

# Authority to Cover Her Head: The Liberating Message of 1 Corinthians 11:3–16

Juliann Bullock

So much has been written about 1 Cor 11:3–16 and the topic of head coverings that it may seem there surely could be nothing new to say. Unfortunately, our modern cultural contexts are so far removed from the context of Paul’s original audience that our default understanding of this passage is likely quite different from the understanding of the first-century Corinthians. Many interpreters have read this chapter as an argument for male authority. These interpreters understand “the man is the head of a woman” (1 Cor 11:3) to mean that men should have authority over women, or at least over their own wives. They also tend to understand v. 10 as a command for women to cover their heads to show that they are under male authority.

However, to understand what Paul was trying to communicate, we need to understand some of the cultural context that would have been readily available to the Corinthian church. This article examines 1 Cor 11:3–16 within the context of the cultural practice of head covering in first-century Corinth, Paul’s teaching in the rest of 1 Corinthians (particularly about male/female relationships), and the meaning of the Greek word *kephalē* (“head”). Read within the context of that information, 1 Cor 11:3–16 becomes a liberating passage for women, giving them authority over their own heads and freedom from the legal control of men within the context of the church body. Rather than placing women in subordination to men, this passage elevates the status of women and grants them a place of honor and privilege within the body of Christ.

## Context for 1 Corinthians 11:3–16

### *Cultural Background on Head Coverings*

It is first necessary to understand the cultural practice of head covering in Corinth at the time Paul was writing.<sup>1</sup> A woman’s covered head was a signal that she was under the protection of an upper-class husband or father and was therefore not sexually available.<sup>2</sup> Men were expected to be sexually promiscuous, and head coverings placed limits on their promiscuity. If a man assaulted a woman wearing a head covering, he would face serious consequences from her husband or father, but if a woman had no head covering, there would likely be no consequences. In fact, if a married woman went out in public without her head covering and she was sexually assaulted, the man was not liable for prosecution.<sup>3</sup> Corinth was not a safe place for a woman with an uncovered head.<sup>4</sup>

Covering, therefore, was not a form of oppression imposed on women as much as it was a form of protection, but it was not protection that was available to all women—only to those who

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were legally protected by an upper-class husband or father. A head covering meant that the woman who wore it had a patron who was able to legally protect her and defend her honor.

Greco-Roman culture was built on the foundation of patron/client relationships, in which both the patron and the client had obligations toward each other.<sup>5</sup> As part of this system, husbands were patrons to their wives. The husband provided food, housing, protection, and the right to wear a head covering. The wife provided honor to her husband by being chaste, which included dressing appropriately and covering her head.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, within Greco-Roman culture, hair was considered one of the most striking, attractive features of a woman’s beauty and sexuality, and thus it could be provocative.<sup>7</sup> An honorable woman kept her hair covered in public. Leaving it uncovered would not only put her at risk; it would also shame both her and her husband by lowering the status of them both.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore unlikely that any woman who was allowed the protection of a head covering would not want to wear one.<sup>9</sup>

### *Background on 1 Corinthians*

In order to understand 1 Cor 11:3–16, it is important to read it within the context of the book of 1 Corinthians as a whole. The letter suggests that the Corinthian church was wrestling with divisions around issues such as lawsuits, immorality, marriage, food offered to idols, socioeconomic differences, spiritual gifts, and resurrection.<sup>10</sup> Corinthian believers were selfishly seeking their own interests and claiming superiority at the expense of others, and Paul was writing to urge them to live in unity, to live as one body.<sup>11</sup> A body exists as a single organism, with all of its parts functioning in unity. Each part is different, and it is precisely those unique differences that make the parts dependent on each other. Paul is urging the Corinthians to recognize their mutual dependence on the other parts of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:26). He is also urging them to treat each unique part with equal honor. The different members of the body are equal before God and therefore must be equally honored by the rest of the body (1 Cor 12:22–25).

The members of the Corinthian body of believers, however, did not treat each other with equal honor (1 Cor 11:21–22, 29). Believers were disregarding the needs of other parts of the body, shaming other parts of the body, and acting as if they were superior to other members of the body. Throughout his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds the church that when they honor or shame others, they honor or shame themselves because they are all part of the same body. Each member needs the other

members as much as they themselves are needed and in order to live in unity each member must recognize their dependence on the other parts of the body.

First Corinthians 11:3–16 should also be read within the context of Paul’s teaching on marriage in the same letter. In 1 Cor 7:3–4, it is revolutionary that the husband and the wife are each given equal authority over the other’s body. There is no hint of hierarchy between the husband and wife; rather, they are instructed to mutually submit themselves to each other’s authority.

