

Women's Headcovering: Why?

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Transcript of sermon preached by **Pastor David Silversides** on **Sunday, November 19, 1995**
Preached at Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian Church, Loughbrickland, Northern Ireland

We turn in the word of God to 1 Cor 11:2-16. Our theme this morning is the women's head covering: why? Why women's head covering in congregational worship?

God willing, we will pause in our studies in the book of 1 Corinthians at the end of chapter 11. Chapter 11 itself deals with two more problems in the church at Corinth: the question of women's head covering in worship and the questions concerning the Lord's Supper.

Probably these two things are the third and fourth matters that the Corinthians had raised themselves with the Apostle Paul. He has already looked at the question of marriage and the question of food offered to idols which ends in chapter 10 or at the beginning of chapter 11.

In chapters 12, 13 and 14 we have a big section dealing with spiritual gifts. But here in chapter 11 we have two matters addressed: the question of women's head covering in worship and the question of the Lord's Supper. And so this morning we embark on the question of women's head covering in worship.

Now, it is plain on the very surface of the passage that the Apostle Paul is saying that in situations of corporate worship men are not to have their heads covered and women are to have their heads covered. So in verse 4: "Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoreth his head. 5. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head." Or, in verse 13, "Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a women pray unto God uncovered?"

Now, I am acutely aware that this subject could be described as something of a hot potato; that is, it has been a source of contention within the congregations of the Lord. And for that reason sometimes this passage of Scripture is either studiously ignored by ministers and preachers or else it is addressed or opened up, and the result is something that might be described as a row.

Now, by God's grace, I do not want to ignore this passage but also I trust that there will be no row either. But being aware that this is a matter of contention, there are certain things I want to make plain at the outset.

First of all, we are not looking at this because it is a hobby horse of the minister. It is quite true that Christians, and ministers included, can have certain themes to which they give disproportionate attention. Now, this is not the case on this one here. It is over seven years since the Lord called me to labor among you in the word of God, over seven years; that means that morning and evening services held here (and we started a regular evening service fairly soon after coming), there must have been some 700 sermons preached from this pulpit. If you add to that the Bible studies (where we seek to expound a passage of Scripture), the number of sermons or expositions amounts up to something around a thousand. And although we have occasionally referred to this passage in other connections, this is the first time we have ever directly addressed the subject of women's head covering in the congregation. We intend to look at it this week and to continue next week. So that's two sermons out of about a thousand or around 0.2 percent of all that has been preached so far. Let no one say, and let no one say to you that we can ignore what is preached this week and next week because it is just some foible

or preoccupation of the minister; it isn't. We look at this subject because it is in the word of God and in process of exposition everything in the word of God must be preached and received with meekness.

But then there is a second thing I want to say. This matter cannot be dismissed as unimportant. It cannot and must not be dismissed as unimportant. To say that some biblical doctrines are more basic than others is true, but to say that anything in Scripture is unimportant or can be safely ignored is utterly untrue. Once we start deciding for ourselves what parts of God's word we take notice of and what we won't, we are running towards chaos and disaster. We may ignore nothing in the word of God.

But then I also want to say, that, as always, if you have difficulty following the argument from the passage of Scripture, or if you can't see that what I am seeking to bring to you is the teaching of this passage of Scripture, then you are free to raise it with me and talk about it with one requirement: I will talk with anybody about any subject provided that we accept that the word of God is final. There is no point in discussing anything if we don't accept the finality of the word of God. So all I ask of you this morning is that by the grace of God you listen with an open heart to whatever Scripture says.

One more thing. I have no desire whatsoever to embarrass anyone. And I fully appreciate that many may be quite unclear on this subject and in fact baffled by the conflicting signals that have come even from the ministers of the word of God. It has to be said that even ministers of the word have not spoken with one voice on this subject. And so I can quite understand if you are thoroughly confused about it. Whatever your practice has been or currently is, let there be no embarrassment but let us draw a line and start with a clean sheet as it were and try to determine before the Lord what His word actually teaches on this subject.

