Once Again: Head, Veil, and Hair in Corinth[1]

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Year after year, though less and less often, articles appear on this Pauline text, which is notoriously not an easy one (1 Corinthians 11:2-16). Why am I writing about it? In my book "Women, Forgive Us!" ("Frauen, vergebt uns!") on the roles of men and women, published in November 2020[2], I dealt with this text in one chapter. But I did so less systematically and in less detail than I have since come to think would have been right. For in the book I relied very heavily on the quotation hypothesis as Thomas Schirrmacher set it out in his book "Paulus im Kampf gegen den Schleier!" (in German). I had pointed out that the quotation hypothesis is also an assumption, one that is quite plausible but ultimately not proven. In this study, with the help of the work of one woman theologian and one man theologian, I arrive at plausible explanations even without the quotation hypothesis.

This text speaks into a cultural situation that is foreign to us, namely the Greco-Roman culture of the first century. Not just anywhere, but in Corinth, at that time a Roman colony in Greece. For Paul it was not an unknown place; he worked there for 18 months. He knew every detail of this city (Acts 18:1-18).

In this study I will often quote from two relatively recent books. They help us to understand this difficult text better, in a new way, or more deeply. Especially in the verse-by-verse discussion I could not have put things better than they have, and so I mostly let the two authors speak for themselves. The first is the (monumental and excellent) commentary by Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther" (series Historisch-Theologische Auslegung) (a conservative, "Bible-believing," evangelical theologian and professor[3]). I know of no other commentary that works through this text so thoroughly and with so many references to the sources. I do not agree with all of his conclusions, but that is always to be expected on this topic. The second book is titled "Paul and Gender"[4]. In 2016 Cynthia Long Westfall (a historian and theologian) presented a study, widely noticed in the English-speaking world, on this text as well as on all the other relevant Pauline texts on the gender question. Paying careful attention to the cultural situation, she sheds new light on the big questions that countless interpreters, as well as the ordinary Bible reader, wrestle with. The two authors agree on many points. (Quotations from Westfall are given in the footnote with the page number only.)

My aim is to clarify (for myself) what Paul's line of argument is and what led him to write exactly as he did. ***Were the women the problem, or the men? And even if that were completely clear in the end, which cannot be guaranteed here and which every reader must decide for himself or herself, the question would remain: What do we do with it in the twenty-first century?***

This is not a question of faithfulness to the Bible, as is often claimed short-sightedly and overzealously, but a question of rightly understanding the Bible. The hard work of Bible study must be done (again and again) and the time must be invested, if we are really serious about so-called faithfulness to the Bible. Otherwise it remains a sanctimonious, endlessly repeated empty phrase. Or even a shibboleth for drawing boundaries where there must be none, or for invoking faithfulness where reflection or restraint would be called for.

Contextualization

Contextualization presupposes that we first study Scripture in its setting. Only then does it try to discover what this text has to say today. So it is less a matter of direct commands, such as the command to love or the prohibition against lying. We have no problem accepting these as timeless. It is different when it comes to outward appearances, or customs and practices (food sacrificed to idols, etc.) that we no longer know today.

Paul is obviously referring to the customs and manners of the time in Greek Corinth and in the Roman Empire as a whole. No interpreter, and no Bible reader either, can get around this reference to the culture of that time. And this is in fact the case with the vast majority of interpreters, even though their knowledge of historical facts and their interpretations of them sometimes vary greatly, which in turn affects the quality of their exposition of the text. (For all who, like me, come from the Brethren movement: Darby and Kelly, too, did not explain the subject of veils and hair solely from within the text, but also referred to the culture of that time. For head covering is a cultural topic, not a biblical-theological one.) Paul succeeds in judging cultural customs in the light of the creation account and even in giving reasons for them, in order to answer what was for the Corinthians a quite important question (or questions).

In his argument Paul does not establish a timeless norm, no code of conduct that applies transcendently across the centuries, or even from the beginning of creation, and is timeless. ***Paul argues for how, despite the freedom of the gospel, one should behave in such a way that none of one's contemporaries takes offense. Even when that restricts Christian freedom.*** Not because it is theologically required or grounded, but because it follows the golden rule that he formulates immediately before this very chapter begins:

1 Corinthians 10:31-33: Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense, either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also try to please everyone in all things, not seeking my own advantage but that of the many, so that they may be saved.

This "golden rule" is a key to the text that immediately follows. For the rules that Paul wants to convey to the Corinthians by way of argument are a combination of "giving God the glory in everything" and at the same time not being a cause of offense to one's contemporaries and fellow human beings because of outward appearances or behaviors that were considered inappropriate at that time, or even shameful in the cultural (not theological) sense. The Corinthian Christians had grown up with these customs anyway, and observing or putting up with them was not too high a price to pay if people could be won for Christ in this way. Paul does not adopt the outward forms of Greco-Roman culture as his own, even though he recommends observing them; rather, he tries to find a path that takes various aspects into account. A balancing act that, on the one hand, reflects on and takes seriously the creation of man and woman, and on the other hand fully includes the sensibilities of people in general (of society).

Let me anticipate here with a reference to verse 10, where Paul clearly says (unlike most translations; more on this later) that the woman has authority over her own head, namely to cover it or not. But she is to make her decision precisely with the criterion mentioned above in mind, and with further aspects that I will come to later.

The Scope of the Text

To what sphere do the recommendations apply that Paul wants to win the Corinthians over to despite their freedom?

It is the gathering! Praying and prophesying may and should happen everywhere and at all times, but in the letter to the Corinthians (see especially chapter 14) they are the main contents of the gathering. The context of the letter must make clear which place and which occasion are in view.

Advocates of a command of silence for women in worship services relocate Paul's statement that women pray and prophesy to everywhere except the worship service. That is not plausible, because the head covering serves the public eye; it must or can be seen, otherwise it would make no sense. In addition, in chapters 12-14 the gifts of the Spirit are distributed in full and without any gender restriction whatsoever, and – as is emphasized several times – ***all*** take part in the gathering. The command to the women to be silent (1 Corinthians 14:34-35) therefore cannot contradict this, but must be answered in the light of chapters 11-14 and ultimately in the context of the whole letter. Then it is about a kind of speaking by women that was disruptive in the house church where the Christians gathered. Probably a kind of speaking that disrupts the spiritual exchange, or that interferes and creates distraction, or even brings shame on the husbands when their wives expose them in the gathering – in today's terms, "embarrass" them. In any case, if basic hermeneutical rules are respected, it cannot be a general prohibition on speaking. It only becomes that if these verses are isolated and viewed as if they stood entirely on their own.

Paul a Misogynist?

How this text is perceived through a ***historical-critical lens*** can be seen from this quotation: "This text has contributed to the oppression of women in the church and in the societies influenced by it. It in no way corresponds – however benevolently it is interpreted – to what must be said in Christian-theological terms about gender relations in the twenty-first century. Equality and justice in gender relations and a critical approach to heterosexual ideologies were unknown to Paul. In what sense such a text could still be inspiring will have to be asked. Or can the text, from today's perspective, only be rejected, because it has harmed justice and was a blunder by a man who in his own time was actually working for justice on earth?"[5] This opinion represents the widespread perception of this text, which I do not share in any way. A negatively critical attitude toward the biblical text must lead to this opinion.

On the other side, the ***Bible-believing side***, this kind of criticism is vehemently rejected, and it is asserted: Hierarchical subordination, and not equality or equal rights, is God's plan from the beginning. This resists the "spirit of the age" of gender philosophy.

Do we have to choose between these two extreme positions? Is there another way of explaining this text without mixing the two positions? That would be a lazy compromise in my view.

