

What Does the Bible Say About Cutting Your Hair?

This Web site has been running for just over four years, and I am frequently asked why I have not written an article on the cutting of hair. As a matter of fact, I get more questions through my Web site about hair than I do any other issue. So why haven't I written an article until now? Well, there are several reasons.

First, this Web site was originally designed to tell friends and family why I left the UPC, and hair was not one of the reasons. Before I left the UPC I studied just about every doctrine in the movement, but hair was not important to me. I wasn't married, I didn't have immediate plans to get married, and I had no interest in growing my hair long, so I didn't get around to studying hair until later.

Second, I have always tried to not just duplicate what others have written. I may deal with the same topics, but I try to deal with them in different ways. Not better ways, just different. There are quite a few articles about hair on the Internet, so I didn't feel that writing an article was a pressing issue. (However, considering the amount of questions that I get about the subject, I must admit that my decision to not write an article was wrong).

Third, I like to deal with "first order issues" and stay away from second and third order issues whenever possible (I will define those terms in a moment).

However, two things prompted me to go ahead and write an article. The first reason, as I already mentioned, is that hair seems to be a very important issue for a lot of people. I receive more questions about hair than I do any other issue. The second reason is that the topic of hair has become even

more pressing in the last several years, thanks to the increasing popularity of “Holy Magic Hair” theology. ((If you don’t know what that is then be grateful. If you want to know what it is then check out <http://www.holymagichair.com> for more information (disclaimer: I have no association with that site).))

The Framework of Biblical Interpretation

Before we delve into 1 Cor. 11 it may be helpful to discuss the interpretive framework that I will be using. We all have a framework that we use to interpret the Bible. The framework is like the pair of glasses that we put on when we read the Bible, and all of the Scriptures that we read gets filtered through those lenses. For example, Roman Catholics might interpret all Scripture through the traditions of the Catholic Church, while evangelical Protestants might interpret all Scripture through the lens of *solo scriptura* (“by Scripture alone,” not by church tradition).

My framework, as it relates to 1 Cor. 11:2-16, is the same as the UPC and evangelical Protestants: The Bible, in its original manuscripts, is the inerrant, inspired Word of God. *Inerrant* means that the original manuscripts were without error, and *inspired* means that they were “God-breathed.” We do not have the original manuscripts of 1 Cor. 11, of course, but there is no ambiguity about what it says. The confusion is about what it *means*.

I do not think that 1 Cor. 11:2-16 should be ripped out or ignored (neither do any evangelical Protestants). I do not think that we should find ways of “getting around it” (neither do any evangelical Protestants). I believe that it was God-breathed and that it is just as important as the rest of Scripture (as do all evangelical Protestants). The idea that Trinitarians just want to rip it out and ignore it is a false

UPC idea that has no basis in reality.

First, Second, and Third Order Issues. What Are They, And What Do They Have To Do With Hair?

A moment ago I mentioned the term “first order issues.” I think it would be helpful to define that before moving on. ((Much of the material in this section was taken from a series of lectures given by Dr. Gary Habermas in “Theology 250: Fundamental Theological Issues,” at Liberty University. Dr. Habermas referenced “Christian Theology” by Millard Erickson at several points in this discussion. The lecture was given in a discussion format, and my interpretations of the material are not meant to be representative of Dr. Habermas’ or Mr. Erickson’s views.))

A first order issue is an issue in the Bible that is clear-cut. It is a direct statement. There can be no ambiguity. It is what it is. A good example of this is baptism. We are directly commanded to baptize in Mat. 28:18-20, and the Bible states on many occasions that baptism is the proper response to faith (Acts 2:38, 8:36-38, 16:15, 16:31-34, 22:16, 1 Pet. 3:21).