### **Background on *kephalē***

Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor 11:3–16 is centered around the word *kephalē* (“head”), which is used both literally and figuratively within the passage. To understand this passage, it is vital to understand the way *kephalē* was used in the Greek language. There has been much scholarly debate about whether the underlying meaning behind *kephalē* is “authority” or “source,” but neither of these figurative uses is truly the underlying meaning of the word.<sup>12</sup> When Paul uses it metaphorically, neither “authority” nor “source” is at the root of its metaphorical usage.<sup>13</sup> Richard Cervin has studied the metaphorical use of *kephalē* extensively and concluded that when it is used metaphorically it is primarily about the most prominent or preeminent part of something.<sup>14</sup> The most prominent part, though the most noticeable, is not necessarily the most important. For example, if I have a prominent nose, it is not my most important feature, but it may be my most noticeable.

For vertical objects, the most prominent part is often the top. *Kephalē* is therefore used to refer to the peak of a mountain and the top of a tree. For horizontal objects, the most prominent part is one of the ends. It is in this sense that *kephalē* refers to the source of a river, but the underlying idea is not “source” as much as “prominent end.”<sup>15</sup> It is also used in this way to talk about the head of a family, often the founding father of a family line. In this case the focus is not on that person as the source of the family or the authority over the family, but simply as the prominent one at that first end of the family line. Therefore, while *kephalē* can refer to a source or to an authority figure, these are not primary or even common uses of the word. Its primary, most common meaning is simply “head,” and when it is used metaphorically it does not necessarily mean either “authority” or “source.” It can be used as a metaphor within the context of its primary meaning of “head” as a part of a body.<sup>16</sup>

First Corinthians 11:3–16 displays brilliant use of language with complex word play, and within this passage *kephalē* is used primarily as a metaphor. As such, it does not mean either “source” or “authority.” Paul is using the literal meaning, “head,” in the sense of a physical part of the body to metaphorically describe the unity and inseparable connection between Christ and God, Christ and the church (Eph 1:23), and men and women. Within Paul’s metaphor, a man is a head and a woman is a body. Let us explore some of the implications of this metaphor.

Heads and bodies are not identical, nor are they interchangeable. A whole person requires exactly one head and exactly one body, and

a true marriage requires exactly one man and exactly one woman. Furthermore, neither the head nor the body can exist without the other; each needs the other. Each naturally seeks the interests of the other because their interests are the same. The body instinctively protects the head, and the head instinctively protects the body.

Finally, the head and the body mutually nourish each other. The body nourishes the head by getting food to the head and then processing it into a form that the head can use, but the head nourishes the body by taking the food in and chewing it up. The body’s job is to maintain the health of the head, and the head’s job is to maintain the health of the body.

Paul himself fleshes this metaphor out further in 1 Cor 12. Each member of the body is unique and different from the others, but their interests are inextricably linked. They need each other, and they stand or fall together. As a part of the body, the head is no different. It is just as dependent on the rest of the body as the hands or toes are. For this reason, the head has no special status over the rest of the body. Paul specifically says, in 1 Cor 4:6, that “you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other” (NIV). Within the metaphorical use of *kephalē*, the head is not the most important part, nor is it an authoritative part. It is simply the most noticeable part—the top part. Within first-century Greco-Roman culture the metaphor is fitting because the man was the most visible, public member of the family. Paul’s teaching makes it clear, however, that within the body of Christ this does not give men any special status over the rest of the family.

### **Therefore, while *kephalē* can refer to a source or to an authority figure, these are not primary or even common uses of the word.**

Some may argue that, because the brain is in the head, the head is the control center of the body and therefore has authority over the body. However, that would not have been part of the metaphor for Paul or the Corinthians because they did not see the head as the control center of the body. At the time Paul was writing, scientists and philosophers had not reached consensus as to whether the mind was located in the head or the heart. Plato said that it was in the head,<sup>17</sup> but Aristotle said it was in the heart.<sup>18</sup> In the first century AD, Philo wrote that the debate was still undecided and that nobody knew for sure.<sup>19</sup> Paul’s use of the word “heart” in connection with thinking and decision making in Rom 1:21 and 2 Cor 9:7 suggests he leaned toward seeing the heart (located in the body) as the location of the mind.

Even with our modern scientific knowledge about the brain and its location in the head, we also know that most of the “orders” the brain gives to the body are actually initiated by “orders” from the body, as the body senses heat, cold, pain, and obstacles and directs the brain to make adjustments accordingly. The head and the body truly have a two-way relationship, with each part equally but uniquely giving, receiving, and initiating at different times and in different ways.

