

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Headship, Hair And Hats I Corinthians 11:2-16

Today we take on the Herculean problem of the relationship of women to men and to the local church. I will attempt to solve in one short lesson what the church has been disagreeing over for two thousand years. In the attempt to deal with the question of whether women should wear some kind of head covering in local church worship, we may forget that the main teaching of this section of Scripture is male headship and female submission and how this relates to women ministering in public. The hat issue, while important, is only incidental to the main thrust of this passage.

Not everyone is going to agree with me on this subject. My wife has already let me know she loves me even though she disagrees with my interpretation of a head covering. Perhaps as we wrestle through this passage, you will at least be tolerant toward my position. Because there is so much disagreement over this issue, I cannot be dogmatic on the head covering, but I can state that women wearing a head covering in certain situations is my personal preference. Each of us must come to our own convictions on this issue and show love and tolerance toward those who disagree.

The matter of a head covering has aroused much controversy and emotion, especially in the modern, western church. Some see a head covering as a mark of orthodoxy and spirituality. Others see it as a matter of legalism and inconvenience. Still others see a hat as a matter of fashion and others find wearing a hat is distasteful. Some feel the issue is inconsequential, for it is only mentioned once in Scripture, and we should be putting our time on doctrines and practices which are more life-transforming. Yet, since I am going verse by verse through the Book of First Corinthians, I have to deal with it. This may be the first and last time you will ever be taught on head coverings. You may remember this sermon and forget all the other sermons I have preached.

Last year, Carol and I went back to Grace Church in Roanoke, Virginia for its 50th anniversary. I pastored this church for 16 1/2 years, and it was exciting to go back to renew old acquaintances. When being introduced by a very faithful elder of that church, he said, "Dr. Arnold preached the Word of God faithfully to us for years and even preached on hats!" I preached there 16 years and have been away for 15 years and what did he remember? My message on hats. Please folks remember me for anything but hats after I preach this message today!

There are several possible interpretations of I Corinthians 11:2-16, but I will spend the majority of my time on the view I personally hold. Some commentators look at this passage as purely a first century cultural practice which has no relevance to us today. Yet, this passage seems to set forth universal truths which apply to every culture or society in any age. Still other commentators believe that a woman's long hair suffices for a head covering in our modern culture, especially if she has it up in a bun. Yet, if this view is taken, other verses in the context seem to be nonsense. Some commentators believe a woman should wear a head covering when attending the official meeting of the local church. This view has support from Scripture and history, for Christians from the very beginning had their women wear a head covering in public worship. Pictures in the catacombs at Rome indicate that up until 400 A.D. women wore head coverings in the public assembly of the local church and men did not. Up until about seventy-five years ago, most denominations (Roman Catholic, Protestant and Independent) had women wear hats in the church services. Today, most women outside of the USA wear some kind of head covering when they go to church. While the vast majority of women do not know why they do this practice, it nevertheless is a tradition that has been passed down through the ages. Still there are other commentators like myself who believe a woman should have her head covered only when she is praying or prophesying in an official way in the presence of men inside or outside the called meeting of the local church.

BACKGROUND

Much of the Epistle of First Corinthians was written to deal with problems in the local church, especially in the area of public worship. Paul's clear teaching of the equality of men and women in Christ had been misinterpreted by the women in the church of Corinth. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). They were pushing the truth of their spiritual equality with men too far, stressing their freedom and independence from their husbands and all men. These were the first century Christian feminists. To express their freedom, they laid aside their head coverings (shawls) in certain situations. The shawl was regarded in the early church as a symbol of dependence and submission. Therefore, Paul moves to correct this extreme independent spirit in the Christian women at Corinth. Remember, the Corinthians were a carnal church, so we might expect that women might abuse their feminine liberties and freedoms.

What Paul is going to show in this passage is that the woman is spiritually constituted subordinate to her husband in God's creation order. In view of this fact, there should be an outward representation of it. The covering for the head is that outward representation.

