

## Head Coverings and the Glory of God: An Analysis of the Logic of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16<sup>1</sup>

E. Calvin Beisner

The Apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, expresses three controlling principles regarding the attire of men and women in worship in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16: (1) that the God-ordained structure of authority and submission should be maintained; (2) that God, and no other, should be glorified in worship; and (3) that decorum, or propriety, should be maintained. The practices Paul prescribes serve these principles. Before setting forth these arguments, Paul introduces the discussion by exhorting the Corinthians to imitate him and commending them for carefully maintaining the traditions he has handed down to them, and after the arguments he returns to imitation and tradition, calling the latter custom. The purpose of this essay is to examine carefully the logic of Paul's arguments so that we understand just how he arrives at his conclusions.

Paul begins by setting forth the principle of the structure of authority and submission: "Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ"—or, to list them in descending order, God - Christ - man - woman. This order Paul wants the Corinthians to understand—which implies that there were things occurring in the congregation contrary to it. Precisely what they were we don't know, though presumably, since he goes on to address man/woman relations, some men were abdicating their authority, or some women were usurping the men's authority, or both. Whatever is the case, Paul wants it understood that this order is of God's ordaining and is rooted in creation itself. It is not a temporary, pragmatic matter but of the very nature of creation. God as Creator is over all creation, including Christ as the incarnate Logos (for by becoming incarnate He took on a created nature); Christ as federal Head of His new creation is over all men; and the man, as the one from whom woman was created and whose God-given commission to subdue and rule the earth the woman's creation was intended to serve, is over the woman.<sup>2</sup>

Paul next sets forth the principle that God, and God only, should be glorified in worship. He introduces this as the reason why, although a woman should have her head covered in worship,<sup>3</sup> a man should not: "For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and the glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man" (v. 7).

Paul concludes by setting forth the principle of decorum, of what is proper or fitting: "Judge for yourselves: is it *proper* for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?" (v. 13). The answer Paul demands is, "No, it is not proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered."

The first and last principles—authority structure and propriety—are the bow and stern lines of the passage, and the second—God and God alone is to be glorified in worship—is the anchor. The

---

<sup>1</sup>The position espoused in this essay represents a reversal of the author's view for the past ten or more years.

<sup>2</sup>Paul does not go beyond that in this context, not because the woman is not over anyone—she is over her children, as they are created through her—but because that is extraneous to the point.

<sup>3</sup>I take it as stipulated for the purposes of this article that Paul uses "praying or prophesying" as a substitute for "in worship," namely, in the church gathered for formal, corporate worship. Whether the requirements he sets forth here apply to other settings—private prayer, family worship, group Bible studies, etc.—is a distinct question.

argument from glory is both thematically and textually central to the passage, and Paul's subtle return to it in verse 15 drives home its importance.

### **The Man's Head in Worship: Uncovered**

After expressing the first principle ("Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ"), Paul turns first to what this implies regarding the attire of a man in worship: "Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head" (v. 4). Before he gives the reason for that, he switches to the woman, but to aid us in following his logic, let us pass over the woman for a moment and go straight to the reason. *Why* does a man praying or prophesying with something on his head disgrace his head? ". . . since he is the image and glory of God" (v. 7a). Here then is Paul's reasoning regarding the man: The man "is the image and glory of God," and therefore "a man ought not to have his head covered." But what is it about being the image and glory of God that yields the inference signaled in "for" and "since"? Clearly Paul's argument is an enthymeme—an argument some of which is unstated but that the author expects his readers to fill in. What parts *does* Paul state explicitly? To begin with, the conclusion: "A man ought not to have his head covered." Since this is the conclusion, its subject and predicate are the minor and major terms (*a man*, and *one who ought not to have his head covered*) in the syllogism. What else did Paul state explicitly? A premise: "A man is the image and glory of God." Which premise is it? Since it contains the minor term (a man), it is the minor premise. The other term in it ("the image and glory of God") must be the middle term of Paul's argument. By combining it with the major term from the conclusion, we can discover the major premise. But before we get there, let's look at what we have so far—the minor premise and the conclusion:

A man is the image and glory of God.

Therefore a man is someone who ought not to have his head covered.