There is a reading that succumbs to neither of the two explanations but takes its bearings from Paul, from his 13 letters and from the Acts of the Apostles, and of course from Jesus, whom Paul had as his model: ***"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).*** This leaves no room whatsoever for discriminatory statements about women. ***No, Paul is a friend of women, who came to know and see the truth in the radiant light of Christ. His Jewish-Hellenistic view of women, too, was reformed in the light of the gospel.***

For Paul it is important not to be a cause of offense, but at the same time to remain faithful to the gospel. Depending on their origin and background, head covering for men in religious cults was the usual custom. In the circle of believers, the men are not to cover themselves when praying and speaking prophetically. Women, on the other hand, when they do exactly the same as the men, are to cover themselves, says Paul. And indeed all women, including those who in the society of that time were not allowed to cover themselves, namely female slaves and freedwomen, or unmarried women. Both are then also partly countercultural, because here the culture contradicts the core of the gospel. Nor is it an instruction (contra Armin Baum, Schnabel) that all women should cover themselves on the street, that is, in public life, because the culture forbade this to the lowest class, the female slaves. In any case it was the custom for married women to cover or veil themselves.

Nor does Paul advocate the head covering as a sign of the woman's subordination to the man. The subordination, the lower rank and worth of the woman compared with the man, had in any case been set in stone for a long time. That did not need to be put on display. This covering had a concrete function; it was, if you will, a functional sign, and less so, or not at all, a hierarchical symbol.

To Whom Is Paul Writing? Who Is to Be Corrected?

Almost all interpreters are convinced that the women being addressed are women who, out of their newly won freedom, refused to go on wearing the head covering that was customary at the time. This covering, in turn, is said to be an expression and acknowledgment of subordination to the man, since – as this text obviously derives from creation – the woman is hierarchically subordinate or ranked below the man in general, and the wife below the husband in particular. If anyone objects to the term hierarchy and prefers to speak of the creation order or of a holy order (or orders), he should be aware of one thing: for all the equal worth and equal dignity of man and woman, he is nevertheless advocating an in-equality as God's order. The man leads and bears responsibility; the woman follows in subordination.

If emancipated behavior by women is what triggered this Pauline text, then it must be explained why it begins with the words that ***Christ is the head of the man***. This beginning directs attention to the men, and indeed in such a way as if they had been the occasion for the argument that follows.

Cynthia Long Westfall holds the view that there were men in Corinth who suggested to the women, or pressed them, to do without the customary head covering. Married women of respectable standing were not willing to remove their covering. That contradicted the custom of the culture in which they had grown up. Their head covering was a protection and an expression of dignity, decency, and moral purity. It was not a symbol of subordination, but it was a sign that, as a wife, she belonged to her husband.

Female slaves and freedwomen, unmarried women (and perhaps widows too?) were not allowed to cover themselves and, as the lowest class, were at the mercy of sexual advances. Prostitutes did not cover or veil themselves and had cut their hair, that is, wore short hairstyles of whatever kind. What if they came to faith? At the beginning of the letter (1:26-29) Paul says that it was many simple, poor people, not of high or noble rank, who came to faith. So these women had to be told that, contrary to the customs of society, they were allowed to cover themselves. For in the church of the New Covenant and of the new creation, social rank no longer plays any role, as Galatians 3:28 also confirms.

Aspects of the Cultural Situation of the Corinthian Christians

Whenever one pursues this question and depends on data from historians, one should pay attention to Paul's view of his time and of society: one should not conform to the course of this world, and thus also not to a given culture, when it contradicts the gospel (Romans 12:2). There are limits to "accommodation" in the gospel. Becoming a Greek to the Greeks (compare 1 Corinthians 9:20-22) does not mean reclining at table in an idol's temple and eating food sacrificed to idols. Paul's assessment of the course of this world, by the way – unlike the customs and manners of an era – is timeless and always valid.

The topic of this essay revolves around the gender question and the behavior and outward appearance that go with it:

"In Greco-Roman society, legislating and enforcing the 'proper' behavior of women was a major concern of the authorities, because they believed that disorder in the household had seditious effects on the welfare of the empire."[6]

"For Paul's mission among the Gentiles to be successful, the behavior of Christian women had to be consistent with what women practiced in the wider Greco-Roman world of the first century. Paul's gender-specific concerns were therefore often missional when he addressed gender roles in the church and at home, and his intention was that believers should fit into the culture while at the same time remaining ethically pure. Conforming to first-century culture was something different from conforming to twenty-first-century culture. Modern Western ideas about how the sexes normally behave and relate to one another differ markedly from the ideas of Greco-Roman culture."[7]

"The patron-client relationship and the reciprocity that form the building blocks of the culture also shape the relationships between husbands and wives."[8] By patron is meant a benefactor or supporter who was higher in rank or standing, even if only because of his prosperity or wealth. "In the Greco-Roman world, husband and wife were usually unequal partners in the patronage system/relationship. The husband functioned as the benefactor and the wife as the subordinate party in the marital relationship, unless she brought a large dowry into the marriage."[9]

"(Corinth) was a place that offered every kind of sexual activity available to men (thus 'to behave like a Corinthian woman' meant to engage in sexual immorality), and the term 'Corinthian girl' was a euphemism for a prostitute. There was no upper class; instead, Corinth's prosperity created a class of nouveaux riches. Paul points out, however, that the Corinthian church drew its members not only from the wealthy elite but mainly from those who lacked status or power (1 Corinthians 1:26)."[10]

So when people from all walks of life, without any prior Christian socialization, came to faith and into the fellowship of believers, these people were still shaped by their lifelong vices. Sexuality was in the air; it was available everywhere. These were the issues and behaviors the church was confronted with.

The Practice of Gathering

The many people (Acts 18:10) whom God called out in the port city of Corinth through Paul and his coworkers could not assemble in one place. Unless they had rented the theater or an arena, which was completely impossible for a new cult practiced mainly by simple people. That is why they met in houses, large or small, in a few villas and mostly in simple houses or apartments (as can still be seen in

Ephesus today). When they gathered, it was the women who prepared the food (and in some cases also brought it along). The Lord's Supper was part of the shared meal.

What Paul expresses applied to men and women in the house church. Westfall sums it up like this: "The difference between men and women, then, is not a distinction of roles in the church, but rather how they function differently in those roles. Women and men can serve God in the same offices, but there are different requirements that include gender-specific appearance. It is not an expression of a double standard in which men have no restrictions while women are restricted; both are restricted."[11]

"Finally, let us point once more to something that, while not part of the intended message of Paul's arguments, is nevertheless important. Paul speaks as a matter of course of women praying and speaking prophetically in the church assembly. That is, women bring the reality of God and of his word to public expression just as men do."[12]

What Is Public?

The public sphere is usually understood as the area where one meets anyone and everyone. At the market in Corinth, in the harbor, or in the idol's temple. Ultimately, everything outside one's own house is public.

The worship gathering took place in the private houses of well-to-do or high-ranking Christians, just as in the houses and rooms of those less well-off. Was that public? It was certainly not comparable to the situation at the market, but outsiders or unbelievers had access to these assemblies. Either led there by the Holy Spirit or invited by Christians. In this respect, the gathering too is not a closed society, but the place for all people to encounter the living God.

That is why observing manners and customs in this gathering is important, and that applies to men and women alike. The unbeliever is not to take offense, but to be convicted by God, by his holy and powerful presence (1 Corinthians 14:16, 23-25).

Several interpreters ask whether this also implies a dress code outside the gathering. Looked at closely, that is neither the topic nor the Corinthians' question in this text. At this point the golden rule of 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 applies, which says not to be a cause of offense to anyone. Married women cover themselves when they leave the house. Female slaves do not, but they do in the worship service, as Paul writes.

Head Covering in Corinth

On this, a few more quotations and more detailed thoughts. I am convinced: Only someone who does not understand the custom of head covering and veiling transfers this Pauline text one-to-one into the present. And does so with a one-dimensional, black-and-white hermeneutic that in the end becomes the justification for a narrow legalism, as I have often encountered and also experienced myself.