WOMEN AND MEN ARE TO RECOGNIZE TRADITION 11:2

I praise you for remembering me in everything. Paul is about to bring a severe rebuke to the Corinthians but before he does he wants them to know he appreciates that they were willing to obey some truth. They were not totally denying his teachings but perverting them.

And for holding to the teachings (traditions), just as I passed them on to you. There are legitimate Christian traditions. Not all tradition is bad. There were certain biblical traditions which Paul expected the Corinthians to keep and to hand down to future generations of Christians. The tradition in this section of Scripture is that of a woman having her head covered when praying or prophesying.

WOMEN SHOULD BE COVERED BECAUSE OF GOD'S DIVINE PATTERN 11:3-6

Now I want you to realize... Paul wants to show them why it is important for the Christian women at Corinth to be covered when praying and prophesying. The question arises as to when and where women were to pray and prophesy. Some think that I Corinthians 11:2-16 refers to the public meeting of the church or the official worship service. If so, then women, if they are praying or prophesying in public, are to have their heads covered. Others think this refers not to the official meeting of the church but to meetings outside the church. It is really not until verse 17 that Paul begins to speak of the gathering of the local church. In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good (I Cor. 11:17).

That the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. God has established a divine pattern of authority in this world God the Father over Christ, Christ over man and man over woman. Paul is speaking about authority not essence or nature. This has nothing to do with IQ or job skills or social skills. A man is no more superior to a woman than God is superior to Christ. Certainly Christ is not inferior to God and woman is not inferior to man. The subject at hand is headship. The head of the human body runs the body; it is in charge; it is the direction setter. Headship in this context refers to leadership. Again Paul is speaking about subordination not inferiority. God is the leader of Christ. Christ is the leader of a man and man is the leader of a woman according to the creation order.

Does this then mean that every woman is to be subject to every man just because she is a woman? Absolutely not! The "woman" in this context is probably referring to a married woman, but this would also apply to a single woman who would acknowledge the headship of her father. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior (Eph. 5:23). A husband is not better or superior to the wife, but in God's creation order, the husband is the head of the wife. Headship by the man never means domination nor does it give the husband the right to act like a dictator while the wife is a brainless slave. A woman in marriage voluntarily submits to the headship of her husband. The man is the leader and she willingly assumes the support role to help him fulfill the objectives of his life in Christ, his head. Now if a woman does not want to do that, she is perfectly free to

forego that role if she chooses. If she wants to stay unmarried and pursue a career, she has the right to do so. No woman should get married until she has decided in her mind and heart to acknowledge the headship of her husband. In marriage, God has ordained that the man should become the leader of the two. Yet with the role of leadership comes the higher responsibility to love, protect and provide for his wife and family. In the divine pattern, God the Father is the ordained head of Christ. In Christ's mediatorial office as a man, He voluntarily subjected Himself to God. The Father and the Son are both one in nature and essence, but in authority the Lord Jesus submitted to the Father in humiliation. So the woman is to submit to the authority of her husband. Paul's point will be that a head covering symbolizes subjection to some visible superior in rank, namely one's husband.

Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head (Christ). The pattern of authority is illustrated by the head covering. For a man to be covered when praying or prophesying is to dishonor or disgrace his head which is Jesus Christ. It is an act of insubordination for a man to wear a head covering when ministering. The head covering which was used in those days for both men and women was a shawl. The Jewish men in those days (as in ours) prayed with their heads showed. Later they just wore caps, but this is not true for Christian men. Perhaps Paul is reacting to Judaism but there are definite biblical and theological reasons for men not covering their heads when ministering.

And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head (husband). By not having her head covered when praying or prophesying, the married woman is dishonoring her head; that is, her husband. By symbol, she is denying the headship of her husband, which is an act of insubordination. Praying and prophesying refers to praying publicly and giving spontaneous words of encouragement in an official way to others.

It is important to note that both husband and wife (man and woman) had the freedom to do the same activity in the public worship service of the church pray and prophecy. The woman is not criticized for praying or prophesying, but is criticized for doing them with her head uncovered. For sure, this teaches that women are not to be silent in church and another interpretation must be given to I Corinthians 14:33: As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches.