What major premise would validly complete the syllogism? Here knowledge of the valid forms of syllogism can help. The conclusion is a universal affirmative, "All s is p." Only one valid syllogism form has a universal affirmative conclusion, the form named *Barbara*,<sup>4</sup> in which both premises also are universal affirmatives, and the middle term is subject in the major premise and predicate in the minor. We have already seen the minor premise. Now we know that the major premise must be, too. So the major premise must be "The image and glory of God is someone who ought not to have his head covered." Paul's whole argument, then, must be:

The image and glory of God is someone who ought not to have his head covered.

A man is the image and glory of God.

Therefore a man is someone who ought not to have his head covered.

---

<sup>4</sup>Here and below (with *Celarent* and *Camestres*) I use the traditional names for two (of the twenty-four) valid syllogism forms, their vowels indicating the types of propositions in their major and minor premises and conclusion in that order, "a" signifying a universal affirmative (All s is p.), "e" a universal negative (No s is p.), "i" a particular affirmative (Some s is p.), and "o" a particular negative (Some s is not p.).

## The Woman's Head in Worship: Covered

So now we have identified and made explicit Paul's argument for why a man ought *not* to have his head covered while praying or prophesying. But what of the woman? Paul takes up the woman between his first assertion of the conclusion about the man and his argument about the man. He writes:

<sup>5</sup>But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. <sup>6</sup>For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head.

Then he interrupts his argument about the woman to present the argument about the man, after which he continues his argument about the woman:

<sup>10</sup>Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

Then he interrupts himself to assure us that despite what he is saying about the submission of the woman to the man, "in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God" (vv. 11-12).. But that is not his focus in this discussion, so he leaves it and returns to the argument:

<sup>13</sup>Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?

<sup>14</sup>Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him,

<sup>15</sup>but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

This is clearly a much more complex argument than what Paul uses for the man. Consider the whole without interruption:

<sup>5</sup>But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. <sup>6</sup>For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. . . . <sup>10</sup>Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. . . . <sup>13</sup>Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? <sup>14</sup>Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, <sup>15</sup>but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

In reality, Paul offers *three* arguments for the woman's having her head covered: one from a comparison between the uncovered head and the shaved head, one from a comparison with the angels, and one from propriety that in turn rests on an appeal to nature.

*In his first argument*, from the comparison of the uncovered and the shaved head, Paul gives us, as before, the conclusion and the minor premise:

Every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.

Therefore every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying is one who disgraces her head.

Here again the conclusion is a universal affirmative, so the tacit major premise must be, too, and the middle term must be the subject and the major the predicate:

Every woman whose head is shaved is one who disgraces her head.

So the whole of Paul's first argument for the woman's needing to have her head covered while praying or prophesying is:

Every woman whose head is shaved is one who disgraces her head.

Every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying is [one and the same as] a woman whose head is shaved.

Therefore every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying is one who disgraces her head.

Why, we might ask, is a woman who has her head uncovered in worship one and the same as a woman whose head is shaved? Paul doesn't defend that assertion either immediately or explicitly, but I believe its *logos* will become clear as we unfold the rest of his arguments. But since it is the Word of God, its authority must be admitted regardless whether we understand its rationale.

*In his second argument*, Paul refers to the angels—and I would suggest that, in keeping with the comparison between the uncovered woman and the shaved woman, his point is to make a *comparison* between the woman and the angels.<sup>5</sup> This is what he explicitly states: “Therefore the woman ought to have authority on her head, *because of the angels*.” The first part of the sentence is his conclusion; the second is a truncated premise. We have, therefore, the minor, major, and middle terms (“the woman,” “one who ought to have [a symbol of] authority on her head,” and “the angels”). Once more the conclusion is a universal affirmative: “The woman is one who ought to have authority on her head.” Consequently, Paul's argument must be something like this:

The angels are those who have [a symbol of] authority on their heads.

The woman is like the angels [in this respect].

The woman is one who ought to have [a symbol of] authority on her head.

It is difficult not to be reminded now of Isaiah's description of the seraphim before the throne of God in Heaven, “each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory’” (Isaiah 6:2-3).

---

<sup>5</sup>Many commentators suggest that Paul's argument from the angels is not comparative but consequential. That is, they think it is not because women are somehow *like* the angels that they should have their heads covered but because if they don't have their heads covered an ill consequence involving the angels will ensue. They will be offended by women's uncovered heads—either because they will lust after the women, or because they will see the uncovered heads as signs of rebellion, offensive to themselves because they submit to God. I find no contextual support for the lust hypothesis. The other makes sense but is compatible with the interpretation I offer. Because the women, like the angels, are under authority and ought to signal that by having their heads covered, the angels will be offended if the women's heads are uncovered. Because Paul has just used one analogy—between the uncovered woman and the shaved woman—I think it more likely that he was still thinking analogously when he wrote “because of the angels.”

