

Women Praying or Prophesying Under Cover

First Corinthians 11:2-16

11:2 Now I praise you, brethren, because ye have minded me regarding all things, and - just as I instructed you - you are holding secure the instructions. 11:3 Yet I desire for you to know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is man; and the head of Christ is God. 11:4 Every man praying or prophesying, while having anything down over his head, continually dishonors his Head [- namely, Christ]. 11:5 But every woman praying or prophesying with her head not completely covered continually dishonors her own head [- namely, her male protector], for it is in effect one and the same with her who has been shaven [- namely, a prostitute]. 11:6 For if a woman does not have herself completely covered, then let her also have herself clipped. But since it is shameful for a woman to have herself clipped or to have herself shaven, then let her have herself completely covered. 11:7 For a man indeed is obligated not to have his head completely covered, being originally constituted as the image and glory of God. But the woman exists as the glory of the man. 11:8 For man is not constituted out of a woman [as his head-source]; but rather, woman is constituted out of a man [as her head-source]. 11:9 For also man was not created for the sake of the woman; but rather, woman was created for the sake of the man. 11:10 On account of this [constitutional order], the woman is obligated to have a controlling-authority upon her head on account of the angels. 11:11 Nevertheless, neither does a man exist apart from a woman, nor does a woman exist apart from a man, in [the design of] the Lord. 11:12 For just as the woman is constituted from the man, in this way also the man is born through the woman; but all things are from God [as their Head-Source]. 11:13 Judge among your own selves: is it proper for a woman to be praying to God while not completely covered? [No, it is not proper.] 11:14 Or does not even the nature of the thing itself teach you that if a man, on the one hand, should be wearing a head of long hair, it is a mark of dishonor to him? [Yes, its nature does teach us this.] 11:15 While on the other hand, if a woman should be wearing a head of long hair, it is a mark of dignity [glory] to her? [Yes, its nature does teach us this.] Because the head of long hair has been once for all given to her [by God] in the place of a veiling apparel. 11:16 Now since someone intends to be contentious about this matter, let it be said that we ourselves [- the Apostles -] are not holding to any custom of such kind [as this last mentioned - wearing special apparel], and neither are the assemblies of God.

The Question of Context

In the minds of many people, the interpretation and application of First Corinthians 11:2-16 is determined by whether this passage is discussing traditions, activities, and practices which either apply 1) only within the gathered assembly, or else 2) only outside of the gathered assembly.

Immediately after First Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul discusses the Lord's Supper in a passage which obviously refers to the time when the assembly gathers in one place to partake of the Lord's Supper [11:17-34]:

11:17 "... you are regularly coming together"

11:18 "... at your coming together in the assembly ..."

11:20 "when you are coming together at one place ..."

11:33 "... when coming together ..."

11:34 "... lest you should come together for judgement"

Is there any reason to think that 11:2-16 may also refer especially to when the assembly gathers?

Paul begins the passage with the words, [11:2] "Now I praise you, brethren, because ye have minded me regarding all things, and - just as I instructed you - you are holding secure the instructions." An "instruction" [παράδοσις] is any teaching which is transmitted, including history, philosophy, poetry, and practice. Paul ends the passage with the words, [11:16] "...we ourselves [- the Apostles -] are not holding to any custom of such kind [as this last mentioned - wearing special apparel], and neither are the assemblies of God." A "custom" [συνήθεια] is an established habit, manner, or practical usage. This is not unlike how Paul begins and ends the immediately following passage. Paul begins with the words, [11:17] "Now in passing down orders as to this [following matter], I do not praise you ... [11:23] For I myself received personally from the Lord, what I also handed over to you," and Paul ends with the words, [11:34] "...Now, I-will-set-in-order the remaining [customs] whenever I-may-come." In fact, we could consider both passages [11:2-16 and 11:17-34] together as one unit surrounded by these verbal parentheses: "...just as I instructed you - you are holding secure the instructions. ... Now, I-will-set-in-order the remaining [customs] whenever I-may-

come.”

This neatly marks 11:2-34 as a unit discussing traditions and customs, and sets it apart from the remainder of the epistle. Since the second half of this unit refers to practice within the gathered assembly, the first half of this unit might easily be understood to refer to the same sphere of activity.

