

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 are very difficult. It has taken me several years to find the time and the courage to tackle this beast of a passage. This is my best attempt at it. I do not cover every question, and I do not claim to have read all the literature. It would take a genius or a madman (perhaps *both*) to master the ink that has been spilt and the megabytes compiled about this monster passage. But this is the best I can do for now and I wager it's a credible job. The reader must decide.

Summary of Paul's argument

1	There exists a graduated series of social relationships (God → Christ, and Christ → Man, and Man → Woman). Each relationship has a prominent representative who is the prism through which honor or shame refracts on the larger relationship family.	1 Corinthians 11:3
2	According to the cultural code language of the day, both men and women can act in ways that bring disgrace, dishonor, and shame onto their prominent representative (and, by extension, the larger group)—e.g., men <i>wearing</i> head coverings, and women <i>not wearing</i> head coverings. Because this reflects shame and disgrace onto their representatives, these actions are very bad.	1 Corinthians 11:4-5
3	So, if women wish to go without head coverings and bring disgrace onto their prominent representative figures (their husbands), they may as well just go all the way, shave their heads, and embrace ridicule . Or they can just wear head coverings!	1 Corinthians 11:6
4	The reason why a woman must wear a head covering is because, while on the one hand man reflects God in the sense that he originates from him, on the other hand the woman reflects man because <i>she</i> originates from <i>him</i> .	1 Corinthians 11:7
5	The woman reflects the man because (a) she comes from the man, and (b) she was made for his sake—for loving companionship . So, if according to the cultural code language of the day, her actions bring disrepute onto her representative, this is very bad.	1 Corinthians 11:8-9
6	Because of these two reasons, the woman must always exercise personal power and agency over her what she does with her body ("head") , because the holy angels watch us and see what we do.	1 Corinthians 11:10
7	Paul hedges a bit to ward off misogynistic interpretations . Regardless of what he's just said, neither men or women are independent of each other in relationship/union with Christ . Each comes from the other, and both come from God.	1 Corinthians 11:11-12
8	According to the cultural code language of the day, it's "just the way things are" that (a) on the one hand men who have long hair disgrace God and thus themselves, while on the other hand (b) women <i>do</i> have long hair and it reflects glory onto their husbands (their relational proxies). So, by analogy, it's obvious women must wear head coverings.	1 Corinthians 11:13-15
9	Paul appeals to universal Jesus people practice: "But, if anyone prefers to argue about this, we don't have a custom where women pray with their heads uncovered. Neither do God's churches " (my translation).	1 Corinthians 11:16

Bottom line

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

This is a passage about holiness and propriety **according to the cultural code language of the day**, in an honor/shame context.

- So, according to the cultural code language active in Corinth in the early 50s A.D., every man praying or prophesying with a head covering disgraces Christ, his prominent representative or “head.” He does this because local men in pagan worship used head coverings. If a Christian man follows local custom and uses one, it communicates the wrong idea.
- But, on the other hand, every woman praying or prophesying with *her* head uncovered disgraces her husband, her forward-facing relationship proxy or “head.” She does this because, according to the cultural code language of that day, if she prays or prophesies without her head covered she is signaling that she is one and the same as a prostitute and a whore.

“[I]t is the Corinthian women, not modern women, whom he wishes to persuade to cover their heads.”¹ To understand this passage’s meaning for today, we must (a) extract the *principle* from the A.D. 50-ish *cultural dress* in which it’s clothed, and then (b) translate that principle into 21st century American cultural code language.

What’s Happening in Corinth?

There are two major problems in Corinth that help us understand 1 Corinthians 11:3-16:

1. The Corinthian church has an awful reputation with the Jewish community in the city.
2. The church has terrible moral problems that disgrace it publicly.

So, Paul insists on a *very strict separation* from pagan culture. He wants them to avoid *any appearance* of impropriety. We should read his commands about “head coverings” in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 in that light—he wants the church to avoid sending the wrong signals to the local community *because of* these two major problems.

Paul has not had a happy time in Corinth. He planted it in troubling times amid severe disagreement and local uproar.

- Paul exploded in frustration and burnt his bridges with the Jewish community when it repeatedly frustrated his efforts at evangelism at the synagogue (Acts 18:6). This doesn’t mean he acted rashly. It just means Paul left in such a deliberate huff that there would be no going back. A decent paraphrase of his remarks would be: “Go ahead and send yourselves right to hell, then! It’s not my fault” (Acts 18:6).
- He then *deliberately set up shop next door* to the synagogue and continued to evangelize. This was surely too much for the Jews, and it’s hard to believe Paul didn’t

¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 482.

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do this on purpose. Add to it, the synagogue leader then converted to Christianity along with his entire family, bringing many Jews along with him (Acts 18:7-8). In a vision, God assured Paul that he must carry on (Acts 18:9).

- The Jewish community detested Paul so much that they lodged an ill-considered civil complaint against him with the Roman magistrate. When Gallio declined to hear the matter because “it involves questions about words and names and your own law” (Acts 18:5), the Jewish crowd launched a public beat-down of the new synagogue leader who likely brought the charges (Acts 18:17).

The apostle’s two letters we have to this congregation reveal that it was a very troubled church indeed.

- The church was beset with factions and pride (1 Cor 1:10-17; 1 Cor 3-4).
- It tolerated a member who had a sexual relationship with his own mother (1 Cor 5).
- Others (perhaps members of rival factions) filed civil lawsuits against one another (1 Cor 6).
- Some were confused by a sexual ascetism craze (1 Cor 7).
- One faction disliked the apostle Paul and cut him down at every opportunity—even claiming he only served for money (1 Cor 9).
- The factions held separate, private “Lord’s Supper” meals that degenerated into drunken debauchery while excluding other outside the clique (1 Cor 11:17-34).
- Corinth was a large port city with a well-established and flourishing prostitute trade. It’s no surprise that Paul wrote the infamous vice list from Romans 1:18-32 *while he was in Corinth*.

Paul does not specifically say these reasons (its awful reputation in the Jewish community, and its spiritually immature moral chaos) are why he insists that Christian men and women (particularly women) follow local, cultural conventions to not bring disgrace upon their representative “heads.” But it makes sense it would be a contributing factor. The believers in Corinth “are still worldly—mere infants in Christ” (1 Cor 1:1).

What Does it Mean for Today?

The principle is this = a woman must not disgrace her prominent representative “head” by broadcasting “sexually available and interested” signals **in the cultural code language of the day**.

This means you *must not do* whatever behavior communicates that message in the cultural code language **of your day**.

- First, consider what dress, actions, and behaviors a woman can use that signal to the wider world that “I’m sexually available and interested”?
- Second, don’t do those things. You will disgrace your husband and yourself.

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Now, to the text. Paul begins with some kind words about how the church follows his teachings “just as I passed them into you” (1 Cor 11:2). This is likely *pro forma* sugar, because the whole letter shows the church *has not* listened to him! Now that he’s said something sweet, Paul gets to it.

1 Corinthians 11:3

Text and translation

3: But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

- Θέλω δὲ (transition) ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι ὅτι παντὸς ἀνδρὸς (genitive of subordination, cf. Wallace, GGBB, 103) ἡ κεφαλὴ (subject) ὁ Χριστός (predicate nom.) ἐστίν, κεφαλὴ δὲ (addition) γυναικὸς (genitive of subordination) ὁ ἀνὴρ (predicate nom.), κεφαλὴ δὲ τοῦ Χριστοῦ (genitive of subordination) ὁ θεός (predicate nom.).
- Now, I want you all to know that the head over every man is the Messiah, and the head over the wife is the husband, and the head over the Messiah is God.

Exegesis

The key question is how to understand what the word “head” means. This is the Greek word κεφαλὴ² How is it used in Greek literature? There are about five broad categories:

1. **The physical body part** (literal and metaphorical for the whole). Gen 16:16 [as the whole person]; Ex 39:2 [whole person]; Dan 7:1 [as mind]; Mt 26:7; 27:29; 27:37; Acts 4:18 [as hair; also Judges 16:13-14];
2. **A being of high status**; “one who is of supreme or pre-eminent status, in view of authority to order or command”³ (Ps 17:44; Isa 7:8; 1 Cor 11:3; Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18).
3. **The uppermost or topmost (etc.) part of a thing** (capstone, leading city; Gen 8:5; 11:4; Mt 22:42 [Mk 12:10]; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7).
4. **Prominence** (metaphorical). Moses told the Israelites: “The LORD will make you the head, not the tail” (Deut 28:13; also v. 44; Isa 9:14)—κεφαλὴν καὶ μὴ εἰς οὐράν.
5. As **life itself** (Isa 43:4 LXX)

² With the exception of #4-5, the categories for these definitions are adapted from William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v., “κεφαλὴ,” 541-542. The citations are from my own word study through the LXX, the NT, and the Apostolic Fathers.

³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), s.v. “κεφαλὴ,” p. 738.

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In 1 Corinthians 11:3-6, Paul deliberately uses the word as a pun and switches between metaphorical and more literal senses:

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

⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head.

⁵But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved.

⁶For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.

The literal sense of head is, well ... your literal head. But what is this metaphorical sense? There are three common options—authority, source, or prominent representative.

Does κεφαλή mean “authority”?

Every English translation of which I’m aware understands this to mean something like “authority.”⁴ So do most commentators, old and new.⁵ They typically do not argue contextually for their position but simply assert it as a bald fact.