Yet there is a problem with this argument. The middle term is not identical in the premises. In the major premise, it is “the angels”; in the minor, it is “like the angels.” The result is a four-term fallacy. Yet it seems to be Paul’s argument. Did Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Spirit, commit a logical fallacy? No.

Every argument from analogy—an argument of the form, “This is *like* that, *therefore* . . .”—fails to prove its conclusion unless its comparative premise contains some relevant element in which the relationship between the two terms is not just *similarity* but *identity*. The *therefore* doesn’t follow unless, along with all the likenesses, there is some actual sameness, some identity between the two terms. Is there something in which women and angels are not merely *like* but *identical* and from which Paul might rightly infer the necessity (or at least the propriety) of their having their heads covered? I think so. Each was made to be under authority to serve the purposes of another—the angels to serve as ministers (Psalm 104:4; Hebrews 1:7), and women to serve the multiplication and dominion mandate (Genesis 1:28; 2:18, 21-23). Recognizing this as the background of Paul’s reference to angels, we may modify his statements to make explicit what is implicit in them:

All made to be under authority to serve another’s purpose, such as angels, are those who ought to have a symbol of authority on their heads.

Women are made to be under authority to serve another’s purpose.

Therefore women are those who ought to have a symbol of authority on their heads.

Recognizing now that Paul used “have a symbol of authority on their heads” and “have their heads covered” interchangeably, we see that this argument validly yields the conclusion Paul wanted.

Yet now a new problem arises. The man, too, is made to be under authority—God’s. Would it not follow, then, that the man should have a symbol of authority on *his* head, too? Yet Paul explicitly wrote that “a man ought not to have his head covered” (v. 7). Would it not follow that since no man ought to have his head covered, but all men are made to be under authority, some made to be under authority ought not to have their heads covered—and consequently the major premise of the argument we just constructed about women is false?<sup>6</sup>

Yes. So we must reconsider how we unfolded Paul’s argument, how it might have led us to the wrong major premise, and what would be the right replacement. We get guidance from Paul’s statements about the man’s being the image and glory of God, the woman’s being the glory of the man, and the structure of authority—the man under Christ, the woman under the man, and Christ under God. It is not simply that the woman is made to be under *God’s* authority that requires her head to be covered, for that would require the man’s head to be covered, too, since he, too, is made to be under God’s authority. It is rather that she is made to be under *the man’s* authority. But would this not eliminate the point of identity between women and angels? The angels were not made to be under man’s authority, were they?

Yes, they were. Paul hinted at this in 1 Corinthians 6:3: “Do you not know that we shall judge angels”? Looking farther afield, we find in Hebrews 2:5-9, building on Psalm 8:3-8, that God did not

---

<sup>6</sup>Stated more formally, the argument is: “No man is one who ought to have his head covered. All men are made to be under authority. Therefore some made to be under authority are not those who ought to have their heads covered,” *Celarent*.

subject the world to come to angels but to man, and while because of the fall we do not presently see man in general ruling over all things, we do see Jesus, the representative Man, crowned with glory and honor, and He made angels to be ministering spirits, ministering to the needs of men, as they did to Christ, the Son of Man, after the temptation in the desert.

Paul's conclusion, "Therefore women are those who ought to have a symbol of authority on their heads," follows validly, then, if we understand him to have assumed as the major premise, "All made to be under the authority of a man and to serve his God-given purpose, such as angels, are those who ought to have a symbol of authority on their heads," and as the minor premise, "Woman is made to be under a man's authority and to serve his God-given purpose." So Paul's second argument for covering women's heads in worship is:

All made to be under the authority of a man and to serve his God-given purpose, such as angels,  
are those who ought to have a symbol of authority on their heads.

Woman is made to be under the authority of a man and to serve his God-given purpose.

Therefore women are those who ought to have a symbol of authority on their heads.

*In his third argument*, from propriety, resting on an appeal to nature, Paul writes: "Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering" (vv. 13-15). Paul has already told us the answer to the first question: "every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved," which "is disgraceful." So the conclusion of this argument will be, "For a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered is not proper."

