

1 Corinthians 11: Questions & Answers

Has the rise in feminism contributed to the decline in women wearing head coverings in church settings?

Yes! David Gilliland writes a most interesting piece which is worth quoting in full: “The first noticeable decline took place in the late 1920s and early 1930s. After that there was a remarkable drop in this practice of head covering in the 1960s and 1970s. It is quite interesting that these decades also happen to coincide with what has become known as the ‘first’ (in the 1920s) and ‘second’ (in the 1960s) waves of feminism. In fact, NOW (‘National Organisation for Women’, founded by famous feminist, Betty Friedan) organised a ‘national unveiling’ in 1968. They declared the following: *‘Because the wearing of a head covering by women at religious services is a symbol of subjection with many churches, NOW recommends... all women participate in a ‘national unveiling’ by sending their head covering to the taskforce chairman. At the spring meeting of the task force of women and religion, these veils will be publicly burned to protest the second-class status of women in all churches.’* Such forceful opposition to the teaching of God’s Word has left its mark on society and makes the teaching of 1 Corinthians most unpopular and its practice most uncommon.”

Aren’t head coverings merely relevant to the culture of first century Corinth?

No. It was clearly a matter of apostolic teaching for **all** “the churches of God” not Corinth alone (v.16). In support of his teaching Paul draws on *creation* (vv.7-12) as well as *nature* (v.14). The principle of headship is therefore rooted in creation and holds good for all time. When Paul does invite the Corinthians to make a moral judgment of their own, he does not appeal to local *custom, culture* (society) or *fashion* but the safe guide of the laws of nature as created by God. “His teaching was not dictated by either the culture or conditions at Ephesus or Corinth. It was derived from the basic order of creation. We are not at all at liberty to dismiss it as local and personal; it is final and permanent.”

Though evidence is sparse, it is likely that “*among the Jews men covered their heads in worship and women uncovered theirs. Among the Romans, both men and women covered their heads in pagan worship. Among the Greeks, both men and women uncovered their heads in pagan worship. Thus, Paul is confirming a teaching that was **culturally different** for every group and society from which converts came to form a Christian assembly. He bases his teaching on a theological foundation, and not on the social customs of the day*” (Walter Boyd).

Galatians 3.28 says there is “neither male nor female”, so surely such distinctions are unnecessary?

If we follow this line of argument to its logical conclusion we will conclude that every believer is asexual and homosexual relationships permissible! No. The full verse reads, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.*” Paul is describing a believer’s **standing** (acceptance) in Christ where there are no national, social or sexual distinctions. For example, a Jewish believer has no advantage over a Gentile believer in terms of spiritual blessings. Such a truth does not deny social and gender distinctions on earth – a slave was still a slave, and a woman was still a woman! So, in terms of **practice** and **service** in the local assembly, distinctions of role and function must be observed between male and female.

Is it necessary to wear a head covering at home when my husband prays?

No. Paul requires women to be covered when they are gathered with the assembly in the *public* sphere (hence the use of words such as “honour” and “shame”). This is an administrative headship designed to display divine order when the local church gathers (v.16). Though Paul does not use the expression “ye come together” until v.17, it is evident from the chiasmic structure of 1 Corinthians 11-14 that church gatherings are in view from beginning to end. Jack Hunter comments, “*It is difficult to see why Paul should be so concerned about a woman’s private devotions in the privacy of her home. After all, while prayer could be private, prophesying requires the presence of others, even in the home.*” However, it is true that some godly sisters feel they should be covered in the exercise of private prayer or when praying with their husbands. “*No one would wish to interfere with their conscience in this matter except to say that such action is not demanded by the teaching*” of these verses (Gilliland).

When should sisters be covered? Does it apply to Sunday School and Bible Class? What about funerals and weddings?

The difficulty with this question lies in the introduction of ‘meetings’ that are non-scriptural. The Bible knows nothing of gatherings for specific genders or age-groups. That is not to say, of course, that children’s meetings are not commendable and valuable. Alan Summers wisely counsels, “While there is Scriptural precedent for the church gathering to hear the Word of God (which covers gospel preaching or teaching meetings), for prayer, for worship and thanksgiving (at the Breaking of Bread), there is no example in Scripture of a gathering dedicated to children. Timothy learnt the Word of God at his mother’s and grandmother’s knee and Scripture seems to assume that children learn either at home or in the ordinary gatherings. On the other hand, there is no passage that positively prohibits children’s

work. All would agree that there is a general obligation to reach out with the gospel and to use all legitimate means to do so (1 Corinthians 9.22). To the author this is sufficient warrant for Sunday Schools and Children's Meetings." The principles of head covering apply in any work that is part of the public testimony of the assembly, *and* for the spiritual purpose of praying and/or preaching. If there is any doubt, it is better to err on the side of extra obedience.

