical holy living of all his writings. It is not for a lack of clarity that his guidance is misconstrued or rejected. Already, while Paul perhaps still lived, Peter writes that “they that are unlearned and unstable wrest [Paul’s epistles], as they do also the other Scriptures, unto their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16).

Among the clear teachings so often victimized is the woman’s head covering discussed in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. This chapter will review what this passage and other Scriptures say about the covering. In addition, this chapter will discuss further justifications for the covering extending beyond Scripture into what Paul calls “nature” (1 Corinthians 11:14). Despite the clarity of Paul’s teaching, this section of Scripture leaves many mysteries for the believer to discover, and this chapter

will probe some of the possibilities to enrich the discussion and prompt the reader to ponder the mysteries of this practice. While others have written more extensively on the doctrine of the head covering,¹ this first section is intended to provide a shorter discussion about the meaning and purpose of the teaching.

1) In Recognition of the Headship Order

Paul explained the headship order in 1 Corinthians 11:3: God⇒Christ⇒Man⇒Woman. This order is grounded in Creation (11:8-9). In the beginning was God (Genesis 1:1). And the Word (Christ) was with God, and the Word was God. Christ submits to His Father and seeks to honor Him (John 5:19, 23, 26-30). Only through Christ does mankind have access to God (John 6:44; 14:6; Acts 4:12). God created man in His image, then created woman in His image from the flesh of man to be a help to him (Genesis 2:18, 21-23; 1 Timothy 2:13; 1 Corinthians 11:7).

What qualities of headship does Paul specifically discuss in the 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 passage? He mentions two: the potential to be a “glory” (11:7) or a “dishonor” (11:4-5) to a head. A woman, specifically, may find it a “shame” to go without a covering (11:6). Headship is a position of responsibility, of love and care, of humble deference to bring glory and honor to our respective heads, be it mankind, Christ, or God. For a woman to wear the covering identifies her position as the glory of man (v. 7), demonstrates her desire to honor man (v. 5), and enables her to avoid shame (v. 6).

Paul does not discuss the biblical concept of submission in

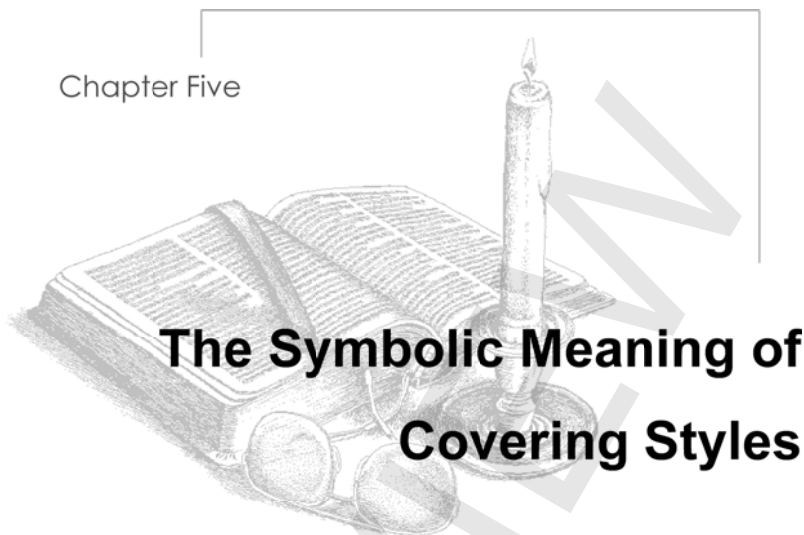
¹ Many such works are cited throughout this book and in the bibliography.

the context of the head covering. Christian women who wear the covering often wrestle with the question: Do I have to do whatever any man tells me if I am in submission to mankind? Though submission is a biblical concept within certain God-ordained relationships, Paul does not explicitly mention submission as a principle of the head covering in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. Therefore, Paul could speak of mankind and womankind generally.² If he spoke of submission, he would have had to refer to a specific relationship between a man and woman, such as father-daughter or husband-wife. Otherwise, he would be saying all women must do whatever any man says.

Perhaps Paul was *implying* the concept of submission with the covering, or perhaps he embedded the concept of submission into his use of the term “head.” But without speculating, we can only conclude that Paul did not mention it directly in this chapter. Conversely, neither can we say definitely that submission is excluded from this practice.

Perhaps an investigation of the passages about submission could reveal more clues about the point Paul was making in 1 Corinthians 11. Interestingly, in the two epistles where Paul teaches headship as an expression of submission, he does not speak of mankind and womankind. He speaks rather of specific relationships: husband-wife, parents-children, and Christ-church (Ephesians 5:22-25, 6:1-4; Colossians 3:18-22). These are three headship order models different from the model in 1 Corinthians 11, God⇒Christ⇒mankind⇒womankind. In Ephesians and Colossians, he does not speak of the head covering,

² Several Bible translations, such as the ESV, erroneously translate “man” and “woman” as “husband” and “wife” in 1 Corinthians 11. However, the vast majority of translations are faithful to the original text. Tertullian, an early church writer, argued in Chapter 3 of *On the Veiling of Virgins* that the commandment applies just as much to the unmarried as to the married because the issues of headship, angels, and modesty apply to all women.