A second order issue is an implication. It is not directly stated, but it is implied. An example of a second order issue is the method of baptism. Should it be done by immersion or sprinkling? It is now commonly accepted that the word *baptizo* referred to immersion. ((Vine, W. E., Unger, M. F., & White, W. (1996). Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words (2:50). Nashville: T. Nelson.)) However, we also know from early church history that baptism by sprinkling or pouring was considered acceptable in areas with a limited water supply ((“[Didache](#)”). So does it matter? Is it a “heaven or hell issue?” This is a great example of a second

order issue.

A third order issue is a doctrine that is determined by inductive conclusions or general revelation. An example of this might be the debate about what baptism accomplishes. Does it actually remit sins? Is it just a symbol? Is a person spiritually regenerated during baptism or does it happen before (or after)? We all have opinions about issues like this, but good, godly men and women will have opinions that differ from ours. Why? Because Scripture is simply not clear about these types of issues.

So an example of a first order issue might be acknowledgement of the fact that we are *commanded* to baptize, a second order issue might be the *method* of baptism, and a third order issue might be what baptism actually *accomplishes*.

Of course, it goes without saying that different groups and individuals draw their own conclusions about the importance of certain issues. However, I think that all serious students of Scripture should agree that direct biblical statements—statements that are clear cut with no ambiguity about the translation or meaning—should receive priority over less clear portions of the text. This doesn't mean that we just throw out everything that isn't a direct statement, of course! Far from it! It just means that we recognize that we *should always use that which is clear to interpret that which is unclear, and we should keep the unclear in its place by never elevating these issues to salvation status and by recognizing that other Christians can form different opinions about issues like this and still be just as Christian as us!*

Now, some might say that *all* Scriptural issues are first order issues, but those people show through their actions that they do not believe that to be true. Those people do not baptize for the dead (1 Cor. 15:29), they do not greet their brothers in Christ by kissing them (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26), and they do not confess every sin that

they commit to other Christians (James 5:26). Instead, they recognize that the three things I just mentioned (and there are many more examples that I could have used) have cultural and practical elements that do not make them binding across time or in every situation. But when they hear someone say that 1 Cor. 11:2-16 was just for the Corinthians, or that it is not an important issue today, or that it meant veils and not hair, or any other interpretation that disagrees with theirs, then they immediately accuse those people of trying to “get around Scripture” and “rip out parts of the Bible!” Doesn’t that seem a bit hypocritical?

Finally, before moving on there is one very important thing that needs to be said about first, second, and third order issues. When we talk about these things we are *not* claiming that we simply cannot know what is true! The problem with second and third order issues is that we do not have enough *data* to make a conclusive determination. For example, if I lived in the ancient world then I would not be able to know the distance to the Sun. The answer is knowable, but it could not be calculated until the fields of science and mathematics reached a certain level of progress. It is the same with second and third order issues. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 has one definite, true meaning, but God in His divine providence has allowed some of the historical data to be lost over time. Until He chooses to make that data known again—perhaps through future archaeological discoveries—we will not be able to know the answer with certainty. The majority of the Bible can be clearly understood, and we should stand united around what can be understood while we wrestle with the things that cannot.

That’s All Well and Good, But How Does It Relate To Hair?

1 Cor. 11:2-16 is a second, if not third, order issue. No one alive today can be 100% certain of what it means. Godly,

conservative scholars throughout history—men and women who are seeking to follow God, not trying to get out of following Scripture—have studied the passage and come to completely different conclusions.

For example...

The MacArthur Study Bible concludes that the covering in 1 Cor. 11 is a veil and that the custom was local. He believes that the reference to hair in 1 Cor. 11:14-15 refers to the natural difference between men and women's hair, and that this natural difference is symbolic of the order of creation which the veil (or lack thereof) also symbolizes. I call this a "two covering solution" to the passage—the spiritual head covering is the veil and the natural one is hair. ((John Jr MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Word Pub., 1997, c1997), 1 Co 11:2 – 1 Co 11:16.))