- They may be influenced by a time-bound assumption about “the way things are.” Hodge declares without explanation that “the subordination of the woman to the

⁴ ESV, ISV, NLT, NASB95, NET, KJV, RSV, Jay Adams *Christian Counselor’s New Testament*, NEB, REB, NIV, CSB, CEB, NRSV, MLB (Berkley), Nlrv, N.T. Wright’s *The Kingdom New Testament*, Phillips, Tyndale, Richard Lattimore’s *The New Testament*, Julian Anderson’s *New Testament in Everyday American English*, and Charles B. Williams’ *The New Testament: A Private Translation in the Language of the People* (an older tome put out by Moody Press in 1958).

⁵ (1) John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, vol. 2, The Baptist Commentary Series (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1809), 683; (2) Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860), 206-07; (3) F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. A. Cusin, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1860), 108; (3) Thomas C. Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed. (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1886), 271-72; (4) John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 353; (5) Ezra Gould, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society), 1887, 93; (6) G. G. Findlay, “St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians,” in *Expositor’s Greek Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1901), 871; (6) Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers: A Critical and Explanatory Commentary*, New Edition, vol. 2 (London: Rivingtons; Deighton, Bell and Co., 1872), 201; (7) Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed., in ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1914), 229.

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man is perfectly consistent with their identity as to nature ...”⁶ Edwards writes that this is simply “the Christian order” and does not defend that statement.⁷

- Older commentators show clear misogyny. John Gill, for instance, declares the man “must be head and chief; as he is also with respect to his superior gifts and excellencies, as strength of body, and endowments of mind, whence the woman is called the weaker vessel ...”⁸
- This perspective struggles to reconcile the equality Paul champions at Galatians 3:28 (“you are all one in Christ Jesus”) with the subordination to which women are supposedly consigned here. John Calvin concludes that, with regards to the spiritual kingdom men and women are equal, but in civil society inequality is necessary as to “external arrangement and political decorum.” So, men and women “are not upon the same footing.”⁹ Edwards, without explanation, declares women are subject to “social subordination” that does not diminish their spiritual status.¹⁰

This perspective struggles to explain in what way God has authority over Jesus. Some advocates point to the incarnation, but that is a temporary arrangement, and Paul speaks in the present tense-form—God is the authority over Christ *right now*.

Tom Schreiner represents the school that downplays *κεφαλή* by seeing a permanent, functional role subordination in the Godhead. He argues, “[t]he point is not that the Son is essentially inferior to the Father. Rather, the Son willingly submits Himself to the Father’s authority. The difference between the members of the Trinity is a functional one, not an essential one.”¹¹ He maintains, “the Son has a different function or role from the Father, not an inferior being or essence.”¹² This is not what *κεφαλή* means—it means Christ is *subordinate* to God, which can only be an orthodox teaching if we restrict Christ’s subordinate role to *the incarnation alone*.

This is the crucial point, because interpreters who see an eternal functional subordination here *must* downplay the implications of *κεφαλή*. Recall that “authority” in this context, according to BDAG, means “superior rank.”¹³ Louw-Nida explains it means “one who is of supreme or pre-eminent status, in view of authority to order or command.”¹⁴ Is this really the Father’s eternal relationship to the Son? Superior rank? Authority to command? Superior status?

⁶ Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, 206.

⁷ Edwards, *1 Corinthians*, 271-72.

⁸ Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:683.

⁹ Calvin, *Corinthians*, 1:354.

¹⁰ Edwards, *1 Corinthians*, 272.

¹¹ Thomas Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 128.

¹² Schreiner, “Head Coverings ... Trinity,” 129.

¹³ BDAG, s.v. “*κεφαλή*,” 1.b.; p. 542.

¹⁴ L&N, s.v. “*κεφαλή*,” p. 738.

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Does this mean there is a hierarchy in the Godhead? If there is a hierarchy, then we have different wills, different agendas, an order that must be imposed—an authority structure. Different wills are a problem for monotheism. God is metaphysically simple; he is not compounded or a composite whole and therefore does not consist of various “parts.”¹⁵

There is one being that is God, who eternally consists of three co-equal and co-eternal Persons. God has *one will*. There are not three wills to be corralled or commanded. There is no “consensus” and compromise to arrive at a united decision. There is a *single* will, because of the mysterious circulation of the divine life that binds the three into one (Jn 10:30, 17:21-23). The Persons “are three intelligent and free subjects; but they possess the same intelligence and the same will, like a triangle with three angles but only one area. All three Persons affirm themselves as an ‘I,’ not in order to close in on themselves, but in order to be able to give themselves to the other two.”¹⁶

Schreiner protests that the Church does not believe Father, Son and Spirit are inferior in nature.¹⁷ This is correct, but his understanding of κεφαλὴ doesn’t allow him to make this distinction. Its implications are too strong.

Does κεφαλὴ mean “source” or “origin?”

In this understanding, God is the source of Christ, and Christ is the source of man, and man is the source of the woman. There is no lexical support from the LXX, the NT, or the Apostolic Fathers for reading κεφαλὴ as “source” or “origin.” I’ve examined every single use of the word in all three collections, and the usage doesn’t exist.¹⁸

The word *can* mean “source” in classical Greek,¹⁹ but that was 4-5th century B.C.—perhaps 400 to 500 years before Paul wrote. Nonetheless, Barrett suggests “origin” here.²⁰ So does Fee,²¹ who dismisses the entries in *BDAG* as “quite worthless.”²² However, it is absurd to

¹⁵ John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, new ed. (reprint; Paris: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1995), 33; Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology*, combined ed. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 245f.

¹⁶ Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (reprint; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 116.

¹⁷ Schreiner, “Head Coverings ... Trinity,” 129.

¹⁸ David Garland rightly observes, “[t]he paucity of lexicographical evidence—no Greek lexicon offers this as an option—makes this meaning for ‘head’ highly suspect,” (*1 Corinthians*, in BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 515).

¹⁹ See Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v., sense II.d. For example, Philo speaks of a virgin goddess “whom the fable asserts to **have sprung** from the head (ἐκ τῆς τοῦ Διὸς κεφαλῆς) of Jupiter” (Peder Borgen, Kåre Fuglseth, and Roald Skarsten, “The Works of Philo: Greek Text with Morphology” (Logos Bible Software, 2005).

²⁰ C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 248-249.

²¹ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 502-505.

²² Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 502, fn. 42.

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believe that Paul suddenly uses a word in a way that's as much as *half a millennium* out of date at this point. Here's a contemporary example to illustrate how ridiculous this is:

ME:	The bible is absolute!
OTHER PERSON:	I agree. The bible is our supreme authority.
ME:	Yes, but that's not what I said. I said the bible is perfect.
OTHER PERSON:	No, you didn't say "perfect." You said "absolute."
ME:	Exactly.
OTHER PERSON:	But, "absolute" doesn't mean "perfect."
ME:	Ah, but it meant that in 1604! ²³ That's the way I used the word just now.
OTHER PERSON:	Seriously ... ?

"Source" would also make God the "source" of Jesus, though Barrett tries to dismiss this implication as "an innocent form of subordinationism."²⁴ Fee suggests Paul is not referring to eternal generation ("the head over the Messiah is God") but the incarnation.²⁵ This could only work in the sense that Jesus "came from" the Father's *location* in heaven, but *location* is not *source/origin*. Finally, it is difficult to see how "source" could work in the sense of "the source of every man is Christ"—are women are not also "from" Christ?

Does κεφαλὴ mean "prominent representative"?

The idea here is that the "head" is a figure of speech for a matrix of related ideas,²⁶ such as:

1. **To occupy a place at the front of something, with the idea of prominence.** Jesus is the cornerstone or, more literally, "the head of the corner" of a metaphorical building (Ps 117:22, LXX; cp. KJV at Ps 118:22). That is, Jesus is *the most prominent* stone in the structure. God told Israel that, if they obeyed him, "The LORD will make you the head, not the tail" (Deut 28:13), and vice versa (Deut 28:44). We still employ this usage in English as to "be at *the head* of the class," etc. Likewise, God cut off "both head and tail" from Israel in the form of corrupt dignitaries and lying prophets,

²³ Robert Cawdrey, *A table alphabeticall, conteyning and teaching the true writing, and understanding of hard usually English words, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greek, Latine, or French etc with the interpretation thereof by plaine English words, gathered for the benefit & help of ladies, gentlewomen, or any other unskillful persons, whereby they may the more easily and better understand many hard English words, which they shall hear or read in scriptures, sermons, or elsewhere, and also be made able to use the same aptly themselves* (London: IR, 1604), 10. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/4jwxyadh>.

See also *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., "absolute" adj. and n., sense II.8.a., June 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8089207512>.

²⁴ Barrett, *1 Corinthians*, 248-49.

²⁵ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 505.

²⁶ See (1) A. C. Perriman, "The Head of a Woman: The Meaning of κεφαλὴ in 1 Cor 11:3," in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, OCTOBER 1994, NEW SERIES, Vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 602-622, and (2) Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, in NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 811-23. Garland follows them both (*1 Corinthians*, 514-16).

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respectively (Isa 9:13-16). That is, he smote the *most prominent* and visible people in society.

