

HEAD COVERING

FOR

PUBLIC WORSHIP



AN EXPOSITION OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16

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INTRODUCTION

The Word of God is the only rule for faith and practice. Christian conduct must be the reflection of biblical standards rather than expedient conformity to changing style or habit. This principle is applicable to every area of Christian life, not the least of which is worship. The Westminster Confession of Faith, the adopted sub-standard of the Free Presbyterian Church, makes a significant statement regarding religious worship: “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” (XXI.i). 1 Corinthians 11 establishes some of the divinely revealed guidelines of acceptable worship. In this chapter, the apostle Paul deals with two essential aspects of public worship: head covering for women and proper observance of the Lord’s Supper. Unfortunately, the regulations concerning head covering have either been misinterpreted, or through expediency, relegated to the sphere of local Corinthian custom which has no applicability to modern, American Christianity. It is the position of the Free Presbyterian Church that the shifting customs of society do not influence or abrogate the imperatives of Scripture. Therefore, the mandate of 1 Corinthians 11 that women must worship with covered heads is as binding today as it was in the first-century church.

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

The Authority of the Regulation (vv. 2, 16)

Paul begins by praising the Corinthian Christians for keeping the ordinances that he had delivered to them. Although the word *ordinance* may have the idea of tradition, it does not suggest that the requirements were of human origin or imagination. Indeed, these traditions delivered by the apostle constituted the revealed Word of God. *The word* designates that which was given to the apostle, who had the duty and authority to convey the received message to the people. Consequently, the word identifies the following context as being divinely revealed truth. To assign the passage to an ancient local custom with no present application is suspicious exegesis. Paul's closing remark in verse 16 confirms the authority of the regulation. Paul is dogmatic; he will not tolerate contentiousness in regard to the matter of head covering. The apostle claims that the churches of God have no such custom. Although some expositors identify the *custom* as the contentiousness, it is more appropriate to associate the *custom* with the practice of head covering. The churches of God have no custom that permits Christian women to participate in public worship with uncovered heads; therefore, there is no room for contention or debate in the matter. It is significant that the apostle refers to the churches of God. The plurality of churches removes this from the sphere of localized custom. To identify as custom that which the Scripture explicitly says is not custom is untenable and dangerous. To ignore the authoritative imperative of God's Word is disobedience.

1 Corinthians 11:3

The Existence of an Hierarchy (v. 3)

There is a hierarchy in God's order. This hierarchy is the basis for Paul's instructions concerning the proper manner of worship. The imagery of the *head* represents the threefold hierarchy of man to Christ, woman to man, and Christ to God. The head is the governing organ; it is that to which all else is subordinate. The

headship of Christ is a frequent theme in the New Testament. In His anointed office Christ is the mediator and sovereign over all things (cf. Eph. 1:22). While Christ is the head of every man, God is the head of Christ. Because Christ is the “very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father” (Westminster Confession of Faith, VIII.ii), this is a subordination of function. The use of the title *Christ* is appropriate for as the Messiah, Christ was chosen and anointed to perform His unique function (cf. Isa. 42:1). The subordination of function rather than essence that exists between the Father and the Son aids in understanding man’s headship over women. Similarly, there is no essential inequality between man and woman, but there is a subordination of role and function. In God’s order, man has a position of authority over the woman. This is true not only in the marriage relationship, but in the relationship everywhere. There is no doubt that the gospel of Christ has done much to give the woman a position of honor. There is honor for both man and woman in their respective and different roles. God expects this created difference to remain valid and obvious in the church.

1 Corinthians 11:4-6

The Implications for Worship (vv. 4-6)

The difference between man and woman must be reflected in public worship. The terms *praying* and *prophesying* are important in this context as one of public worship. The word for *pray* is perhaps the most general term for prayer and is appropriate for public prayer. Although prayer is not essentially public, prophesying serves no purpose apart from the public context. In Paul’s discussion of prophecy in contrast to tongues, it is clear that prophesying serves both to edify the church (1 Cor. 14:4) and evangelize the lost (1 Cor. 14:24). Prophesying is more than predicting the future or preaching the Word although these are important aspects of the word. If these were the only aspects of the word, women would have no legitimate right to participate because they are to learn in silence and have no authority to

teach men (1 Tim. 2:11, 12). In this context, however, the praying and prophesying are acceptable activities for women whose heads are covered. Part of public worship is the “singing of psalms with grace in the heart” (Westminster Confession of Faith, XXI.v; Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). It is significant that this form of praise—that is part of public worship—is designated as prophesying (1 Chron. 25:2, 3).