The head covering in that culture was a veil called a peplum, a shawl worn when a woman went out on the streets and at weddings and funerals. The shawl was a mark of a woman's femininity and was the proper dress of all respectable women in the city. In Corinth, a woman who was not covered was either a prostitute (of which there were ten thousand in that city) or a slave who was used at times as a harlot. Also the priestesses in the Temple of Aphrodite ministered in the temple with their heads uncovered. Therefore, no respectable woman in Corinth would think of going out without a head covering. It would be disgraceful and shameful for Christian women to appear in any public place, pray in church or give encouraging words to others in church without the sign of acknowledgment of the principle of headship in her life. For the Christian, however, there were more than just cultural reasons for being shawled. There were biblical and theological reasons as well.

It is just as though her head was shaved. Only the temple prostitutes in that cultural situation in Corinth had very short hair or were shaved bald. For a woman to do this was to classify herself a harlot, so the proper thing to do was for her to cover her head.

If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or shaved off, she should cover her head. The irony of Paul comes through and he says if a woman is not going to cover her head, then she should shave off all her hair and be like a prostitute. But since Christian decorum will not allow this, she is to have a proper head covering in the tradition of respectable Greek women. To avoid all suspicion of being a loose woman, Christian women in Corinth were commanded to be covered with a shawl.

Some commentators think the head covering here is a woman's long hair which was probably put up in a bun. If this interpretation be right, then in the excitement of worship the women let down their hair out of the bun and let it flow, causing the men in the congregation to be distracted by gorgeous hair in worship.

Paul is saying that when praying or ministering publicly and officially, a woman is to have her head covered as a symbol of her acknowledgment of the headship of her husband and her subordination to his leadership. Why? She is speaking before other men and she wants to show outwardly by a symbol of her inward acknowledgment of her husband's headship.

WOMEN SHOULD BE COVERED BECAUSE OF THE DIVINE ORDER IN CREATION 11:7-9

A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God. This goes back to the original creation in Genesis 1:26-28 where God created Adam, man. By design and position man was created before the woman. He was given this position from the beginning. Women also share the image and glory of God, but it was man who was first created. By position, therefore, man represents God's authority in this world. He is the visible manifestation of the headship of God and the authority of God. If a man prays or prophesies publicly with his head covered, he conceals that which he is representing—the authority and headship of God. By position in creation, man is the representative and manifestation of God's authority and headship in the marriage, in the home, in the family and in the church. With this position comes the great responsibility to use this authority wisely.

But the woman is the glory of man. The woman is man's glory. She is in so many ways of finer character than he, but in God's creation order, she is the glory of man. She has a place all her own, but it is not the man's place. When she has her head covered, she expresses the glory of man and conceals her own glory.

For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. This refers to Genesis 2 where Eve is spoken of as being made from the rib of Adam. This act of the original creation of woman does not show inferiority but only subordination in rank.

Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. According to Genesis 2, after God created Adam He saw that Adam was lonely and needed a mate for his helper. Woman was created for man. God was satisfied with His creation of Adam, but

Adam was lonely and needed companionship. God did not create Adam and Steve, but Adam and Eve. As a helper,

the woman is to be submissive to her husband and this submission is symbolized by a head covering when praying and prophesying. The head covering was a symbol by the woman that she acknowledged the headship of her husband, that she chose to give herself to her husband, and that she belonged to him in God's scheme of things. Perhaps the nearest equivalent in our society is the wedding ring. This ring is the outward symbol that a woman belongs to her man to whom she has freely and voluntarily given herself as her head.

Archeology has shown us that the ancient Assyrian women wore head coverings as a sign that they were owned by their husbands. Oriental women wore head coverings when they were in public. Greek women, however, were more free and some did not wear head coverings at all but were given to eloquent hair styles. This may be why there was such a fuss over head coverings among Christians at Corinth, a Greek city.

