

Why should ladies wear headcovering in church?

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The Headcovering - 1 Corinthians 11:2

More and more today the custom of ladies wearing a headcovering when they come to public worship is fading away. About thirty years ago nearly all women wore hats in church. Very few women would have thought of going to Church without having their heads covered. Then among the ungodly and especially in the more middle class congregations of the ecumenical churches it became acceptable to come without a headcovering. Then with the advance of the years more and more evangelical congregations have accepted ladies coming to Church without a headcovering until it has become a rarity in some places to see women with hats in Church. And it has become so common to see ladies without hats that even some who have held on to the custom of the headcovering are now questioning and wondering if it is really necessary at all. Sometimes you get people asking whether they should wear a hat at this meeting or that meeting and it betrays the fact that they have never really understood the principle behind the headcovering. They have never really understood what the Bible has to say about this subject and so they are confused about when the headcovering should be worn. But we should not only do what the Bible says but we should understand why we do what it says so that if we were to be in a situation where we were attending a Church whose practice is for ladies not to wear hats we would not be tempted to fit in with their custom. The Westminster Confession of Faith which is the adopted standard of the Free Presbyterian Church says "the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men" So the worship of Lord is to be conducted according to the divinely revealed guidelines. In this chapter we are told about two essential aspects of public worship - headcovering for women and the observance of the Lord's Supper. Unfortunately the regulations concerning headcovering have either been misinterpreted or through expediency have been relegated to a local Corinthian custom. But the changing customs of today do not make any difference to the Word of God. The Word of God does not change and its authority over us does not change. So I want to take a few minutes today to show you what the word of God does say about this matter so that we might be clear why it is that in this Church that ladies wear a headcovering at worship.

I The Outline of the doctrine

First of I want us to do an outline of what the chapter itself says. Notice first of all what it says in verses 4 and 5 "Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven". Paul starts off here by commending these Corinthians for keeping the ordinances that have been delivered to them. In these ordinances that had been given to them there was a contrast made between men and women when they are worshipping the Lord. Indeed the Word of God tells us that there should always be a difference between the way that men and women appear. This day of unisex clothing is not in accordance with the Bible's standard for dress and appearance. But we want to keep with the subject of headcovering and we see how that women when they worship are to have their heads covered and men are not to have their heads covered. Men do not wear hats the way that they once did. Once nearly every man had a cap but the

man should not wear his cap when he comes to worship the Lord. Maybe you wondered where that custom came out of, where a man would take off his cap when he comes into Church. Well here is the reason - it is the command of Scripture. But it is equally the command of Scripture that a lady does wear a hat or a veil or a headcovering of some kind. There is no doubt about that. A lady who comes to worship the Lord should come with a headcovering and that is the word of God. But then the word of God goes on to give us the reasons why the lady should wear a headcovering. There are a number of reasons the word of God gives.

The first thing is the argument of authority. The third verse of this chapter is the very heart of the apostles argument here. He is speaking about God's order and he says three things here. He says the head of Christ is God, then he says that the head of the man is Christ and then he says that the head of the woman is the man. Now as far as Christ being the head of man I don't think you will argue with that. There are some of you who are not saved and you don't want Him as your head but I don't think even you would say he has no right to be your head. But then it says the head of Christ is God. You say but surely Christ and God are equal. How then is God the head of Christ? Well they are equal in one sense. But one time the Lord Jesus once said "My Father is greater than I". The Father was greater than Christ in regard to function. God the Father speaks of Christ as "My servant". The Lord said he came to do the will of His Father. They are equal in essence but Christ was subordinate in function. And you think of that when it comes to the relationship of the man and the woman. They are equal. The Bible is the great liberator of women. In the days of the Bible women were second class citizens but Paul was saying they are equal with men but the man has been given a prominence in function. He is the one who holds the authority and the responsibility. Now that is what Paul is saying but then I want you to see how Paul says that should be reflected in public worship. Verse 4 uses the terms praying and prophesying and the indication there is that he is speaking of public worship. And what Paul says here is that if a man appears in the meeting with his head covered he has abandoned the place of authority God has given him and if the woman doesn't wear a headcovering it is because she is fighting against the divinely ordered place that God has given her. And that has been the agenda. That is why the wearing of headcovering has been abandoned in these days of women's lib. The woman doesn't see why she has to be different from the man. Well the Bible makes a difference. It is not a difference in status. There is neither male nor female, bond or free in the eyes of God in that sense but there is a difference in the function God has given each sex and that is to be reflected in worship and Paul drives this home very strongly here. Sometimes we lose the impact because we are not just familiar with the conditions when these things were written but Paul is indicating that it was a disgrace for a woman to worship without a covering. Paul says in verse 5 "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven". He says it is as if she had her head shaven. The image of having the hair shorn or cut with a razor is a very significant one here. The cutting of a woman's hair in this way at this time was often the mark of adultery or prostitution. It was used not only among the people of Israel but among other people as well to identify a woman who had been involved in some kind of fornication. Now Paul is saying that a woman who comes to Church with her head uncovered is like carrying the mark of a fornicator. Now that is strong but that is what he is saying here. There is no greater shame than that. And to avoid shame a woman should have her head covered.

