

# CHURCH-ONLY COVERING: RE-EVALUATING THE BEST ARGUMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

In the eleventh chapter of First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul explained the Christian practice of head covering. The [first article](#) in our 3-part series considered the context for *when* that head covering practice was to occur. It found that Paul taught Christian women to use a covering while praying or prophesying (in other words, while communicating *to* God or *from* God). Christian men were to uncover their heads during the same activities.

The article pointed out that Paul did not mention the Sunday morning church service during his instructions about head covering, nor state that the local church gathering was the *only* location where coverings were to be worn. Instead, he gave clear indications that head coverings were also intended for use beyond the congregational church assembly. Further, Paul's specific *reasons* for covering did not exclusively relate to church gatherings. Instead, his reasons for covering applied wherever prayer and prophecy occur.

The article concluded that the Bible provides an open door for the use of coverings beyond the Sunday morning assembly. After all, Christian women often pray *outside* of church services! However, there is more to this discussion that's worth examining. Those who advocate for "church-only" covering often base their position on four main arguments. The previous article in this series did not consider or respond to those arguments. It's [only proper that we carefully consider other perspectives](#), and that's what this article is all about.

## 1. THE CONTEXT OF CHAPTERS 11-14

One of the most common arguments for church-only covering comes from the idea that *the local church gathering* is the sole focus of Chapters 11-14 in the book of 1 Corinthians. Some would say that although Paul did not mention a church assembly when he taught about head covering, the Corinthians' congregational gathering is *implied* by virtue of the placement of his head covering instructions within this particular section of 1 Corinthians.

We should start by fully agreeing that Paul did discuss the local church's assembly several times within these four chapters. Further, one of his gathering-related topics is the use of spiritual gifts, including prophecy. And indeed, a head covering was to be worn by women when they prophesied. So the question becomes whether Paul's reference to "prophecy" (1 Cor 11:4-5) automatically indicates that he's referring to a church gathering.

First, we should remember that New Testament prophecy occurred both within the local church *and* outside of the local church. Examples of prophecy happening outside the church gathering include Acts 11:27-28, Acts 19:1-7, Acts 21:10-11, and Revelation 1:3. The references to prophecy in 1 Corinthians 11 do not automatically place the entire passage within the context of a Sunday morning church service.

Second, note that Paul taught the Corinthians that women were not permitted to prophesy while in the local church assembly (1 Cor 14:34). This means that when using the spiritual gift of prophecy, their act of covering was *not* tied exclusively to the Sunday morning service. This creates a problem for those who say that Paul's headcovering instructions *must* (due to the presence of spiritual gifts) be *only* for a local church gathering.

Third, notice that head covering is taught to women only once in relation to prophecy (v.5), but is taught twice in relation to prayer (v.5, v.13). Prayer is likewise the more common of these two actions within a Christian's life, and it often occurs outside of church assemblies. Since prayer is not a spiritual gift<sup>1</sup> and Paul talks about covering for prayer in verse 13 (with no mention of prophecy), we can see that his instructions aren't restricted to the assembly's use of spiritual gifts.

Let's take a moment to step back and challenge the initial assumption behind this particular argument for church-only covering. Examples of *non-church* activities are actually easy to find in this four-chapter section. Chapter 11 itself includes practices that Christians are to follow in contexts outside of church assemblies.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 12 discusses spiritual gifts – including the gift of tongues (v.10), which could be used outside of the local church assembly (Acts 10:46, Acts 19:1-7). In fact, *most* of the "local body" dynamics taught in Chapter 12 apply *beyond* the moments that the body of Christ is gathered. Likewise, Chapter 13 describes the unique practices of agape love, which must often be expressed beyond the Sunday morning service.

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul's lists of spiritual gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

<sup>2</sup> Such as gender roles, gender-specific hair lengths, and gender interdependence.

While Chapter 14 does primarily discuss church gatherings, it's simply not accurate to say that every topic covered within all four chapters was intended for (and *only* for) the local church gathering. Moreover, Scripture itself doesn't specify that this range of chapters relates only to the local assembly. In fact, there are just a few verses within these chapters that refer to the act of Christians "coming together" and those verses are limited to only two topics: spiritual gifts and the Lord's Supper.