WOMEN SHOULD BE COVERED BECAUSE IT BENEFITS ANGELS 11:10-12

For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. Paul felt it was a Christian woman's moral duty to have a symbol of authority on her head; that is, a head covering. The woman puts a covering on her head as an outward sign of being inwardly submitted to her husband. It is a sign of authority. Why then is the sign of authority important? Because the angels are looking on the actions of Christian women. Angels are looking to see if Christian women will acknowledge the leadership and authority of their husbands, having an attitude of subordination and submission.

In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. In Christ both husband and wife are not independent but interdependent. The woman has a very important part in God's plan. She has a place in God's creation which no man could ever fill. The woman and the man complement one another and neither sex is complete without the other. There is a difference in rank but no inferiority of the sexes, especially in Christ.

For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. In order to keep down man's pride and vanity (and a spirit of male chauvinistic domination) Paul declares that woman originated from man but man comes through the woman. Neither is independent of the other, but both are dependent upon God. Both sexes are incomplete without the other and both are dependent on God. Paul sets the record straight. He is not talking about the superiority of men. He is talking about rank in God's creation.

WOMEN SHOULD BE COVERED BECAUSE OF THE NATURE OF THINGS 11:13-15

Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? If a woman is to pray and prophesy publicly, it is proper for her head to be covered. To fail to do so would be impropriety.

Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, Quite frankly, I do not know for sure what Paul meant here. I do not believe this is an argument from nature (from mother nature); that is, nature shows that

women naturally have longer hair than men. Paul is not arguing that a man must have his hair short and a woman

must have her hair long. In actuality, nature does show that man can grow his hair as long as a woman. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul knew that the Nazirite vowed never to cut his hair and Sampson in the Old Testament had very long hair. Even in the Greek world, the Spartan men had shoulder length hair.

The NIV seems to have captured Paul's thought by stating "the nature of things", referring to the way things generally are by custom and propriety. That is, in the first century culture most men (Greeks, Romans and Jews) had hair which was shorter than that of women. This same principle applies down through the ages that men generally have shorter hair than women. In Paul's opinion, men should have shorter hair as a general rule (there are exceptions) than women.

This verse says it is a disgrace for men to have long hair. We must, therefore, make some observations. First, this verse does not say how long is long. It simply implies that a man's hair should be shorter than woman's. This does not forbid a man to have a full head of hair, or an Afro, or a Prince Valiant cut or even hair down to his waist. Second, Jesus Christ, as far as we know from secular history, did not have long hair or a beard. Every picture of Christ in the catacombs in Rome shows Christ with short hair and no beard. However, we must remember that in the days of the Roman Empire, emperors, governors and high heads of state set the styles of that day and short hair for men was the vogue, so it may be that the Roman Christians made pictures of Christ to conform to their own culture. Third, if a man chooses to have long hair, he must never wear it in a way which would make him look homosexual. Nor should a woman wear her hair so short in makes her look lesbian. Fourth, in any culture where long hair is a symbol of rebellion, the Christian should think twice before having long hair because we are not to be rebellious to God or the State or society.

In any culture, believers must strenuously avoid whatever forms of dress or grooming potentially communicate to the non-Christian world sexual misconduct or idolatrous worship. Behavior, mannerisms, clothing, or hairstyles that suggest that a person is sexually unfaithful to his or her spouse, promiscuous, homosexual, or the devotee of some non-Christian religion or cultic occult sect are entirely inappropriate for Christians, particularly in church (Craig Blomberg, I Corinthians).

Whatever else these verses teach, they most certainly point out there should be a definite distinction in the sexes. God has made men and women different. Any design of dress or life which glorifies unisex, homosexuality, lesbianism, transvestitism or whatever is to be rejected by the Christian. God has made man and woman different and vive la difference!

But what if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? Long hair is a glory to women. It does not say how long, but in most cultures women wear their hair quite long.

For long hair is given to her as a covering. It almost seems as though Paul contradicts himself here, for he now seems to say that a woman's long hair is her covering. The Greek language helps us out a little here. The word "as" is the preposition *anti* which may mean "instead of" in the sense of substitution or "answering to" in the sense of one thing is equivalent

to another. If it means "instead of" then Paul's original argument doesn't make much sense. In verses 5 and 6, Paul commanded women to wear a head covering. For a woman's long hair to count for a covering would negate his own command. Furthermore, in verse 6 if a woman's hair is for a covering, what is the man to do to pray uncovered? Does his hair count for a covering also? He would have to shave his head to pray uncovered.