The Ryrie Study Bible also proposes a two covering solution. Dr. Ryrie concludes that the covering in verses 2-13 is a veil and the covering in 14-15 is hair. He writes, "[A]s the hair represents the proper covering in the natural realm, so the veil is the proper covering in the religious." However, Dr. Ryrie does NOT believe that the custom was meant to be local to Corinth. Dr. Ryrie's view is almost identical to my own.

The Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary concludes that the passage is referring to hair, but they take the unusual view that the covering refers to wearing the hair up on top of the head. They also conclude that the custom was not meant to be local to Corinth.

The Believer's Bible Commentary proposes a two covering solution (much the same as the Ryrie Study Bible). They also conclude that the custom was not meant to be local to Corinth.

The Nelson Study Bible – New King James Version concludes that the covering in 1 Cor. 11:2-13 was a veil. It does not deal at all with 1 Cor. 11:14-15 or 16.

The Woman's Study Bible determines that the covering in 1 Cor. 11:2-13 was "some kind of hair covering—perhaps even a shawl." It hints that the custom was "especially important to the Corinthians because of the pagan and immoral influence around them," but does not directly state that the custom was meant to be local. It also does not deal with 1 Cor. 11:14-15 or 16.

The Complete WordStudy Dictionary (1 Cor. 11:5) says that the covering was used until a woman's hair grew long enough to cover her hair (meaning that women who had shaved their head before converting to Christianity would need to wear a head covering until their hair became long enough to cover their head).

It is important to remember that all 7 of these sources are written and edited by well-trained scholars. Yet at least four of them reach very different conclusions from the others, while two are silent on some of the most important points. So it is obvious that even leading scholars cannot determine exactly what Paul meant. Why? Because it's simply not clear. God has allowed the exact meaning to be lost with time.

And this is where I think the holiness apostolic movement has gone wrong. They have taken an issue that simply cannot be understood with any level of certainty and they have turned it into a first order issue. They have claimed that their interpretation—an interpretation that is at best very convoluted and at worst does not work at all—is the only correct interpretation, and then they have condemned those who disagree.

My Views

With all of that said, I do have my own views on the passage. I have studied it many times and drawn certain conclusions. The remainder of this article is going to be dedicated to an exegesis (interpretation) of the passage. Once I am done with that I will respond to a few common objections to my view. But

I want to make one thing clear before I even start: I do not claim to have the final answer. I do not think that this issue will be settled with any level of certainty until we get to Heaven. Nevertheless, I will share my conclusions for those who are interested.

Before I do, though, there is one other thing that's worth remembering: God's not going to send you to hell because you misinterpreted a passage of Scripture that no one alive today understands completely. If you're not cutting your hair out of fear then you're doing it for the wrong reason. Don't be afraid. Study the issue, draw your conclusions, and then trust in God's grace to cover you. I promise you that if the issue was that important to God then He would have made it unmistakably clear.

Exegesis ((All Scriptures are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.))

1 Cor. 11:2 – Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

The “traditions” referred to here are a synonym for God's Word, not the manmade traditions that are condemned at other places in Scripture ((MacArthur, Ryrie)). Paul is praising the church at Corinth for remembering the Word of God that he had previously taught them.

1 Cor. 11:3 – But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a

woman, and God is the head of Christ.

“But.” The one word that as a child I hated to hear. “You can go out and play...but...did you clean your room?”

There was one tradition that the Corinthians had been taught but were now forgetting: The tradition of the head covering. Paul is about to remind them in writing of a teaching that he had previously given to them verbally.

The tradition that he was reminding them of is this: There is a principle of headship that is active in the church—a natural order of things. God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of the man, and man is the head of the woman.

