

Head Covering During Prayer - Understanding I Corinthians 11:2-16

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

"Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. 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. Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. 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. For if a woman does not cover her head, 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 cover her head. 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. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 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. 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. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God."

Historical Background

Corinth was a prominent city in Greece. The Apostle Paul (Apostle: one sent with authority) had gone into Corinth as a missionary to spread the gospel. Many believed the gospel and thus the church (gathering of believers) was planted in Corinth. The church there had grown and was going through the growing pains of understanding and applying the teachings of the Scriptures, while struggling against the culture of the day. Paul wrote two letters to Corinth, known as First Corinthians and Second Corinthians. Here, First Corinthians is a response letter that Paul wrote after having received a letter from them. Much of the letter is Paul responding to matters and questions that the Corinthians had asked him; 7:1 – marriage and sex, 7:25 – virgins and singles, 8:1 – things sacrificed to idols, 8:4 – eating meat sacrificed to idols, 12:1 – spiritual gifts, 16:1 – collections for God's people (offerings to help the poor). Throughout the letter Paul repeats the phrase, *"now concerning."* In verse 7:1, Paul will reiterate what the Corinthians had written about, ***"Now concerning the things about which you wrote..."***

A Passage of Scripture

This is one passage of scripture. All of scripture has been broken down into chapter and verse, as well, the Bible is broken down into passages. A passage of Scripture is a segment of text which contains one main thesis or thought; one point that is often supported by argument clauses. A passage can be contained in a single verse, many verses, or a whole chapter. Some Bible versions will show where passages start and stop by having bold print on some verse numbers. The point is, a passage contains one main point that the author is making; it can have multiple applications, but only one single thesis. In this passage, Paul addresses the way men and women ought to conduct themselves in public assembly.

Unpacking 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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

- ***"remember me"*** – Probably by respect, as to write to Paul regarding any matter.
- ***"traditions"*** – keeping ordinances; baptism and the Lord's supper/communion, which Paul had delivered to them previously (1 Corinthians 11:23).

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.

- Some of the Corinthian women converts to Christianity were overstepping bounds of propriety (the correct/appropriate standards of behavior), having miss assumed that the gospel had abolished distinction of the sexes. This confused belief was sometimes due to a misunderstanding of Paul's teaching. Take for example what Paul taught in Galatians 3:28, ***"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."***
- The gospel raises women from degradation, especially in the eastern world. The gospel teaches that woman are equal recipients of God's grace and in their standing with God. Christian women are to maintain subjection with regards to formality and modesty. This word subjection, when improperly understood, has negative connotations, but when biblically understood is very freeing for women.
- In this passage Paul reproves their impropriety regarding head-covering in the public assembly (i.e. church gathering) as the women there were not yielding to Biblical headship. Headship is the distinction of roles that God has placed on men and women, as seen in His original design going back to Adam and Eve (see verse 9). As Jesus is the head over the universal Church, so man represents Christ as being head over the local church and as head over the family unit. This role is a heavy responsibility for man, not anything that he should ever wield as some sort of overlord. Women are freed from the ultimate responsibility of answering for the church or the household in the same way that the man is held accountable. Headship, when biblically applied, should humble the man and the woman to Christ and to each other.
- It was the Greek culture of the day, women wore head-coverings in public and at assemblies. Paul addresses the Corinthians with regards to this cultural distinction as to what is fittingly male and what is fittingly female. Headship is not cultural, but the covering of one's head was cultural. It's critical to distinguish this, because some will wrongly argue that headship is cultural. God assures us of this by citing that it's His design (verse 9) from the beginning, with Adam and Eve, which pre-dates all culture. Again, in 1 Corinthians 14:34, Paul reproves women's authority over men in the church, and again cites biblical headship going back to Adam and Eve as his reason.

4 Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.

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.