2. **The uppermost part or extremity** (*BDAG*, s.v., sense 2.b.) The remnants of Saul's army took their stand against Joab "on top of one hill;" that is, at the *head* of the hill (2 Kgdms 2:25 [2 Sam 2:25]). Solomon's temple had "two bowl-shaped capitals *on top of* the pillars" (2 Chr 4:12).
3. **The literal head being a figure of speech referring to the whole person.** "Your blood be on your own heads!" (Acts 18:6). Solomon told Shimei that if he ever left Jerusalem "you can be sure you will die; your blood will be on your own head" (3 Kgdms 2:37 [1 Kgs 2:37]). The blessings of his father and mother "will be upon the head of Joseph" (Gen 49:26, LES). Ezra confessed that: "our sins have multiplied beyond our heads" (Esdras A8:72).

The sense would be that "head" in 1 Corinthians 11:3 signifies one who is the prominent, forward-facing representative of another. This "head" is prominent because he is "out in front" (as it were). He is also the "head" because he is the proxy for the larger relationship.

In a similar way, in Baptist polity the pastor is not the "ruler" or "authority over" the congregation. Rather, he is the *most prominent* member because he is "out in front" and forward facing. He is the local church's proxy because he represents the congregation. This is why "he must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap" (1 Tim 3:7). In this sense, the pastor is "the head" of the local church.

Which use of κεφαλή best fits the context?

"Source" is unlikely, as we have seen. This leaves "authority" or "prominent representative." Which makes best sense of (a) the text of 1 Corinthians 11:3, and (b) the larger context of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

"But I want you to understand that ..."

The "authority" option

Meaning	Significance
Christ is the [authority] of every man	Christ rules over the man.
And the man is the [authority] of a woman	Man rules over the woman.
And God is the [authority] of Christ	God rules over Christ.

The "prominent representative" option

Meaning	Significance
Christ is the [prominent representative] of every man	Christ represents man.
And the man is the [prominent representative] of a woman	Man represents woman.

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And God the [prominent representative] of Christ	God (i.e., the Father) represents Christ.
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The crux is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:4-5: the woman who prays with her literal head uncovered dishonors or disgraces her “head” (i.e., the man). Whatever “head” means, it is *the reason why* the disgrace happens. The shape of this relationship explains the disgrace. How do our two options explain this?

- **Authority.** The idea is that insubordination makes the leader look weak. This is the most basic corollary to emphasizing authority and disgrace—you *must not* be a very competent ruler. Thus, the woman can disgrace the man by rebelling against his authority. Christ can do the same to the Father. Man may do the same to Christ. This cannot stand, etc.
- **Prominent representation.** Your wrong action brings shame and disgrace upon the forward-facing, “out in front” proxy for your relationship. You disgrace your husband. The husband disgraces Christ. Christ disgraces his heavenly father. The prominent representative is the hinge upon which honor and glory pivot towards the whole. You [must not bring dishonor](#) upon your prominent representative.

Paul’s focus is dishonor, disgrace, and shame. We know this because that’s what he says in 1 Corinthians 11:5-6 (“**dishonors** her head ... **disgrace** for a woman”).²⁷ The issue *is not* disobedience, which is the slant the “authority” option takes.²⁸ **This tilts the scales in favor of “prominent representative.”** It is a metaphorical usage well supported in contemporaneous Greek literature. It retains the “head” wordplay Paul deliberately employs. It makes good sense of the context of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. It fits with the honor and shame culture in which Paul operated—one in which honor and dishonor were “the primary axis of value.”²⁹

The passage has little or nothing to do with the issue of the man's authority over the woman. What mars the headship relationship, whether between man and woman or between Christ and man, is dishonour, not disobedience: so the woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered 'dishonours her head' (v.5). The question of authority is irrelevant to a discussion of the proper manner in which men and women should pray and prophesy; nor is it a valid deduction from the idea

²⁷ Paul uses *καταισχύνω* in 1 Cor 11:4-5, which means *dishonor, disgrace, or shame* (BDAG, s.v., senses 1-2). He uses *αἰσχρός* at 1 Cor 11:6, which is “a term esp. significant in honor-shame oriented society; gener. in ref. to that which fails to meet expected moral and cultural standards [opp. *καλός*] pert. to being socially or morally unacceptable, shameful, base” (BDAG, s.v.).

²⁸ Hodge says this passage is based on the principle “that order and subordination pervade the whole universe, and is essential to its being” (1 Corinthians, 206). Gould writes: “This rank and subordination form the principle on which the apostle bases his teaching in regard to the veiling of women” (1 Corinthians, 93).

²⁹ David A. DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 25.

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*that man has authority over the woman that she should veil herself in worship, an activity directed not towards the man but towards God.*³⁰

The emphasis is honor to one's prominent representative, and its negative corollaries dishonor, shame, and disgrace. [Mulan understood this well.](#)

Paul's argument so far ...

1	There exists a graduated series of social relationships (God → Christ, and Christ → Man, and Man → Woman). Each relationship has a prominent representative who is the prism through which honor or shame refracts on the larger relationship family.	1 Corinthians 11:3
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1 Corinthians 11:4-5

Text and translation

4-5: ⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved.

- ⁴πᾶς ἀνὴρ προσευχόμενος ἢ προφητεύων κατὰ (spatial) κεφαλῆς (obj. of prep.) ἔχων καταισχύνει τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ. ⁵πᾶσα δὲ γυνή προσευχομένη ἢ προφητεύουσα ἀκατακαλύπτῳ τῇ κεφαλῇ (dative of manner) καταισχύνει τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτῆς· ἐν γάρ ἐστιν καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ τῇ ἐξυρμένῃ
- Every man praying or prophesying having [a covering] hanging down from the head disgraces his “head.” But every woman praying or prophesying with the head uncovered disgraces her “head,” because she is one and the same as a woman who is shaved bald.

Exegesis

The NIV's “dishonor” here (καταισχύνει) means to *disgrace* or *to put to shame* or *humiliate*.³¹ Paul explains how this honor/shame thing works for each person's prominent representative:

- Man's head covered:** This is a physical covering of some sort. In the local context, it was common for men to wear a covering over their heads in pagan worship.³² So, the

³⁰ Perriman, “Head of a Woman,” 620. Emphasis added.

³¹ BDAG, s.v., senses 1 and 2; L&N, 25.194.

³² Some commentators passionately believe the man's disgraceful covering here is *long hair*. The Greek is ambiguous and simply reads “having ... hanging down from the head.” See the extensive discussion

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man must keep his *literal head* uncovered in the Christian assembly or risk disgracing his *representative head* Christ.³³ It's important to note that Paul is forbidding Corinthian men to use **local, cultural code language** that suggests they worship false gods.

- **Woman's head uncovered:** It was typical for women in Greco-Roman culture to wear either a covering or a veil on their heads. A woman's hair was almost an aphrodisiac.³⁴ The local custom in some locales, like Paul's hometown of Tarsus, was for women to be completely veiled from head to foot.³⁵ So, Jewish women kept their heads covered to signal, **in the cultural code language of the day**, that they were not "available."³⁶ This was particularly important in a bustling port city like Corinth which was "a hub of Roman paganism, and a hotbed for immorality"³⁷ and had a population of perhaps 750,000 (including slaves).³⁸

in Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 823. It is shocking to see how much ink has been spilt on a question that, in the end, does not matter a whit—whether the man's covering is long hair or an external head covering, it is bad, and he must not do it because, **according to the cultural code language of the day**, to do so sends a message that disgrace's the man's representative "head." The issue is not the head covering. The issue is the message the head covering sends *and its impact on the representative "head"*—whether that covering may be.

³³ Garland, (*1 Corinthians*, 518); Gill (*Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:683).

³⁴ In a second-century Roman novel, we read a man marveling at the beauty of a woman's hair:

"... not her studied care thereof but rather its disorderliness did increase her beauty : her rich tresses hung gently about her shoulders, and were dispersed abroad upon every part of her neck hanging from the nape, and fell fairly down enwound in a kerchief, until at last they were trussed up upon her crown with a knot: then I, unable to sustain the torture of the great desire that I was in, ran upon her and kissed very sweetly the place where she had thus laid her hair upon her crown, whereat she turned her face and cast her sidelong and rolling eyes upon me, saying: 'O scholar, thou hast tasted now both honey and gall; take heed that the sweetness of thy pleasure do not turn into the bitterness of repentance.'

'Tush!' quoth I: 'My sweetheart, I am contented for such another kiss to be broiled here upon this fire;'' wherewithal I embraced her more closely and began to kiss her. Then she embraced and kissed me with like passion of love, and moreover her breath smelled like cinnamon, and the liquor of her tongue was like sweet nectar" (Apuleius, *The Golden Ass: Being the Metamorphoses of Lucius Apuleius*, in Loeb Classical Library, trans. W. Adlington (New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1924), §2.8 (pp. 63, 65).

³⁵ "As Tarsian ladies walked in the street, you could not see any part either of their face or of their whole person, nor could they themselves see anything out of their path. They were separate from the public world, while they walked in it" (William Ramsey, *The Cities of St. Paul: Their Influence on His Life and Thought* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1908), 202). See also "C. C. Kroeger, "Women in the Greco-Roman World," in *Dictionary of the New Testament: Background*, 1276.

³⁶ Josephus speaks of a Jewish woman wearing a veil as if it were a natural occurrence (*Antiquities*, 3.270). Philo describes the same event and says the head covering is: "the symbol of modesty, which all those women are accustomed to wear who are completely blameless" (Philo of Alexandria, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. Charles Duke Yonge, New Updated Edition (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), § Special Laws, 3.56 (p. 599).