Also, 11:2-16 does speak of “praying and prophesying” (11:4-5), and this is commonly regarded as a regular activity within the gathered assembly (Acts 13:1, 3; First Corinthians 14:1-5, 13-15, 23-26, 29-32; First Thessalonians 5:17, 20).

Also, 11:2-16 does speak of being covered or not being covered, which addresses the question of how men and women are to appear before others, and therefore it assumes a more social context such as in the gathered assembly, not a solitary or very private context.

Also, 11:2-16 refers to the need for women to have a covering of authority over their heads “for the sake of the angels,” which could refer to angelic beings invisibly present when the assembly gathered, or it could refer to the men who speak and teach as messengers of God in the gathered assembly.

Also, the Lord’s Supper has been part of the underlying context of Paul’s argument since Chapter 5, and more immediately both just before 11:2-16, and immediately thereafter in 11:17-34. Since the Lord’s Supper marks when the assembly gathered together, this may lend a strong presumption that behavior and practice in the gathered assembly is the understood context of 11:2-16.

However, these observations are not conclusive because:

- 1) The fact that two passages are joined together and separated from the remainder may suggest, but it does not prove, that they both refer to the same sphere of activity.
- 2) Praying and prophesying might occur elsewhere than in the gathered assembly.
- 3) There are other social contexts than in the gathered assembly.
- 4) The reference to angelic beings, or to men as messengers, is obscure, and therefore is not a sound basis upon which to build an interpretation.
- 5) Though the Lord’s Supper is definitely part of the underlying context which accumulates in the six chapters before Chapter 11, and which culminates in the last half of Chapter 11, nevertheless there are many other things discussed in these six chapters which are not directly related to the practice of the gathered assembly.

The Question of Women Praying and Prophesying

The Hermeneutical Rule

It is a fundamental rule of hermeneutics (the rules of interpretation) that we must determine our practice from clear texts of Scripture which teach directly upon that practice. First Corinthians 11:2-16 focuses upon the question of “headcovering,” not upon the question of women speaking in the assembly. Whatever information First Corinthians 11 may provide regarding women speaking in the gathered assembly, that information is necessarily out of focus. The focus is on headcovering, not on speaking. Hence all of the information in this passage which does touch on speaking must be interpreted in the clearer and more direct light of First Corinthians 14:33b-35 and First Timothy 2:11-15.

It would be wrong to assume, on our own authority, that women can pray and prophecy in the gathered assembly, then to interpret the more obscure First Corinthians 11:5 in accord with our assumption, then to force all other texts to conform to our interpretation of First Corinthians 11; including texts which clearly teach the opposite, such as First Corinthians 14:33b-35 and First Timothy 2:11-15. This would be turning hermeneutics on its head, twisting the Scriptures to make them say what we want them to say (Second Peter 3:16), and reasoning in a circle by pretending to prove in our conclusion what we have already assumed in our premise.

Because First Corinthians 11:5 refers to women “praying and prophesying,” some persons have concluded that this passage cannot possibly be describing activity within the gathered assembly. Why? Because statements elsewhere (First Timothy 2:11-12), including one explicit statement in this very epistle (First Corinthians 14:33b-35), clearly forbid women teaching or exercising authority or even speaking to the

assembly. If, indeed, this passage teaches that women regularly pray and prophesy to the gathered assembly, would this not contradict these other clear statements of Scripture? They argue that Scripture describes women praying and prophesying, but nowhere is this explicitly described as occurring within the context of the gathered assembly.

Acts 2:17-18 describes daughters and handmaidens prophesying, but nothing is said of the context in which this would occur. If this passage refers directly to the very activity in Acts 2, that occurred in a public context on Solomon's porch in the temple, which clearly is not the private gathering of the assembly of the saints to eat the Lord's Supper.

Acts 18:26 mentions Priscilla who, along with her husband Aquila, explained the way of God more accurately to Apollos. Nothing is said of Priscilla teaching in the assembly. She helped her husband explain something to Apollos outside of the Jewish synagogue.

Acts 21:9 speaks of four virgin daughters of Philip who prophesied. Nothing is said of their prophesying in the assembly.