Now then, that the Word of God in this passage teaches that a woman but not a man are to cover their heads in certain situations of worship, that much is clear and obvious. But we need to address three questions: why, what and when? Why is a woman but not a man to have her head covered in corporate worship? Was this something just for those times, or is it something for the church of God in all ages? Why?

Then we have to look at *what*. Is the covering, as some people maintain, simply the woman's hair, or is it something above and beyond a woman's hair? In other words, is the covering that Paul is speaking about the women's hair, or is he simply using the hair as the natural covering day to day by way of comparison with the fact that in corporate worship there is to be a covering above and beyond the natural covering of the hair?

Then we have to ask *when*. When does this apply? In what situations does this apply? It evidently applies in worship, but in what situations of worship?

And so we look then at the first of these questions today. Why should men *not have* their heads covered in corporate worship, and why should women *have* their heads covered in corporate worship?

1. First of all then, it is not a temporary concession. Some maintain that the apostle is simply deferring to accepted custom of the day and age in which he lived. That is, that what the apostle is saying is, "It is the norm in our society in the Middle East and in our day and generation for a woman to have her head covered. And, as Christians, don't unnecessarily rock

the boat. Fall in line. Accept the convention that a woman's head covering indicates submission to male authority, and just fall in line. Don't cause unnecessary offence." We may call this "the concession to current culture position," that is, that what Paul is teaching here is not a permanent rule but something that applied then because in that situation it was the norm that a woman would have her head covered.

Now, there are three fatal objections to that view of the passage. First of all, there is nothing in the passage to suggest it. Nothing. There is nothing in this passage that indicates that what the apostle is saying is that the woman should have her head covered because it would cause unnecessary offense in this day and this age and this culture. You can search the passage; you will not find any indication that the question of women's head covering was simply a concession to local feeling.

It is quite true that the apostle Paul would concede to local culture where there was no sin. It is quite true that he would teach the people of God not to be deliberately unconventional when there was no need; and it is quite true that if you or I went to some distant part where the culture was different so far as there was no sin involved we should try to adapt and to fit in and cause no unnecessary offense beyond the necessary offense of the truth in word and in practice. But there is no indication that that is what the apostle Paul is speaking of in this passage.

And we may never at random say that something is purely cultural and temporary that is in the word of God. We are not at liberty to take the word of God and wherever there is something commanded say, "Well, that was just temporary and because of that culture." The liberals have done that; they have done it with all the teaching of the Scriptures on the distinctive roles of men and women; they have even done it with the Ten Commandments and said it was temporary, it was cultural, it was for that time. But if we believe the Bible is the word of God, then we can only say something was temporary and for that particular place and time and culture and form of society if there is a reason for doing so in the text. And there isn't. There isn't.

We are to get the meaning out of the text; we are not to take our ideas and inject them into the text or foist them on the Scriptures. We are to get the truth out of the text, not put our ideas upon the text. And you can ransack this passage of Scripture; you will find no indication that the apostle is saying, "Here is something that you should do for the time being."

There is another objection: This explanation does not explain why the apostle deals with this in the context of worship. If he were just saying, "In our culture women have their heads covered and you should carry on doing that as long as that is the case," why is he talking about prophesying and praying? Why is he saying, "is it comely for a women to *pray* unto God uncovered?" What has prayer got to do with it? In other words, the purely cultural, temporary connection doesn't address the fact that Paul is saying there is a particular reason for the woman to have her head covered in worship.

And then there is a third reason, a very simple reason: the passage makes good sense without resorting to this concession to culture approach. The passage makes sense if you forget all about culture and forget all about the Middle East and what the culture and the practice of the Middle East was in those days. If you just read the passage, you will find it makes sense. If you accept that the apostle is teaching that the women's hair is the natural covering which is in place day by day but that in worship there is to be a specific and additional covering; if you open your heart and mind to that, you will find that the passage makes very straightforward sense and reading. And the only time we can resort to cultural explanations is when the passage itself indicates that or at least when there is no other meaning that is forthcoming at all. But there is.