The *Mishnah* says a man will be fined if he "pulled apart the hairdo of a woman in the marketplace" (*Baba Qamma*, 8.6) and that it is against the law for a woman "if she goes out with her hair flowing loose" (*Ketubot*, 7.6).

³⁷ Matthew S. Beal, "Corinth," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016). On Corinth's immorality, see John McRay, *Archaeology & the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 315-17.

³⁸ McRay, *Archaeology*, 312. See also Kroeger, "Women," 1278.

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So, to not have a covering on her literal head dishonors the man (her representative head) and is the same as having a literal bald head—which is disgraceful.

The problem is a local issue, from that particular context. Keener explains that an uncovered female head provoked lust and was scandalous: “To fail to cover their hair was thought to provoke male lust as a bathing suit is thought to provoke it in some cultures today.”³⁹ This need not be a “prudish” kind of asceticism. It’s natural for something out of the ordinary in sexual propriety to raise male eyebrows in a salacious way—no matter what it is. For example:

- If local convention is for women to wear skirts down to the floor, it would be “sexy” if a woman flouted this by wearing a 1960s-era miniskirt.
- If local custom says it is “proper” for women to wear modest blouses, it would be scandalous if a woman suddenly began wearing tight, cleavage-bearing outfits in public.
- So, if it is “proper” in AD 50s Corinth for a woman to have her hair covered, it would be *scandalous* and *salacious* for her to be uncovered and display her riotous, elaborate hair. This may seem quaint to us, but we forget that “flappers” were scandalous and titillating in 1920s America for public behavior that is “normal” today.

The point is that the woman must have her literal head covered or, **in the context of local, cultural code language**, she disgraces her representative head. Paul is saying that it’s possible for both men and women to act in a culturally shameful way that disgrace their prominent representatives—and that’s a bad thing!

- Why does Paul need to tell Christian men to not pray *covered*? He doesn’t tell us, but it’s reasonable to believe they wrongly assume it’s acceptable to adopt **the local, cultural code language of the day** to advertise: “I’m worshipping right now!”
- Why does Paul warn Christian women to not pray *uncovered*? He doesn’t tell us that either, but it makes sense to assume some women were tossing aside **the local, cultural code language of the day** regarding dress and decorum. Paul says this is incorrect (see discussion at 1 Corinthians 11:10, below).

In mission’s studies, one hears a lot about *contextualization*, which considers how to best “translate” the gospel and its implications from one culture to another. How do we distinguish biblical truth from its cultural dress?

- The men seem to be *retaining* local cultural cues that send bad signals. These signals are bad because, **in the cultural code language of the day**, people might assume these men are still worshipping pagan gods. It suggests syncretism.

³⁹ Keener, *Bible Background*, 482.

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- In contrast, the women may be casting aside local customs and inadvertently transmitting their sexual availability to the wider world. This is bad because their actions, **in the cultural code language of the day**, say: “I’m here. I’m feeling sexually frisky. I’m available.”
- In both cases, each party brings *disgrace*, *dishonor*, and *shame* on the prominent representative who is a proxy for the larger relationship.

Again, the issue here is honor/shame, not authority/submission, so this **is not** a passage about gender roles:⁴⁰

*In a hierarchically structured shame/honor society, Paul is concerned about the propriety of women’s appearance in public worship ... it does not mean she can disregard social conventions.*⁴¹

Garland observes, “[w]omen are not to be oogled as sex objects during worship. Paul’s primary interest in this passage is to prevent this from happening, and he argues that women should be covered.”⁴² Paul does not want women (likely wives) to humiliate the representative “heads” in their social relationships—their husbands. If they do not wear head coverings, they humiliate their husbands, so they must wear head coverings. “The basic issue revolves around what is ‘proper.’”⁴³ The reason is not “gender roles” *per se*, but the appearance of propriety **according to the cultural code language of the day**. To label this a “gender role” issue is to import 21st century American culture wars anachronistically into an honor/shame context—sort of like labeling Franklin Roosevelt’s 1933 appointment of Francis Perkins to Secretary of Labor as a “woke DEI hire.”

It’s important to note that Paul expects women to pray or prophesy in public!⁴⁴ There is no “silence” edict, which suggests 2 Timothy 3:12-14 must be tempered by this and other references.

Paul’s argument so far ...

1	There exists a graduated series of social relationships (God → Christ, and Christ → Man, and Man → Woman). Each relationship has a prominent representative who is the prism through which honor or shame refracts on the larger relationship family.	1 Corinthians 11:3
2	According to the cultural code language of the day, both men and women can act in ways that bring disgrace, dishonor, and shame onto their	1 Corinthians 11:4-5

⁴⁰ Simon Kistemaker is representative of the “gender role” school when he writes, “If the Corinthian woman puts aside her head covering in public, she thereby renounces the subordination to her husband that God intended her to show. She appropriates to herself authority that belongs to her husband,” (*1 Corinthians*, in NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 369).

⁴¹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 509.

⁴² Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 521.

⁴³ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 511.

⁴⁴ Barrett, *1 Corinthians*, 250.

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	prominent representative (and, by extension, the larger group)—e.g., men <i>wearing</i> head coverings, and women <i>not wearing</i> head coverings. Because this reflects shame and disgrace onto their representatives, these actions are very bad.	
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1 Corinthians 11:6

6: For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head

For: Paul explains more about what he just said, continuing the cultural discussion about female propriety which is hard to directly import to 2025 America.

Not cover her head ... hair cut off: This is sarcasm from Paul = if you won't wear a head covering, you might as well go all the way! An adulteress was commonly shaved, and so perhaps Paul is saying they may as well just hang that "scarlet letter" on themselves. "[L]et her wear it as men do theirs; and let her see how she will look, and how she will like that, and how she will be looked upon, and liked by others; everybody will laugh at her, and she'll be ashamed of herself."⁴⁵

She should cover her head. But, if you don't want the "scarlet letter" or a shaved head, then just do the honorable thing and wear a head covering so you signal you are a proper woman. Again, the point is that it is possible to commit a "shameful" act or live in a "shameful" way and therefore disgrace your representative figure. You shouldn't do that. These women *are* doing it, even if we don't quite appreciate the "scandal" of not wearing a head covering.

In their culture, in their context, **according to their cultural code language**, they are humiliating their prominent representative figures (their husbands) by not wearing a head covering. So, they must wear head coverings. "If she wishes to be regarded as a reputable woman, let her conform to the established usage."⁴⁶

Paul's argument so far ...

1	There exists a graduated series of social relationships (God → Christ, and Christ → Man, and Man → Woman). Each relationship has a prominent representative who is the prism through which honor or shame refracts on the larger relationship family.	1 Corinthians 11:3
2	According to the cultural code language of the day, both men and women can act in ways that bring disgrace, dishonor, and shame onto their	1 Corinthians 11:4-5

⁴⁵ Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:684.

⁴⁶ Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, 209.

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	prominent representative (and, by extension, the larger group)—e.g., men <i>wearing</i> head coverings, and women <i>not wearing</i> head coverings. Because this reflects shame and disgrace onto their representatives, these actions are very bad.	
3	So, if women wish to go without head coverings and bring disgrace onto their prominent representative figures (their husbands), they may as well just go all the way, shave their heads, and embrace ridicule.	1 Corinthians 11:6

1 Corinthians 11:7

Text and translation

7: A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.

- Ἄνὴρ μὲν (**marker of correlation with δὲ**) γὰρ (**explanation**) οὐκ ὀφείλει κατακαλύπτεσθαι τὴν κεφαλὴν εἰκὼν καὶ δόξα θεοῦ ὑπάρχων (**adverbial, causal**) ἡ γυνὴ δὲ (**contrast**) δόξα ἀνδρός ἐστίν.
- I'm saying this because,
 - while on the one hand man is not obligated to have his head covered because he is God's image and glory,
 - on the other hand, the woman is man's glory.

Exegesis

For. Paul explains the grounds for 1 Corinthians 11:4-6—why the woman must cover her head or else risk disgracing her representative figure. He uses a “on the one hand man ... one the other hand woman ...” structure for the argument.

Man is not obligated. For reasons Paul does not explain, his equation goes like this:

Subordinate		Authority		Head covering?
Man	→	God	→	No
Woman	→	Man	→	Yes

Paul says the reason for this equation is that the man is God's image and glory. **What does this “glory” mean, here?** Some categories:⁴⁷

1. Condition of brightness or shininess (*BDAG*, s.v., 1).

⁴⁷ The following categories are from *BDAG*, s.v. “δόξα,” 256-258.

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

2. A state of being magnificent, as in something *fine* or that *catches the eye*; Mt 4:8 (BDAG, s.v., sense 2). A woman's long hair is glory to her; *i.e.*, magnificent and worthy of splendor (1 Cor 11:15).
3. Honor as recognition of status (BDAG, s.v., 3; LSJ, s.v., IV.5).
4. A transcendent being deserving of honor (BDAG, s.v., 4).
5. An opinion or judgment (LSJ, s.v., II).
6. One's reputation or opinion about someone (LSJ, s.v., III).
7. External appearance (LSJ, s.v., IV).