## 2. USING A SYNECDOCHE?

*Synecdoches* ("[sih-NEK-dah-kees](#)") are figures of speech in which a representative *part* is used to refer to the *whole* (or vice-versa). Among those who advocate for covering exclusively within church services, the phrase "prays or prophesies" (v. 4-5) is sometimes seen as a synecdoche. This three-word phrase would refer (figuratively) to the full range of activities that may happen during a church worship gathering.

The best way to get a sense of how synecdoches work is by looking at some examples. Below is a list of seven synecdoches, with a few comments after each one.

- "The White House issued a statement..." This phrase is obviously *figurative* since a literal "house" cannot talk or write. Instead, "the White House" refers to the United States President and/or the administrative staff communicating under his authority.
- "We do not war against flesh and blood" (Eph 6:12). Of course, war is waged against *enemies*, not against disembodied human tissue and bodily fluids (flesh and blood). In this verse, the phrase "flesh and blood" is a word picture used to distinguish enemies that are *human beings* from enemies that are *spiritual entities*.
- "I had escaped the officer's pursuit, but eventually the law came knocking at my door." Obviously, "the law" cannot literally knock on a door. A *person* who represented the legal system eventually caught up with the transgressor.
- "By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread" (Gen 3:19). Were the water droplets on Adam's forehead *literally* involved in the act of placing bread in his mouth? No, this verse can be understood only *figuratively*. Here, the sweaty brow refers to the effort needed to work the land, which leads to harvesting the grain, which leads to grinding the flour, which leads to making the bread, which leads to eating the bread. And that whole process is neatly summed up using this vivid synecdoche.

- “I want to thank our hired hands.” Here, the gratitude isn’t directed towards the literal hands themselves but to the entire person who is using his hands to do the work. Everyone understands that the whole *person* was hired, not just his hands.
- Matthew 3:5 says, “Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him [John the Baptist].” Was “the region around the Jordan” literally moving towards John the Baptist, or were the *people* in the region going to see him? Obviously, it’s the latter.

Synecdoches are a great tool. They allow larger dynamics to be summed up in a simple, often visual way. Their meaning is both intuitive and memorable. And the fact that they are intended figuratively (not literally) is easily apparent.

Synecdoches are *figures of speech*, so we should expect them to make sense *figuratively*. While there are no other Scriptural examples of “prays or prophecies” being used figuratively, the use of “flesh and blood” is repeatedly documented in the Bible to refer to human persons (2 Sam 5:1, Mat 16:1, Gal 1:16, Eph 6:12). It is *necessary* and *obvious* that “flesh and blood” be understood figuratively, but the same can’t be said for “prays or prophecies.” The phrase “prays or prophecies” makes perfect sense literally.

In fact, there is nothing in Paul’s teaching that makes it *necessary* for this phrase to be reinterpreted figuratively. Further, there’s no evidence from the passage itself that the phrase “prays or prophecies” is *intended* to be understood as a synecdoche. This is reaffirmed soon after Paul finishes his instructions about head covering. When he actually *wants* to refer to the congregational church gathering, he does so easily and plainly by inserting an additional phrase: “when you come together” (v.18).

For a moment, though, let’s suppose that “prays or prophecies” is intended as a synecdoche. We then have to face the problem that the passage does not indicate what exactly the synecdoche refers to. In other words, this phrase could easily refer to something other than “when a local church is gathered for worship.” Perhaps “prays or prophecies” is a shorthand way of referring to the entire range of Christian disciplines in a woman’s life. Or perhaps the phrase refers to all the spiritual activities of the female half of the local church. Perhaps it refers to something else.

In the big picture, re-interpreting “prays or prophecies” to become a code phrase for “local church gathering” simply doesn’t add up. What is the reason that Paul would use a synecdoche here, *and* hope that we figure out that he’s doing so, *and* hope that we correctly guess the meaning of the synecdoche?

Note that the phrase “prays or prophecies” indicates that just *one* of these activities is triggering the use of a covering. Paul did not use the word “and” in this phrase. Instead, the Greek word translated “or”<sup>3</sup> is a *disjunctive conjunction*, which indicates that prayer and prophecy are two *alternative* activities. One *or* the other is happening, but not both. Consider situations where a woman is covered for prophecy rather than for prayer. In that case, if she *isn’t* needing to cover her head for prayer (remember the disjunctive conjunction), does that situation really sound like a Sunday morning service? The potentially prayerless context for a covering argues against the idea that the phrase is a synecdoche referring to a church worship gathering.