Now, however simple it might appear at first glance, this is actually a complex, multilayered argument. To unfold it, we must recognize that Paul uses different *linguistic* terms to represent the same *logical* term—or its contrary. If a man has long hair, he writes, "it is a dishonor to him"; if a woman has long hair, "it is a glory to her." *Dishonor* and *glory*, then, are taken to be opposites, which implies that *honor* and *glory* are interchangeable.<sup>7</sup> Since Paul writes the question with those terms in answer to the question whether it is *proper* for a woman to pray with her head uncovered, *honor* and *glory* must be understood as interchangeable, in Paul's argument, with what is *proper*.<sup>8</sup> Verses 14 and 15, then, teach that it is improper (a dishonor) to him if a man has long hair, but if a woman has long hair it is proper (a glory) to her. Why? Paul explicitly explains only one part of this conjunctive proposition. If a woman has long hair it is proper (a glory) to her because God gave her hair "to her for a covering." We are left to infer the explanation for why it is improper (a dishonor) if a man has long hair: because God did not give long hair to him for a covering. These things, Paul writes, nature itself teaches. How? Paul doesn't answer that question. It might be nice for us to know how, and we might speculate, but it isn't necessary for us to answer the question to understand Paul's argument. Every argument must start somewhere, with some axiom, something taken for granted. That nature teaches that it is a dishonor for a man but a glory for a woman to have long hair appears

---

<sup>7</sup>So also, by comparison, *disgrace* (in verses 4 and 5) is interchangeable with *dishonor*.

<sup>8</sup>The point is not that *honor* and *glory* carry no more weight than *proper* but that they carry no less.

to be axiomatic to Paul's argument. Since we know that his words were inspired by the Holy Spirit, we can be sure that, in whatever manner, nature does indeed teach us this. (Whether we learn it is another question.)

What then do we have as the parts of this third argument for covering a woman's head in worship? We have the conclusion: "For a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered is improper." We have the conjunctive proposition—actually one in which two hypothetical propositions are contrasted: "If a man has long hair, it is improper for him because God did not give it to him for a covering, but if a woman has long hair, it is proper for her because God gave it to her for a covering." Now we can see that Paul asserts four things about long hair: (1) Long hair is something God gave to woman as a covering and (2) so is proper (a glory) for a woman. (3) Long hair is not something God gave to man as a covering and (4) so is improper (a dishonor) for a man. These things, according to Paul, nature teaches us. They are taken as true for the sake of his argument. The "and so" in each of these statements comes from the "For" that begins the last sentence of verse 15: "For her hair is given to her for a covering."

Now it is clear that Paul's deep enthymeme assumes the following two arguments:

What God gives for a covering is proper.  
Long hair for a woman is something God gives for a covering.  
Therefore long hair for a woman is proper.

and

What God does not give for a covering is improper.  
Long hair for a man is something God does not give for a covering.  
Therefore long hair for a man is improper.

So if a woman has long hair, it is proper—indeed, "it is a glory to her." It "is given to her for a covering"—indeed, a glorious covering.

### **The Crux of the Matter: The Glory of God**

Having arrived at this point, we suddenly are forced to look back to what Paul has already said about glory. In the very center of this passage,<sup>9</sup> the chiasmic pivot, Paul wrote that 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" (v. 7), and so—and so, what? The man is not to have his head covered because he is the glory of God. Yes, Paul has explicitly said that. But his words, seen in context, imply something about the woman also. What? The woman is the glory of man, and so she ought to have her head covered. Why? Because *only* what displays God's glory should be displayed in worship. The woman displays God's glory just as surely as the man: "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; *male and female* He created them" (Genesis 1:27). Should she not then have her head uncovered? No, for she is *not only* the glory of God *but also* the glory of the man. Further, her long hair is *her* glory. For the woman's head to be uncovered is for two glories to be on display besides

---

<sup>9</sup>These words are at the center calculated not by counting the words but by measuring the space needed to write or print the words of the Greek text.

the glory of God: the woman as the glory of the man, and her long hair as the glory of the woman.

We saw in considering verse 7 that Paul's enthymematic argument unfolded to this:

The image and glory of God is someone who ought not to have his head covered.

A man is the image and glory of God.

Therefore a man is someone who ought not to have his head covered.

Now it is clear that another implicit argument arises from the combination of verses 7b ("but the woman is the glory of the man") and 15 ("if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her"). It is this:

All glory that should be displayed in worship is the glory of God.

The woman and her long hair are not only the glory of God (but also the glory of the man and of the woman).