If men exercise their right to worship with any covering upon their heads, they disgrace their head, Christ. Conversely, if women exercise their right to worship without a covering upon their heads, they disgrace their head, man. Any violation of God’s established order is ultimately an affront against God Himself. Although the requirements for man and woman are stated with equal clarity and authority, they have not received equal obedience. Whereas there are few men who would be so irreverent as to wear a hat during worship, there are many women who demonstrate equal irreverence by worshipping with uncovered heads.

Head covering for women is distinctively Christian. In the Jewish community men were to pray with their heads covered. In the pagan Greek community, both men and women worshipped with uncovered heads. The new Christian practice established by the apostle was contrary to the customs of the first-century world. Conformity to custom was not an option that the apostle allowed for either the ancient or modern church. The uncovered head for men and the covered head for women became symbols of the divinely established order in Christ. Symbols are designed to represent spiritual reality. Although the reality exists independently of the symbol, a willful rejection of the symbol represents rebellion against the reality.

Indeed, failure to comply with the requirement not only constitutes apparent rebellion against God’s order, but it degrades the woman herself. If the woman participates in worship with uncovered head, she is one and the same with one who has been shaven. Paul uses two synonyms to describe what ought to be done to the one who dishonors her head. The word translated

shorn implies the cutting short of hair with shears whereas the word *shaven* implies the use of a razor. There are two possible implications connected with this extreme cutting of the hair, both of which involve great shame for the woman. It may be the mark of prostitution. It has been suggested that shorn hair was the “scarlet letter” to identify publicly those who had been guilty of sexual impurity. That would be shame for the woman who professed faith in Christ. If this is the imagery, it was a shame no more severe than worshipping with the head uncovered. On the other hand, it may represent the extreme behavior that is the logical extension of the act of improper worship. If the woman sets aside the head covering in worship and thus erases the symbol of her subordination to man, she might as well be consistent with her expressed attitude and shave herself thus completely removing what Paul identifies as her glory (v. 15). For woman to abandon her God-given role and usurp the authority and function of man is to leave a position of honor and to bring shame upon herself. To avoid the shameful implications the woman ought to have her head covered.

1 Corinthians 11:7-15

Arguments for Obedience (vv. 7-15)

In order to substantiate his claim of woman’s subordination and his demand for the appropriate symbol in public worship, the apostle argues from two facts: creation and nature. The difference between man and woman is by virtue of creation. Man has the duty or obligation not to cover his head (a symbol of subjection) because he is the image and glory of God. Genesis 1:27 indicates that the woman also is in the image of God, but Paul adds that man is the glory of God and woman is the glory of man. This glory refers not to divine majesty but to that which brings honor. Man was the climax, the crown of God’s creative work. He enjoyed a position of honor before God that woman did not share because there was no woman. The creation of woman was different and constituted woman as the glory or

honor of man. It is a position that belongs exclusively to woman. Verses 8 and 9 give the reasons for the thesis of verse 7. Woman is the glory of man because her origin was from him and man's origin was independent of her. The purpose of woman's creation was directly connected to man (Gen. 1:18-22) but the purpose of his creation was independent of hers. That Paul concentrates on creation rather than marriage places the same responsibility on both single and married women.

Because of the woman's place dictated by creation, she ought to have power on her head (v. 10). The word translated "ought" both here and in verse 7 is a strong term expressing obligation or duty; consequently, there is no option or choice in the matter. The expression *power on her head* requires explanation. The word *power* has the idea of right or authority. It is the same word that describes the teaching of Christ in contrast to the scribes (Mark 1:22) and designates the right or privilege given to believers in Christ to become the children of God (John 1:12). By a figure of speech called metonymy, the word *authority* designates the symbol of that authority, the head covering. It is the head covering, the symbolic recognition of subordination, that gives to woman the right, authority, and privilege to approach God and participate in public worship. Recognition of proper place and function in God's order is essential to acceptable worship. Head covering is a symbol of that recognition.

