

Why A Head Covering Doesn't Cover The Face

Periodically, the Head Covering Movement comes across men or women who believe that “face covering” is included in the practice of “head covering.”

Why is this? They usually believe that the practice of *face* covering is supported by Scripture, or by historic Christian practices, or by their own theological concepts, or by certain writings outside of the Bible.

They are sometimes even referring to “full face” coverage provided by styles like the burqa/burka. And yes, they identify as “Christian” and are not promoting Islam.

Of course, it's true that some women have covered their faces in certain cultures, in specific situations, at various points in history, and for a variety of reasons. This includes women among several religions, some ladies in the Old Testament, and even some sisters in Christ (often many centuries ago).

Obviously, face-veiling is not the normal practice within most of Christianity today, including among those who practice head covering.

However, there's something more important than simply identifying which practices are “normal” among Christians of various locations and periods of time. Instead, we look to the authority of God’s Word to identify His direction for Christians of all times and locations.

So let’s do that now.

1. In 1 Corinthians 11:4, the Apostle Paul explains that a Christian man should not pray or prophesy with “something on his head” or “with his head covered.”

In this verse, Paul is using the Greek phrase *kata kephalē echōn*. It means: "having [something] down over [the] head.”

This wording is fairly vague. Indeed, the Greek phrase doesn’t specify *what* this

“something” on the man’s head actually is, and it doesn’t specify *how far* “down over” the head it would hang. Some have argued that Paul uses this phrase to prohibit men from wearing long hair (which matches up with his later instructions in the same chapter), or that he is prohibiting men from wearing cloth head coverings.

We can gain a little insight from the Old Testament. This same phrase is used in the Greek translation of Esther 6:12, which tells us that “Haman hurried home, mourning, with his head covered.” While the Greek translation of the Old Testament was not inspired by God (and therefore isn’t infallible), Esther 6:12 does provide some precedent for this phrase being used to refer to a man using something to cover his head. The context suggests that the covering was used to conceal Haman's identity, so it was likely a cloth rather than his hair. Similarly, many of the cloth head coverings worn by Christian women hang “down over the head.”

Now, could a head covering be large enough to completely cover a man’s face? That would depend on the purpose, size, and shape of the covering. Plutarch (writing in the same time period as Paul) uses a similar phrase to describe Scipio the Younger covering both his head *and* his face.

Plutarch’s wording, however, is somewhat different from the phrase that Paul uses.¹ Further, Plutarch actually specifies that the “face” was covered,² while Paul does not. Moreover, Scipio used a rather large garment (a toga) to cover both his head and face, while Paul has an open-ended restriction against male head coverings even if they don’t cover the face. Also, observe Scipio’s specific situation: he used his toga to temporarily hide his face from people while walking around in a new city – which is a completely different act than what Paul is describing. As the similarities break down between Paul’s head-covering and Scipio’s face-covering, note that even when Scipio’s fellow Romans used a toga in the style of capite velato (“with covered head”), their faces were still uncovered.

In summary, we can observe that Paul’s use of *kata kephalē echōn* makes no reference to covering the face. Indeed, the entire verse (and chapter) does not mention the face at all.

¹ Paul used: *kata kephalēs echōn*. Plutarch used: *kata tēs kephalēs echōn to himation*.

² Because the Greek phrase does not inherently imply that the face was covered.

Those who argue for face-veiling cannot prove their position from 1 Corinthians 11:4. Instead, the one thing we know from this verse is that the man should not have something covering his head while he's praying: not a toga, nor a hoodie, nor a hat.

2. In 1 Corinthians 11:5-7 & 13, Paul teaches the practice of head covering by using the verb *katakalupto*.³ This word means: "to conceal or cover over."

The Greek word *katakalupto* is a compound word: *kata* means "down" or "over" and *kalupto* means "to cover" or "to conceal."

This word, by itself, does not refer to covering the face – or even covering the head. In other words, the definition of *katakalupto* doesn't specify *what* is being covered, nor what something is being covered *with*. Here are two examples of this word being used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament:

- Jeremiah 51:42 uses this word to predict that Babylon will be *covered* with waves.
- Ezekiel 32:7 uses this word to explain that God will *cover* the heavens.

The Greek translation of Isaiah 6:2 is another passage that uses *katakalupto*. In contrast to 1 Corinthians 11, however, this verse in Isaiah does specify that "faces" were covered. In further contrast with 1 Corinthians 11, the faces in Isaiah weren't human faces, and they weren't covered with a cloth. Again, whenever *katakalupto* is used, the context will specify *what* is being covered. This dependency on context is

³ Various forms of this verb are found in these four verses. Translated literally, they are...

Verse 5: "uncovered"

Verse 6: "covers" and "let her be covered"

Verse 7: "to cover"

Verse 13: "uncovered"

seen in the use of other covering-related words as well.⁴

Fortunately, finding the context is easy enough: 1 Corinthians 11 repeatedly lets us know that the “head” is being covered (or uncovered). Specifically, Paul makes no mention of covering the face, and we’ve already seen that face-covering is likewise not included in the word’s definition.