Therefore the woman and her long hair are not to be displayed in the worship of God.

(*Camestres*)

The man being the glory only of God, but the woman being the glory not only of God but also of the man, and her hair being her glory, neither the woman nor her glorious long hair should be displayed in worship—which makes it impossible that her hair itself is the requisite covering. It is indeed a covering for her, and a glorious covering, on all other occasions, but precisely because it is glorious it is not the covering she needs in worship. Far from an insult, far from implying something inferior about the woman—ideas in reaction to which some modern women reject the requirement of head coverings—the necessity of her head's being covered in worship arises precisely because, while the man is the glory only of God, the woman is the glory not only of God but also of the man, and her long hair is her glory. Why is her head to be covered? Because she is *too glorious* not to be covered in worship, lest the display of her glory distract from the worship of God.

### **Cultural or Universal?**

It remains to be asked, does Paul view head covering as symbolic of being under authority regardless of cultural context (that is, as transcending culture) or only within particular cultural contexts (that is, as limited to culture). If the former—and because of the structure of Paul's argument, appealing not only to propriety but also to creation, angels, and nature, I think it is—then he requires head coverings for women in worship through all time and across all cultures. If the latter, then Paul requires head coverings *per se* only in those cultures where they are recognized as such.

Even in the latter case, however, Paul still requires that women in worship display some kind of sign of being under authority and that, as men's glory, they not be displayed, and that, as women's own glory, their long hair not be displayed. His argument from the angels makes this clear. Whatever is made to be under authority to serve man's God-given purpose ought to have a symbol of that submission—somewhere, whether on the head or not. The woman is made to be under authority to serve the man's God-given purpose. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of that submission—somewhere. Those who reject the use of head coverings are obliged, then, to come up with some other symbol that will communicate the same message. Some might argue that a wedding ring would do, but in an egalitarian culture that explicitly rejects male headship even in marriage, it would not.

In any case, this view ignores the other aspect of Paul's argument: the necessity of hiding all glory but God's in worship. Granted the Biblical background and the long history of the use of head coverings for women in churches, I cannot think of a better symbol than the historic one. Additionally, it serves the purpose of covering not only the man's glory (the woman) but also the woman's glory (her long hair) in worship. Nothing else meets all of Paul's Spirit-inspired concerns: the display of God's glory (and so the man is uncovered) and the hiding of any other glory and signaling that the woman is made to be in submission to the man and to serve his God-given purposes (and so the woman is covered).

## **Two Remaining Matters**

One question with which we have not dealt is whether the "head" a man disgraces if he worships with his head covered is his own anatomical head or Christ as his federal head, and, similarly, whether the "head" the woman disgraces if she prays with her head uncovered is her anatomical head or her husband as her federal head (vv. 4-5). Our answer does not affect the outcome of the larger investigation, but it is a question that deserves answering. It is possible that Paul intentionally wrote so as to invite *both* understandings, but I think it is more likely that the disgrace is not to the federal head but to the anatomical head—here used in metonymy for simply oneself. I offer two reasons. First, in verses 14 and 15, Paul writes that "if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor *to him*, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory *to her*." This seems textually and thematically parallel to Paul's concerns in verses 4 and 5. Second, while we may imagine that a woman's showing insubordination by praying with her head uncovered brings disgrace on her husband by the implication that he is failing as her federal head to have her in proper submission, it is impossible to imagine Christ's failing as the man's federal head. It is more likely that Paul means simply that a man disgraces himself by refusing to glorify Christ as he ought in worship, and a woman disgraces herself by refusing to wear the symbol of authority and the veil of glory on her head in worship. But I leave a more detailed consideration of this question to another opportunity.

Paul concludes with a statement that reminds us of his introduction, which exhorted the Corinthians to imitate him and commended them for maintaining the traditions he had passed down: "But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God." Does he mean by this that if someone is inclined to press this point of head coverings, and so to cause contention in the churches, he should be rebuked because it is not the practice, or custom, of the churches to be contentious? That understanding would be something of a stretch, granted that Paul himself was always contending for truth and righteousness—indeed, even in this passage he was contending against a wrong practice in the church in Corinth, and he would correct yet another in the next. On the contrary, he means by this that someone who wants to reject head coverings and, corrected for it by the church, becomes contentious, must be made to recognize that he stands against the practice of the apostles and the churches. It was not those who required head coverings who were contentious, but those who did not.