Titus 2:3-5 speaks of older women teaching younger women, but the circumstances would exclude this happening in the assembly.

We know that women should pray and that they should prophesy in many contexts outside of the assembly. There is nothing in the text or the context of First Corinthians 11:2-16 to conclusively prove that the praying and prophesying of women is happening in the gathered assembly. So many are satisfied with the simple explanation that this passage is not referring to the practice of the gathered assembly.

However, there is nothing in the text which is conclusive or decisive on the question. It must therefore be conceded that how we take the passage – whether it does or does not refer to activity within the gathered assembly – depends entirely upon how we weigh certain presuppositions, and those presuppositions may be selected according to how we want to interpret the text. In other words, our own desires may be in the interpretive driver's seat. If we want women to be praying and prophesying to the gathered assembly, then we can find a way to have what we want by presupposing that the passage refers to activity within the gathered assembly. If we do not want women praying and prophesying to the gathered assembly, then we can find a way to have what we want by presupposing that the passage does not refer to activity within the gathered assembly.

Well, not exactly. We must not so quickly dismiss the possibility that this passage could be describing activity within the gathered assembly. If the passage does indeed refer to women "praying and prophesying" in the gathered assembly, there may yet be other reasonable explanations which do not contradict the clear texts which forbid women speaking to the gathered assembly. We will explore three such explanations.

Other Possible Interpretations

For the sake of argument, we will assume that First Corinthians 11:2-16 refers to activity within the gathered assembly. We propose three other interpretations which would still eliminate this passage as a proof text for women speaking to the gathered assembly. If it be conceded that any of these interpretations is possible, then the proponents of women speaking to the gathered assembly must go elsewhere for a proof text. First Corinthians 11:2-16 would only be a text which may possibly be interpreted so, it would not be a text which must necessarily be interpreted so. If a text may be interpreted more than one way, then it must be interpreted in a way which agrees with other explicit statements. The ambiguous text cannot be allowed to rule the unambiguous text. That is one and the same as reading our own subjective notions into Scripture, which is assigning to ourselves the role of the Holy Spirit, which ultimately amounts to blasphemy.

Here are three possible explanations which would reconcile the passage with those other passages which explicitly forbid women to speak to the gathered assembly.

1. We Assume Too Much About Praying and Prophesying.

One simple explanation for the mention of women praying or prophesying is that we are assuming too much from the mere mention of praying and prophesying. The passage may mean to include the *passive* or *indirect* participation of both men and women in *corporate* prayer and prophecy. Corporate prayer is

generally passive for both men and women. They passively listen to another who actively leads them in prayer as they silently follow him in mental agreement or, at times, with mental expansion, amendment, or reservation. Though prophesy is generally understood as active, yet everyone participates in passive listening and learning, not unlike when listening to corporate prayer. Hence we read, [14:24] “But if all should prophesy,” which only means that everyone participates in the prophesying, some actively speaking, others actively and verbally judging, others passively judging in their minds and spirits, including judging whether they should speak. So when the passage speaks of men or women praying and prophesying, it means only that they are present and participating in appropriate ways as it is occurring in the gathered assembly.

2. We Assume Too Little About Praying and Prophesying.

We sometimes have rigid preconceptions in our mind, forcing us to take things too narrowly. In the above explanation, we suggested that “praying or prophesying” could refer to corporate participation. Here, we suggest that “praying or prophesying” could refer to active corporate participation, namely, the regular practice of singing Psalms in worship. The Hebrews regularly referred to the Psalms as the prayers. (For just a sample, compare the titles or the first lines of Psalms 4; 17; 55; 61; 64; 86; 90; 102; 142; 143; also the subscript after Psalm 72:20, “The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.”) Scripture refers to Psalms as prophecy (Second Samuel 23:2; First Chronicles 25:1; Matthew 22:43-44; Acts 2:25-31; Hebrews 3:7-8). The content of the Psalms is largely, if not entirely, prayers and prophecy.

The early Christians sang the Psalms (First Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:18-19; Colossians 3:16; James 5:13; also Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26 refer to the Passover singing of the Hallel Psalms).