- This is in regards to individuals attending public worship/assembly, not private prayer, or private worship.
- For men to keep a hat/turban on his head, while engaged in the public administration of the Word or public prayer, was seen as inappropriate, since he was to be considered as a representative of Christ, and on this basis being veiled or covered would be improper.
- For a woman to pray or prophesy, but with her head uncovered, presents herself in an unfitting way. The woman didn't represent Christ in the same role as the man. For the woman, the head-covering was a token of yielding to headship, and to remove it was inappropriate; like cutting her hair short, which was customary for Greek men, but not women, as the next verse highlights. Again, this doesn't mean it's wrong for a woman to cut her hair short, but Paul is using the custom of the day to show what is fitting and not fitting to differentiate between male and female propriety.
- In the day and age of these Corinthian men, some men would, for spiritual reasons, put on a head-covering; either an imitation of some pagan worshippers whose practice it was to cover the head while praying/worshipping. Or, in imitation of some Jews that covered their head so as to be veiled in public worship out of a spirit of bondage or fear; as the Jews wouldn't allow a man to pray unless he was veiled, citing that he should veil himself to show that he is ashamed before God, and unworthy with open face to behold him. Paul here directly condemns these viewpoints.
- Paul doesn't prohibit women praying or prophesying, just the manner in which they do it. Yet, he appears to utterly disallow women from being vocal at all (14:34), but that's just the view at a casual glance. His intent is to address vocal authority, not vocal silence; in both chapter 11 and 14, the issue is the manner.

6 For if a woman does not cover her head, 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 cover her head.

- Paul argues that just as it was known to be disgraceful for a woman to have her natural hair shaved off, likewise it is equally disgraceful to have her assume an equal role as the men in the church assembly by uncovering her head while praying/prophesying.

7 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.

8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man;

9 for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.

- **"woman is the glory of man"** – Man is a representation of the glory of God, as Adam was made by God, man bears responsibility/role of headship. The woman is a representation of the glory of man, since she was made from man. God placed woman in subjection to man and she shouldn't assume or usurp man's role, but instead keep a mind suited to her role.

10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

- **"symbol of authority"** – a veil. A token – not of her having power/authority, but being under the subjection of authority; as Rebekah put on her veil in token of her subjection when meeting her husband, Isaac (Genesis 24:65).
- **"because of the angels"** – This is a difficult statement to explain. In studying it, the consensus seems to be either meant *evil* angels; as woman was first tempted to sin by the devil, causing increased subjection to man (Genesis 3:16). Or, meaning of *good* angels, as it was historically believed that there were literally a presence of angels bearing witness in our church assemblies, thus Christians should restrain from indecencies/quarreling.

11 However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.

12 For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.

- **"in the Lord"** – men and women are made to be a mutual comfort and blessing to one another; joint instruments to each other's lives.
- **"independent of"** - Woman (Eve) came from man (Adam), but subsequently, all other men come from women (through birth). There is a mutual need; neither is independent of the other, though roles differ in certain contexts. God wills that both know their role and that neither abuse their role.

13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?

14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him,

- **"nature itself teach"** – argues from the point of view that historically, women kept long hair while men kept it short. Greek men kept their hair cut short as it was seen as unmanly to have it long, while some nations thought differently. Paul is simply citing a tendency of the day that commonly distinguished men and women.

15 but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

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

- **"inclined to be contentious"** – Contentious means argumentative or quarrelsome. Paul is saying that the custom of woman appearing veiled in public was a prominent eastern custom, and if someone should try to challenge his teaching, they should know that this is the common practice of other churches in regions where he's planted them. But, regardless of how widespread this custom is, it is an obvious disturbance in Corinth churches and needed to be squelched. Those who argued this aren't fighting over truth, but are fighting merely to have a victory. Therefore, enough had been said to satisfy a wise and discerning person.
- **"no other practice"** – no other practices by which to measure this argument by, so Paul ceases the discussion here. His authority should be enough to end the matter in the Corinthian church.

Summary

If I walked up onto a stage to preach in a church in the United States, wearing a dress and high heels, people would rightly say I'm dressed inappropriately. Why? In all cultures men and women wear different things. Something similar is being addressed here by Paul, but for a deeper purpose than just Greek culture. Paul reminds Corinthian Christians that the woman is under the authority of the man, just as the man is under the authority of Christ. The head covering was seen as a sign of that relationship. Therefore, a man should not wear a head covering when he prays or prophesies, because he is not under any man's authority; but a woman should, because she is under the authority of the man.

In the Christian church today in America, the principles of biblical headship still apply, while head-covering may not. In the United States, few women wear head-coverings as part of a cultural/religious mandate (Mennonite, Amish, Brethren, as examples). Cultures differ, but headship should always be understood in any Christian church. Some Christians view passages like these differently. These passages aren't viewed as "major" doctrines of the faith, but what we might call a "minor" doctrine, and as such it shouldn't be an issue that causes Christians to break fellowship with one-another.

If you're concerned as to whether or not you should wear a hat when you pray, don't be concerned with this; God looks at the heart, not the hat!