The final statement of verse 10, "because of the angels," adds a sober thought to the obligation. Because the word *angels* can have the simple idea of messenger, some have identified the angels here as the ministers of the church (cf. Rev. 2, 3). This adds little to the verse, and it is best to interpret the word in its usual sense as the supernatural created beings. On other occasions Paul suggests that these angelic creatures are witnesses to man's activity (1 Cor. 4:9; Eph. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:21). Job 38:7 indicates that the angels (sons of God) were witnesses of creation. This fits nicely with the context. Women are to worship with covered heads not only for public testimony before men, but also as testimony to the angels

who witnessed their creation and know their ordained position. Verses 11 and 12 are a warning against drawing the wrong conclusion about woman's position of subordination. Galatians 3:28 teaches that in the sphere of faith all share the same benefits of salvation whether male or female. Although in the created order woman's position is subordinate, it is not an inferior or less dignified position. The relationship between man and woman is complementary. The word translated *without* in verse 11 means separate, apart, or by itself. It suggests the interdependency that exists between male and female which is best served when men and women move within their proper spheres. Both creation and natural generation support the thesis of interdependency. Both woman and man owe their existence to the other. The preposition *of* in verse 12 expresses the idea of source or origin. At creation woman came from man. The preposition *by* expresses the idea of mediation or agency. In natural generation man comes through the woman. Paul concludes that all this has its source in God.

Having established woman's subordinate role, Paul commands his readers to determine for themselves the appropriate application (v. 13). He asks whether it is a suitable or proper act for a woman to pray without the symbolic head covering. The word for praying is the same as in verses 4 and 5; therefore, the context is still dealing with public prayer. Although Paul does not explicitly answer the question with a yes or no, the answer is implicitly clear. It is not proper behavior for a woman to participate in public worship without the head covered.

Paul's final argument is from nature (vv. 14, 15). Nature itself teaches that there is an essential difference in appearance between man and woman. The word *nature* can have various senses in the New Testament: natural endowment, natural disposition, natural order, or species. The idea of natural disposition or characteristic is the appropriate sense here. Paul is essentially appealing to the general consciousness that recognizes that according to the natural disposition of things a man should not have "long

hair.” For a man to have this kind of hair is a shame to him. The word *shame* literally has the idea of “without honor.” The position that rightly belongs to man is sacrificed if he has “long hair.” A proper understanding of “long hair” is essential to the context. There are two words for hair: *thriks* which is hair as hair and *kome* which is fixed hair. *Kome* is the word used in this context. There is nothing in the word that dictates length. Rather, it represents that hair which is ornate, a hairdo. It is that coiffure that belongs exclusively to the woman. It is contrary to nature for a man to have a distinctively feminine hairstyles. Whereas this *kome* is dishonorable for man, it is the glory of the woman. Even apart from the matter of precise length, there is to be a clear difference between masculine and feminine hairstyle. To erase this distinction within the natural sphere is rebellion against God’s ordinance established at creation. Just as the hairstyle in every day life identifies male and female, so in public worship the use of head covering symbolizes their respective positions before God. If the distinction is part of the natural sphere, it is fitting for the Christian woman, who acknowledges and enjoys her God-given position, to wear the divinely ordained symbol of that position in public worship.

The final statement of verse 15 has been the source of a common misinterpretation of the whole passage. Some interpreters claim that the only head covering intended is the hair. Therefore, if a woman worships with hair on her head, she is in perfect compliance with Paul’s instruction. The context is clear that there must be a distinction between men and women in public worship in regard to their heads. In verse 6 Paul explicitly says that women ought to be covered whereas in verse 7 he says “a man indeed ought not to cover his head.” If it is proper for women to worship with hair on their heads, it is improper for men to worship with hair. It is preposterous to interpret the passage as saying that women must have hair, but men must be bald while worshipping. Although preposterous, it is the only logical conclusion possible if the head covering is simply the hair. God does