Acts 4:24 ... they lifted up their voice with one accord directly to God, and they said, ‘O Sovereign Master, You Yourself are God, Who made the heaven, and the earth, and the sea, and all things which are in them.

This is a quote from Psalm 146. The passage goes on (Acts 4:25-26) to quote Psalm 2. We can only conjecture at the mechanics of what actually happened here, but our guess is that they corporately sang Psalm 146 and Psalm 2, then, in accord with First Corinthians 14:26, someone gave the interpretation, which is recorded in abbreviated form (Acts 4:27-30).

Acts 4:31 So when they had prayed

There we have it. They prayed. The content of the prayer – at least Psalm 146 and Psalm 2 – was a prophecy. They all – presumably both men and women – “raised their voice to God with one accord” and prayed and prophesied together by reciting the Psalms. We cannot absolutely prove that the “praying and prophesying” of First Corinthians 11:5 refers to this same corporate activity as described in Acts 4, but can anyone prove that it does not? If no one can, since the activity of Acts 4 was done in the presence of the apostles we may assume that it was legitimate, so it would be fair to assume that First Corinthians 11:5 may at least include activity of this sort.

Some have argued that if women are not allowed to speak or to teach, then women could not be allowed to participate in the singing of Psalms, because Colossians 3:16 calls for “teaching and admonishing one another” with Psalms, and Ephesians 5:19 calls for “speaking to one another” with Psalms. But if we understand “praying or prophesying” to refer to the regular practice of singing Psalms in worship, then this argument becomes moot. We must distinguish between an individual directly speaking to, teaching, admonishing, and exercising authority over the gathered assembly, and the entire gathering of individuals collectively raising their voices as one voice to God with one accord. [Note the singular “voice” in Acts 4:24, “they (plural) lifted up *their* voice (singular) with one accord directly to God.”]

3. We Assume Too Much From What Paul Actually Says.

The first thing we must acknowledge is that nowhere does the text speak approvingly of anyone – male or female – praying or prophesying. Read it over again if you doubt what we are saying. Verse 4 tells us that a man praying or prophesying with his head covered puts Christ, his Head, to shame. Verse 5 tells us that a woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered puts her husband, her head, to shame. Verses 13 through 15 tell us that nature teaches that it is improper for a woman to pray uncovered or without long hair, and it is improper for a man to pray covered or with long hair. The entire passage speaks only of improper or shameful conduct. It does not say one word about what is proper conduct.

But does it not follow implicitly that if one behavior is improper, shameful, and unacceptable, that the opposite must be proper, honorable, and acceptable? Not at all! One cannot prove a positive from only a negative.

We will illustrate with an argument to show the logical fallacy of trying to prove a positive from only a negative. We will construct this argument from things perhaps more familiar to us, but which parallel the things of the passage in First Corinthians 11. We will need to follow the logic closely. [Please note: by using the following example, we do not mean to endorse professional football. We are simply using it as a ready and familiar example which most everyone can understand.]

For the purposes of this argument, we must first assume the following three propositions to be true:

- 1) Only men should play professional football.
- 2) In order to play pro-football, one must wear only pro-football uniforms.
- 3) Only women should wear skirts.

These three propositions are our presuppositions. Whether or not they are true in fact, we nevertheless assume that they are true for the purpose of this argument.

Now read the following three statements carefully.

- 1) Every man who plays pro-football in skirts shames his coach and his team.
- 2) Every woman who plays pro-football in a football uniform, shames her husband and family.
- 3) Judge for yourself, is it proper for a woman to play pro-football in a pro-football uniform?
Does not even common sense teach you that if a man wears women's clothing it is a shame to him, but if a woman wears women's clothing it is a glory to her?

Now we ask ourselves, how do these last three statements prove that women play pro-football? We must agree that they prove no such thing!

Then what are these last three statements designed to prove? Suppose that someone raises the question of whether it were proper for a woman to wear a pro-football uniform? How would we construct an effective argument against women wearing pro-football uniforms? Well, persons who wear pro-football uniforms do so in order to play pro-football. We already know only men should play pro-football – that was one of our presuppositions. So we raise the specter of a woman playing pro-football. Remember, in order to play pro-football, one must wear only pro-football uniforms. We thereby associate in the mind the sight of a woman wearing a pro-football uniform together with the known impropriety of a woman playing pro-football. Complement this with the comparable impropriety of a man wearing clothing only appropriate for a woman, and we have completed the argument against a woman ever wearing a pro-football uniform like a man.