"Michelle Auerback summarizes the argument for veiling: ***'Symbols, statements, have meaning only in a culture that knows what they mean.'*** But in traditional biblical scholarship most have assumed that veiling in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 means 'submission,' ***without engaging with an understanding of the meanings that veiling had for women in ancient eastern Mediterranean culture*** or in its continued widespread use in a number of modern cultures."[13]

“Bruce Winter states that at the time of the Roman Empire ‘it can be assumed with certainty that the veiled head was the symbol of the modesty and chastity expected of a married woman.’”[14]

“Now, however, we have access to women’s narratives from cultures that practice the veiling of women, and they tell a different story. We find that in Islam and in Judaism there is a strong current of devout fundamentalist women who veil themselves for reasons that sound very similar to Paul’s reasoning in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. However, we are not entirely dependent on later anthropological parallels, which run the risk of being anachronistic. ***The history of women who refuse to take off the veil, and the reasons for wearing the veil, can be traced back to Assyrian culture***.”[15]

“***Paul’s concern seems to extend to all women in the church who prophesy and pray – including female slaves, freedwomen, unmarried women, and widows.*** The dress code of the Roman matrona[16] manifested both her rank and ‘her status and role as a sexually capable woman in Roman society.’ ***On the other hand, an unveiled head signified sexual availability, so that a female slave or a freedwoman was forbidden to wear a veil***.”[17]

“The regulation of veiling was the prerogative of men; they would be the ones who would most naturally see the need to lay down a guideline. ***In Roman practice, both men and women covered their heads to pray. Paul apparently taught the men in the churches to pray with uncovered heads, contrary to Roman practice (1 Corinthians 11:4), so the men may have thought that what is good for the gander is good for the goose. But while a man’s uncovered head was a sign of his humility before God, a woman’s uncovered head was not a sign of a woman’s humility before God; rather, it sent a signal about her sexual availability that could amount to an enticement.*** But cultural ideals about what was proper could be abandoned by someone in favor of supposedly theological priorities.”[18]

“It is usually assumed without question that Paul was correcting the Corinthian women. ***However, the passage makes better sense if one assumes that the Corinthian women refused to remove their head coverings or veils***, but were pressured or encouraged by the authority figures, the men in the house church, or possibly even by their own husbands, to remove their veils. This is a kind of scenario that plays out again and again in cultures that practice veiling.”[19]

Veiling made social differences visible, the high and low of the social classes. This class distinction can be observed for 1,800 years, right into modern times. “This not only signaled that such women were sexually available but also maintained the social order and a distinction between the classes. […] ***Paul’s support for the veiling of all women leveled social relationships in the church; insofar as this veiling was in his hands, he secured respect, honor, and sexual purity for women in the church who were denied that status in the culture.***”[20]

“In Near Eastern culture, a woman of the upper class covered her head to signal her devotion and modesty. Her covered head also directly signaled her own honor and the honor of her family – especially of her paterfamilias (the head of the ancient household), the source of her identity. Paul draws on the complex meaning of the symbol to make a theological argument for veiling based on the creation account.”[21]

Eckhard J. Schnabel writes: “The wearing of a head covering by women (not only in religious contexts) had a self-evident plausibility in the Roman-Hellenistic cultural sphere. Roman statues, above all portraits of the women of the imperial family, as well as funerary reliefs, depict married women with the stola (palla) drawn over the head or with the vitta, the woolen head or hair band, which were regarded as symbols of modesty and chastity. Women did not have to wear a stola in public. Wearing

the stola, however, symbolized their chastity. The marriage legislation of Augustus stipulated that prostitutes were forbidden to wear the stola of the respectable wife, the matrona."[22] Armin Baum writes about the head covering:

What did the female head covering mean in antiquity?

To understand the cultural background of 1 Corinthians 11:5-6, one has to go back at least to the second millennium before Christ. The Middle Assyrian Laws from the reign of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (1115-1076 BC) state: "If a citizen wants to veil his confined woman (i.e. his concubine, to whom he is not married), he shall have five or six of his companions sit down, veil her in their presence and say: 'She is my wife.' Then she is (indeed) his wife." At the wedding, then, the wife's head was covered with a cloth. The covered head was the visible mark of the wife.

This custom survived for centuries. It was also very widespread in New Testament times, when Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. Ultimately, the ancient veiling of the wife is even a forerunner of our modern bridal veil, which the bride wears at a church wedding. For thousands of years, women have, in the truest sense of the word, come "under the veil" when they married. In its countless variations, the head covering always symbolizes the same thing, namely the new status of the wife.

In Judaism, removing the head covering meant that marital faithfulness was in question. An adulteress even had her head covering removed by force. Voluntarily doing without a head covering was a signal of being available to men.

Where were women to wear the head covering? When they took part audibly in the worship service, that is, when the attention of everyone present was directed to those speaking. According to Paul, all could and should take part. Must we therefore assume that they were always covered in the worship service? That is quite possible, but we do not know. If we take Paul literally at this point, then they covered themselves only when they raised their voices in the worship service.

"This study refutes the prevailing assumption in biblical scholarship that the veil symbolized the woman's submission to her husband. Wearing the veil was not a private symbol but a public practice

regulated by law and custom, and both men and women were expected to submit to the custom. ***In short, the veil represented the woman's honor, status, and protection.***"[23]

"It was (and is) common for women to refuse to remove their veil, because it symbolizes honor and protection. It is more likely that women who were not allowed to veil themselves in public wanted to wear a veil in the assembly to symbolize that they had been justified through Christ. Paul's instruction to all women to veil themselves was anti- or countercultural and benevolent toward women. The practice of all women wearing the veil equalized the social relationships in the Christian community."[24]

That men covered their heads during religious acts is well attested among the Romans, but only partly among the Greeks. In studies and expositions it is striking that much less attention is paid to the head covering of men.

A statue of Caesar Augustus performing a temple sacrifice in Corinth shows the ruler with a veil covering his head. Richard Oster explains that Greek men often covered their heads during religious sacrifices to pagan gods. It is likely that Paul was commenting on the Corinthians' former practice in pagan idolatry. Cyprian even commented on this in the third century: 'Your head has remained free from the godless and sacrilegious veil with which the captive heads of those who sacrificed were covered there' (De lapsis 2). Brian Rosner shows convincingly that in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 Paul was concerned about men who engaged in sexual acts at sacred events. Thus Paul's concern about male head coverings could also have been a rebuke of sexual acts with temple prostitutes. Nevertheless, Paul did not go into the topic in more detail in verse 4, which suggests that he used this situation only as a contrast to the women.

Guidelines and Aspects for Interpreting the Text

Most readers of these lines are not reading this Pauline text for the first time. For them, here are some aspects that may open up a new approach to the text. These aspects are the result of repeated engagement with this text and with relevant studies, and did not simply fall from heaven. They can help us not to fall back into the familiar reading that understands the text through the lens of the hierarchical subordination of the woman (or women), which, as already described, is not the topic.

- Above all, the text places importance on how everything is to be done to the glory of God.
- It is about highlighting the glory of God in the worship service, with men and women behaving and dressing in such a way that attention is not drawn to themselves.
- (Some) men were the cause and trigger of Paul's instruction, by demanding that women leave off their head covering.[25]
- Cultural and social customs and manners are being addressed. Shame and dishonor are meant not in a religious or theological sense, but in terms of social sensibilities.
- It is therefore not about timeless commands of Paul, even though he cites the creation account in his argument.
- Freedom in Christ stands in tension with not being a cause of offense to one's surroundings.
- It is about covering the hair (not simply the head), and it is not about full veiling either.
- Nowhere is it about the hierarchical creation order in which the man stands above the woman. Nor is it anywhere about the subordination of the woman to the man. Both pray and speak prophetically, as equals in rank and status.

- Ultimately Paul is speaking about all women, not only about married women. He remains focused on a more general relationship between man and woman that is grounded in creation and applies even when a woman is a slave and formally has no husband, father, or guardian who is her head.
- Outward things such as clothing or hairstyle are not prescribed by the gospel. They are essential in the worship of the Old Covenant, but not in the New Covenant, which the Corinthians celebrated in the Lord's Supper.
- It is not about rules of conduct for men and women in the twenty-first century.