If you forget about culture and forget about the Middle East and forget all this stuff about concessions to the local situation and accepted culture of the Middle East, you will find that the passage makes sense. It is not a temporary concession.

2. Secondly, by way of contrast, it is a permanent ordinance of God. There are three reasons that I want to give to you which confirm that this is for the church in all ages and in all places. Perhaps that is even suggested by verse 16, where he says, “we have no such custom neither the churches of God.” But I suppose some could object that he means the churches of his time, but I say it suggests universal application. But there are three more solid reasons why it must be a permanent appointment of God.

First of all, it is described as an ordinance.

Verse 2, “Now I praise you brethren that you remember me in all things and keep the *ordinances* as I delivered them to you.”

The apostle Paul is saying, “I praise you. I’m glad you are keeping the ordinance I delivered to you.” That is, on the whole, but he is preparing the way for the fact that in two things they were defective--the question of head coverings and in certain aspects of their observance of the Lord’s Supper. And so the question of head covering is one of these ordinances delivered to them.

Now, some have argued that the word *ordinances* here is weak. And it is true that the word can be translated *traditions*, and they say that this is indicating not only a custom but a custom without divine authority or permanent obligation. This is a mistake; the word ordinance here does not imply mere human custom. If you turn to 2 Thessalonians 2 and verse 15, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the *traditions* which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.” That word *traditions* is the same word as in our text. Then in 2 Thessalonians, chapter 3, verse 6, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the *tradition* which he received of us.” “Tradition”--same word. Tradition means that which is given over or handed over. And whilst the word is used of man-made ideas passed from one to another, the apostle Paul also uses it to refer to that infallible instruction he has received from God and passed over to the church of God. Whether by spoken word or by written word. And so he uses the same word of the instructions he gave to the Thessalonians, that a man should seek to work for a living if he possibly can, which some of them were taking no notice of; this was part of the tradition, the ordinances that he had passed to them as an apostle of Christ.

We may no more say that we can set aside what the apostle says about a woman’s head covering than we can set aside what he says about the Lord’s Supper later on in chapter 11 or what he tells the Thessalonians about the necessity of a man needing to work for his living. It is not a mere custom; it is a divinely appointed ordinance. That is one reason it is called an ordinance.

Secondly, it is based on creation. The uncovered head of the men and the covered head of the women in worship is meant to point to God’s created distinction between man and woman. This comes up first of all in connection with headship. Verse 3, “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.”

He introduces this subject, this subject of the women’s head covering, with these fundamental

principles; he is not saying it would be a good thing; he's saying this is the outworking of these basic principles of divine order. If you were arguing for some temporary arrangement, he wouldn't start by saying, "I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." What has that go to do with temporary concessions? Nothing.

He says that God is the head of Christ. Not by nature because Christ is divine and equal with the Father, but, in His role as the Mediator and the God-man, He fulfilled the will of the Father. He also says that Christ is the head of the man; that man is to fulfill the will of Christ. But he then says that the man is the head of the woman. Now, he is not saying that they don't have the same spiritual privileges before God; every Christian has the privileges of the children of God; they have access to God through Christ. In that sense, in Christ, there is neither male nor female, Gal 3:28. But he is speaking about function and role, and it is the Lord's appointment that government and leadership in the home and in the church is to be in the hands of men.