Now we will use the identical form of argument which we used in our pro-football example, but we will replace our pro-football propositions with the propositions of First Corinthians 11. Here are the propositions which we assume to be true for the purposes of this argument:

- 1) Only men should pray and prophesy.
- 2) In order to pray and prophesy, one must not have his head completely covered.
- 3) Only women should have their heads completely covered.

Here is the argument:

- 1) Every man praying or prophesying, while having his head covered, is putting to shame his Head, namely, Christ. (11:4)
- 2) Every woman praying or prophesying while having her head uncovered is putting to shame her head, namely, her husband. (11:5)
- 3) Even nature itself teaches us that if a man should be wearing a head of long hair, it is a dishonor to him. Yet if a woman, on the other hand, should be wearing a head of long hair, it is a glory to her, because the head of long hair has been once-for-all given to her

in place of a veiling apparel. (11:14,15)

If the earlier argument did not prove that women should play pro-football – and it certainly did not; then how does this argument prove that women should pray and prophesy? Our propositions determine our conclusions. If we assume certain propositions to be true without first testing them, then we may arrive at perfectly logical conclusions which are nevertheless false – because our propositions are false. If we want to correctly reason things out, then we must continually re-examine our propositions to see if we have perhaps presupposed what is not true. We must always be aware of our presuppositions.

We can begin by asking ourselves what these statements from First Corinthians 11:4-5, 14-15 are designed to prove? Suppose that someone raised the question of whether it were proper for a woman to be uncovered in the gathered assembly? How would we construct an effective argument against women being uncovered? Well, persons are uncovered in order to pray and prophesy, aren't they? We already know – from First Corinthians 14:33b-35 and First Timothy 2:11-12 – that only men should actively pray and prophesy in the gathered assembly. So we raise the specter of a woman praying and prophesying in the assembly. Remember, in order to pray and prophesy in the assembly, one must be uncovered. We thereby create in the mind the specter of a woman wearing no covering and associate this with the improper sight of a woman praying and prophesying in the assembly. Complement this with the inappropriate specter of a man being covered like a woman, and we have completed the argument against a woman ever being uncovered in assembly like a man.

In other words, if we were logical, we could just as easily understand Paul's words as an argument against women being uncovered in the gathered assembly at any time. After all, the topic of this passage is not praying and prophesying, but the covering. His argument would be built upon these three assumptions:

- 1) Only men should pray and prophesy.
- 2) In order to pray and prophesy, one must be uncovered.
- 3) Only women should be covered.

Now we may argue that these three assumptions are not established. But this would be our assumption. If we can find no evidence to contradict these three assumptions, then we must admit that they remain genuine possibilities. As long as these assumptions cannot be disproved, then the interpretation may not be proven, but it remains a genuine possibility.

Is there any evidence to support these three assumptions?

The first assumption – that only men should actively pray and prophesy as individuals to the gathered assembly – is explicitly established elsewhere in Scripture (First Corinthians 14:33b-35; First Timothy 2:11-15). If women cannot speak or teach to the gathered assembly, it logically follows that they cannot actively pray and prophesy, because prayer and prophecy requires speaking and teaching. Since prayer and prophecy are elsewhere described as activities which take place in the gathered assembly, and because women cannot perform these activities, therefore, obviously, only men are left to do it. The Apostles had been resident in many of the assemblies and they had established the pattern of Christian practice among the assemblies. The Apostle Paul had been resident at Corinth. Would the Apostle Paul have allowed a practice which is contrary to his teaching to be begun, continued, and established in his very presence? Certainly the Apostle Paul allowed only men to speak or teach in the Corinthian assembly while he was resident there. What is taught in these two passages is only a re-enforcement of what has already been the practice in the Apostolic assemblies.