What follows is a look at each individual verse of this passage.

1 Corinthians 11:3-16[26]

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

Paul presents three pairings in order ultimately to speak about the topic of head covering. It is not about a sequence of levels or a ranking with God first, then Christ, below him the man, and at the bottom the woman. It is not a chain of command. What stands at the end is not the woman but God, from whom everything comes (v. 12). Three pairings stand ***side by side*** as analogies. It is not about an order of salvation. The woman's relationship to Christ differs in no way from the relationship of the man (or of her husband) to Christ.[27]



In German usage, the word ***head*** (Haupt), in its figurative sense, leads immediately to the idea of an authority figure, as for example in *Hauptmann* (captain, literally "head man"). That is also how almost all interpreters understand it. Some translations do not even use the word head but render it straightaway as subordination. The NeÜ (German Bible translation) immediately uses the word ***Oberhaupt*** (chief, supreme head) and so leaves no room for doubt about what Paul's argument for the women's head covering is supposedly based on. "Most scholars have assumed that the topic of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 is the authority of men and the subordination of women. This is partly because 'head' in Latin, English, and German is a metaphor for authority, so that the meaning 'authority' has seemed self-evident in the history of the interpretation of the passage."[28]

Since this whole text is not about the question of authority and subordination at all, we need to clarify what the metaphorical meaning of head is. As is only to be expected, advocates of hierarchy

and advocates of equality have fallen into fierce dispute over this. ***This text, at any rate, supports the meaning of head as source and origin (vv. 8, 12).***

"Westfall argues that the allusions to Genesis 1–2 in the context limit the possible variety and range of the metaphorical meanings of 'head' in the Greek language so that it refers to the source of life, so that it could be paraphrased: ***'But I want you to recognize that the life of every man comes from Christ, the life of a woman comes from the man, and the life of Christ comes from God.'"***[29] … "Since the man is the origin of the woman's life, he is her head. If the man is the head of the woman and they are one flesh, then Paul concludes that the woman is his body. Paul is able to use the metaphor of 'head' in applying it to marriage, to man and woman, to the relationship between Christ and the church, and to the relationship between Christ and God the Father; he uses 'head' to interpret these relationships in light of one another."[30]

"The semantic range of κεφαλή (head) includes the head of a human being or an animal, which was extended into metaphors that include identity, source, life, and provision. In idiomatic Greek (usage) it did not mean 'authority,' as is evident from its entry in Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon."[31] … "So Paul uses κεφαλή ***to refer to the origin or source of life and identity in the context of family relationships*** – husband and wife, the church as family, and God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ."[32]

"Humanity's relationship to Adam is described by theologians as '***headship***,' 'natural head,' or 'federal head.'" … "Adam is the head of humanity because he is the source of biological life. Adam is therefore not accorded any precedence, honor, authority, or veneration before or over humanity***; rather, it is a relationship based on the identity that results from origin***, and Paul evaluates it negatively. Jesus replaces Adam as head ***because Jesus is the spiritual, life-giving source that fills the church, and the church forms an organic unity with him (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15-16; Colossians 1:18).***"[33]

"If Christ's headship over human beings is understood as the source of their life/existence, then the analogy between the three pairs is parallel, and exploring them contributes richly to our understanding of Pauline theology." … "Similarly, Paul's explanation of the relationship between man and woman and between husband and wife can be interpreted consistently with the historical understanding of Adam's natural/biological headship. ***It is a family relationship."***[34] ***… "In Greek culture, the concept of the headship of a progenitor included the representation and identity of the family."***[35]

"Finally, the last of the three associations of 'head' is significant for its use as a synonym. ***Anthony Thiselton explains that the anatomical head also represented the whole body. If someone dishonored his physical head, the whole person was defiled. Paul noted that a person's appearance reflects on others and on oneself.*** The repeated use of the word 'head' was therefore not meant to mark hierarchical positions or to create a distinction between the sexes. Instead, it was a poetic device that served to change the Corinthian worship practices in order to avoid association with a pagan religion that was heavily entangled in sexual rituals."

The metaphorical meaning in the usage of that time has a certain range. Head stands for unity, identity, and origin as well as for the highest standing of a person. All in all, it shows how man and woman are connected and relate to each other, and how one is associated with one's head.

In their equality of rank there are, depending on the culture in which they live, differences in outward behavior. It is not the roles that are distinguished; in 1 Corinthians 11 the roles are precisely the same, for both pray and prophesy. But within this there are differences in outward appearance,

and these are grounded in the culture of that time. Paul takes up these cultural realities and is even able to connect them with the idea of creation.

> *4 Every man who prays or prophesies having something on his head dishonors his head.*

Praying and prophesying, that is, prophetic speaking, are part of the worship gathering. God's presence in the gathering manifests itself both in speaking to God, in petition and worship, and in God's speaking to the assembled church. All members of the body of Christ, men and women alike, are called to do both.

Men are not to have anything on/over their heads when they pray and prophesy. ***This is a statement by Paul, a statement that cannot be explained without reference to the (religious) culture of that time. For many years I, like others, looked for a reason for it in the immediate context, then in the whole letter, then in the whole New Testament, and last but not least in the Old Testament. Without any meaningful or plausible result.***

The Romans covered their heads during religious acts, whereas the Greeks mostly did not (Keener). Men who now confess Jesus distance themselves from the practices and behaviors that took place in the idol cults in Corinth and elsewhere.

"(The man) behaves shamefully because when he prays he is more concerned with his own personal prestige than with the honor of Jesus Christ. With reference to Christ, the statement means that confessors of Jesus who belong to the upper classes of society and who ostentatiously display their elevated status when praying bring shame on Christ, because they glorify not Christ but themselves (compare the word δόξα (honor, glory), repeated three times in vv. 7–8).[36] … They draw attention to themselves instead of directing the attention of those present to God, from whom everything comes (v. 12) and on whom one calls in prayer (v. 13). ***In Roman society, uncovering the head, if one happened to have drawn the toga over one's head, signaled the presence of people worthy of veneration*** (Plutarch, Mor 266)."[37]

"***In this context the man (without a head covering) shows his humility by appearing before God as the unadorned image of God, and the woman shows honor to God, to herself, and to her family by holding back her glory/beauty in public and in worship.***"[38] For women do the opposite: they cover themselves.

Which head does the man dishonor? First of all, his own head. He dishonors himself as a person, which his head stands for. And he dishonors Christ, his head, because by wearing a head covering he (consciously or unconsciously) assigns himself an honor that is not his due in God's presence.

> *5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head;*
> *for it is one and the same as if she were shaven.*

"***Men are to give up the Roman elite tradition of drawing the toga over their heads when they pray and prophesy. Women, however, are always to pray and prophesy only with a head covering. The phrase 'with uncovered head' does not describe a particular hairstyle of women, but a textile head covering, specifically the stola (palla) drawn over the head.***"[39]

"Paul's argument supports this understanding when he says that an uncovered head is a disgrace for a woman, similar to having her head shaved, which destroys her reputation and therefore diminishes her worth (1 Corinthians 11:5-6). This meaning of the uncovered head was shared by Roman law, which

stated that if a woman was not dressed like a matrona (including wearing a veil or binding up her hair) and a man tried to seduce or harass her, he could not be prosecuted for assault."[40]

"Paul criticizes Corinthian women who, by appearing in the church assembly without the stola drawn over their heads, consciously or unconsciously sent nonverbal signals that they were 'available.' The worship assemblies of the church, however, are not the place where women send signals and become 'objects inspected' by men. The argument that the issue is the woman's praying and prophesying and not her appearance in public can be answered from Paul's point of view by noting that he understands the church assemblies precisely as public space, to which outsiders are invited and in which they are present."[41]