He is talking about outward order, not spiritual privilege. And Christ governs the man. And as far as outward order is concerned, He governs the woman through the man by placing her under obligation to accept the government of the man. He reigns in her heart by the Spirit directly, but, in outward order, Christ governs the man, and He governs the woman through the man by placing her under obligation to accept His delegated authority given to the man. So, when a man prays with his head covered, the apostle is saying that he fails to behave in the way God has appointed to men; by that turning upside down of this appointed ordinance of head covering, a man covering his head is denying his role as a man—to lead in the home and to assume the more prominent roles assigned to men in the church. And so, he dishonors his head, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me try and illustrate this. If a king appoints a general over his army, he appoints a man general over his troops. If that general fails to take hold of the responsibility and the authority that the king has committed to him and allows disorder and fails to govern the troops, it is not humility; it is not humility; it is showing disrespect for the authority committed to him by the king. It is incompetence. It is failure to accept responsibility that the king has given to him; it is failure to use the authority the king has given to him. It is not humility of mind; it's dereliction of duty.

And so it is with a man. If a man fails to take the lead in the home, and if he fails to be willing so far as his gifts allow to take on the leadership roles in the church, then it's not humility. It's neglect; it's irresponsibility. I'm not saying of course that everyone in the church has to have a leadership office; that's not the case. But those things assigned to men in the church, because men are to lead, whether they are office bearers or not, those things which men are to do--if men don't do them, it is not humility; it is simply denying that God has made the men with specific responsibilities of leading.

And the man who prays with his head covered is saying, "I don't accept God's arrangements," and he dishonors Christ. But the woman praying uncovered dishonors her head, the man, because by praying uncovered she is saying, "I won't have God's appointed sign in worship that I accept the role distinctions that God has made; I won't have it; I reject the authority of the man." And therefore she dishonors her head, that is, the man.

So that's the first line of argument. Then there is the creation. In verse 7, "For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man."

There is the question of image-bearing. Now we are immediately faced with a puzzle here. How can he say the man is the image and glory of God when Genesis says that “God created man, male and female, in the image of God created he them.” Man and woman are made in the image of God; they are rational, moral creatures. But man as opposed to woman reflects one aspect or element of the image of God that the woman does not, and that is this: God has been pleased that His *authority* should be reflected in the man, not the woman. And it is in that aspect, that limited aspect of the image of God, that the man reflects the image of God and not the woman. God’s authority is reflected in the delegated authority given to the man and not the woman. And the woman glorifies the man’s God-given authority by submitting to it.

Then, in verse 8, there is the sequence of creation. Verse 8, “For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man.” What was the order of creation? Did God, when He made Adam and Eve, did He make them both at the same time? No, He didn’t. He could have made them both out of the ground, dust of the ground, man and woman both together, but He didn’t. He chose to observe a particular sequence. He made the man, and then He took the rib of the man, Genesis 2:22, and made woman and brought her to the man. There was a sequence: man first, then the woman. And the apostle is saying that that was an indication given at creation that leadership, government, was to be by the man and not by the woman.

And then in verse 9 we have the purpose of creation: “Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.” God made the man, and He made the woman to be a helpmeet for the man, not the other way around. The man wasn’t made a helpmeet for the woman, but the woman was made a helpmeet for the man. And so therefore the apostle is saying the man is to lead; the man is to lovingly govern.

Now, in verses 11 and 12, it is true that the apostle, lest he should seem over-severe on this point, expresses the mutual dependence of man and woman. Not only are they spiritually equal, but, even in their diverse roles, they are both necessary to one another; that’s true in the home; that’s true in the church. The apostle isn’t so putting the women down as to say there was no importance and their functions irrelevant, far from it. Their function and role was different but is every bit as necessary as that of the man.

And so in verse 11, “Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.” That is true in the home; that’s true in the church, or it should be.

And even in the natural sense, it is true. Verse 12, “For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.” Even in the natural sense, men need women, and women need men. The woman was made of the man, his rib, but, for there to be men on the earth, they must be born of the woman. So there is a mutual dependence both in nature and in the kingdom of grace. But this mutual dependence does not obliterate the difference of role; the man is to lead and to govern, and the woman is to follow. And so the leadership offices and all the leadership functions in the church are to be in the hands of men. Just as the man is to lead in the home, so in the church, both the offices of leadership and also those other functions of the church not confined to the office bearers--the leadership is to be with the men. And so that is the argument from creation.