The second assumption, that in order to pray and prophesy one must be uncovered, may well be inferred in this passage of First Corinthians 11. Verse 4 may be interpreted as a general principle that to pray or to prophesy with a covering over the head in the gathered assembly brings shame upon Christ. Someone may counter, "but the text literally limits the reference to 'every male' not to all persons, male or female." We do not dispute this fact, rather we can account for it. Remember, First Corinthians 14 and First Timothy 2 teach us that women do not speak in the gathered assembly. Had we no Apostolic teaching on the subject, the Hebrews and Gentiles alike would nevertheless have taken this as a cultural given. Indeed, the theological Liberals today attempt to subvert the plain command against women teaching by pointing to

what they consider to be the barbarous cultural norms of the First Century. Now, taking it as an Apostolic command and a practical fact that women simply do not speak in the gathered assembly, we would never expect Paul to express himself in such general terms, “every person (male or female) praying or prophesying...” That would be most confusing, because it just does not happen in the assembly. What we see implied is that to actively pray and prophecy in assembly with the head covered dishonors Christ. Obviously, if only men could pray and prophecy, only they could potentially violate this principle by praying and prophesying while covered.

The third assumption, that only women should be covered, seems implicit in the passages which speak of women being in submission in the presence of men. How could covering be a sign of submission to men if the men are covered as well? And if it is naturally a shame for men to wear long hair, then it is likewise a shame for men to be covered in the gathered assembly.

If it is a general rule that to pray or to prophecy in the gathered assembly required the removal of any headcovering, and if women never pray or prophecy in this context, then it follows that women should remain covered in the assembly.

Does the remainder of the text support such an interpretation? Indeed it does! Paul declares that if a woman would uncover herself in assembly, she might just as well be shorn like the prostitutes of the pagan temple in Corinth (verses 5 and 6). But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn – and it certainly is a shame to be a prostitute; then she must be completely covered (verse 6). This agrees with First Corinthians 14:35, which declares that “it is shameful for women to be speaking in assembly.” In other words, it is shameful for a woman to be uncovered in assembly, for to be uncovered is to be entitled to speak, and it is shameful for a woman to speak in assembly. To be entitled to speak in assembly is to be entitled not to be in submission to one’s husband, which is shameful.

But the argument goes further when we consider the covering itself. Imagine ourselves to be those who insist that women are to wear a veiling apparel of cloth over their heads in the gathered assembly. Throughout this passage, Paul speaks very emphatically of the need for women “to completely cover” [κατακαλύπτω]. As this letter is being read to the assembly at Corinth, we are nodding our head in emphatic agreement. We are thinking, “Amen, brother Paul, preach it! It is only proper that women completely cover themselves!” Perhaps we glance over our shoulders at others around us, with a “knowing” look on our faces, communicating the message, “Now you must see that I am right!” But the Apostle Paul is about to pull a “bait and switch” on us. Throughout this passage, Paul has avoided using the actual term for a physical veiling apparel [περιβόλαιον]. He has baited us with his insistence upon the woman’s need of a complete covering. But at the very end of his argument (verse 15) he substitutes the natural long hair for the artificial cloth veil: “Yet if a woman... should be wearing a head of long hair, it is a glory to her; because the head of long hair has been once-for-all given to her in place of a veiling apparel.” We feel a little disoriented. Our complexion changes. Cognitive dissonance may set in for a time. Paul does not insist upon an artificial cloth veil. He insists only upon the natural veil. Paul thoroughly agrees with us in principle, yet he thoroughly disagrees with us in application. Long hair is sufficient. The air is gone from our sails.

Paul drives the point home in verse 16: “Now since someone intends to be contentious about this matter, let it be said that we ourselves [– the Apostles –] are not holding to any custom of such kind [as this last mentioned – wearing special apparel], and neither are the assemblies of God.” The practice of wearing veiling apparel is contrasted with *such* customs as the assemblies did hold to! The word “such” [τοιούτος] denotes quality. Of what quality were the customs of the assemblies? They were simple and unadorned. They did not require elaborate preparations or special furnishings or distinct costumes, as did the tabernacle or the temple. *Such* shadows of the Old Covenant are now excluded under the New Covenant. Spirit and truth, not shadow and form, are now the marks of true worship. Can anyone point to any *such* custom among the assemblies as the wearing of special clothing? Christians met in simple homes in the evening immediately after the Jewish Sabbath, they sang the Psalms of Scripture without instrumental accompaniment, they determined their leaders without regard to genealogies – they did everything in a very simple and natural way. Their symbolic imagery was simple, and stated clearly the reality figured. They baptized with a simple pouring out of water symbolizing the baptizing with the Holy Spirit washing away