Unlike Schnabel, Westfall, as already noted, sees the men as the ones who wanted to do away with the women's head covering. For whatever motives: the freedom of the gospel or, negatively, subliminal sexual motives. ***So Paul drastically shows the men who demanded that the women do without head covering what their demand would ultimately mean for a woman.*** A shaven woman brought every shame upon herself as an adulteress or as a prostitute. "Paul identifies the public appearance of women in worship with the social stigma of an exposed and punished adulteress, whose status resembled the 'prestige' of a prostitute."[42]

> *6 For if a woman is not covered, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaven, let her be covered.*

Because the consequence of this demand not to cover themselves must necessarily be thought through to the end for the women, Paul repeats the consequences – catastrophic in the social context – for the women who would follow the men and not cover themselves. "Paul can assume that the Corinthians will understand this sarcastic demand as an argument."[43]

"The appearance of a woman who had her hair cut off or who was shaved bald is 'shameful,' because this appearance recalls the degradation of a woman convicted of adultery. It is a disgrace to be publicly exposed as an adulteress and to be recognized as such by everyone from the shorn hair. In Paul's view, it is precisely this disgrace that must be noted when women appear in the church without a head covering. If a woman wants to avoid public disgrace, ***she should veil herself***."[44]

This consequence of the demand to do without head covering is unambiguous in the cultural context. But in order to support the head covering, Paul will also bring theological reasons from the creation account, starting directly with the next verse. ***I consider it very important to point out already at this stage: these reasons are not timeless. They relate to a cultural phenomenon, not the other way around. So Paul does not develop a theology of the gender question in order then to derive from it the necessity of a head covering. In that case the head covering would still be a norm today that women would have to observe in the worship service.*** But in the twenty-first century, head covering in the Western world is no longer an issue, no longer a social convention. It is embarrassing when Christians turn it into a convention that is law for their small, separated world.

> *7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head,*
> *since he is the image and glory of God;*
> *but the woman is the glory of the man.*

Now Paul brings insights and inferences from the creation account ***that give reasons for the cultural behavior of women and men of that time, not of today***. It is still about the worship gathering.

It is important to note that Paul does not say that the woman is not God's image. Nor is she the image of the man, but his glory (Medema). Paul's argument here is special because it concerns cultural, that is, time-bound conventions. The parallelism shows: ***Both are God's image, but the woman is at the same time the glory of the man.***

"While the woman bore the image of the 'man of dust,' she was in fact formed from a higher order in creation, since Adam had already been formed and given life by a direct act of God. She was made from him. ***Therefore the woman is the glory of the man, or the glory of glory.*** But this 'more' is not described as hierarchical either in the Pauline writings or in the creation account. Hierarchy (humanity's dominion over the earth and its other creatures) is addressed in Genesis 1:27-28, but Genesis 2 addresses other themes."[45]

"How can we understand 1 Corinthians 11:7, where Paul states that the man is in the image and glory of God, but the woman (in contrast) is the glory of the man? ***The answer is that Eve, like every descendant of Adam and Eve, had a multiple identity: she was both created in the image of God and the glory of Adam, because she was created directly from him. She was uniquely in Adam's likeness and even a part of him, so that they were one flesh in a way that was inseparable*** and different from the relationship of offspring to parents (Genesis 2:23-24)."[46]

"The statement becomes understandable when one sees that Paul is not commenting on the nature of the human being in the difference between man and woman, but, in the context of the question of head covering, is emphasizing that the woman is the 'reflection' of the man. The statement that the woman is the δόξα (glory) of the man means '***no reduction in the quality of the woman's being in the image of God, and thus no diminishing of her dignity, since Paul is arguing from Genesis 2, according to which the woman is precisely bone of the man's bone and flesh of his flesh, and is thus his equal, unlike all other living creatures***.'"[47]

As mentioned above, the woman bears the image of Adam (1 Corinthians 15:49), and in Christ she also bears the image and glory of God, like the rest of humanity. However, Paul also says that the man's appearance shows the image and glory of God in a way that differs from the woman's appearance, for the woman's appearance or beauty is the glory of the man (1 Corinthians 11:7). ***Paul points out that the "glory of the man" (that is, his wife) should be covered or concealed during worship, so that worship is not about honoring or glorifying either the man or the woman.***

"When it comes to outward appearance, however, there is a difference between the glory of men and the glory of women. In keeping with the culture, Paul believed that God created the woman to be more attractive or more glorious, so that she is the glory of the man."[48]

> *8 For the man is not from the woman, but the woman from the man;*

How did the woman become the glory of the man? How did the man become the head, that is, the origin of the woman? She was created from him, from his side.

"Therefore any assumption that a quotation of the creation account must point to a transcendent norm is a problematic presupposition. Both Jesus and Paul believed that the biblical account of the creation of humanity as male and female conveys transcendent norms about gender, but ***Paul also quoted it to support his argument for veiling in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, which is thus a culturally bound application. It is a logical fallacy to claim that transcendent norms or universal principles can only be used to support normative or universal conclusions."***[49]

It is not about the nature or the function of man and woman, but about how they are related to each other in the context of society, as v. 9 shows.[50]

> *9 for neither was the man created for the woman's sake,*
> *but the woman for the man's sake.*

"Paul underlines that the woman, from creation onward, is oriented toward the man. That this does not mean a devaluation and is not meant disparagingly does not follow from the wording with διά + accusative, but from the drift of the argument in the context, which is not about the nature or quality of man and woman, as well as from vv. 11–12. ***The fact that in Roman-Hellenistic society wives were often considerably younger than their husbands helped the Corinthian women to understand the argument of temporal priority and of the functional relationship of man and woman that Paul develops from the biblical creation account.***"[51]

Three things, however, contribute to rethinking the interpretation of the meaning of "the woman was created for the man" (11:9): First, the claim that "the woman was created for the man" confirms the statement "the woman is the glory of the man"; second, the claim is interpreted by the creation account in Genesis 2:4-25; third, it provides the reason for the conclusion "a woman ought to have authority over her head" (v. 10).[52]

Verse 9 gives the impression that priority belongs to the man and that the woman functions "only" as a complement. But as Westfall emphasizes, the creation of Eve is in fact a sign of Adam's need for help. She therefore has a "strong" position, one of personal responsibility. This now finds expression as confirmation in verse 10!

> *10 Therefore the woman ought to have a power on her head because of the angels.*

Countless translations have added a "sign of power or authority" to the Greek text here! The Greek only says power, authority, or right. This addition does not surprise me since, as mentioned at the outset, this Pauline text has been understood as confirming the hierarchy of the man over the woman, and that has influenced the translation. In other words, this addition is an interpretation. This verse can just as well – or better: must – be rendered like this:

Therefore the woman ought to have authority over her head because of the angels.

(so Schnabel, Westfall, Bushnell, Keener, Schirrmacher, and others)

"As an abstract noun, in the sense of 'a power (i.e., control) over her head,' i.e., over herself. The last-mentioned meaning corresponds a) to the common use of the word ἐξουσία (authority) as an abstract noun in the sense of 'power' (i.e., the power one has, not the power of others experienced passively), b) to the syntactic construction of the phrase, and c) to the drift of the argument.[53]

Paul points out that in the Christian community it is the woman's right to veil herself, which transforms the symbol. It is thus expressly not a sign of submission or hierarchical subordination. This could mean that a woman should be able to exercise her own judgment in matters of women's clothing, because she is destined to judge the world and the angels, as he already said in 1 Corinthians 6:2-3. "***By wearing the traditional head covering, the wife demonstrates her control over her head by accepting her faithfulness to her husband as well as her personal social status. The erotic signals that women***

send by uncovering in the public setting of the church assembly are avoided, the relationship of man and woman is preserved, and the woman's articulation of the reality of God in prayer and prophetic speech remains authentic."[54]

"Consequently, in Paul's theology of origins, man and woman are expressly dependent on each other. In the context of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, Paul diplomatically tempers any inappropriate independence of the women that might result from his support of their desire to be veiled."[55]

On the question of which angels are meant, Schnabel summarizes: "The following interpretive options have been proposed for angels. 1. Church leaders, as in Revelation 2:1. 2. Messengers from other churches who take offense at the behavior of the women in the Corinthian church. 3. Messengers of unbelieving citizens who are interested in the Christian community and send a client (or slave) into the church assembly to obtain a report on the activities of the confessors of Jesus. 4. The angels who proclaim to the women on Easter morning the news of Jesus' resurrection. 5. The angels who, according to Isaiah 6:2, cover their faces and feet with their wings before the throne of God. 6. The fallen angels of Genesis 6:1-4, whose victims are the women who pray with uncovered heads. 7. The angels over whom believers will sit in judgment (compare 6:3). 8. Good angels who are present in the worship service, represent God, and mediate prayer and prophecy. The third and the last two interpretations are the most plausible."[56]

Like Westfall, I agree with point 7, because the judgment of the angels indicates the immensely high status of believers, including women, which must go hand in hand with maturity, spiritual discernment, and wisdom.

