

Tim Bouter

# Women's Head Covering

*“Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. For this reason, the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God. Judge among 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 anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.”*

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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The head covering in the context of the Apostle Paul's teaching is a symbolic hat or veil that a Christian woman wears in public gatherings of the assembly to glorify the Lord Jesus in collective acknowledgement of God's creation order. Although Adam and Eve were created equally in the image of God, the position of headship (primary responsibility, authority and leadership) was given to man. The principle

of headship originates from God’s creation order, but in practice it is confined to the spheres of the Christian home and church in the teachings of the New Testament, and not society in general. “God has not commanded in His word that men have exclusive authority in politics, business, education, and so on. It also does not mean that every woman in the church is under the authority of every man – ridiculous! Instead, it means that those who lead the church – pastors and ruling elders – must be men, and women must respect their authority, not because of their gender, but because of their office.” <sup>1</sup>

It is imperative to establish that subjection does not mean inferiority; Christ is subject to God the Father, but He is not inferior to Him! Neither is woman inferior to man, though she is subject to his leadership in the assembly. This doesn’t have anything to do with capability, talent, intelligence or anything else along those lines. It simply means that God has designed different roles for men and women, and has equipped each gender with different characteristics to glorify Him in them. “Men and women are equal with respect to dignity and worth, and yet different with respect to role and responsibility. While there is a great deal of overlap, men have a specific stewardship regarding public ministry and women have a specific stewardship with respect to the raising of children. In the Bible those roles are treated as equally valuable and necessary for the health and flourishing of God’s people.” <sup>2</sup>

It is also important to point out that submission in the Biblical context is active and voluntary, rather than passive or forced. Any position of leadership and authority should likewise be practiced in love and compassion. The headship of man and subjection of woman reflects the reciprocal relationship between Christ and the Church. The woman should be submissive to the authority (spiritual leadership) of man in the assembly, just like the Body of Christ should submit to His authority as the exalted Head.

First Corinthians 11 was written in the context of *public* gatherings of the assembly, as verses 16-18 indicate: *But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God. Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and*

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<sup>1</sup> David Guzik, Enduring Word Commentary

<sup>2</sup> Paul Carter, The Gospel Coalition

*in part I believe it.*<sup>3</sup> Along with the saints in Corinth, this Epistle was written to “all who in every place call on the name of Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:2). Head coverings are, after all, an outward symbol.

As the *representative of Christ*, and in acknowledgement of his leadership role (place of headship) in creation, the man ought not to cover his head in public worship/ministry. As the *compliment of man*, and in acknowledgement of her supporting role (place of subjection) in creation, the woman ought to cover her head in public worship/ministry.

It is important that these instructions are not merely obeyed in a suppressive, legalistic manner, but rather embraced as a privilege and opportunity to glorify our Lord Jesus. The following comments outline some Biblical principles regarding head coverings in the assembly, women’s ministry and private settings:

### Assembly Setting:

Headship is the *principle* of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, and head covering is the *picture*. The symbolism of the head covering answers to the instruction for women to be silent in public gathering of the assembly (1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:11-12); both complement each other and should be practised together. The picture is most complete in mixed gatherings when men and women come together as a church congregation:

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<sup>3</sup> Compare with 1 Corinthians 14:23, 28, 35. The official meetings of the whole church coming together in one place include the remembrance meeting, prayer meeting, and Bible study/open ministry (Acts 2:42). However, these principles may be extended to other public Christian services (even if they are not strictly assembly meetings), such as weddings, baptisms, gospel meetings, etc.



Christ;  
glory of God

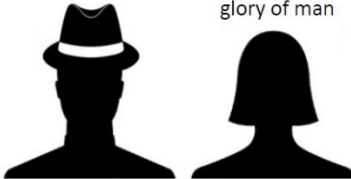
man;  
glory of man



Christ;  
glory of God



man;  
glory of man



*The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God (1 Corinthians 11:3).*

*[Man] is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man (1 Corinthians 11:7).*

The glory and prominence of man should not be visible in the assembly; together as believers we gather to display the glory of God and recognize Christ as our Head. For this reason, men should not cover their heads in the assembly, while women should.