Now, a full discussion of the principle of headship is outside the scope of this article, but there are a couple of things that should be noted. First, the type of submission that is being discussed is not a willingness to be dominated. God does not dominate Christ. Christ is equal to God, yet He chose to willingly submit (Phil. 2:5-11). (This can be interpreted in either the Oneness or Trinitarian frameworks, it does not matter for our discussion). This ties into the second point, which is that men and women are equal in God’s eyes. One is not superior to the other. Gal. 3:28 says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” So this principle of headship is not saying man is superior to woman anymore than it is saying God is superior to Christ.

1 Cor. 11:4 – Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.

This is a key verse to the interpretation of the rest of the passage. Note that Paul’s instructions about head coverings only apply to a person who is *praying or prophesying*. The word

“prophecy” that is used here is the Greek *propheteuo*. This word has the primary meaning of “telling forth the divine counsels,” with a secondary meaning of foretelling the future ((Vine, W. E., Unger, M. F., & White, W. (1996). Vine’s complete expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words (2:492-493). Nashville: T. Nelson.)). The fact that 1 Cor. 11:2-16 is giving instructions for behavior in the church leads me and most scholars to conclude that this is referring to a person leading the church in prayer and preaching or prophesying to them. In the end it does not matter whether the prayer and prophecy is public, though, because, the point is still the same: *The teaching of head coverings only applies to when a person prays or prophesies.*

We can conclude, then, that a man is to have his head uncovered when leading the church in prayer or when speaking prophetically to them (preaching or foretelling the future). Again, if a person wants to extend this to private devotions then that is fine. Either way, the point remains the same.

1 Cor. 11:5 – 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.

The reverse of the doctrine for men is stated here: Women are to have their head covered when praying or prophesying. It should be noted that the word “uncovered” is the Greek word *akatakalyptos* which means, quite simply, “unveiled.” ((Vine’s))

If the woman refuses to wear this covering then she disgraces her head. This could mean either her husband or the woman’s own head. The Greek wording is ambiguous, and it is possible that Paul meant it that way. ((Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible

Commentary))

Just like in 11:4, the main thing to notice in the first part of the verse is that the instruction only applies to prayer and prophecy.

Paul adds an additional point in the second half of the verse, though. He states that the woman who does not cover her head while praying or prophesying is the same as a woman who's head is shaved.

There has been a lot of debate about this. The debates usually center around *why* it was considered shameful for the woman to have her head shaved. The most common explanation is that it was related to temple prostitution, but that is not certain. ((WordStudy, 11:5, says that the priestesses at the temple of Aphrodite cut their hair short, but I have not been able to find independent confirmation from secular sources.)) In the end, though, does the reason really matter? What matters is that it was considered shameful in Corinth in that time period for a woman to have her head shaved. It was not *universally* shameful for all women in all cultures and it was not *spiritually* shameful. The disgrace referred to here is a natural disgrace that the women in Corinth would have been able to easily understand.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that it was just as shameful in the spiritual realm for a woman to pray or prophesy with her head unveiled as it was shameful in the natural world for her to shave her head. He is using an example from the natural world (shaving the head) to illustrate a religious principle (wearing a head covering while praying or prophesying).

To summarize, the three things that we should take from this verse are:

1. The Greek word that we translate as "uncovered" means "unveiled" (nothing to do with hair).

2. The instructions still refer only to prayer and prophecy.
3. If a woman prayed or prophesied while unveiled then it was considered just as disgraceful as if she cut her hair off. We are not sure why it was considered disgraceful in Corinth for a woman to cut her hair short, but we do know that it was disgraceful. Again, the disgrace that came from cutting off the hair was a cultural disgrace, not a spiritual one.

1 Cor. 11:7-9 – For 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. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.

These verses again deal with the principles of submission and headship. See my note in verse 3 for some comments about this issue.

1 Cor. 11:10 – Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels

“Therefore” refers to the things just discussed, namely, the principle of headship.

There is something interesting to consider about this verse. If the “symbol of authority” (the covering) on the woman's head is “because of the angels,” then how could it possibly be hair? Hair might work well for a lady who has been a Christian for a long time, but what about the new convert? Do the angels

not know she is a Christian until her hair grows out? That just does not make sense.