not require the absurd. Rather than stating an absurdity, the final statement provides an additional reason for God's demand for head covering. This statement is part of Paul's illustration from nature and must be understood in that context. In every day life apart from public worship the *kome* has been given for a veil. The normal significance of the preposition *for* is substitution. Consequently, the *kome* has been given in the place of a covering. Proper understanding of this statement depends on the meaning of the word translated "covering." The word is *peribolaion*, a compound word whose component parts mean "to put around." Although the word occurs only here with reference to the head, its transparent meaning of "wrap around" together with its usage elsewhere suggests the idea of a veil that would enclose the entire head. For instance, in Hebrews 1:12 the word is used of a vesture or mantle that would be wrapped around the body. Similar references to clothing occur in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (cf. Ezekiel 16:13; 27:7). This veil, which would hide the face, would be a mark of degradation and humiliation. Even in the sphere of nature this mark of second-class citizenship has been replaced by the *kome*, the mark of glory. It is not this sign of degradation that Paul requires in worship. It is significant that this word does not occur in the specific instructions of verses 5 and 6 regarding the head covering for women. There the apostle does not specify a particular kind of covering. He demands simply that something be on the head during the period of public worship. That temporary covering, rather than being a mark of degradation, is the symbol of authority that entitles the woman the place of worship.

In simple terms the message is clear. If the hair is woman's glory, then the Christian woman ought to cover her glory in the place of public worship where attention is to be directed to God and away from self. No flesh should glory in His presence (1 Cor. 1:29).

ADDENDUM

Women in the Church

Two specific texts (1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12) seemingly deny women any right to public participation in the church, thus restricting them to being passive spectators. But let's look at these passages more closely. As we do so, we must keep in mind two important principles of interpretation. First, God never contradicts Himself; His word is always consistent. Therefore, specific, restrictive texts must be interpreted, not only in their immediate context, but also in light of the larger context of the whole of Scripture. The second principle we must keep in mind is that God reveals and establishes His truth both by precept and by example. By applying these principles we will be able to identify both what is permitted and what is prohibited for women in the place of public worship.

What Is Permitted

It is clear that women played an active and important role in the New Testament church. Paul includes several women in his greetings to the church in Rome and comments on their important service (Romans 16:1, 3, 6, 7, 13, 15). In Philippians 4:3, the apostle mentions women who labored with him in the gospel, apparently in the same capacity as Clement.

1 Corinthians 11 is a key passage that regulates the woman's role in the place of public worship particularly. It is important to note that a role Paul regulates in one text he would not prohibit in another—that would constitute a contradiction incongruous with the very nature of Scripture. In this text, Paul defines the head-covering requirement that gives women the right to pray and to prophesy. Although praying can be either private or public, prophesying serves no private function—it is always a public

operation. This suggests that the reference here to praying would be to public praying as well. The word *prophesy* is a general term, having a wide and elastic range of usage. Since general words are capable of referring to any or all of the elements in their range of meaning, individual contexts determine how a word is to be understood, whether in its most restrictive or inclusive sense or somewhere in between. The New Testament sense of this word *prophesy* includes the declarative act of preaching as well as praising and giving of thanks by declaring or testifying concerning what God has done. In this passage, Paul does not restrict the sense of the word, and it would be arbitrary to limit the sense of the word only to musical praise when it is applied to women. So, whatever disagreement may exist concerning the nature and relevance of the head-covering restriction, the passage is clear that women who submit to the head-covering restriction can, indeed, participate in public praying and prophesying.

The Scripture provides significant examples of women engaged in prophetic activity. Miriam was a prophetess who led the women in joining the worship of the entire congregation in celebration of the Exodus (Exodus 15:20–21). Deborah was a prophetess who gave the Lord's word to direct deliverance from the Canaanites and composed an inspired song of praise declaring the Lord's work (Judges 4–5). Although her ministry is not detailed, Isaiah's wife is called a prophetess (Isaiah 8:3). Huldah was a prophetess who played a major role in declaring the Lord's word to Josiah (2 Chronicles 34:21–28). While it may be argued that God used Deborah only because there were no qualified men, that would hardly be the case for the others who ministered at times when God-called men were also active (Moses, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah).

If in the Old Testament dispensation, women had a function in public ministry, it follows that the New Testament dispensation would see an increase rather than a squelching of that female participation. This is in fact part of Joel's Pentecost prophecy (Joel 2:28–29). He predicted the day would come when a massive effusion of spiritual power would come on all flesh, enabling

both genders and all ages to prophesy. Acts 2 records the amazing fulfillment of the prophecy when the Holy Spirit empowered and gave utterance to all who had gathered in the upper room. Acts 21:9 specifically notes the prophetic activity of Philip's four daughters. The reference to their ministry is sandwiched between references to Philip's evangelistic efforts and Agabus' prophetic word to Paul, so it is not likely that this prophetic ministry was limited to providing special music at their father's evangelistic campaigns. Therefore, it seems clear that both by precept and significant example the Scripture permits women a right and role in public worship and ministry.