> *11 Nevertheless, neither is the woman without the man*
> *nor the man without the woman*
> *in the Lord.*

For all the independence and personal responsibility of the women in the question of head covering, they remain connected with the men, in marriage and in the church, married and unmarried alike. Paul underlines a mutual dependence that could not be put more aptly. And one that corresponds to what happened at creation. Anyone who might conclude from verses 8 and 9 that the woman is something like a slave, inferior, to be dominated or led – whether in marriage, in the family, or in the church – is mistaken. Paul heads this off and uncompromisingly emphasizes the equality of man and woman. ***"In the Lord" describes the existence of the new creation, which sets itself apart from the culture of its time, in which this equal dignity and equality did not exist!***

"The woman is not inferior; rather, 'in the Lord' man and woman depend on each other as equals. Πλήν, however, does not always have an adversative meaning; in Paul it has the meaning 'only, in any case,' 'which concludes the discussion and highlights what is essential.' Paul writes: ***Yet in the Lord neither is the woman (anything) without the man nor the man without the woman.*** The phrase 'in the Lord,' placed at the beginning in the translation, stands at the end of the sentence in the Greek text, i.e., in an emphatic position. Paul emphasizes that man and woman are related to each other. ***The sentence 'the woman is nothing without the man' is not particularly surprising in Hellenistic-Roman society, apart perhaps from the attitude of the 'new woman' (see on v. 5). What is surprising is the sentence 'the man is nothing without the woman.' The parallel formulation underlines the equal rank of man and woman as a consequence of God's saving action in Jesus Christ."***[57]

> *12 For just as the woman is from the man,*
> *so also the man is through the woman;*
> *but all things are from God.*

Paul deepens his argument from verse 11 and proceeds in his thinking exactly as in verse 8. The woman, Eve, is made from Adam. Without Adam there would be no Eve. A one-time event, a true kickoff. Since then, every man is born of a woman, again and again.

No one can derive from this any advantage or precedence for himself; everyone has his or her God-given worth. For everything comes from God, the Creator, the head.

> *13 Judge among yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God uncovered?*

Paul challenges their spiritual discernment. He is addressing men in Corinth and questions them urgently. If they demand of the women, or of some women, that they not cover themselves, then they are forgetting essential elements that were associated with the head covering.

"He argues that he wants all women to cover their hair when praying and prophesying, including those who are not allowed to veil themselves in the culture, such as female slaves."[58]

"In v. 13 Paul argues from propriety, an argument that ought to convince the Corinthian Christians: ***Is it fitting for a woman to pray to God unveiled?*** If the expression τὸ πρέπον in Hellenism has a meaning that, like τὸ δίκαιον, τὸ καλόν, and τὸ ἀγαθόν, 'spans the whole of life, because social life demands an abundance of virtues,' then it also includes questions of dress code."[59]

"The phrase πρέπον ἐστίν (is it fitting, is it proper) in contemporary texts refers to the expectation that one behaves in conformity with existing norms – a fundamental category of Roman culture, not least as a result of the marriage legislation of Augustus, in which behavior was regulated right down to the dress code. Because the Corinthians knew the norms and expectations of society, Paul expects them to answer the question posed with 'yes.'"[60] "It is not about the custom that governs the right way of praying, but about the norms of propriety that apply in society, that are known to the Corinthians, and that have not been abolished by the new existence 'in the Lord.'"[61]

"The command to veil is to be understood neither as a polemic against women nor as the subordination of the woman to the man, for veiling was her protection and a sign of the status and honor that a woman could possess in Greco-Roman culture."[62]

I repeat the observation that the answer Paul expects is not grounded theologically, but socially and culturally: one adapts precisely in order not to be a cause of offense.

> *14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor (disgrace) to him,*

"First Paul again speaks of the man: ***Does not even nature itself teach you that it is a disgrace for a man if he wears long hair?*** Paul again expects this question to be answered with 'yes' as a matter of course. The term 'nature' (φύσις) refers to the recognized order of nature, to which the constitution of men and women and the appearance of men and women belong. Paul obviously does not mean to say that 'nature' makes men's hair grow short. The reference to 'disgrace' (ἀτιμία), like πρέπον in v. 13, names the practice recognized as the norm in the natural order of things. When appealing to nature, one expected undivided agreement. Even the highest representatives of the state and its

administration argued from the nature of a thing, 'which gives such arguments the highest authority.'"[63]

"The adult men who lived in Corinth wore their hair not long but short. Long hair signaled a denial of masculinity and often provoked the suspicion of passive homosexual inclinations, which were socially stigmatized in Roman society. Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that the male members of the church should wear short hair, as was customary."[64]

Nature teaches? Is nature a teacher for the disciple of Jesus? Certainly not, for that is the Holy Spirit and not a nature that has been tainted and damaged by sin. No, as Schnabel writes, it is about a fixed order of society, about what people have done this way over long periods of time and what has thereby become culture. A fitting comparison from our time is hard to find. For when it comes to hairstyle and clothing, anything goes today. Our postmodern age, in which there may be no absolute truths, is marked by absolute individualism.

In this argument, nature is a subjective order, as it was more or less accepted and lived by people in the era of antiquity. Dishonor – or, translated more sharply: disgrace – is not dishonor before God, but before and for people in Corinth. The long hair of the Nazirite, or of an Absalom or Samson, of a Paul, and perhaps of Jesus, is no disgrace before God. Disgrace corresponds to offense, which Christians should avoid for the sake of the gospel, as far as was at all possible for them as followers of Jesus.

I will only briefly mention the physiological understanding that had formed and become established centuries earlier. According to this understanding, a man's seed (sperm) was formed in the head and came from there. Long hair would hold back or slow the flow of the seed and harm procreation.

> *15 but if a woman has long hair, it is an honor to her, because her hair is given to her instead of a veil?*

What, then, does "nature" teach with regard to women and their hairstyle or constitution?

"For women the custom is different. ***Does not nature teach you that it (is) an honor for a woman if she wears long hair?*** Women wore their hair long. Sculptures always show women with long hair. Especially among the better-off women, the long hair was artfully styled."[65]

In antiquity a woman's hair was generally regarded as an object of desire (Keener). A woman who did not cover it wanted – so the interpretation went – to arouse desire. Upper-class women sometimes disregarded this in order to show off their elaborately braided hair and the jewelry worn in it. In the church of the Corinthians, as in other places, different cultures met.