But then, thirdly, it is because of the angels.

Verse 10, “For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.”

She is to have power or a sign of authority on her head because of the angels. Now we have seen in the not too distant past that the angels are deeply concerned with God's saving operations in the world. They desire to look into the sufferings of Christ, the application of Christ's redeeming work to sinners through the gospel. These are the material that fascinate the angels of God. They are fascinated over sinners coming to repentance, and they are ministering spirits sent forth to minister to them who shall be the heirs of salvation. And what is more, God has planned to display His manifold wisdom even to the angelic world by the church. Ephesians 3:10, "To the intent that He might make known to the principalities and powers in the church the manifold wisdom of God." It is as if God is displaying, reflecting His glory in the church for the wonderment and the instruction and the amazement of the angels.

So the angels see God's glory reflected in the church. They see the effects of God's saving grace in the lives of His people. And one of the effects of God's saving grace is that His people, men and women, accept the created order, the difference between male role and female role. They accept it by the grace of God working in them. They don't chafe against it anymore. They accept it gladly, sweetly, submissively. They accept God has made man male and female: this is what the man is to do; this is what the woman is to do. They accept that. And one way that God has appointed that they should display the fact they accept that is that the man should have his head uncovered in worship and the woman should have her head covered in worship.

So when the man has his head uncovered, he is saying, "I accept God has made me a man, and I have responsibilities as a man." And the woman when she has her head covered in corporate worship, she is saying, "I accept God has made me a woman, and I have a different role from the man. And I accept that I must follow the leadership of man."

Now none of these considerations are temporary. The issue of headship in verses 3 to 5; the created order in verses 6 to 8; the presence of the angels in verse 10; these factors all apply as much today here in Loughbrickland as they did in Corinth in the first century AD.

Well now, what are the lessons. Very briefly.

Firstly, God has appointed in all ages that man is to lead. That is true in the home; it's true in the home. God's saving grace to sinners does not obliterate what was established at creation; it causes sinners to accept what was established at creation. So man is to lead in the home.

But then also God has appointed that in the church the leadership offices and functions are to be performed by men. You say, "But surely there are women who can do just as good a job." But whether that is true or not true is irrelevant; it is what God commands. If God didn't say this in His word, I wouldn't be saying it. And when a church rejects the fact that God has appointed that men must lead in the church, they are rejecting the kingly authority of Jesus Christ. When a church thinks they know better than Scripture, they are saying to the Lord Jesus Christ, even though they profess to be part of His church, "We will not have this man to rule over us."

And when a church goes the length of actually not only permitting women to lead but of actually formally ordaining them to the ministry and to the eldership of the church, it is difficult to conceive of how a professing Christian church could more clearly show its contempt for the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a great deal of discussion about the ordination of women. Let me say quite plainly, and I am not exaggerating, that the only reason there is any debate about the ordination of women is because men have set aside and rejected the word of the Lord. No one who takes the Bible in

his hand as the infallible word of God could read it without realizing that the Scriptures teach that the rule and the teaching in the church of God is to be in the hands of men. And a church that ordains women is a church that has rejected the word of the Lord. And we should be desirous to be watchful against all concessions to such rebellion against our King Jesus.

It's not a question of male chauvinism; it's a question of love and loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ. Who knows best? He knows best! And the fact that we can think perhaps of gifted women who we imagine would do such a good job in the ministry or in the eldership or to the fore in the church of God is irrelevant.

And then, fourthly, Christian men and women are to accept the different roles assigned to them. The man must lead and govern lovingly in the home. And so far as his gifts allow, he must be willing to take on leadership functions, if not leadership office, in the church of God. (We look at that more next week.) And when the work of the church is left to the leadership of women, it is not just the women that are wrong; it's the men. It's because the men have become spiritual wimps; it is because the men have lost a manly, godly willingness to lead.

--To be continued--