Paul's point, then, is that within the body of Christ men and women are like two different parts of the same body. We need each other. Paul uses the head metaphor to say this in 1 Cor 11:3, and he says it more explicitly in 11:11. Men and women are different, but interdependent.

## Interdependence

### Head Coverings

What does the interdependence between men and women have to do with head coverings? Remember that not all women were legally allowed to cover their heads, and the ones who were allowed would likely want to cover as a form of protection. A covered head gave a woman status and honor, because it meant that she was connected to a man who could protect her honor. Many English translations of 1 Cor 11:6 make it sound like women were refusing to cover their heads,<sup>20</sup> but the Greek phrase literally reads “if a woman is not covered” and does not imply that any of the women were resisting being covered.

It is much more likely that women who were not legally allowed to cover their heads wanted to wear a head covering while they were praying and prophesying, but someone was telling them not to.<sup>21</sup> For slaves and prostitutes who became part of Christ's body, it would make sense for them to want to have that symbol of honor within the family of believers. Now that they belonged to Jesus, who had taken away their shame, when they stood up to pray or prophesy it would be humiliating for them to stand in front of everyone, especially all the men, with an uncovered head. Their uncovered hair would be a symbol of their shame, and it would also be considered alluring and provocative to the men in the congregation. Even today, in modern cultures, if a former prostitute who became a believer was expected to dress provocatively in church, it would be disgraceful and humiliating for her, awkward for everyone, and distracting for some people.

Paul says in 1 Cor 11:13, “Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?” (NIV). This word “proper” is not about whether something is morally right as much as whether it is fitting, suitable, and appropriate to the context.<sup>22</sup> Paul is appealing to the Corinthians' inherent sense of propriety.

It is possible that a man or group of men was trying to prevent the lower-class women in the congregation from covering their heads.<sup>23</sup> Although we do not know for sure what the situation was, there is grammatical evidence that it was not only women who were being quarrelsome about head coverings. In 1 Cor 11:16 the word for “quarrelsome” or “contentious” is a masculine adjective, which implies that at least one man was involved in the quarrel.<sup>24</sup> If Paul had only been reprimanding women it would have been a feminine adjective.

Still, it is quite possible that there were also some women trying to keep other women from covering their heads. Some members of the church were claiming superiority over others, and the women who did have the legal right to cover their heads may have resented having their superiority taken away if all the women were allowed to wear coverings during a worship service. Nevertheless, Paul insists that within Christ's body, everybody has the same status. Every woman is allowed the honor of a covered head.

For the Corinthian women, standing in front of the congregation with an uncovered head was as shameful as standing there with a bald head (1 Cor 11:6). First Corinthians 11:6 suggests that, within the Corinthians' cultural context, it would be disgraceful and embarrassing for a woman to shave off all of her hair, and women who could not or did not cover their heads carried a similar shameful stigma. This is why Paul says in v. 5 that “every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head” (NIV). She dishonors her own literal head.

## Paul's point, then, is that within the body of Christ men and women are like two different parts of the same body.

But Paul has just said that “the man is the head of a woman,” so she is also disgracing the men, especially her metaphorical head, her own husband (if she has one). Paul is reminding the Corinthians that they are one body, so what is shameful for one part of the body is also shameful for the other parts. Any man who tries to keep a woman from covering her head is not only shaming her head; he is also shaming his own head. Within the metaphor of the man as head and the woman as body, what is shameful for the body is shameful for the head, so when a woman within the Christian community is shamed, so are the men, especially the husband of that woman. He cannot damage her honor without damaging his own, because his honor depends on hers as surely as a head depends on a body for life.

### Women as “the Glory”

Paul elaborates on the connection and interdependence between men and women in 1 Cor 11:7–9, and he does so in a way that honors women and raises their status within the body of believers. In v. 7, he says that “woman is the glory of man.” The word translated “glory” is defined as “the condition of being bright or shining, brightness, splendor, radiance. A state of being magnificent, greatness, anything that catches the eye. Honor as enhancement or recognition of status or performance, fame, recognition, renown, honor, prestige.”<sup>25</sup> “Glory” describes “persons who bestow renown through their excellence.”<sup>26</sup> For example, in Luke 2:32, Jesus is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (NIV). Israel has renown because of the excellence of Christ.