It seems more consistent with the context to take this as "answering to". A woman's hair is a hint from the nature of things that she ought to wear a covering. A covering is consistent with her long hair. It is a symbol or picture of a far deeper truth that the wife recognizes her husband as her head and final authority.

WOMEN SHOULD BE COVERED BECAUSE IT IS THE CUSTOM OF THE CHURCH 11:16

If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice. There were people then, just as there are some now, who make a big fuss over wearing a head covering. Paul seems to indicate by using "we" that a head covering for women when praying and prophesying publicly was apostolic practice. He did not say, however, to put these women out of the church for not wearing a shawl, but they were not to be contentious over the issue. It would be foolish to discipline women out of the church over a symbol.

Each woman must come to her own conviction as to what this passage teaches. My wife and I do not agree. Because it is really a trivial custom (tradition), it is not worth fighting over.

If a woman is really of the conviction that her long hair is her covering, then she ought to stick with that conviction until the Lord changes it, but I would ask women to study this passage diligently. The head covering is only a symbol. The important thing is that the woman is in submission to her husband. The heart attitude is more important than the symbol. However, the ideal is have a submissive wife with the proper symbol of a head covering.

Nor do the churches of God. The tradition of the New Testament church was to have women cover their heads when praying and prophesying publicly in some official capacity.

Why would anyone conclude that a head covering is applicable today? Let me first say the head covering can be of any nature: a shawl, a veil, a bonnet or a hat. It can be of any size or shape. If it is a hat, it does not have to be accompanied with the latest fashions. The reason a head covering is fitting is because there are certain universal principles in this context which do not change: 1) Man is the head of the wife; 2) Woman is the glory of man; 3) Woman was created for man; 4) Angels are still looking on; and 5) It is a good tradition handed down by the Apostles.

There is still one issue which must be solved. When is a woman to have her head covered? The first view is the traditional one which says that a woman is to be covered when in the official, public meeting of the local church. Women would not have to have their heads covered at Sunday school, evening service, prayer meeting or a small home group. The second view (which is my personal conviction at this time) is that a woman should have her head covered when she is praying or prophesying publicly in some official capacity. I Corinthians 11:2-16 may not be dealing with the official meeting of

the church at all. Therefore, women do not have to wear hats to the official service, but they should be covered if they are going to

officially pray or prophesy (pray in an official capacity or give words of encouragement to the body) either at the official meeting or outside the meeting if adult men are present. If a woman is going to pray publicly before the congregation in a leadership role, or if she is to teach a Sunday school class or home small group with men present, she should wear a covering, so as to show that even though she has a leadership position, she is in submission to her husband, her leader.

CONCLUSION

You may be saying, "Wait a minute! I know plenty of women who wear hats to church who aren't submissive to their husbands, and I know lots of men who do not cover their heads when they pray and prophesy but they are lousy leaders in their marriages, homes and businesses." What God is interested in is the heart; the symbol is only secondary. God is always more concerned about the heart than the symbol.

There are other symbols Christians employ. For instance, water baptism. This is a symbol of one's personal identification with Christ by faith. Water baptism does not save anyone; it does not make anyone more spiritual. It is only a symbol of a heart attitude. There are multitudes of people who have been water baptized as infants or as adults who are not saved. Why? Their hearts have not turned to Christ alone for salvation.

Another symbol is church membership, signifying identification with a local body of Christians. There are multiple millions of people who have their names on church rolls who are not saved. Why? Their hearts have not been turned to Christ.

Christ wants our hearts. Have you by faith received Christ? If you have, your sins are forgiven; you have eternal life; you have a divine purpose for living. If you have not received Christ, you are lost, and if you do not receive Him before you die, you are lost for all eternity.

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved (Rom. 10:9-10).

God wants your heart!