BDAG suggests a variant of sense 1 (above) which is “reflected radiance” or just “reflection.”⁴⁸ This would mean the word would have to function as a synonym for “image” (εἰκὼν καὶ δόξα θεοῦ). BDAG suggests this may also be the idea behind Paul's comment that “all have sinned and **fall short of the glory** of God” (Rom 3:23, τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ), in the sense that we fail to *reflect back* God's own holiness in our attitudes and actions.

Silva refers to Jewish influence in this passage,⁴⁹ and in his discussion of δόξα in the LXX he refers to God's “luminous manifestation of his person.”⁵⁰ Paul's usage here, Silva argues, is an extension of the idea that angels and other heavenly beings are endowed with God's glory.⁵¹ What is this but a radiant reflection; a derivative splendor?

- Moses' face reflected the glory of the “ministry of death,” and Christians reflect the glory of the ministry of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:7-8).
- As Christians stand with unveiled faces and look on the Lord's glory, we are being transformed into that image (2 Cor 3:18). That is, the reflection from the Lord changes us into that same image. Eventually, the reflection will be a perfect mirror.

This seems to be the best option. That is, man *reflects* God in some sense. Friberg agrees with that usage for this context (ANLEX, s.v.). So, when Paul says: “a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God,” he is saying that *because* the man reflects God in some sense, he must not cover his literal head.

Paul does not *specifically* tell us what this reflection is. Is it moral (holiness and righteousness)? Is it functional (exercising dominion)? Is it derivation (e.g., “God made the male human”)?

- If “image of God” in 1 Corinthians 11:7 carries the same sense it had at Genesis 1:27, then the moral or functional ideas of this divine reflection may be in play here.

⁴⁸ BDAG, s.v., “δόξα, 1.d.

⁴⁹ Moises Silva (ed.), *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), s.v., “δόξα,” NT 2.e; 1:765.

⁵⁰ NIDNTE, s.v. “δόξα,” JL 2; 1:763.

⁵¹ NIDNTE, s.v. “δόξα,” NT 2.e; 1:765.

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

- But if Paul meant “image” in the Genesis 1:27 sense of “image of God,” then he would have said the *woman* was also made in God’s image (because she was = Gen 1:27).
- But Paul *did not* repeat “image” when he mentioned the woman (“a man ought not to have his head covered, since **he is the image and glory** of God; but **the woman is the glory** of man”).
- Instead, Paul repeats the “glory” idea, which suggests he is focusing on the “reflection” between the “out in front” proxy and the rest of the group.
- So, it seems likely that “image and glory” in Paul’s “God + man” comparison are synonyms for “divine reflection.”
- If this is true, then we can likely set aside the moral (cf. Orthodox Catechism, Q6) and functional senses of this reflection of glory.

This suggests that the “derivation” sense of this divine reflection is best. This is why Paul writes, at the end of 1 Corinthians 7, “but the woman is **the glory of man.**” Comparing this with Genesis 2:7, 20-22, we’re left with this conclusion:

1. Man reflects God, because God made man *from* the dust of the earth.
2. And so, woman reflects man, because God made woman *from* the man.

This is precisely what Paul says at 1 Corinthians 11:8-9.

Somehow, some way, the woman’s derivation from the man means she must wear a head covering. The only logical difference (from this passage) seems to be in the degree of separation each person is from the creation of earth itself:

Person		Degrees removed from original creation		Head covering?
Man	→	1 (dust)	→	No
Woman	→	2 (dust + man)	→	Yes

Man and woman function as representative groups. If the equation read “more than one degree removed from original creation = head covering,” then everyone except Adam must wear a head covering! So, the idea seems to be that of a *representative* or *delegate*. The man, as a gendered class, is one degree removed from the original creation. The woman, as a second gendered class, is two degrees removed.⁵² Thus, she most immediately reflects the man (her prominent representative), and so she must wear a head covering.

Paul’s argument so far ...

1	There exists a graduated series of social relationships (God → Christ, and Christ → Man, and Man → Woman). Each relationship has a prominent	1 Corinthians 11:3
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⁵² Gill writes that the woman is the image and glory of God “only secondarily and mediately through man” (*Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:684).

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

	representative who is the prism through which honor or shame refracts on the larger relationship family.	
2	According to the cultural code language of the day, both men and women can act in ways that bring disgrace, dishonor, and shame onto their prominent representative (and, by extension, the larger group)—e.g., men <i>wearing</i> head coverings, and women <i>not wearing</i> head coverings. Because this reflects shame and disgrace onto their representatives, these actions are very bad.	1 Corinthians 11:4-5
3	So, if women wish to go without head coverings and bring disgrace onto their prominent representative figures (their husbands), they may as well just go all the way, shave their heads, and embrace ridicule.	1 Corinthians 11:6
4	The reason why a woman must wear a head covering is because, while on the one hand man reflects God in the sense that he originates from him, on the other hand the woman reflects man because she originates from him—and our actions reflect shame and disgrace onto our representatives.	1 Corinthians 11:7

1 Corinthians 11:8-9

Text and translation

8-9: ⁸For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.

- ⁸ οὐ γάρ (explanation) ἐστὶν ἀνὴρ ἐκ (derivation) γυναικὸς ἀλλὰ γυνὴ ἐξ (derivation) ἀνδρός ⁹ καὶ γὰρ (explanation) οὐκ ἐκτίσθη ἀνὴρ διὰ (benefaction) τὴν γυναῖκα ἀλλὰ γυνὴ διὰ (benefaction) τὸν ἄνδρα
- ⁸I'm saying that "the woman is man's glory"
 - because the man does not originate from the woman but the woman originates from the man,
 - ⁹and because the man was not created for the sake of the woman, but the woman was created for the sake of the man.

Exegesis

Paul provides two reasons why "the woman is the man's glory" (1 Cor 11:7). He is not explaining the reason for the head covering—he just did that at 1 Corinthians 11:7. He is simply explaining *why* the woman is man's glory and gives two reasons.

First, she came from the man and so reflects his glory.

The second reason is more difficult, and it hinges on how you interpret the preposition: καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἐκτίσθη ἀνὴρ διὰ τὴν γυναῖκα ἀλλὰ γυνὴ διὰ τὸν ἄνδρα. This is rendered as, "and because man was not made *** the woman, but woman *** the man."

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

What does the preposition mean? You have two options with an accusative object of this preposition:⁵³

1. **Causal** or **reason** (“because of the woman”).

The sense here would focus on the temporal priority of the man. He was there first, and God made the woman because of the man; that is, because he was there and needed a companion. Paul’s point would then implicitly depend on your understanding of Gen 2:18-25, which I take to be a covenant of loving companionship—not a mercenary transaction.

However, no English translation of which I’m aware opts for this translation—not even more obscure ones.⁵⁴ That is a death blow to this translation.

2. **Benefaction** (“for the sake of the woman”).

You can take this is a very patriarchal way, like Barret does when he crudely writes that woman finds her fulfillment in serving the man: “This is her role in creation ...”⁵⁵ The sense here is that a woman’s role is to serve the man, not vice versa. This is absurd. The apostle Paul tells us: “Submit **to one another** out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21).

Thankfully, you can bring the same “covenant of loving companionship” motif from the *causal* sense straight into here. So, the second reason why woman is the reflection or image of man is that God made her *for the sake of* the man; that is, for loving companionship, to be a life-partner. Adam was not “complete” until God made Eve so they could be together. They [complete each other](#).⁵⁶

So, the woman is man’s glory in two senses:

1. She originates from the man, and
2. She was made to be his loving companion (and vice versa).

In this sense, he is her prominent representative “head” in the marriage relationship. Adam shouted for joy when he saw Eve: “This **at last** is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”

⁵³ *BDAG* gives these categories (s.v., “διὰ,” B., 225-226), as do standard intermediate grammars (e.g., Edward Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek* (Nashville: B&H, 1994) 91-93).

⁵⁴ I looked at ESV, ISV, NLT, NASB95, NET, KJV, RSV, Jay Adams *Christian Counselor’s New Testament*, NEB, REB, NIV, CSB, CEB, NRSV, MLB (Berkley), NIV, N.T. Wright’s *The Kingdom New Testament*, Phillips, Tyndale, Richard Lattimore’s *The New Testament*, Julian Anderson’s *New Testament in Everyday American English*, and Charles B. Williams’ *The New Testament: A Private Translation in the Language of the People* (an older tome put out by Moody Press in 1958). All opt for *benefaction* as the translation sense for the preposition.

However, A. T. Robertson opts for “because of” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1931), 1 Cor 11:9).

⁵⁵ Barrett, *1 Corinthians*, 253.

⁵⁶ Yes, this movie clip is a joke.

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

(Gen 2:23). She comes from him and *completes* him—there was no partner for him before she came along (Gen 2:20). In 1 Corinthians 11:11-12, Paul explains that men and women come from and relationally *need* one another—in that way each reflects glory back onto and “completes” the other.

However, here in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9, Paul just focuses on the woman’s role in properly reflecting this glory. Just as God decided to make man in his own image and likeness, so the woman reflects the man’s “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” So, she would *disgrace*, *dishonor*, and *shame* her husband if, **in the cultural code language of the day**, she sent public signals about her sexual availability. Her actions reflect honor (or dishonor) upon the one with whom she is in relationship—her husband, her representative “head.”

Paul’s argument so far ...