"It seems that, because of the way he applies glory to women and their hair, Paul believes ***that women are visually the glory of glory – that is, women have the greater glory. The fact that the woman was created for the man's sake (1 Corinthians 11:9) points to the purpose of her greater beauty and her attractiveness to men. It also indicates that Adam was the one who needed Eve as a companion, a partner; he benefited from her creation, not the other way around.***"[66]

"Rather, Paul's argument is that the woman's 'head' must be covered in worship so that honor is directed to God. The metaphor of the 'head' is essential to the argument. The man is the head of the woman (literally), the woman's head is above all the glory of her husband, and the hair on her head is her glory, and also the glory of her husband."[67]

"A woman's beauty arouses jealousy and at the same time displays her husband's status, which would be in direct competition with God's honor in worship. ***It is about God's honor and glory, not about the honor and glory of the men in the house church, nor about the glory and beauty of the women who pray and prophesy."***[68]

"This is indeed the starting point of Paul's argument, and he seems to affirm the cultural ideals about the woman's relationship to the paterfamilias, but the development of his argument has in fact made the relationship between men and women equal, established their respective worth, and highlighted the mutuality of their origin: although the woman came from the man, the man also came from the woman. ***His focus and his concern are not to confirm or strengthen the authority or control of husbands over their wives, but to ensure that God is glorified."***[69]

"The woman is the glory of the man, and her hair is her glory; therefore she should cover it in worship. Paul says that hair is a woman's glory because it is her mantle/her covering (1 Corinthians 11:15). ***This means that a woman's hair functions like a beauty accessory (like a wrap/veil) that enhances her appearance.*** Cultures that practice veiling believe that the hair of an honorable woman should be reserved for her husband to look at and enjoy, and therefore should not be seen in public."

> *16 But if anyone thinks it right to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.*

There was enough strife about all sorts of things in Corinth. Further strife was not to flare up over head covering as well. The custom of covered men or uncovered women taking part in the worship service was not to exist, and is apparently not known or customary anywhere else either. That is a final argument against the skeptics in Corinth who question everything: All Christians and churches (in the Roman Empire) practice it the way Paul has described. Men pray without, and women pray with, a head covering in the assembly.

"Paul concludes in v. 16b ('***we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God***') with the remark that there is no apostolic tradition that could justify such a practice. And he points out that there is no parallel for this behavior in any of the churches of God (αἱ ἐκκλησίαι τοῦ θεοῦ). Chr. Wolff comments: 'The Corinthians would be breaking away from fellowship with the other communities of salvation that stand under God's authority if they held on to their innovation.'"[70]

Current Relevance

God's word is timeless. Not one word will pass away. But there are things that belong to a particular era and are addressed to that era.

By covering themselves, the women were to avoid drawing attention to themselves, displaying the glory of their hair, and distracting the men (and perhaps some women too). God's glory was to be exalted, praised, and extolled. God's glory, his presence, was the center of the gathering. Today, too, nothing in the worship service should exalt the human being; no one should draw attention or honor to himself or herself.

Women were not to take anything away from God's honor through their outward appearance, through their natural or dressed-up beauty. ***This is the ethical principle of the text, which still applies today. No speaker, no preacher, no one giving a testimony or a mission report, no singer, no instrumentalist, no person at all should – today just as then – draw attention to himself or herself through clothing.***

"As far as the practice of head covering is concerned, it has long ceased to be customary in Western societies for women to signal their status as faithful wives by means of a head covering [In Islamic countries, and thus in churches in Islamic regions, this is different! – HJR]. If Christian wives in such a situation are active in the church without a head covering, it is precisely because they also move about in the public life of the city in which they live without a head covering. ***The absence of a head covering sends no signals. When some Christians demand that wives should still wear a head covering today out of 'obedience to Scripture,' then the instructions of the apostle Paul are precisely not understood and implemented 'obediently': Paul is not concerned with the head covering, but with the deliberate disregard and mockery of traditional conventions that are important and fundamental for society as a whole.*** When women in the churches of Western Europe wear a head covering, this is not the conformity Paul called for toward a convention that symbolizes a wife's chastity and solidarity, but a behavior that is precisely not conforming – in the West, marital solidarity and modesty are hardly symbolized anymore by a particular way of dressing. This happens rather verbally, i.e., through concrete statements about the value of marriage and of one's spouse."[71] And of course with a wedding ring, which unmistakably shows that its wearer lives in a committed (marriage) relationship and is neither free for a new relationship nor out for sexual adventures. The wedding ring offers only limited protection against that; what matters is the sign.

Anyone who nevertheless prescribes a head covering for women today – or, as a woman, prescribes it for herself – has not yet understood the freedom of the gospel to which we are called.

What follows is an ***explanatory, free rendering (paraphrase)*** of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 – the way I would briefly explain the passage.

It is important to me that you Corinthians realize that the origin, namely the head of every man, is the Christ, the Messiah. Through him man was created. And as men you are related to him, and this can be seen in the assembly.

The head of the woman is the man. She was created from his side in order to become one with him. He the head, she the body. The man is her origin, and she too is related to him, which becomes visible in the assembly.

We see this relationship in Christ as well. His head is God. He begot him, his Son, who is equal to him.

If a man in Corinth prays aloud to Christ or God in the assembly or speaks prophetically, and in doing so has his head covered, that is a disgrace. He is giving honor to himself, not to Christ. For the idol worshipers cover their heads when

they sacrifice to the idols. Uncovered, the man shows humility and gives honor to the Most High, the invisible Christ.

With the women it is exactly the other way around. Women who pray and speak prophetically in the assembly and do not cover themselves bring shame on their head. They dishonor themselves and their husband, that is, their head. For they draw attention to themselves.

If anyone demands that the women, just like the men, need not cover themselves, he is not thinking it through. For you know very well that in Corinth an uncovered woman is regarded as shorn and is like a woman who prostitutes herself or who is out for sexual encounters. If she does not veil or cover herself, then logically she should also have her hair cut off or have herself shaved completely.

I know that this is not what you intend! But in the society in which you live, that would be the consequence! So do not risk becoming a cause of offense for people who come to you and see how the usual custom of women being covered in public is rejected.

The men are not to veil themselves in the assembly, in the presence of God. For the man is the image of God and the reflection of his glory.

The woman, in turn, is also God's image, but beyond that she is also the reflection of the glory of the man. Her beauty is that of her husband, with whom she is one.

How could she become his glory? Certainly not because he was created from her, but because she was formed from him, from his side.

And she is the glory of the man not because he was created for her sake, but the other way around. She was created for his sake, because he was alone and needed help. And as a woman she was desirably beautiful to him.

Because the woman has such great worth and is of such great benefit to the man, she is therefore to decide for herself about her head: whether she covers it or

not. No one may dictate this to her. Neither her husband nor the leaders of the church may dictate to her that she must not wear a head covering.

But in her independence and freedom of choice, let the woman bear in mind that she is not separate from or independent of the man. In the church she does not exist without the man, and the man does not exist without the woman either. God's idea was always the togetherness and partnership of man and woman. In the unity of head and body they act together, in agreement, in consultation, peaceably, submitting to one another, complementing each other.

What does it mean that the one does not exist without the other? Remember once again the creation of the first human couple. In the beginning the woman came out of the man. From his side. Related to him, in order in turn to be one flesh with him. But think further: since then every man comes from a woman. Without the man there would be no woman, and without the woman there would be no man. Both are equal in dignity, equal in worth, and equal in standing, the perfect complement in their difference. All this was God's idea. He is the head from whom all this came forth.

In view of this I ask you: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God publicly but unveiled and uncovered? No, you will agree, it is not, in view of the customs in Corinth and in the Roman Empire.

There are, after all, manners and customs that are like laws of nature for people. If a man, contrary to the manners and customs, wears long hair, that is regarded as a disgrace. Here too, with the women it is exactly the other way around. The long hair of women is their glory, their natural adornment, which is also perceived as such. The long hair is given to her like an adorning veil or mantle, so that she may be the glory of the man.

This adornment, which seems so desirable to men, she is to cover in the assembly. This is not the place to appear with this glory, just as the man is to demonstrate his humility with an uncovered head. For it is about the honor and

glory of God and of Christ. He is the one who invites us to an audience with the King of all kings.

If anyone in Corinth wants to argue about this and calls this custom of head covering into question, he should realize that this exists nowhere: that women pray uncovered, as you want to prescribe for the women and as you do yourselves. No church practices anything like this; therefore keep to what usually applies to head covering and is honorable and gives offense to no one.