But not only is there the argument of authority but the second argument of glory. This argument is based on two premises. The first is that man was the image and glory of God and the second is that the woman is the glory of man. Now what Paul is saying is that since woman is the glory of man then her head must be covered because when you are worshipping God the glory of God is what is to be seen. Man's glory is not to be seen but

God's glory. Now Paul is not talking here about marriage but about creation. Taking the first argument where the man has an authority in a marriage somebody might say well then it is all right for a single woman to have her head uncovered because she is not subordinate to a man in a marriage. But Paul now closes the loophole. He is saying that because she was taken from a man she is the glory of the man so that glory has to be covered in worship. So this is not only for married women but for single women too.

Then Paul uses a third argument. It is in verse 10 where he says that the woman should have her head covered because of the angels. Notice the phrase "For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels". The word "ought" there speaks of obligation and the word power in the Greek is used in a way which indicates a symbol of authority. The headcovering is the symbolic recognition of authority. The verse says that the woman must have it. But then he goes on to say that she ought to have it because of the angels. Now that is a hard phrase and there have been all sorts of explanations. The angels could be the ministers because the word angel in Greek just means messenger but if we take them as supernatural angels perhaps it means that the woman who is obedient and wears a headcovering is an example to the angels. Or it may be that since the angels are very reverent beings and it may be because it offends the angels to see irreverent worship.

But at the conclusion of it all Paul asks the question "Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?" The answer to that question is no! And I think that is quite plain from the Scriptures.

II The Objections to the doctrine

But having outlined the doctrine let us come now to the objections to the doctrine. When you face people with what the word of God plainly says they come up with all sorts of excuses. Some Christians have just come to the point where they think it is ridiculous to require it. In America, what otherwise are the most sound of Christian, women would not dream of wearing a headcovering. How has it come about? How do they explain the Scripture here?

Well the most common explanation that I have come across is that the woman's hair is her covering. Indeed it says that in verse 15 "But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering". Well the hair of a woman is a covering but is obvious from the passage that Paul is arguing for another covering over the hair. To argue that the hair is all the covering a woman needs is a classic example of not taking the whole passage into account. If you take the whole passage and take hair as a covering and write that in it becomes ridiculous because a man is not to have a covering when he worships the Lord. But if the hair is a covering that would mean that a man needs to shave all his hair off to be able to worship God. Now there has been no instance in the history of the Church when anybody has ever suggested that men need to be bald to worship God. Then look at verse 6. If you say that hair is the only covering a woman needs this verse becomes non-sensical - it would say "If a woman did not have any hair on her head then her hair was to be cut off". It makes nonsense of the thing. How can you cut off hair that somebody hasn't got? But you would have to say that if you say that hair is the only covering a woman needs. Actually when Paul says her hair is given her for a covering. The word "covering" there is a different word in the Greek from the one used before in the passage. There are different words for covering. Paul is not talking about the same thing when he speaks of the hair being a covering as when he speaks about the headcovering. This word here simply means that which is thrown

around. So her hair is simply that which is thrown around her head and that is a description of what hair is. But it is not the covering that the woman needs for worship. That is different and it would do some of God's people good if they would actually look at God's word rather than pick something out to make an excuse. They do not look at the passage and they do not apply what they say and serious scholars do not use that reason to justify not wearing hats at all. Most of them know it won't hold water.

