

Small Group Study Guide
Head Coverings and Haircuts
1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Introduction: Steve mentioned that the meaning of most passages of Scripture is quite clear. Ordinary people can approach a passage of Scripture with faith and humility and understand what the author is trying to say. This doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is known as “the perspicuity of Scripture.” The perspicuity of Scripture, however, does not mean that every single passage of Scripture is easy to understand. Some are just down right hard to understand even after serious study and contemplation. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is one such passage. Almost every major term and every aspect of the cultural context are debated. Theologians and commentators look at the same Greek words and come to very different conclusions about this passage. Some people argue that we should adopt the exact same practices today in American churches that Paul commanded in the Corinthian church, while others conclude that Paul’s commands were obviously a cultural application of deeper issues. Having said this, this is the passage before us today. May God grant us wisdom as together we wrestle with a difficult passage.

Opening Question: How do you feel about this fact that there are some passages like 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 that are so hard to figure out? Does it bother you? Why or why not?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

1. What initial reactions or questions do you have after reading this passage?
2. What distinctions does Paul make between men and women?
3. How is the term “head” used in this passage?
4. In what ways were these instructions a response to problems unique to the Corinthian church?

Steve said:

Beginning in verse 4 Paul states that what you wear on your [physical] head (while you pray or prophesy) either honors or dishonors your [spiritual] head . . . Paul is saying that if a man wears something on his head (a hat or a hood) while praying or prophesying, he disgraces Christ (his spiritual head). . . Some suggest that men wore head coverings when they worshipped Greek gods; others suggest that a man wearing a head covering signified homosexuality. Sending such signals (pagan worship or homosexuality) would be a distraction in worship. This might be analogous to a man wearing a dress and lipstick to church today.

A woman who prays or prophesies with her head **uncovered** disgraces her head – namely “the man” of verse 3, her husband. In verse 10 Paul will refer to this head covering as a “sign of authority.” In Paul’s mind, such a woman without this sign of her husband’s authority was no different from a woman who shaved her head, which was clearly a sign of disgrace in Corinthian culture. If you saw a woman with her head uncovered or shaved, you were probably looking at a prostitute. Women who prayed with uncovered heads were sending the signal, “I’m sexually available.” I think you’ll agree that sending that signal would be quite a distraction (and even temptation) for the men in the church at Corinth.

5. So, what public worship practices did Paul rebuke? Why?

6. In what ways could this passage be misinterpreted or misapplied?

Steve said:

My conclusion . . . is that the real issue is not head coverings and haircuts. The deeper issue involves the signals we send through our appearance – especially in worship. American culture is much more egalitarian than many cultures; a wedding ring is one of the few markers that a person is married. A woman not wearing a head covering here at Faith doesn’t send the signal, “I’m available (relationally or sexually).” In some cultures it still does, but not ours. And length of hair doesn’t generally send signals in our culture that it might in other cultures. People don’t generally read anything into a woman having short hair or a man with long hair. It’s hard for me to see much application related to respecting God-given gender distinctions.

In my mind, the primary application of our passage involves being mindful of other ways that our appearance can send the wrong signals to others in worship. Whereas head coverings and haircuts sent signals in Corinth, perhaps the issue for us is **modesty**. A lack of modesty – on the part of men or women – can distract others from worshipping God when we gather. I would assume that very few people show up [to] worship with the intention of distracting someone else sexually or sending signals such as, “I’m available.” Nevertheless, we should pay attention to the signals we send. . . . I would simply appeal to our common love for God and for each other: be mindful not to be a distraction to others through lack of modesty.

7. What are some ways that we, as men or women, might be distracting to others in worship by our appearance?