Because the definition of *katakalupto* is “cover over” or “conceal,” Paul probably had in mind a head covering that is more extensive than just a wide headband. But could covering the “head” also include covering the ears? The face? The eyes? The neck? Or does *katakalupto* just refer to a cloth that “conceals” the top of the head and then flows “down over” the back of the head?

It would probably help to step back a bit and recognize that the word “head” obviously *can* include the ears, the face, and the eyes (as in Matthew 14:11, which mentions John the Baptist’s head on a platter). The word “head” can also be referenced *separately* from the “face” (in Matthew 6:17, the “head” is *anointed* but

⁴ The negative version of *katakalupto* is also used in 1 Corinthians 11, and translated as “uncover” (verses 5 and 13). Philo used this same word when he wrote *Special Laws*, which includes a reference to a woman who had her “covering (κάλυμμα) of her head” removed. The word κάλυμμα means “to cover” or “to conceal” and can be applied to such things as...

- a head-covering (as Philo specified)
- a tablecloth (see Plutarch’s *Moralia: Quaestiones Convivales* 642e)
- a face-veil (see 2 Corinthians 3:13-16)
- a headband or hairband (see Euripides’ *Bacchae* 695)
- the husk or shell of a fruit (see Theophrastus’ *Historia Plantarum* 3.3.1)
- leather or skin (see Numbers 4:10 [LXX](#))

This word for “covering” wasn’t used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. However, we see that it likewise requires additional context in order for the reader to identify *what* is being covered, since that information is not included in the definition of the word.

the “face” is *washed*). Similarly, putting “burning coals on his head” (Romans 12:20) obviously means that the coals would be placed *on top* of the head (similar to a typical head covering), and not over the face. And when “crowns” are described as sitting “on the head” (Revelation 19:12) then we know that they are not covering the face (also similar to a typical head covering).

This difference between “head” and “face” is referenced by Tertullian, an Early Church leader who lived less than a century after Paul. In Chapter 17 of his work entitled *On the Veiling of Virgins*, he explained a noticeable difference between Christian women and a certain group of pagan women: the Christian women covered their heads while the pagan women “cover not only the head, but also the face.”⁵ Back then, a Christian’s head covering generally did not cover the face.

3. Other forms of *katakalupto* were used to refer to a head covering as distinct from a face-veil.

The Shepherd of Hermas is an early Christian piece of literature, probably written within 50 years of the Book of Revelation. While this fictional work was not inspired by God, we can see how certain Greek words were used during that time period.

In “Vision 4” of *The Shepherd*, the following statement [is found](#) in chapter 2, verse 1:

...“behold, there meeteth me a virgin arrayed as if she were going forth from a bridal-chamber all in white and with white sandals, veiled up to her forehead, and her head-covering consisted of a turban...”

In the phrase “veiled up to her forehead,” the word “veiled” comes from our same word *katakalupto*.⁶

⁵ Tertullian himself believed that the uncovered faces of women tempted angels and caused them to fall. Because of this, he actually promoted face-covering (as well as ear-covering, neck-covering, and [other unbiblical beliefs](#)). But again, the point here is that he felt the need to specify the “face” as distinct from the “head” (notice the phrasing: “not only the head, but also the face”).

⁶ The spelling of Greek words often changes (sometimes dramatically) based on their usage. In this phrase, the spelling is adjusted to [katakakalummēnē](#).

As we learned earlier, *katakalupto* can be applied to almost anything that's covered. If it is used here to refer to a veil that covers the woman's face "up to the forehead," then we see that her face-veil is limited to her face. It is, explicitly, *not* the same garment as her head covering. Again, head coverings are typically not face coverings.

Further, consider that another translation of *veiled up to her forehead* is actually: "covered down as far as her forehead."⁷ That wording doesn't sound very much like a face-veil. Instead, it would describe a head covering.

What kind of head covering could that be? The very next phrase explains: "her head-covering consisted of a turban [[or hood](#)]."

Interestingly, the word "head-covering" here is actually just a noun derived from *katakalupto* (yes, this word shows up again!). This consistency in wording further identifies the "head-covering" as the garment that goes "down to the forehead." In essence, the author is saying that the head covering *does not* cover the face. This aligns with the fact that there is no reference to her "face" in this passage from *The Shepherd*.

We may wonder about the exact style of this lady's "turban" or "hood." The word is

Why is *katakekalummenē* spelled so differently from *katakalupto*? The changes indicate grammatical information about the word.

The specific spelling of *katakekalummenē* indicates that the word is: a participle (verbal adjective), used in the perfect tense (similar to the past tense, but refers to a completed action with ongoing results in the present), using the middle or passive voice, in the nominative case, singular, and feminine.

⁷ "Veiled up to her forehead" can also be translated as "[veiled to her forehead](#)." The direction of "up" is not specified in the Greek. Instead, the Greek word translated "to" means: "until" or "as far as."

The word "veiled" simply translates *katakalupto*, which means "concealed" or "covered over/down."

Combined as a phrase, we have: "covered down as far as her forehead."

translated from a Greek word that means: *mitre, turban, snood, headband, or head-dress*. But whether the woman was wearing a turban or hood isn't our main concern.⁸ The point here is that these pieces of clothing were clearly items that were placed on top of the head, without covering the face.