1	There exists a graduated series of social relationships (God → Christ, and Christ → Man, and Man → Woman). Each relationship has a prominent representative who is the prism through which honor or shame refracts on the larger relationship family.	1 Corinthians 11:3
2	According to the cultural code language of the day, both men and women can act in ways that bring disgrace, dishonor, and shame onto their prominent representative (and, by extension, the larger group)—e.g., men <i>wearing</i> head coverings, and women <i>not wearing</i> head coverings. Because this reflects shame and disgrace onto their representatives, these actions are very bad.	1 Corinthians 11:4-5
3	So, if women wish to go without head coverings and bring disgrace onto their prominent representative figures (their husbands), they may as well just go all the way, shave their heads, and embrace ridicule . Or they can just wear head coverings!	1 Corinthians 11:6
4	The reason why a woman must wear a head covering is because, while on the one hand man reflects God in the sense that he originates from him, on the other hand the woman reflects man because <i>she</i> originates from <i>him</i> .	1 Corinthians 11:7
5	The woman reflects the man because (a) she comes from the man, and (b) she was made for his sake—for loving companionship . So, if according to the cultural code language of the day, her actions bring disrepute onto her representative, this is very bad.	1 Corinthians 11:8-9

1 Corinthians 11:10

Text and translation

10: Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

- ¹⁰ διὰ (explanation) τοῦτο (antecedent = vv. 8-9) ὀφείλει (verb, iterative present) ἡ γυνή (subject) ἐξουσίαν (BDAG, s.v., sense 2) ἔχειν (anarthrous, complementary) ἐπὶ (authority) τῆς κεφαλῆς διὰ τοὺς ἀγγέλους.
- Because of these two reasons, the woman is always obligated to exercise control over her head, because of the angels.

Exegesis

“This is one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament.”⁵⁷ Kistemaker confesses: “I really do not know what Paul intended to say in this verse.”⁵⁸ Fee agrees: “we must admit that we cannot be sure.”⁵⁹

There are three key questions to answer:

1. What is this “authority” a woman is obligated to be having?
2. What do angels have to do with anything?
3. Once we answer no(s). 1-2, what on earth is Paul even saying?

What does “authority” mean?

Two options are common:

1. **Means of authority.**⁶⁰ This “authority” is *the control* the woman exercises over when and how she uses a head-covering. The focus is on the woman’s responsibility to not dishonor her authority head.
2. **Figurative.**⁶¹ How can a woman *place* authority over her head? So, these advocates reason it must be figurative, whereby the head covering *symbolizes* that she is under her husband’s authority. The focus is on the head-covering itself.

⁵⁷ Paul Ellingworth, Howard Hatton, and Paul Ellingworth, *A Handbook on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians*, in UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 248.

⁵⁸ Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 377.

⁵⁹ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 522.

⁶⁰ BDAG, s.v. “ἐξουσίαν,” 7; p. 353. John Gill also agrees (*Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:685).

⁶¹ **Bengel:** “Paul uses ἐξουσίαν by an elegant metonymy of the sign for the thing signified ...” (Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, ed. M. Ernest Bengel and J. C. F. Steudel, trans. James Bryce, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1860), 282).

Alford: “[T]he sign of power or subjection: shewn by the context to mean a veil” (Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers: A Critical and Explanatory Commentary*, New Edition, vol. 2 (London; Oxford; Cambridge: Rivingtons; Deighton, Bell and Co., 1872), 203).

Robertson: “The veil on the woman’s head is the symbol of the authority that the man with the uncovered head has over her” (A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1933), 1 Co 11:10).

Calvin: “In the term ‘power,’ there is an instance of metonymy, for he means a token by which she declares herself to be under the power of her husband; and it is a covering, whether it be a robe, or a veil, or

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

Most English translations go for the figurative use (“a symbol of authority on her head”).⁶² However, the normal sense of the word “authority” (ἐξουσίαν) means to exercise power or control over something.⁶³ The woman is the subject, so it is she who must do the exercising. Yet, the figurative rendering would make her *passive*—she must “have a symbol of authority on her head” (ESV, most EVV). She does nothing. It is done *to her* to signify her submission to the man.

I believe the “means of authority” rendering is best, which gives us something like: “the woman is always obligated to exercise control over her head.” This rightly focuses on the woman’s responsibility to not dishonor her proxy representative by transmitting sexually available signals **in the cultural code language of the day**. Yes, that means wearing a head-covering, but the focus is not the covering *per se*. The focus is that the woman needs to *exercise control* (i.e., have authority) over what she puts on her head. **The real sense is that the woman has power and agency over her body and must exercise it the right way.**

Why?

Because a Christian woman who wears her hair uncovered is acting in a culturally unacceptable way. Corinth is a port city with a thriving religious *and* secular prostitute trade.⁶⁴ **In the cultural code language of the day**, for a woman to wear the hair uncovered is a deliberately sexy, scandalous, and salacious act. The head-covering a woman ought to wear is her way to exercise authority by shutting down any thoughts men in the community might have about her sexual availability. It declares she *is not* a prostitute or a so-called “loose woman,” but a proper lady—as befits a Christian. She dishonors and humiliates her husband, who (in the marriage context) is her representative “head.” So, she must take care that she exercises authority over when and why she uses a head-covering, so she doesn’t dishonor her husband.

In fact, on her wedding night a Jewish bride was escorted to the bridal-chamber *with her hair unloosed*.⁶⁵ It was proper *for the husband* to see his bride with her hair uncovered, but

any other kind of covering” (*Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 358).

⁶² This includes William Tyndale (explained in his marginal note), Phillips, Charles William’s translation published by Moody, Julian Anderson’s *New Testament in Everyday American English*, ESV, NLT, NASB95, NET, Jay Adams’ *Christian Counselor’s New Testament*, NEB, REB, CSB, NRSV, and MLB—Berkley.

⁶³ *BDAG*, s.v., 352-53; *LSJ*, s.v., 599.

⁶⁴ C. C. Kroeger, “Women in Greco-Roman World and Judaism,” in *Dictionary of the New Testament: Backgrounds*, ed. Craig Evans and Stanley Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000, 1278).

⁶⁵ Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life: Updated Edition* (reprint; Peabody: Hendriksen, 1994), 142.

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nobody else. **This is a cultural divide**—we will not understand Paul here if we look at his commands as 21st century Americans.⁶⁶

What does “because of the angels” mean?

The phrase is διὰ τοὺς ἀγγέλους. When you have this preposition with the accusative case, you translate it as either *causal/reason* (“because of the angels”) or *benefaction* (“for the sake of the angels”). If the angels are angels, then their supernatural rank (good or evil) seems to be the *reason why* the women must exercise control over their bodies by dressing appropriately and wearing head-coverings. So, we can set the *benefaction* rendering aside.

Are the angels really angels?

- The word here *does* mean “messenger” in seven instances in the New Testament, six of which refer to *human messengers*. John the Baptist is the messenger whom God promised to send (τὸν ἄγγελόν μου; Mt 11:10; Mk 1:2; Lk 7:27). John the Baptist sends out his own messengers (τῶν ἀγγέλων Ἰωάννου; Lk 7:24), as did Jesus (Καὶ ἀπέστειλεν ἀγγέλους; Lk 9:52). It was “a messenger of Satan” who tormented Paul (ἄγγελος σατανᾶ; 2 Cor 12:7). It was Hebrew messengers (ὑποδεξαμένη τοὺς ἀγγέλους; Jas 2:25—NIV = “spies”) whom Rahab hid upon her rooftop (Jas 2:25).
- But the overwhelming instances in the New Testament (179 out of 186) refer to divine angels. This suggests that, unless there is a compelling reason to believe otherwise, we should assume Paul refers to divine angels here.

If these are divine angels, what about these angels explains *the reason why* women must exercise agency over their own bodies by wearing head coverings? A. T. Robertson’s explanation is simple and biblical:

*This startling phrase has caused all kinds of conjecture which may be dismissed. It is not preachers that Paul has in mind, nor evil angels who could be tempted (Gen. 6:1f.), but **angels present in worship** (cf. 1 Cor. 4:9; Psa. 138:1) **who would be shocked at the conduct of the women since the angels themselves veil their faces before Jehovah** (Isa. 6:2).⁶⁷*

Some object and suggest these are *fallen, evil angels* who lust after women. The only possible justification for this would be a fringe interpretation of the “sons of God” in Genesis

⁶⁶ “To the European the words are unintelligible; but that is because he is a European. He must cease for a moment to be a European and pass into the realm of life and thought in which the words apply. Then he will understand them” (Ramsey, *Cities of St. Paul*, 203).

⁶⁷ Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 1 Cor 11:10. C.K. Barrett, echoing Morna Hooker, agrees: “... we may think of the angels as watchers of the created order (cf. 4:9, referred to by Dr Hooker). Some are ready to uphold it, others perhaps ready to pounce on any lapse from the security it affords” (1 *Corinthians*, 254). See also Garland, 1 *Corinthians*, 527-529.

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

6. Are women truly subject to some kind of “angelic sexual attack”?⁶⁸ The context does not support it!

In this very letter Paul told us that Christians “have been made a spectacle ... to angels as well as human beings” (1 Cor 4:9). That is, holy angels watch what we do. They even long to experientially understand the gospel (1 Pet 1:12). They are ministering spirits sent to serve those who inherit salvation (Heb 1:14). So, it does make sense that women ought to exercise prudent agency over their bodies (in this case, their heads) by wearing head coverings *because of the angels*—that is, because God’s holy creatures are watching us. They are “spectators of the whole, delighted with the decency and order of the servants of God”⁶⁹ and “offended by irreverence and misconduct.”⁷⁰

*The allusion here is not mysterious or recondite, but simply to the presence of angels, whose witness of our actions should be a restraint and an impulse to us, like the presence of all good beings.*⁷¹

If the Christian women fail to do this, they present deliberate, sexually provocative signals to men **in the cultural code language of the day**.⁷² So, because these holy angels watch what we do, women must do the holy thing and wear head coverings.