The typical UPC response is, "God considers her hair long the moment she decides not to cut it." That's all well and good, but the head covering isn't for God, it's for the angels. So the idea that the covering is hair is not a coherent, logical interpretation of this passage.

On the other hand, the idea that the covering is a veil makes perfect sense. A veil can be put on when praying or prophesying and taken off the rest of the time. The angels can see when a veil is put on or taken off. A veil is the simplest explanation and the one that makes the most sense in light of everything discussed so far.

There is another thing that I must say about this Scripture. I regret to have to even mention it, but I feel that I must. The "symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels" has in recent years lead to the explosion of the doctrine that many are calling "Holy Magic Hair." If readers want more information on that doctrine then I encourage them to visit <http://www.holymagichair.com> (I am not affiliated with that site in any way). This is not the place for a full discussion of that doctrine, but I do think it will be beneficial to make a couple of brief comments.

When I interpret Scripture I follow several guidelines. One of those guidelines is to use the simplest interpretation possible, as long as that interpretation does not conflict with other Scripture. As the reader has already seen, I find the idea that the veil is the covering to be the simplest solution to this passage of Scripture and, since it does not conflict with other Scripture, it is the interpretation that I choose.

When we deal with the statement "because of the angels" there is a solution that is simple, Scriptural, and makes good

sense. Eph. 3:8-10 says:

“To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.”

This Scripture passage is saying that the mystery of “the unfathomable riches of Christ” is being revealed to “the rulers and authorities in heavenly places” through the church. In other words, the angels are learning about the mystery of Christ’s redemptive work by watching the church.

In light of that, 1 Cor. 11:10 has a very simple explanation: The head coverings, as an illustration of the principle of headship (God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of man, man is the head of woman) is one more way that the mystery is being revealed to the angels.

This solution is both simple and Scriptural. It does not require going to the occult for information, as some apostolic preachers have sadly done. It does not require telling story after story (all secondhand) of flying cars and thwarting of national revolutions all happening because a woman did not cut her hair. It does not require telling women that if they twirl their hair in the wind then their prayers get more power. No, it does not require any of that, because none of that is Scriptural. What *is* Scriptural is that the angels watch the church and desire to learn the mystery of the unfathomable riches of Christ. The principle of headship, as shown through head coverings, is one more way that the mystery is revealed to them.

1 Cor. 11:11-12 – However, 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

.Another reference to the principle of headship (see my note on verse 3). Paul is careful to remind the men that they are not independent of women, and that they are both dependent on God. This is a balance that is present in all of Paul's writings.

1 Cor. 11:13-15 – 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.

These three Scriptures have caused more confusion and debates than the rest of the passage combined.

The UPC and other holiness organizations use these Scriptures as the key to interpreting the rest of the passage. They insist that hair is the covering, and all the preceding Scriptures must be forced into line, no matter how convoluted that interpretation gets.

Is that what Paul was doing? Were the preceding 11 verses just meant to tell us that a woman's hair is her covering? If so, what does that mean? Does it mean that a woman should not cut

her hair, or just that she should wear it long? If so, how long is long? And for that matter, how short is short?

Let's take a look.

First, the word "uncovered" in this section is the same word used in 1 Cor. 11:5. It is *akatakalyptos*, and it means "unveiled." So verse 13 could read, "Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God unveiled?" In other words, "In light of everything I have just told you—the principles of headship, the reason for the head covering—is it proper for a woman to pray to God unveiled?"

Notice that the focus is still on prayer (and by implication prophecy).

Next, Paul makes an appeal to nature. He says, "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."

There are a couple of things that need to be said here. First, the word that we translate as "long" is the Greek word *komao*. The word simply means "to have long hair" ((WordStudy)) or "to let the hair grow long, to wear long hair" ((Vine's)). Some holiness preachers have insisted that the word *has* to mean uncut, but that is not correct. The word does not mean uncut. It means the same in Greek as it does in English. It is a relative word—things that are long are only long when compared to things which are short. The passage never defines what "long" is. Three inches? Three feet? Thirty feet? Paul does not say.