In the end, the church-only theory falls apart when we come to verse 13. Even if the phrase “prays or prophecies” refers to a church gathering, Paul also says (v.13) that it’s proper for a woman to use a head covering simply while praying, apart from the synecdoche (that is, apart from a church gathering).

Dr. David L. Cooper (1886-1965) was the founder of The Biblical Research Society and published guidance for the practice of biblical interpretation. His “Golden Rule of Interpretation” is still quoted nowadays. It goes like this: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.” And the plain sense of “prays or prophecies” *does* make sense. Inserting an additional interpretive lens (a synecdoche) without linguistic or biblical support brings us further away from the straightforward reading of Scripture. This is unhelpful, especially when there are good contextual reasons *not* to do so (as described above). Just two chapters later, Paul tells us that God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor 14:33). All indications are that God’s Word means exactly what it says: the covering is intended specifically for times of prayer or prophecy.

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<sup>3</sup> ἢ, Strong’s #2228.

### 3. MEANING OF “THE CHURCHES”

In 1 Corinthians 11:16, Paul explains that his teaching is intended not just for the Corinthian church but is also followed by “the churches of God” as a whole. Among those who promote church-only covering, some believe that the phrase “churches of God” is a reference to “church gatherings.”

Does the word “churches” refer to “gatherings”? Churches are indeed known for their times of gathering. However, a church doesn't cease to be a “church” when its gathering-time has finished for the day. The word “church” refers to the Body of Christ (believers locally or universally), whether or not the members are currently gathered.

This can be seen in biblical examples of churches that exist as “churches” beyond their moments of gathering.

- Acts 14:27 includes this phrase: “they [Paul and Barnabas] arrived and gathered the church together.” In other words, at the moment of their arrival, the church hadn't yet been gathered, but it still existed.
- 1 Thessalonians 2:14 says, “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans.” Here, the “churches” were being persecuted beyond the time of their Sunday morning service.
- In 1 Timothy 5:16, Paul wrote: “If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.” The word “church” here refers to the local membership of believers that cares for the widows (beyond just Sunday morning).
- In Revelation 2-3, Jesus shares messages to various local churches. Note the large number of activities listed in these chapters, which the “churches” participate in *outside* of their local gatherings.

In Scripture, the local church refers to *people*, not just to *gatherings*. This distinction can be seen in our immediate context as well. Just two verses after Paul finishes his instructions about head covering, he again refers to the “church” as people, but this time he also provides an additional specification: “when you gather together” (1 Cor 11:18). This shows

that the word “church” by itself (v.16) doesn't automatically refer to the church’s gathering.<sup>4</sup>

In verse 16, Paul's goal is to promote the practice of head covering by showing support from two parties: himself (with his fellow ministers<sup>5</sup>) and the other churches. The focus of his argument is on the unity of Christians around this apostolic teaching, rather than on the act of gathering.

“The churches of God” in verse 16 simply refers to the local bodies of Christians, which exist in both gathered and ungathered states. This is consistent with how Paul uses the phrase “the churches” elsewhere in Scripture.<sup>6</sup> Verse 16 does not include any reference to their time of gathering. Therefore, we should not presume to manually add in that specification, much less *limit* his prior instructions to that (supposed) specification.

#### **4. THE SIMILARITY BETWEEN VERSES 2 AND 17**

A fourth common rationale for church-only covering points to the similar phrasing between verse 2 and verse 17. In verse 2, Paul wrote “I praise you” as he introduced the topic of head covering. In verse 17, he wrote “I praise you not” when introducing an issue occurring during the church’s gathering.

Those in favor of church-only covering observe that both verses have a shared focus on the issue of praise. Since verse 17 has an obvious church-gathering focus, they reason that the similar phrasing in verse 2 must indicate that it likewise has a church-gathering focus.

Some simple observation reveals that this reasoning is a *non sequitur*. This Latin phrase (meaning “it does not follow”) refers to a common logical fallacy in which a conclusion does not result from the preceding statements.

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<sup>4</sup> This is also seen in a phrase found just two chapters later in 1 Corinthians 14:23: “if the whole church comes together.” The word “if” (here translated by the Greek word *ean*) indicates that sometimes the “church” is not gathered together.

<sup>5</sup> He uses the word “we” in 1 Corinthians 11:16, which likely includes Sosthenes (1 Corinthians 1:1) and the other apostles (1 Corinthians 4:9).

<sup>6</sup> As demonstrated in 1 Cor. 7:17, 1 Cor. 16:1, 2 Cor. 11:28, and 2 Cor. 12:13.