Paul’s argument so far ...

1	There exists a graduated series of social relationships (God → Christ, and Christ → Man, and Man → Woman). Each relationship has a prominent representative who is the prism through which honor or shame refracts on the larger relationship family.	1 Corinthians 11:3
2	According to the cultural code language of the day, both men and women can act in ways that bring disgrace, dishonor, and shame onto their prominent representative (and, by extension, the larger group)—e.g., men <i>wearing</i> head coverings, and women <i>not wearing</i> head coverings. Because this reflects shame and disgrace onto their representatives, these actions are very bad.	1 Corinthians 11:4-5
3	So, if women wish to go without head coverings and bring disgrace onto their prominent representative figures (their husbands), they may as well just go all the way, shave their heads, and embrace ridicule . Or they can just wear head coverings!	1 Corinthians 11:6

⁶⁸ This is Garland’s phrase, and he finds this interpretation as silly as I do! (1 *Corinthians*, 526).

⁶⁹ Alford, *New Testament*, 2:203. Calvin prefers to see this as referring to angels being present with Christ, and because Christ watches us always, the angels are second-hand bystanders who witness the women’s irreverence: “When, therefore, women venture upon such liberties, as to usurp for themselves the token of authority, they make their baseness manifest to the angels” (*Corinthians*, 1:359).

⁷⁰ Findlay, “1 Corinthians,” 874.

⁷¹ Gould, *Corinthians*, 95.

⁷² John Gill writes: “... it is better to understand them of good angels, who attend the assemblies of the saints, and observe the air and behaviour of the worshippers; wherefore women should cover their heads with respect to them, and not give offence to those pure spirits, by an indecent appearance” (*Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:685).

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

4	The reason why a woman must wear a head covering is because, while on the one hand man reflects God in the sense that he originates from him, on the other hand the woman reflects man because <i>she</i> originates from <i>him</i> .	1 Corinthians 11:7
5	The woman reflects the man because (a) she comes from the man, and (b) she was made for his sake—for loving companionship . So, if according to the cultural code language of the day, her actions bring disrepute onto her representative, this is very bad.	1 Corinthians 11:8-9
6	Because of these two reasons, the woman must always exercise personal power and agency over her what she does with her body (“head”), because the holy angels watch us and see what we do.	1 Corinthians 11:10

1 Corinthians 11:11-12

Text and translation

11-12: Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

- πλὴν (*BDAG, s.v., sense 1c*) οὔτε γυνή χωρὶς ἀνδρὸς οὔτε ἀνὴρ χωρὶς γυναικὸς ἐν (*association—relationship*) κυρίῳ. *12 ὥσπερ γὰρ (*explanatory*) ἡ γυνή ἐκ (*derivation*) τοῦ ἀνδρός, οὕτως καὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ διὰ τῆς γυναικὸς (*means*). τὰ δὲ πάντα ἐκ (*derivation*) τοῦ θεοῦ.
- Regardless, in relationship with the Lord the woman is not separate from the man nor is the man separate from the woman. This is what I mean: just as the woman originates from the man, so also the man is born by means of the woman—and everyone originates from God.

Exegesis

Nevertheless. Paul now hedges against a misogynistic takeaway of 1 Corinthians 11:7-10 by shoring up the woman’s value. That is, “even though I just said all that, nevertheless ...” or “regardless of what I just said, this is still true ...”

Women and men are not separate/independent. Neither party is apart from or independent of the other. They are a unit, a team. There is a mutual submission and neediness; a biological, psychological, and emotional perichoresis of shared life. This is the way things are “in the lord,” which means “in union with Christ” or “in relationship with Christ.”

The point is that, in God’s family, husband and wife don’t think, act, or live apart or independent from one another. What you do impacts the family unit. Not wearing a head covering signals sexual availability **according to the cultural code language in Corinth,**

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

and this signaling will bring disgrace upon your husband—which really means it brings disgrace upon your entire family because the husband and wife are not *separate, apart, or independent* of one another. The issue is not authority at all, but the disgrace and shame the woman will visit upon her husband that will rebound upon her. When one party acts shamefully, it harms the other *because of* their marriage bond “in the Lord.” There is no autonomy.

Why are husband and wife not separate from and independent of one another? Because they come from each other. According to Moses the woman originates from the rib from the man’s side (Gen 2:20-22), and according to biology the man is only born *through* the woman, and so the cycle repeats—and both man and women (in fact, everyone who ever lived) originate from God himself.

Paul’s argument so far ...

1	There exists a graduated series of social relationships (God → Christ, and Christ → Man, and Man → Woman). Each relationship has a prominent representative who is the prism through which honor or shame refracts on the larger relationship family.	1 Corinthians 11:3
2	According to the cultural code language of the day, both men and women can act in ways that bring disgrace, dishonor, and shame onto their prominent representative (and, by extension, the larger group)—e.g., men <i>wearing</i> head coverings, and women <i>not wearing</i> head coverings. Because this reflects shame and disgrace onto their representatives, these actions are very bad.	1 Corinthians 11:4-5
3	So, if women wish to go without head coverings and bring disgrace onto their prominent representative figures (their husbands), they may as well just go all the way, shave their heads, and embrace ridicule . Or they can just wear head coverings!	1 Corinthians 11:6
4	The reason why a woman must wear a head covering is because, while on the one hand man reflects God in the sense that he originates from him, on the other hand the woman reflects man because <i>she</i> originates from <i>him</i> .	1 Corinthians 11:7
5	The woman reflects the man because (a) she comes from the man, and (b) she was made for his sake—for loving companionship . So, if according to the cultural code language of the day, her actions bring disrepute onto her representative, this is very bad.	1 Corinthians 11:8-9
6	Because of these two reasons, the woman must always exercise personal power and agency over her what she does with her body (“head”), because the holy angels watch us and see what we do.	1 Corinthians 11:10
7	Paul hedges a bit to ward off misogynistic interpretations . Regardless of what he’s just said, neither men or women are independent of each other in relationship/union with Christ . Each comes from the other, and both come from God.	1 Corinthians 11:11-12

1 Corinthians 11:13-15

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

Text and translation

13-15: ¹³Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.

- Ἐν (association) ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς κρίνατε· πρέπον (predicate acc.; Wallace, GGBB, 190; BDAG, s.v.; LN 66.1) ἐστὶν γυναῖκα (subj. of infinitive) ἀκατακάλυπτον τῷ θεῷ προσεύχεσθαι; 14 οὐδὲ ἡ φύσις (BDAG, s.v., sense 3; LSJ, s.v., sense III) αὐτὴ διδάσκει ὑμᾶς ὅτι ἀνὴρ μὲν (marker of correlation with δὲ in v. 15)⁷³ ἐὰν κομᾷ ἀτιμία αὐτῷ (dative of ref.) ἐστίν, 15 γυνή δὲ ἐὰν κομᾷ δόξα (see discuss. at 1 Cor 11:7) αὐτῇ ἐστίν; ὅτι (explanatory) ἡ κόμη ἀντὶ περιβολαίου δέδοται [αὐτῇ].⁷⁴
- Judge amongst yourselves—is it proper for a woman to be praying to God with her head uncovered? Doesn’t the established order of things teach you all that:
 - on the one hand if a man has long hair it is disgraceful for him,
 - but (on the other hand) if the woman has long hair she reflects God’s glory, because her hair has been given to her as a covering?

Exegesis

Here Paul clouds an already difficult issue with an awkward analogy. But we press on. He appeals to “common sense” by assuming his audience will be on the same page about women covering their heads, for all the reasons we have just discussed. Given all he has just written, it is *right*, *fitting*, and *proper* for women to wear head coverings.

Done deal.

Then he tosses in a timebound, cultural reference for effect by appealing to “nature,” which means “the established order of things” or “the way things are.” He declares two things by comparison:

1. That it is *against* nature/the established order **for a man** to have long hair, and
2. It is *according to* nature/the established order **for a woman** to have long hair and reflect God’s holiness.

Here is the question:

1. Is this “established order of things” about **the God-ordained** “way things are”?⁷⁴

⁷³ Timothy Brookins and Bruce Longenecker, *1 Corinthians 10-16: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 40.

⁷⁴ “The word nature does not mean sense of natural propriety, but NATURE,—the law of creation” (Alford, *New Testament*, 2:204). Barrett: “Nature (i.e., God) has made men and women different from each

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

2. Or is it about the **cultural codes of the day** in first-century Corinth?

It seems to be option 2.⁷⁵

There is no place in the scriptures where God tells us that long hair on men is against nature or the order he established. The closest evidence for men not having long hair is an ambiguous command for priests who minister at Ezekiel's future temple to not let their hair grow long (Ezek 44:20). On the other hand, the bible tells us that:

- Samson never cut his hair until Delilah betrayed him (Judg 16:17-19), and he was a righteous man (Heb 11:32).
- Nazarites swore an oath to never cut their hair (Num 6:5). If this broke the establish/natural order God ordained, then why did he decree they never shave their heads?
- The great prophet Samuel was a Nazarite who likely never cut his hair (1 Sam 1:10-11). God never condemns Samuel for breaking the natural/established order.
- David's son Absalom habitually wore his hair quite long because he only cut it once per year, and the trim regularly yielded five pounds of cut hair (2 Sam 14:25-26)!⁷⁶ Scripture does not record any rebuke of Absalom for violating the natural/established order of things. Indeed, Absalom died when his long hair became tangled in tree limbs as he fled by mule (2 Sam 18:9).