Second, the word *covering in 11:15* is a different Greek word than the words used for *cover* earlier in the passage. The word used earlier was *katakalypto* which means "to cover oneself" (Vine's) or "to be covered" (WordStudy) (in other words, within the context of this passage, to wear a veil). But the word used in verse 15 is *peribolaion*, which means "something

thrown around" (Vine's). It could mean a veil or other head covering or it could mean a mantle around the body, as it is used in Heb. 1:12 ((Vine's)).

What are we to make of this? Why would Paul use one word throughout most of the passage and then switch at the very end? Why would he talk about a covering that seems to obviously be a veil and then suddenly turn around and say that the hair is the covering?

Well, the possibility that makes the most sense to me is that Paul chose a different word because he was talking about a different type of covering. The first covering is the one that the woman puts on and takes off as needed in the church—the spiritual covering—while the second covering is the one given to her by nature—the natural covering. This is the position that Ryrie's Study Bible takes, and it is the one that seems the most sensible to me. It explains why Paul would use two different words for "covering," and it neatly interprets the passage without requiring people to jump through textual and logical hoops.

But why would Paul make an appeal to nature when trying to explain a spiritual concept? Well, Paul is actually known for doing that. In Athens Paul used the pagan altar "To an unknown god" to explain Jesus (Acts 17:23). Was Paul telling the Athenians that they needed to worship Jesus at that altar, or that the altar was Jesus? Of course not! It was just an illustration from nature that they could understand. Likewise, in the Epistle to the Romans Paul is famous for using the Roman idea of the natural law—a law that all people hold in common—to explain the relationship between the Gentiles and the Mosaic law (see Rom. 2:14-15 for one example).

1 Cor. 11:14-15 is another example of an appeal to nature. Paul had just spent twelve verses explaining the necessity of wearing veils while praying and prophesying, but before he left the subject he decided to throw in one last argument. He

reminded the Corinthians that even in the natural world women had hair that was longer than a man's and styled differently. This is something that has held true across all cultures in the world with very few (if any) exceptions. As a matter of fact, the differences in hair length and styling are so prevalent, even in cultures like ours where it is normal for women to cut their hair, that one would almost think it was something genetic. Perhaps even a part of nature. Exactly like Paul said!

1 Cor. 11:16 – But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

It seems obvious that Paul is saying that his teaching on head coverings is not limited to Corinth. Instead, Paul says that there is no other practice in the churches of God. In other words, the practice of the head covering was taught in all of the churches. Contrary to UPC rhetoric, most modern scholars agree that the practice was not meant to be limited to Corinth. It is also clear that all of the early churches practiced head covering. Their biggest debate seemed to have been whether or not virgins were excluded from wearing head coverings. ((Tertullian, "[On the Veiling of Virgins](#)")

On the other hand, it's important to remember that there are a couple of things in the passage that are cultural:

1. The shame that a woman with shaved hair felt. As I stated in my note on 11:5, the shame that a woman felt in Corinth when her head was shaved is not something that is transcultural. It seems clear that the shame mentioned in 11:5 is natural, not spiritual. The context of the passage does not demand that the shame be spiritual, and it is obvious that women in certain cultures do not feel shame when their heads are shaved. An American or European woman today is unlikely to feel

shame if she chooses to shave her hair, but apparently that was not the case in Corinth.

2. The statement “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” is a statement from nature, not religion. We know that is true because Paul says that it is. He openly and frankly says that he is appealing to nature. The natural differences in hair between men and woman are common across all cultures, but it is not spiritually commanded. It is simply the natural order of things. That is why Paul could point to the natural order of things to illustrate the spiritual order, like he did in Romans 1:18-21.