their sins. In the Lord's Supper, they broke a simple loaf of unleavened bread – symbolizing the sinless (unleavened) body of Christ, and they drank simple wine – symbolizing the blood which has taken on the sin (the fermenting agent) as Christ bore our sins in His body on the tree, then thoroughly paid the penalty, satisfied justice, and removed sin (through complete fermentation which thoroughly expends the fermenting agent and thereby purges the wine of the agent). Even under the Old Covenant, where special clothing was required, there was no legislation requiring that women cover their hair. Peter declared that placing the yoke of the Old Covenant ceremonials upon the Gentiles would be tempting God (Acts 15:10), and James agreed that this would be “troubling” the Gentiles (15:19), hence the Jerusalem assembly agreed this would be “subverting souls” (15:24) and they placed “no greater burden” (15:28) upon the Gentiles than what was absolutely necessary for love's sake to accommodate the weakness of uninstructed Jewish consciences. Then how much less authority is there for imposing a ceremonial restriction which was not even mentioned among the Old Covenant laws! There is historical evidence that both Jews and Gentiles may have observed some *such* “customs” regarding headcoverings. But the assemblies had no *such* customs. Anyone who might be contentious must here and now acknowledge that he was running contrary to the very spirit and truth of all Christian practice. Requiring special clothing was contrary to the spirit and truth of the Gospel. Period.

If the covering of long hair (verse 15) satisfies Paul's injunction for the woman to have her head covered, then for a woman to speak in assembly, she must literally have her hair clipped short like a man's, or shaved like a prostitute's, in order not to bring shame upon Christ (verses 4-6). Thus the requirement of long hair on a woman forever precludes the possibility of a woman ever speaking or teaching or praying or prophesying actively to the assembly. We might paraphrase his argument in this way: “Is it proper for a woman to pray or prophecy in the assembly? Of course not! Well, that would be the only reason for them to be uncovered wouldn't it? Of course it would! Therefore it is only natural for women's heads to be covered. If women were to speak, they would have to have their heads clipped or shaved, and that would be contrary to nature itself!”

Paul here requires only the natural covering of long hair for women. Those who require more than this must give some further reason than First Corinthians 11. Perhaps a newly converted prostitute should wear a wig or some cloth covering until her hair is grown. A balding woman (which is rare) should perhaps wear a wig or a cloth covering in place of the hair which she simply does not have. In our day, newly converted former feminists and lesbian sodomites must feel the need to cover their heads until their short hair is grown.

If the hair is considered the covering for the woman, then wearing a cloth veil as an additional covering is a matter of personal and cultural discretion. Obviously, there are moments when it may be culturally appropriate for a woman to blend with the cultural norm and wear a cloth veil. At other times, it may be appropriate to wear only the covering of the hair.

Men should be required to remove hats or hoods in assembly. Men with long hair should be required to cut their hair distinctively shorter than women. Just exactly how long their hair should be is a judgment call. The word for “long hair” [κόμη] means tresses of hair. Certainly any hair hanging down like a skirt over the ears and neck is too long for a man.

Summary of the Argument Concerning Women Praying and Prophesying

There are at least four possible explanations for this passage:

- 1) The passage is referring to prayer and prophecy elsewhere than in the gathered assembly.
- 2) The passage is referring to women passively and corporately participating in the prayer and prophecy.
- 3) The passage is referring to women actively and corporately participating in singing psalms, which is prayer and prophecy.
- 4) The passage is actually arguing for the covering of women from the already established teaching that women do not pray and prophesy in the gathered assembly.

All four explanations agree with the teaching of Scripture elsewhere regarding the role of women in the gathered assembly.

It may be a false dilemma to propose that the passage refers either to activity inside the gathered assembly or else to activity outside of the gathered assembly. The passage may actually refer to social contexts at all times – both in and out of the gathered assembly.