Being “the glory” is therefore an immense privilege. Humankind, as God's image, has the privilege of being God's glory—the most magnificent and splendid part of creation, the part that brings God the greatest honor and renown. And women have the privilege of being the glory of humanity. As Westfall puts it, “she is both the image and glory of God, and she has such additional beauty that she is the glory of humanity. She is the glory of man by virtue of the fact that she was created from him, and that is why her glory, her beauty, reflects on him.”<sup>27</sup>

Later in the chapter, in v. 15, Paul asks whether “if a woman has long hair, it is her glory” (NIV). “Her hair,” says Westfall, “is something valuable that needs to be protected and managed appropriately.”<sup>28</sup> In

many cultures in which women are required to cover their heads or faces, it is because women and their beauty are seen as dangerous, a threat to men and their purity. Paul, however, takes a different view and sees women, including their glorious hair, as one of the most magnificent parts of creation, a part that brings great honor to God. A woman's hair, in Paul's view, was something so good that it needed to be carefully guarded and protected from those who would abuse it. Within the Corinthian cultural context, that meant covering it.

### *Woman Created from Man*

The reason woman has the incredible privilege of being the glory of man is that "man did not come from woman, but woman from man" (1 Cor 11:8 NIV). Woman gets to be the glory of man because she was formed from the man. As we have pointed out, this is a privilege, but at the same time it balances the interdependence between men and women. Westfall points out that "male and female would not be interdependent if the creation order was reversed and if the first man came out of woman."<sup>29</sup> Since every other man has come from a woman, that would put women in a position of independence that Paul is not advocating.

Paul goes on, in v. 9, to say that woman was created for the sake of man, and this is also a privilege.<sup>30</sup> Paul is pointing out that it was not the woman who was alone needing the man. Rather, it was the man who was alone needing the woman. This statement, says Westfall, "means that man needed woman and knew it. . . . The woman met a need and provided a service, which also invokes the principle of reciprocity in which the woman is the patron (helper) and the man is the client."<sup>31</sup> Greco-Roman culture was built on these patron/clients relationships, but it was the husbands who were the patrons and the wives who were the clients. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that the first man was a client in need of a helper, a patron. As Westfall puts it, "Adam was the one who needed Eve as a companion, partner, and procreator; he benefited from her creation, not the other way around."<sup>32</sup> This idea would have been shocking to Corinthian men living in a culture in which they were the patrons within the marriage relationship.

In summary, Paul gives women a place of incredible honor and privilege in 1 Cor 11:7–9. Women are not only the glory of creation by virtue of being human; they also get to be the glory of humankind, because they were formed out of the very image and glory of God. It was the first man who was in need of the woman, not the woman who was in need of the man. This is why Paul concludes in v. 10 that, "It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head . . ." (NIV). Many English translations take significant interpretive liberties with this verse and say that a woman should have "a symbol of authority on her head" (ESV) or "a covering on her head to show she is under authority" (NLT). The Greek text, however, simply says that a woman should have authority on or over her head.

If it is assumed that the Corinthian women were trying to remove their coverings and Paul was telling them to keep them on, then this verse needs to mean something about women being under authority. However, it is necessary to perform spectacular grammatical gymnastics with the Greek text to arrive at such a meaning. In Greek, "having authority" means being the authority, and there are

no examples in the NT or in other Greek literature where this phrase "have authority" refers to being under someone else's authority.<sup>33</sup> Gordon Fee says that "by all normal rules of language and grammar" 1 Cor 11:10 is not talking about women being under authority.<sup>34</sup> Rather, it is giving authority to women.

It is likely that some of the Corinthian women who wanted to cover their heads during worship were being prevented from doing so, and Paul was defending their right to wear head coverings within the context of the house church. With this understanding, we can read v. 10 according to the normal rules of the Greek language. Paul is giving these women authority over their own heads by giving all of them the right to decide whether to cover their heads. This means that they no longer needed a man to give them the right to wear a head covering.

### *Mutual Dependence*

Within the first ten verses of 1 Cor 11, Paul hands a remarkable degree of honor, privilege, and authority to women. One might wonder whether Paul is saying that women are somehow better or more privileged than men, but Paul anticipates this question and qualifies the honor and privilege of women in vv. 11 and 12. It may have been the first man who needed the first woman, but women still need men just as men need women. Men and women are mutually dependent on each other, and both are fully dependent on God.

To emphasize this, in v. 11a, Paul is qualifying the authority he has given to women in v. 10 by saying, "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man" (NIV). If v. 10 were about the authority of men over women, we would expect Paul's qualifying statement to be framed the other way around, stating that men still are not independent of women.<sup>35</sup> Its structure suggests that it is the women's authority he is qualifying, to make sure that it is not abused. Westfall says that v. 11 "may indicate Paul's awareness that his support for 'women's rights' to cover their heads may override the conventional authority of some of the Corinthian men over their wives, sisters, daughters, or slaves, and he is making it clear that he is not empowering women to operate independently without consideration of their family or masters."<sup>36</sup>

Paul realizes that, if taken to an extreme, his words could be used to suggest that women do not need men at all. Even though the women have authority over their own heads and do not need a husband or a father to give them the right to wear a head covering during worship, Paul maintains that, in the Lord, women are still not independent of men, and neither are men independent of women.