One final note on 1 Cor. 11:13-15

While I was researching this article I came across an interesting point. It was made by Dr. Robert Spinney in his article [“Should Christian Women Wear Head Coverings Today.”](#) Many of his conclusions were different than mine, but I still found much of what he wrote to be informative.

Dr. Spinney says that if the covering in verse 15 is the same as the covering in verses 5-6 then we should be able to use the words interchangeably. In other words, if hair is the covering that is being discussed throughout the entire passage, then we should be able to use the word “long hair” (for women) or “short hair” (for men) in place of every instance of the word “covering.” That makes sense, right? If the hair is the covering then the two words can be exchanged and it will still make sense. But let’s try that and see how it works out:

(4) Every man who [has long hair] on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.

(5) But every woman who [has short hair] while praying or

prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.

(6) For if a woman [does not have long hair], 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 [have long hair].

Now let me ask: Does that even make sense? A man is to not have long hair, but only while praying or prophesying? A woman cannot have short hair while praying or prophesying, but if she does then she should just cut all of her hair off? If a woman has short hair then it is the same as a shaved head? (One might ask how can she ever get her hair long if she keeps having to shave it because it's short!)

And what about the angels in verse 10? Are they unable to tell saved women from unsaved? Do they get confused when a saved woman with short hair prays or prophesies? And since when does the Bible punish sin by ordering more sin? If cutting the hair is a sin then cutting all of it off certainly doesn't make it any better!

And we haven't even touched on the "how long is long" question. Do the angels know how long "long" is? And what about short? How short is short? If long is uncut then short can be as long as we like as long as we trim the ends, right?

Does any of that even make sense? I think that the answer is obvious! Dr. Spinney's point is well made. The idea that hair is the spiritual covering simply does not make sense.

One last question: Should it be done today?

Should women wear head coverings today when praying or prophesying? I think it goes without saying that the matter should be left up to personal conviction. However, I strongly

oppose teaching a particular view of 1 Cor. 11 as normative for the churches, and here is why.

My interpretation is not necessarily the correct one. As I said in my discussion of first, second, and third order issues, we simply do not have enough data to know for sure what 1 Cor. 11:2-16 means. Great biblical scholars have come to very different conclusions. So if I take my interpretation (or anyone's interpretation) and try to enforce it on everyone else then I will be guilty of doing the exact same thing that the UPC has done. All it would do is cause more division within the church.

On the other hand, if future archaeological discoveries allow us to know the precise meaning of the passage then we would need to revisit our current practices. But we don't know when, or even if, that will happen. We don't know what state the Christian churches might be in then. In short, we simply cannot speculate on what the proper course of action would be. That would be a decision for godly men and women living in that time to make.

Objections

Aren't we commanded to pray at all times?

Q. 1 Thess 5:17 says that we should pray without ceasing. Doesn't this mean that we should always pray? And if so then doesn't that mean that women should always have a head covering on? And, since it is something that always should be done, then wouldn't the idea that hair is the covering start to make sense again?

A. I have heard this argument given in at least one UPC church, but there are a couple of reasons why it fails.

First, it is impossible to pray 24/7. It is not even possible to pray every waking moment. Paul's command in 1 Thess. 5:17

could be referring to prayer in the church since it is part of a series of exhortations to the church in Thessalonica (it is followed in verses 19 and 20 with commands to not “quench not the Spirit” and to not “despise prophetic utterances”) or it could mean to do everything with a prayerful attitude. Either way, I think most Christians would agree that the command is not to literally pray every second of the day, or even every waking second. We have to interpret the Scripture through the dual lenses of reason and common sense. God does not command us to do impossible things.