So, Paul is probably referring to social convention. If he was not, then the prophet Samuel was in grave error all his life. This is unlikely! So ...

1. It's "just the way things are" in the local culture,
2. that men shouldn't have long hair,
3. but women's long hair reflects God's glory,
4. because God gave them their hair as a covering.

But, why does Paul say *a woman's hair* is her "covering"? Doesn't that mean all this talk of separate head coverings is a waste of time?

The best explanation is that this is an awkward parallel. It doesn't work well, it confuses the issue, and it adds nothing to the argument. The idea seems to be that women need a covering on their head, and because Paul chose to use a cultural analogy about men's hair being short, he's forced to keep the analogy when he refers to women's hair being long.

other, and has provided a visible indication of the difference between them in the quantity of hair he has assigned to each" (*Corinthians*, 256).

⁷⁵ Hodge (*1 Corinthians*, 213); Gould (*Corinthians*, 96); Findlay (*First Corinthians*, 875); Fee (*Corinthians*, 527); Garland (*1 Corinthians*, 530-31); Gill (*Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:686); Calvin (*Corinthians*, 1:361).

⁷⁶ The weight of his annual haircut was 200 shekels, at about 0.40 oz to the shekel = 80 oz = five pounds.

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

Perhaps Paul expects his readers to reason that (a) the woman's hair is her covering, but (b) local Corinthian culture says a woman's uncovered hair signals sexual availability, which means (c) the natural covering doesn't do its job in Corinth, and so (d) yet another covering—an external head covering—is needed.⁷⁷ “[H]er longer hair is a proof of covering the head as much as possible.”⁷⁸

If you think this analogy obscures rather than illuminates, then you are correct. Maybe Paul should have omitted this illustration!

Paul's argument so far ...

1	There exists a graduated series of social relationships (God → Christ, and Christ → Man, and Man → Woman). Each relationship has a prominent representative who is the prism through which honor or shame refracts on the larger relationship family.	1 Corinthians 11:3
2	According to the cultural code language of the day, both men and women can act in ways that bring disgrace, dishonor, and shame onto their prominent representative (and, by extension, the larger group)—e.g., men <i>wearing</i> head coverings, and women <i>not wearing</i> head coverings. Because this reflects shame and disgrace onto their representatives, these actions are very bad.	1 Corinthians 11:4-5
3	So, if women wish to go without head coverings and bring disgrace onto their prominent representative figures (their husbands), they may as well just go all the way, shave their heads, and embrace ridicule . Or they can just wear head coverings!	1 Corinthians 11:6
4	The reason why a woman must wear a head covering is because, while on the one hand man reflects God in the sense that he originates from him, on the other hand the woman reflects man because <i>she</i> originates from <i>him</i> .	1 Corinthians 11:7
5	The woman reflects the man because (a) she comes from the man, and (b) she was made for his sake—for loving companionship . So, if according to the cultural code language of the day, her actions bring disrepute onto her representative, this is very bad.	1 Corinthians 11:8-9
6	Because of these two reasons, the woman must always exercise personal power and agency over her what she does with her body (“head”), because the holy angels watch us and see what we do.	1 Corinthians 11:10
7	Paul hedges a bit to ward off misogynistic interpretations . Regardless of what he's just said, neither men or women are independent of each other in relationship/union with Christ . Each comes from the other, and both come from God.	1 Corinthians 11:11-12
8	According to the cultural code language of the day, it's “just the way things are” that (a) on the one hand men who have long hair disgrace God and thus themselves, while on the other hand (b) women <i>do</i> have long hair	1 Corinthians 11:13-15

⁷⁷ This is what John Gill suggests (*Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:687) and Garland (*1 Corinthians*, 531). It's likely the best anyone can do. “When therefore we deal with the proprieties of the artificial state, of clothing the body, we must be regulated by nature's suggestion: that which she has indicated to be left uncovered, we must so leave: that which she has covered, when we clothe the body, we must cover likewise. This is the argument” (Alford, *New Testament*, 2:204).

⁷⁸ Bengel, *Gnomen*, 3:283.

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and it reflects glory onto their husbands (their relational proxies). So, by analogy, it's obvious women must wear head coverings.	
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1 Corinthians 11:16

Text and translation

16: If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God

- Εἰ δέ (**contrast**) τις δοκεῖ φιλόνηκος εἶναι, ἡμεῖς τοιαύτην (**dem. pronoun, ante. is women praying with heads uncovered from v. 13—matches GCN**) συνήθειαν οὐκ ἔχομεν οὐδὲ αἱ ἐκκλησίαι τοῦ θεοῦ.
- But, if anyone prefers to argue about this, we don't have a custom where women pray with their heads uncovered. Neither do God's churches.

Exegesis

The major English translations largely elide the difficulties of this verse. They do not specifically identify the antecedent of the demonstrative pronoun in the phrase: “we have **no other** practice.” They don't have a practice other than ... what? The issue is women praying with their heads uncovered, last mentioned at 1 Corinthians 11:13, and that is what Paul refers to.⁷⁹ The passage ought to specify this: “we don't have a custom where women pray with their heads uncovered ...”

Who is the “we”? Paul probably writes from Ephesus, but that church is not an authority in any sense of the word because Paul planted both churches. It's probably a “royal we” in the sense of “the universal understanding” of he and the other apostles in Jerusalem. In other words, Paul says: “Nobody has a custom where women pray with their heads uncovered. NO. CHURCH. ANYWHERE.”

Paul's argument so far ...

1	There exists a graduated series of social relationships (God → Christ, and Christ → Man, and Man → Woman). Each relationship has a prominent representative who is the prism through which honor or shame refracts on the larger relationship family.	1 Corinthians 11:3
2	According to the cultural code language of the day, both men and women can act in ways that bring disgrace, dishonor, and shame onto their	1 Corinthians 11:4-5

⁷⁹ Garland (1 Corinthians, 531-32); Fee (1 Corinthians, 529-30); Gill (Exposition of the New Testament, 2:687); Hodge (1 Corinthians, 214); Godet (1 Corinthians, 2:133); Findlay (First Corinthians, 876); Bengel (Gnomen, 3:283); Alford (New Testament, 2:204); Barrett (1 Corinthians, 258).

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

	prominent representative (and, by extension, the larger group)—e.g., men <i>wearing</i> head coverings, and women <i>not wearing</i> head coverings. Because this reflects shame and disgrace onto their representatives, these actions are very bad.	
3	So, if women wish to go without head coverings and bring disgrace onto their prominent representative figures (their husbands), they may as well just go all the way, shave their heads, and embrace ridicule. Or they can just wear head coverings!	1 Corinthians 11:6
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6	Because of these two reasons, the woman must always exercise personal power and agency over her what she does with her body (“head”), because the holy angels watch us and see what we do.	1 Corinthians 11:10
7	Paul hedges a bit to ward off misogynistic interpretations. Regardless of what he’s just said, neither men or women are independent of each other in relationship/union with Christ. Each comes from the other, and both come from God.	1 Corinthians 11:11-12
8	According to the cultural code language of the day, it’s “just the way things are” that (a) on the one hand men who have long hair disgrace God and thus themselves, while on the other hand (b) women <i>do</i> have long hair and it reflects glory onto their husbands (their relational proxies). So, by analogy, it’s obvious women must wear head coverings.	1 Corinthians 11:13-15
9	Paul appeals to universal Jesus people practice: “But, if anyone prefers to argue about this, we don’t have a custom where women pray with their heads uncovered. Neither do God’s churches ” (my translation).	1 Corinthians 11:16

Summary

This is a passage about holiness and propriety **according to the cultural code language of the day**, in an honor/shame context.

- So, according to the cultural code language active in Corinth in the early 50s A.D., every man praying or prophesying with a head covering disgraces Christ, his prominent representative or “head.” He does this because local men in pagan worship used head coverings. If a Christian man follows local custom and uses one, it communicates the wrong idea.
- But, on the other hand, every woman praying or prophesying with *her* head uncovered disgraces her husband, her forward-facing relationship proxy or “head.” She does this because, according to the cultural code language of that day, if she prays or prophesies without her head covered she is signaling that she is one and the same as a prostitute and a whore.

What is Paul Saying in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16?

“[I]t is the Corinthian women, not modern women, whom he wishes to persuade to cover their heads.”⁸⁰ To understand this passage’s meaning for today, we must (a) extract the *principle* from the A.D. 50-ish *cultural dress* in which it’s clothed, and then (b) translate that principle into 21st century American cultural code language.

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⁸⁰ Keener, *Bible Background*, 482.

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Latine, or French etc with the interpretation thereof by plaine English words, gathered for the benefit & help of ladies, gentlewomen, or any other unskillful persons, whereby they may the more easily and better understand many hard English words, which they shall hear or read in scriptures, sermons, or elsewhere, and also be made able to use the same aptly themselves. London: IR, 1604.

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