### **Conclusion**

For the Corinthian women, covering their heads was a privilege that gave them both protection and status within their culture, but it was not a privilege available to all women. The emphasis on boasting and divisions throughout the rest of the letter supports the possibility that Christian women who wanted to cover their heads during worship may have encountered resistance if they did not have the right to cover their heads within Corinthian society. Paul's use of the word *kephalē* should be read with its literal meaning of "head" as a part of the human body, with Paul using it metaphorically to describe the mutual

interdependence between men and women within the body of Christ. Read within its appropriate cultural context, 1 Cor 11:3–16 grants women a position of freedom and honor within the church. Because they were created from the image and glory of God, they are privileged to be “the glory of man.” It was the first man who was in need of the first woman, not vice versa, and, within the Corinthian house churches, women are given authority over their own heads. Rather than placing women under the authority of men, this text recognizes women as the glory of men and acknowledges that women are deeply needed by men (as men are by women). Within the Corinthian women’s cultural context, this was expressed by giving them the freedom to choose to cover their heads during worship.

In Christ, we are one body, and each part is unique and different but still dependent on the other parts. Just like a head and a body are unified, inseparably connected, and mutually dependent on each other, men and women in the church ought to realize their unity and inseparable connection in Christ by living in mutual dependence and in submission to each other. Within our own cultural contexts today, our unity and interdependence will not always be expressed through what we do or do not wear on our heads. Nevertheless, as Christian women and men today, we must strive to live out our unique identities in unity and interdependence in ways that are relevant to our cultural contexts and that honor all parts of Christ’s body.

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#### Notes

1. For further information, see Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2016) 26 ff. and the sources she cites.
2. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale University Press, 1992) 14–15.
3. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 29–30.
4. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 34.
5. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 20.
6. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 21; see further, Westfall, “‘This is a Great Metaphor!’: Reciprocity in the Ephesians Household Code,” in *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts (Brill, 2013) 561–98.
7. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 30.
8. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 33.
9. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 34.

10. 1 Cor 11:18–19; 6:1–7, 12–20; ch. 7; 8:1–13; 11:21–22; ch. 14; and ch. 15.
11. 1 Cor 4:6–7, 1:10, 10:17, and 12:12, respectively.
12. For the meaning “authority,” see Wayne Grudem, “Does *kephalē* (‘Head’) Mean ‘Source’ or ‘Authority Over’ in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples,” *TJ* 6 NS (1985) 38–59; for the meaning “source” see Berkeley Mickelsen and Alvera Mickelsen, “What Does *kephalē* Mean in the New Testament?,” in *Women, Authority, and the Bible*, ed. A. Mickelsen (InterVarsity, 1986) 97–110.
13. Richard S. Cervin, “On the Significance of *Kephalē* (‘Head’): A Study of the Abuse of One Greek Word,” *Priscilla Papers* 30/2 (Spring 2016) 18.
14. Cervin, “On the Significance of *Kephalē*,” 10.
15. Cervin, “On the Significance of *Kephalē*,” 10.
16. Christy Hemphill, “*Kephalē* is a Body Part: Unified Interdependence in Relationship in Ephesians 5,” *Priscilla Papers* 35/2 (Spring 2021) 3–9.
17. J. M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Hackett, 1997) 1248.
18. *De motu animalium* (“Movement of Animals”) 10.703a; *De partibus animalium* (“Parts of Animals”) III.10.672b; in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1984).
19. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, trans., *Philo*, vol. 5 (Harvard University Press, 1934) 311, 313.
20. Such as the NLT (“if she refuses to wear a covering”) and ESV (“if a wife will not cover her head”).
21. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 34–35.
22. BDAG 861.
23. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 33.
24. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 36–37.
25. BDAG 257.
26. BDAG 257.
27. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 103.
28. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 42.
29. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 73.
30. Contra Thomas Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies, and the Trinity,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway, 1991), 133.
31. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 103.
32. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 41.
33. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1987) 519 (574 in the 2014 rev. ed.).
34. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 519 (574 in the 2014 rev. ed.).
35. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 522–23 (577 ff. in the 2014 rev. ed.).
36. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 41.



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