Second, the reference to praying in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 almost certainly refers to leading the church in prayer. There are two reasons for this:

1. The context of the passage is about order within the church gathering. The passage about hair sits at the beginning of a long discourse on order in the church. It starts with head coverings, goes to the communion dinner, and finishes with a discussion of tongues and prophecy in the church.
2. Spoken prophecy is by its very nature public. Prayer might be private, but prophecy is not. The two are linked together in this passage, indicating that the discussion is about public prayer and prophecy in the church setting.
3. Even if a person decides that Paul was referring to private prayer as well as public, it does not change the fact that a veil can be easily put on and removed as a woman starts and finishes her devotions.

Can't the Greek word *akatakalyptos* in 1 Cor. 11:5 still be referring to hair? Can't a woman's hair "hang down" in the

same manner that a veil would?

This is the interpretation proposed in the WordStudy dictionary, but it does not seem coherent to me. First, how long does a woman's hair have to be before it hangs down? Organizations like the UPC claim that it just means uncut, but there is no textual basis for that conclusion. Second, and more importantly, 1 Cor. 11:2-16 only deals with praying and prophesying. Is a woman supposed to grow her hair long to pray or prophesy and then cut it again? Organizations like the UPC claim that this is why a woman should simply never cut her hair, but again, there is no textual basis for that interpretation. Moreover, that is a very, very convoluted explanation. If Paul's goal was to tell women to not cut their hair then wouldn't it have been a lot simpler to just say, "Women, don't cut your hair"? In my mind, trying to make hair the covering for verses 2-13 is confusing, convoluted and ultimately incoherent.

Can't angels read our minds, so can't they see when a woman determines to not cut her hair?

Most of the angelic appearances in the Old Testament were "the angel of the LORD." This was something called a theophany—a bodily manifestation of God before the incarnation. The angel of the LORD, being God, could certainly read minds, but there is no Scriptural evidence that regular angels have that ability. If they could then it would defeat the entire purpose of wearing the head covering "because of the angels" (1 Cor. 11:10).

What about revelation?

Q. Isn't it true that God reveals things to those who have His Spirit, things that a non-Spirit-filled scholar may not be able to understand? And, if that is the case, then shouldn't

Spirit-filled Christians be able to understand the true meaning of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 while non-Spirit-filled Christians would remain deceived?

A. A person doesn't need revelation to understand the Greek language and Corinthian history any more than I need revelation to understand the English language and United States history. These are very natural things that do not require revelation.

Also, if revelation gives all Spirit-filled Christians the answers to all "disputable matters" (Rom. 14:1, NIV), then Spirit-filled Christians should not longer disagree about anything! But unfortunately we all know that is not the case. Even if we conclude that Oneness Pentecostals who have spoken in tongues are the only ones filled with the Spirit (something I do not agree with) then we can still see that interpretations vary. Oneness Pentecostals are fragmented on everything from the use of television to holiness standards, so I think that common experience leads us to conclude that the purpose of revelation is not to make us understand everything that there is to understand. Even Paul said that while on Earth we "see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV).

Finally, even people who are deceived can understand some truth. A deceived person is not automatically robbed of every truth that they have ever known or ever could know. There are many deceived people who recognize Jesus as Lord but are deceived on other points of theology. So the fact that a person is deceived does not mean that they are automatically unable to understand any truth in Scripture. A deceived person does not understand *some* truth, but they are not robbed of *all* truth.

You say you like to deal with first order

issues and stay away from second and third order ones, but don't many of your articles deal with the debatable issues?

It's very true that many of my articles deal with second and third order issues, but I always deal with them in the negative sense. The Oneness Pentecostal movement has taken many second and third order issues and elevated them to first order status, then claimed that their interpretation is the only correct one; that it is some sort of return to a truth that was lost for almost 2,000 years (as if God would really let that happen!). So when I deal with those issues my primary goal is to point out to people that they are second and third order issues and that they should not cause us to separate ourselves from other Christian groups.

You will not find me taking second and third order issues and writing articles claiming that my interpretation is the only correct one. I try to keep the focus on things that can be clearly understood—things that all Christians can stand united on.