Conclusion and Summary

"The language of the passage and Paul's conclusion suggest that someone wanted either to restrict or to forbid veiling in the Corinthian house churches, but that all the women, some women, or a single woman wanted to be veiled. First Paul briefly summarizes the creation account and explains that the creation of the woman from the man and for the man is the reason why the woman is the glory of the man. The man is her head because she was created from him, and her head consequently reflects his glory or expresses it in some way. In the account of the book of Genesis she was also his glory because she was specially created to attract him, in contrast to all the animals (Genesis 2:18-23)."[72]

"The Pauline texts contain a theology of the sexes (gender) ***that is realized in the way Paul explains the creation account with concepts and symbols of Greco-Roman culture and the idioms of the Greek language.*** By applying the metaphor of 'head' to Adam, Paul indicates that Eve has multiple identities, like the rest of humanity after Adam. Women are the image of God, the image of Adam, and also 'the glory of the man.' ***Paul's description of the woman as 'the glory of the man' does not point to a subordination or a lesser glory, but refers to an additional glory: the power of her beauty over men.*** Nor can we project the priority of the man into Paul's brief account in 1 Timothy 2:13-14, which says that Adam was created first (v. 13). Instead, Paul teaches mutuality from the creation account, for Paul presents the man as the recipient of benefits who needs the woman's help. He describes this in terms the culture would understand. ***The woman was formed from the man, so that in the creation account the man functions as the head of the woman (her source of life) in Greek usage;*** but later every man comes from the woman, so that the woman is also the source of life, which is what the name 'Eve' in Genesis 3:20 means.

"Therefore, by God's design, woman and man are not independent of each other. There is no compelling reason to interpret Paul as contradicting, reinterpreting, or relativizing the woman's authority in the creation account in Genesis 1:27-28 or in his use of the Greek idiom 'head.' Both the man and the woman were created in God's image, and both were created to rule, which according to Paul is exercised in the sense of partnership and mutuality within corresponding cultural norms."[73]

It is brilliant how the gospel can be lived in every culture to the glory of God and without giving offense. God, the greatest missionary, is rich toward all: the gospel is for all nations.

Appendix

The two following arrangements of the text have to do with a chiasm (a crosswise, diagonal arrangement of words or ideas). The first arrangement comes from Schnabel. It shows: the text speaks to men and women in equal measure. Anyone who wants to deduce from the frequency of address who caused the problem in Corinth will ***not*** get any further that way.

v. 4 every man … dishonors his head

v. 5 every woman … dishonors her head

v. 7a the man is the reflection of God

v. 7b the woman is the reflection of the man

v. 11a in the Lord the woman is nothing without the man

v. 11b in the Lord the man is nothing without the woman

v. 12a the woman is from the man

v. 12b the man is through the woman

v. 14 it is a disgrace for the man

v. 15 it is an honor for the woman[74]

Here a flawless chiasm of this text – that is, of this coherent train of thought or unit of meaning – is presented, as David E. Garland outlines it. It is interesting to see how the same letters A B C D face each other, once before and once after the central statement in ***v. 10, which he highlights as the core statement on the woman's covering. For me this means: the woman decides whether she wears a head covering or not. That is not decided by men or by her husband. She is free.***

A Introduction: the "Head" of Men and Women (vv.2-3)
Commendation (v.2); Summary of Headship (v.3)
B Shame for Men and Women (vv.4-5)
For Men (v.4); For Women (v.5)
C Social and Theological Reasons for Shame (vv.6-7)
Social Reasons (v.6); Theological Reasons (v.7)
D Creation of Men and Women (vv.8-9)
Men (vv.8a; 9a); Women (vv.8b; 9b)

E Reason for Women to be Covered (v.10)

D' Equality of Women and Men (vv.11-12)
Women (vv.11a; 12a); Men (vv.11b; 12b);
Equality in God (v.12c)
C' Social Implications for Women (v.13)
B' Shame and Glory in Men and Women (vv.14-15)
Shame for Men (v.14); Glory for Women (v.15)
A' Conclusion: Exhortation to Adhere to Teachings (v.16)

Notes

1. Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf, hj-ronsdorf@t-online.de, feedback welcome. January 24, 2021, revised in October 2026
2. www.hans-joerg-ronsdorf.de
3. https://theoblog.de/eckhard-schnabel/16636/
4. Cynthia Long Westfall, Paul and Gender. Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2016.
5. Schottroff, L., *Der erste Brief an die Gemeinde in Korinth*, edd. E. W. Stegemann/L. Schottroff/A. Strotmann/K. Wengst, VII, Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2013, 197.
6. Westfall, Paul and Gender, p. 13 (hereafter cited by page number only).
7. p. 13
8. p. 17
9. p. 20
10. p. 25
11. p. 26
12. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther, Historisch-Theologische Auslegung, Witten/Gießen: SCM R. Brockhaus/Brunnen, 4th edition 2018, p. 625.
13. p. 26
14. p. 27
15. p. 29
16. In the society of the Roman Empire, a woman married to a Roman citizen was called a matrona. Her place was mostly in the house, caring for family and household. She was under the protection and guardianship of the head of the household, either her father or her husband. (Source: Wikipedia, article "Matrona")
17. p. 29
18. p. 31
19. p. 32
20. p. 33
21. p. 37
22. Schnabel, E. J., *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, edd. G. Maier/H.-W. Neudorfer/R. Riesner/E. J. Schnabel, Historisch-Theologische Auslegung Neues Testament, SCM R. Brockhaus; Brunnen Verlag, Witten/Gießen, 4th edition 2018, 602–603.
23. p. 42
24. p. 44
25. Paul's basic statement remains the same even if some women wanted to leave off the head covering on their own initiative. This assumption, however, is rather unlikely.
26. Elberfelder translation (German Bible translation), CSV edition, unless otherwise indicated.
27. These thoughts are a supplement to chapter 6.2 of my book "Women, Forgive Us!" ("Frauen, vergebt uns!"). I will not repeat most of it here and recommend reading both studies.
28. p. 87
29. p. 38
30. p. 84
31. p. 80
32. p. 82
33. p. 85
34. p. 89
35. p. 90
36. Schnabel, E. J., 601
37. Schnabel, E. J., 602

38. p. 40
39. Schnabel, E. J., 602
40. p. 29
41. Schnabel, E. J., 604
42. Schnabel, E. J., 605
43. Schnabel, E. J., 606
44. Schnabel, E. J., 606
45. p. 72
46. p. 65
47. Schnabel, E. J., *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, edd. G. Maier - H.-W. Neudorfer - R. Riesner - E. J. Schnabel, Historisch-Theologische Auslegung Neues Testament, SCM R. Brockhaus; Brunnen Verlag, Witten; Gießen 2018, 4th edition, 608–609.
48. p. 70
49. p. 62
50. Schnabel, E. J., 609
51. Schnabel, E. J., 609–610
52. p. 103
53. Schnabel, E. J., 610
54. Schnabel, E. J., 610–611
55. p. 73
56. Schnabel, E. J., 611
57. Schnabel, E. J., 613–614
58. p. 30
59. Schnabel, E. J., 616
60. Schnabel, E. J., 616–617
61. Schnabel, E. J., 617
62. p. 70
63. Schnabel, E. J., 617–618
64. Schnabel, E. J., 619
65. Schnabel, E. J., 619
66. p. 40
67. p. 41
68. p. 41
69. p. 42
70. Schnabel, E. J., *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, edd. G. Maier - H.-W. Neudorfer - R. Riesner - E. J. Schnabel, Historisch-Theologische Auslegung Neues Testament, SCM R. Brockhaus; Brunnen Verlag, Witten; Gießen 4th edition 2018, 622–623.
71. Schnabel, E. J., 624
72. p. 98
73. p. 105
74. Schnabel, E. J., 590