The principles also apply for a wedding or funeral convened in the Gospel Hall, for the saints will be gathered and engage in prayer and/or preaching. It might be added, that though the building is not the assembly, it is *associated* with assembly testimony. We must therefore be careful what activities we allow under its roof.

Would it be suitable to wear a more culturally relative symbol such as a wedding ring instead of a head covering?

No. Some argue that since the head covering has no meaning in modern Western culture, believers can uphold the principle by substituting the symbol with a more modern cultural parallel such as a wedding ring to show a wife is married and under her husband's authority. Really? An eminent Greek scholar even argues there is no universal "meaningful symbol" because conventions change – and then encourages each church to "wrestle with an appropriate symbol for the present time" (DB Wallace)! Wouldn't it be better to use the universal symbol God *has* ordained – a simple artificial covering for the head?! We would not feel at liberty to change the symbols of the bread and cup in the second section of the chapter, so why change the symbols in the first? It is also the *head*, not the *finger*, which is the symbol of headship – being the uppermost part of the human body. Thus, it is a **head** covering which is all important.

Should unsaved women coming into the gospel meeting, and young female children be covered?

This is a difficult question on which there is some difference of opinion. As far as this writer is concerned, the obligations placed upon believers in these verses concern those who belong to the fellowship of a local church. It is these individuals that are corporately "praying" and preaching as part of the assembly. Those who are not saved or not in assembly fellowship may well be present in the gathering, but they are not corporately participating in its spiritual exercise. Therefore, there is no scriptural reason why they must be covered. However, children may well inquire why head coverings are worn and want to do so themselves. Though not, strictly speaking, required by Scripture, it is commendable to set a good example and encourage young children in the discipline of obedience to the word of God. Tolerance is, of course, appropriate for the unsaved or untaught.

If it is shameful for a man to have long hair, why did some men in the Bible have long hair?

It seems Paul had let his hair grow long for a Nazarite-like vow whilst at Corinth (Acts 18.18; cf. Numbers 6.3, 5). Malcolm Horlock explains, *"In that particular situation, his long hair had been a symbol of his consecration to God. But that was an exception. And it was only temporary. As a general rule, Paul observes, for a man to have abnormally long hair is a disgrace to him. Paul's very vow demonstrated that it was unusual for men to have long hair."* Nazarites were commanded to "let the locks of their hair grow" (Numbers 6.5). This was an exception to the normal natural order for a specific purpose. His long hair was a sign of his separation from common activities to devote himself to special service for the LORD. It symbolised the yielding of himself to God, taking an attitude of total submission and surrender of his own will.

Did the Lord Jesus have long hair?

No. We are not given any details of the physical appearance of the Lord Jesus, and that by divine design. Mankind would be only too ready to make idolatrous representations of Christ if we did. Scripture does give us some general descriptions and makes it very clear that He looked just like a regular human being (cf. Isaiah 53.2; John 1.31, 33). Many people think the Lord Jesus had long hair because of the way He is portrayed in films, media, clipart and art. Scripture only ever describes His hair as "white like wool" (Revelation 1.14)! Jewish men traditionally kept much shorter hair than Jewish women and it is interesting that the temple priests of the millennial kingdom will have short hair (cf. Ezekiel 44.20). *Joe Zias*, a physical anthropologist who has studied hundreds of skeletons found in archaeological digs in Jerusalem says *"Jewish men back in antiquity did not have long hair. Along with extensive writings from the period, experts also point to a frieze on Rome's Arch of Titus, erected after Jerusalem was captured in AD 70 to celebrate the victory, which shows Jewish men with short hair taken into captivity"*. The busts of Roman citizens (above) show the typical hairstyles in the Roman Empire in the first century.



How long should "long hair" be?

Scripture does not state a specific length in centimetres or inches, no doubt to avoid the extremes of legalism. What is clear is that there must be a pronounced distinction between the sexes in terms of hair length. The apostle is not commanding Christian women to *have* long hair – he is taking for granted they *do* have long hair!