The Symbolic Meaning of Covering Styles

The actual text of 1 Corinthians 11 is silent on describing any specific elements of head covering design. Thus, we must determine a design that carries the essence of the Word of God in our present age. In pondering the constitution of a head covering, I identified two basic elements: size and symbolism. Regarding size, the head covering must actually cover the head to such an extent that it lives up to its name. Paul speaks of the literal act of covering the head (verses 4-5), even though he does not specify a size. Yet, if the covered head was the only measure of a “head covering,” then *any* material could be used for this purpose: a large paper bag from your local grocery store could serve as a head covering—after all, the head *is* covered, and quite sufficiently. Similarly, a feed sack, a bucket, a wig, an octopus, a thick coating of shampoo, or a hollow dinosaur egg could serve to cover the head in obedience to 1 Corinthians 11.

The “covered head” is important, but so is something that

symbolically represents a covering, that communicates to the observer that this practice is of sacred significance. The world is full of symbols, from company logos, road signs, and money to the cross, hand gestures, and even written languages. It is not symbolism or “form” that a society likes or dislikes, but what certain symbols and forms represent. A paper bag on one’s head is symbolic: people may look at the wearer and think she is a little off the deep end. The viewer sees a representation and interprets the meaning.

The example of flags illustrates better how symbolism works.⁹ What makes an American flag so important to some Americans? After all, it is just a piece of cloth. However, when this cloth is deliberately crafted into the distinctive pattern of an American flag, it is acknowledged as representing an exceptional concept and treated with special care. The federal government provides extensive guidelines for the proper treatment of this symbol in the Flag Code. It cannot touch the ground. It should not be left out in poor weather or overnight. If it becomes tattered, special guidelines govern its respectful disposal. It should not be used in a commercial way or placed on disposable merchandise. Passionate debates raged in the 1990s over the constitutionality of burning an American flag in protest. What’s the big deal? It’s just a piece of cloth. But it is the distinctiveness of the cloth that makes it special; it is the values and symbolism embedded in that cloth which we acknowledge when we see a flag. We humans like to represent our orientations and messages in symbols, whether flags, signs, or written languages.

Of the 193 countries recognized by the United Nations,

⁹ By comparing flags to the woman’s head covering, I am not suggesting their equality in all domains. However, the concept of symbolism is shared in both. This illustration—like all analogies—provides insights but has limitations as well.

Chapter Eight



Disunity and Style Diversity

The plain churches have a long history. They have had their proud moments and their ignominious moments. Plain churches that are faithful to the Scriptures still ask their people to submit to the authority of the church and avoid individualistic self-expression. Individualism stands against the church community because it stands against Christ. In Christ, we are to submit to one another, even when we are inconvenienced.

Although no covering design is specified in Scripture, the Apostle Paul called for a certain amount of uniformity in practice. The Corinthian church was known for its factions. One purpose of Paul's letter to the church was to encourage loving, sacrificial uniformity. This is seen in 1 Corinthians 1:10.

THE ORNAMENT OF A SPIRIT

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

At the end of the letter, he makes a direct statement that the things he wrote were the commandments of Christ.

If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 14:37)

It is in this book that the ordinance of the head covering is found. In defense of the ordinance, Paul wrote,

Now if anyone is disposed to be argumentative and contentious about this, we hold to and recognize no other custom [in worship] than this, nor do the churches of God generally. (1 Corinthians 11:16, AMP)

Paul listed the head covering as an ordinance in conjunction with Communion. Just as he detailed the proper conduct of the Communion service, he laid out the facts about the covering. The following instructions are given to new believers in the Mennonite Church.

By reading the verses carefully, we find the purpose of the ordinance. ... It shows the proper relationship between woman, man, Christ, and God. ... The covering is a sign of power or authority which shows that the woman is taking her rightful place in God's order. ... She has both

power and authority in her prayer and Christian testimony. Since the covering is a sign, it stands for a pure devoted Christian life. ... Since this is an ordinance of the Church, the Church should decide the form of the covering since the Scriptures give no exact form. (Horst, 1934)

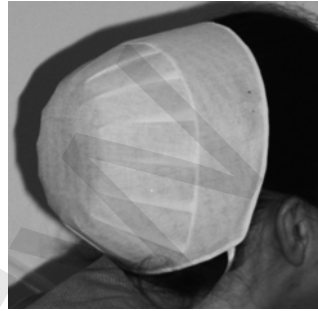
Thus, the Church has acknowledged its responsibility in creating a unified and recognizable expression of the head covering for members. The introduction of cloth styles has allowed for many contrasting styles that invite and encourage cliquishness. Often, to appease both sides of the issue, both the traditional covering and at least one cloth style are allowed to exist side by side. This dual practice only shows the fracture in the church, not its loving submission. The style of covering is then no longer chosen by the church but by groups within the church. The groups may coexist, but there is tension and judgment among the cliques. Such problems are not the exclusive cause of cliques, but to allow the head covering to symbolize cliquishness and personal opinions is to profane a sacred doctrine.

When the elderly wear caps, the middle-aged wear white hanging veils, and the young adults wear small lacy cloths and doilies, is there unity? When the ex-missionaries wear large white veils, the converts wear opaque caps, the lifetime members wear traditional caps, and the sophisticated wear lacy cloths, is there unity? When on Sunday mornings she wears the traditional covering, on Sunday afternoons she wears the casual black doily, and on Sunday evenings she wears the dressy hanging veil, is there consistency?

One may respond that, as Christians, we should respect individual conscience and be able to tolerate differences and still



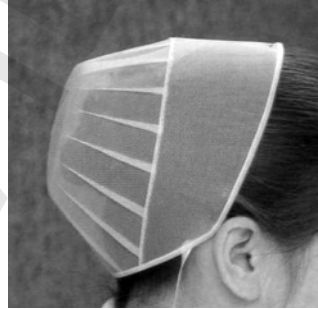
Ambassadors/Maranatha



Maranatha/Beachy



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