“Verse 17 indicates a church-gathering context in verse 2.” Why is this idea a *non sequitur*? There is no principle of linguistics (nor principle of biblical interpretation) to show that *similar phrasing* proves each verse has a *similar context*. Neither is there a principle stating that an *obvious contrast* between the two sections (as Paul switches from praise to rebuke) indicates that both verses have *similar contexts*.

This logical fallacy can be seen by looking at comparable examples...

- “Your cooking skills are commendable, but your soccer skills are not commendable.” Does the similar phrasing here indicate that cooking and soccer are both happening in the same location? No, that line of reasoning would be a *non sequitur*.
- According to Acts 28:12-13, Paul started sailing after “3 days.” Four verses later, Paul met with a gathering<sup>7</sup> of Jewish leaders after “3 days.” Does the similar phrasing in both statements mean that the contexts are the same? In other words, when Paul was sailing, was he sailing with a gathering of Jewish leaders? When reading the narrative in the passage, this is obviously not true.
- In Revelation 2:18-23, Jesus praises the Church in Thyatira for their love, faith, service, and perseverance. He then rebukes them for engaging in sexual immorality with a false prophetess. Does this same pattern of praise-followed-by-rebuke indicate similar contexts? Was their love, faith, service, and perseverance happening in the bedroom of the prophetess? No, that conclusion is a *non sequitur*.

Obviously, Paul used the phrases “I praise you” and “I praise you not” to provide encouragement and rebuke. These two phrases weren’t intended to be used as context indicators. Those in favor of church-only covering attempt to pull location information out of two phrases that simply don’t specify location information. Instead, the functional similarity between verses 2 and 17 is that each verse introduces a biblical ordinance<sup>8</sup> and provides Paul’s evaluation (either praise or rebuke) of the Corinthians’ response to those ordinances.

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<sup>7</sup> This is the same word for “gathering” or “coming together” that Paul used in 1 Cor. 11:17.

<sup>8</sup> The word “ordinance” is used in verse 2 (KJV) in reference to head covering. The word is also used by Christians to refer to the Lord’s Supper (verse 17), as well as to baptism. All three practices were taught with apostolic authority and were used to physically symbolize meaningful spiritual truths.



Further, the similarity in wording between verse 2 and verse 17 isn't as extensive as it may first appear. In English, the phrase "I praise you" (v.2) shares three words with the phrase "I praise you not" (v.17). However, "I praise" is only one word in Greek, and the word "you" is actually absent from verse 17.<sup>9</sup> This means that both phrases have only one word in common.

When two different verses have just one word in common (which happens hundreds of times in the New Testament), that doesn't mean each verse has the same locational context. Besides, we don't normally reinterpret passages of Scripture by pulling in contexts from 15 verses away (the distance from verse 2 to verse 17), especially after the author has changed topics<sup>10</sup> during those 15 verses!

Instead, we should let Scripture itself define the context. The sections of 1 Corinthians 11 that actually do indicate context are the verses that describe *people taking action*. Specifically, covering happened when *women prayed*, and the Lord's Supper happened when the *church gathered*. The context is plainly given and doesn't need to be artificially created by forcing the phrase "I praise you" to do more than it was intended to do.

## CONCLUSIONS

Those who advocate church-only covering are fully welcome and accepted within the Head Covering Movement. In fact, they may well make up the majority of women who practice head covering in the modern evangelical world.

However, our responsibility as Christians is to always examine (and re-examine) our beliefs and behaviors in light of the authoritative teachings of Scripture. The first article in this series concluded that a church-only position is not something that the passage itself teaches. Rather, the passage indicates a practice that goes beyond times of the local assembly. This second article has reviewed the four best arguments for church-only covering and found that they all fall apart fairly easily (for *multiple* reasons) upon closer inspection.

If the practice of head covering is not intended exclusively for church gatherings, then that opens up a lot of potential time to use a covering during the week. So what specific times did Paul have in mind? The third and final article in this series will grapple with the key phrase "prays or prophesies," seeking to define the biblical boundaries of those two practices.

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<sup>9</sup> In verse 17, the absence the Greek word "you" (ὁμας) is conveyed in English by [Young's Literal Translation](#), which uses this phrasing: "I give no praise."

<sup>10</sup> Between verse 2 & verse 17, Paul changed topics from "head coverings" to "the Lord's Supper."