What Is Prohibited

Suffice it to say that the New Testament limits the leadership of the organized church to men. God has ordained men to be elders, those responsible for governing and teaching the church. He has given men to be deacons to aid the elders in the church's operation (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). So for women to assume the occupation of pastor or any official church office would go beyond their rights.

It remains to consider the two texts that restrict the role of women in the church. The immediate context of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is the passage in which Paul demands orderly conduct in public worship (vv. 29-40). It would appear that the injunction for women to keep silence addresses a particular violation of order in the Corinthian assembly in which women were disturbing the meeting by asking questions or disputing over what had been preached. Rather than asserting themselves publicly, they were to ask their husbands privately about the content of the prophecies, etc. In public worship, women are not to be forward, but to give evidence of their submissiveness that is part of the divine order.

The kind of silence Paul has in mind is specifically defined by the statement, "they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law." Paul's use of "law" in this context invites consideration of the whole Old Testament revelation (see 14:21 where

he refers to Isaiah as law). Nowhere does the Old Testament command women to be silent, but rather—as illustrated above—it gives witness to those most vocal in service to God. Genesis does record, however, that at creation God ordained a hierarchical relationship between man and woman. Man was created first, and then woman was created as his necessary complement and opposite. The roles and functions of both man and woman were set from the beginning. The whole history of humanity flows from Adam's headship both over Eve and over the race that followed. It is important to emphasize that this divinely established subordination of woman to man existed from the original creation. It was not the consequence of the curse, and was not, therefore, reversed by redemption. Tragically, as Genesis 3:16 foretold, sin corrupted and perverted the relationship. The gospel can heal the hurts of those perversions, but it does not eradicate the relationship established for pre-fallen humanity. This "creation law" is precisely what Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 11 where he defines the proper guidelines and decorum for women's participation in public worship. So what Paul prohibits in this context of 1 Corinthians 14 corresponds to what God has already made clear. It is women's submissiveness and not their absolute silence that is according to law. The problem was not that the Corinthian women were talking in public worship, but they were doing something in what they were saying that violated the command for submissiveness. The rule against speaking cannot be absolute given what the Scripture teaches and illustrates elsewhere in both the Old and New Testaments, but it does prohibit an assertive participation that would either disrupt the service or violate the functional subordination that God has ordered for women. That is the law.

In 1 Timothy 2:8 Paul instructs men to pray without wrath and doubting and then in verse 9 continues the instructions on prayer by adding that women should pray in modesty, humility, and self-control. He then gives instructions not on how women are to pray but on how they are to learn and teach. That they are to learn in silence in subjection parallels precisely the command in

1 Corinthians 14. The silence pertains to maintaining quiet and peaceful order in the assembly and does not forbid an active participation in her scripturally legitimate praying or prophesying. To properly understand Paul's prohibition against a woman teaching requires attention to the tense of the infinitive "to teach." It is a present tense, which suggests that Paul forbids women assuming the occupation of teacher, which ministry is reserved for the pastor/elder. This is substantiated by the next infinitive, which prohibits her exercising dominion over men. By law of Greek grammar, the second infinitive defines, explains, or restricts the significance of the first. In other words, Paul says that what he means by a woman not teaching is that she must not have a position that exercises dominion over men. There is a kind of teaching in the church that is based on a God-given authority for leadership, and which therefore, cannot be exercised by women. God-called and God-equipped teachers who have official authority in doctrinal interpretation and instruction are gifts to the church (1 Corinthians 12:28–29 and Ephesians 4:11) and are limited to men. Consequently, the New Testament does not sanction women pastors or elders. Since the Scripture excludes women from having an official teaching office, the session of the church would not have the authority to permit or to ask women to fulfill the office or teaching ministry of an elder. So a woman's keeping silence is equivalent to being in subjection to the God-ordained leadership, not being mute in regard to permissible praying or prophesying.

There is indeed a divinely ordered hierarchy between men and women that must be maintained and evidenced within the church. The Scripture specifically defines their respective roles and regulates the behavior of both male and female in the place of public worship. A woman's submission to the authority placed over her and her obedience to the biblical prescription for evidencing that submission frees her to open her mouth in prayer and in testimony to the word and work of the Lord—particularly when she is so instructed to do by those in authority in the church. ■