In essence, this passage describes a lady "covered down to her forehead, and her covering was a hood." Instead of *The Shepherd* providing support for face covering, we see (again) that *katakalypto* was used to refer to a head covering that does not veil the face.

4. Paul describes a covering that is worn "above" the head (not "over the face").

As mentioned earlier, 1 Corinthians 11 doesn't mention the face at all, much less the face being *covered*. But we also have additional clues about the location of the covering described by Paul.

According to 1 Corinthians 11:10, "a woman should wear a covering on her head to show she is under authority" (NLT). The NASB and NKJV likewise use this phrase: "on her head."

Young's Literal Translation translates the phrase as "upon her head" and the NIV says "over her head."

All these English translations reflect the fact that the Greek word is commonly translated "upon" or "above."

This wording seems to focus on the location of the covering vertically "above" the "head" (rather than around the face).

5. Does the cloth head covering wrap around her head, or does it cover over her head from above?

⁸ For further insight, consider the book [Roman Women's Dress](#) by Jan Radicke (Kiel University), available for free [by the publisher](#) (see PDF page 481).

In 1 Corinthians 11:15, the Apostle Paul teaches that a woman's long hair is given to her for a "covering."

This covering-made-of-hair comes from the Greek word *peribolaion*. It is a completely different word than Paul uses when describing the covering-made-from-cloth. The word *peribolaion* was often used to refer to objects that were "thrown around" or "wrapped around" somebody or something.

Paul says that a woman's long hair was given to her by God [for the purpose of wrapping around](#) her head. Similarly, a face-veil would have *wrapped around* her head. But Paul did not use this "wrapped around" term when describing the cloth head covering. Instead, he described a head covering that "covers over" the head from *above*.

6. 1 Corinthians 11:5-6 says there's a connection between uncovering her head and shaving off her hair.

Verse 5 describes the similar disgrace of two situations: (1) a woman shaving her head and (2) a woman praying or prophesying without a head covering.

The situation continues in Verse 6, in which a woman's hair would get "cut short" or "shorn." In other words, a head that's bare (it has no cloth-covering) then becomes even more bare (it has no hair-covering).

In both verses, notice that all the action happens on the top of the head (rather than around the face).

In fact, the logic of this passage breaks down if the cloth covering *were* to wrap around her face. Uncovered women don't have *facial* hair that could be "cut short" or "shorn" – and they don't typically wear hairstyles that cover their faces. Therefore, Paul's connection between "uncovered" and "shorn" exists only if the covering is *on top* of her head.

7. Some people may use 1 Timothy 2:9 to argue for face-covering.

In the King James Version of the Bible, this verse is rendered:

“In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array.”

For those who promote face-covering, the theory here is that an uncovered face is immodest. Face-veiling would then support the concept of “shamefacedness.”

Interestingly, apart from the KJV, it is actually rare to see any of the older English Bibles use the word *shamefacedness* in this verse. Those published *before* and *after* the KJV normally used “shamefastness” instead.

Further, the definition of the archaic word “shamefacedness” actually referred to having a humble expression, not a shamed face (nor covered face). Though the term would seem to be a compound word (with “shame” and “face”), the Greek word behind “shamefacedness” makes no reference to the face.

This becomes more evident when considering the large number of Bible translations that translate the word as “modesty.”⁹ Similarly, when the same Greek word appears in the [Old Testament](#) (eg, Proverbs 15:33 and Proverbs 22:4), it often is translated as “humility.” Ultimately, the word “face” shows up in 1 Timothy 2:9 only due to a unique word choice by the translators of the King James Version.

CONCLUSIONS

Paul could have specified that Christian women were to cover their faces, but he simply didn't.

Why not? Because the principle of the passage is *headship*. And so the *symbol* relates to the head, not the face. This position is supported by the amount of [artwork from the Early Church and beyond](#) showing the uncovered faces of Christian women.

⁹ To clarify, I am not suggesting that the practice of head covering is related to modesty. Please see [our article](#) on that topic.

For those who believe that face-covering was a standard part of Corinthian culture, it should be remembered that any need to cover the head (much less the face) was [not found in that society](#). And as Paul corrected women who prayed without a covering, he likewise corrected men who prayed with a covering. Yet, the likelihood of Corinthian men praying with veiled *faces* is even smaller.

True, covering the face is not *forbidden* in Scripture. In other words, for any women in Christian history who covered their faces, they were not sinning by doing so.¹⁰ But neither is face-veiling encouraged by Scripture, much less commanded.

Indeed, 2 Corinthians 3 tells us that “we are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face.” Instead, “we all, with unveiled faces, are reflecting the glory of the Lord and are being transformed.”¹¹ May that be true of you and I!

¹⁰ Though if they were covering only because someone taught face-covering as a command from God, that teacher was at fault for misteaching Scripture.

¹¹ The broader context of this passage, quoted here from the Christian Standard Bible, uses the word “veil” in both the physical and metaphorical senses. The physical veil is used in reference to the “face,” while the metaphorical veil refers to the “heart.”