But then there is a second argument that is used and that is that headcoverings are certainly commanded in the Bible but that was for Paul's day and it was to do with the customs in Corinth but it is not for today. They say that prostitutes in Corinth went about with uncovered heads so Paul was telling the Christians in Corinth to make sure they were not like them. But they say this was only to do with Corinth and not with us. Well once you start arguing along those lines you are on very dangerous ground indeed. That is the reason that people give when they say that homosexuality is all right. They can't deny that the Bible is against it. They can't deny that Paul and the New Testament is against it but what they say is that Paul was a product of the age in which he lived and so what he says doesn't apply today. But what is to stop you saying that the ten commandments were a product of their age. What is to stop you saying. Moses had particular problems to deal with among the children of Israel there at Sinai and God gave him these commands but they don't apply today. I want you to notice what Paul said when he wrote his letter. It wasn't just to the Christians at Corinth. He says in chapter 1:2 who he was writing to and he says "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord". So this isn't just to do with the Church at Corinth - this is to do with all who in every place call upon the name of the Lord. Paul never says it is just for women at Corinth. He was writing here under inspiration of the Spirit of God to every place and to every age.

Some people say well God does not look on the outward appearance but God looks on the heart. Of course that is right. But outward appearance should convey inward condition and if you want to maintain a defiance of God's word on this then your outward appearance is betraying your heart. And the verse does not say that God does not look on the outward appearance. It says that man only looks on the outward appearance but God looks on the inward and the outward. Many people are just making an excuse because of the fashion. There are many Churches which are so concerned to be trendy and relevant that they don't want anything that makes them different from the world. They go along with the fashions of the day but when God's people start to conduct themselves by what is fashionable rather than by what the word of God says we are in deep trouble indeed. There can be no reasonable doubt to anyone who looks at this with unprejudiced eyes that the word of God commands headcovering for ladies at worship. We see the objections to this doctrine

III The Ordering of our practice from the doctrine

Because this is where a lot of people get confused. For example there were ladies who would not question that they should wear a headcovering in the Church building but then there are other worship services and they are not in the church building and they wonder should I wear a hat? Should I wear a hat at the field service or the open-air? Should I wear a hat at the children's meetings in the local hall? Well as we have looked at what the word of God says I think we have seen that the thing that God is thinking of is not the building where the meeting takes place but the purpose of the meeting. Paul was writing at a time when purpose built Church buildings did not exist- he is speaking here of public worship wherever it takes place. If a woman is in a

meeting where prayer and prophesying or the teaching of God's word is taking place then she should have a hat. Now that might be a gospel concert but if it is opened with prayer and closed with a little word then the ladies should have their headcovering on. Now it might be a Church hall or a school or a recreation hall or in an open-air meeting. Some people would even say that headcovering should be maintained even in private worship and that is a debatable one but what we can say is that wherever public worship is maintained there should be the use of the headcovering.

Then there are people that say well these hats are just style items. These people with hats make a display of themselves and the one who has the biggest brim and the most feathers and the fashionable colour and when somebody comes in as a stranger they are put off by that. Well unfortunately there is a degree of truth in that. Sometimes the headcovering is used as a fashion statement. And then sometimes there are hats that would hardly qualify as a headcovering at all. I have seen girls put a bow in their head and claim that was their hat. Well there are certainly fashion considerations and I think it is wrong that a hat should become a thing of display. When it gets to the place where there is a rivalry over the fashion of hats that is wrong but when you weigh up what the Bible says it is not as wrong as coming to Church with no headcovering at all. And we should remember too that the word used in 1 Corinthians 11 speaks of an ample covering. It is to cover the woman's glory and not to enhance it. But let us not be proud because the headcovering is worn. Is it worn because of convention or because of obedience to the word of God?

There was once a verse that was written which said,

*They of the Church and they of the world
Journeyed closely hand and heart
Till none but the Master who knoweth all,
Could tell the two apart.*

How true that is and how often is it that the fashions of the world tend to spill over into the Church. Sometimes people use the freedom and liberty of Christians as an excuse but it is only when we are submitted to the rule of the Lord that we have true liberty. The Lord said "Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you". Now Paul asks this question and I want you to put it to yourself in the light of what we have seen in the Scripture "Judge in yourselves: Is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered". You know the answer to that. What must we do? We must act and I think we should do something else we should influence other Christians with what we have learned. There are multitudes of Christian women today and they may be ignorantly disobeying the word of God. We need to reverse this trend. We need to see God's people dictated to not by the fashions of the world but by the precious Word of God.