*For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels (1 Corinthians 11:10).*

Angels are ministering spirits that watch and attend on behalf of the heirs of salvation. Paul writes that the apostles had been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men (1 Corinthians 4:9). The manifold wisdom of God is made known to angels through the church (Ephesians 3:10). Angels should see God's order observed in the assembly. In the first creation, they observed Adam and Eve acting outside of their roles in disobedience to God. God does not want what happened in the old creation to be repeated in the new creation. When the angels look down on the public gatherings of the saints, He wants them to see the men taking the place of leadership, and the women taking the place of submission, indicated outwardly by covering their heads. Angels themselves yield perfect obedience in subjection to God.<sup>4</sup>

*Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray <sup>5</sup> to God with her head uncovered? (1 Corinthians 11:13).*

Paul appeals to the Corinthians' instinctive sense. The suggestion is that it is not reverent or decorous for a woman to publically enter into God's presence unveiled. Admittedly, this verse had more cultural significance in the setting it was written than in our day.

*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 (1 Corinthians 11:14-15).*

Long hair is nature's symbol of submission; God gave women this natural covering of glory in a way that he did not give to men. What is true in the natural sphere should be true in the spiritual. The head covering is the spiritual symbol of

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to the unchanging principle of headship in creation, the seemingly random argument of the angels indicates that the head covering was not intended to be limited to a certain city, culture or time.

<sup>5</sup> Although public prayer is restricted to the men (1 Timothy 2:8) and although women are instructed to keep silent in the assemblies (1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:11-12), they should actively participate in silent prayer. Acts 1:14 confirms this lovely fact: *these all continued in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.* All were praying, although not all audibly. Similarly, Acts 4:24 says that the company there *raised their voice to God with one accord*, and when Peter was imprisoned later on, it mentions that "many were gathered together praying" (Acts 12:12).

submission. The head covering veils a woman's own natural glory <sup>6</sup> (covering her hair) and simultaneously veils the glory of man (covering her head). We assemble together as believers in order to focus our attention on Christ Himself, and away from ourselves. There is a beauty and privilege in these principles that does away with all legality. By simply obeying God's instructions regarding head coverings, women may visibly demonstrate that Christ is the head of the assembly to the glory of God.

## Women's Ministry Setting:

*But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered (1 Corinthians 11:5-6).*

It is difficult to know exactly what context the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote about women praying and prophesying. Certainly, this verse should not be interpreted in a way that contradicts other New Testament passages about the role of women in the public gatherings of the assembly. According to one point of view, there are settings of women's ministry where head covering would be appropriate and consistent with the Biblical principle of headship. According to this viewpoint, a woman should be covered when she exercises a ministry in audible prayer or prophesying. <sup>7</sup> Otherwise she is saying that she does not recognize man's God given headship and will not submit to it. Paul says that if a woman does not want to wear

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<sup>6</sup> It is striking that in wearing a head covering to glorify God, a woman also covers her personal glory. When we yield our own sources of glorying to God, He can be glorified through us (compare with Jeremiah 9:23-24; Philippians 3:7-8). When Mary anointed the feet of the Lord Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair, she was laying her glory, as it were, at His feet

<sup>7</sup> Two spheres of such ministry mentioned in the New Testament are older women teaching younger woman (Titus 2:3-5) and the instruction of children (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14-15). In these spheres, it would be appropriate for a woman to take the role of primary responsibility and leadership normally afforded to the man. However, in public settings with men present, it would not be appropriate for women to pray audibly – this is taught by Paul in 1st Timothy 2:8. Likewise, women are not permitted to teach or have authority over a man, but are instructed to keep silent in the assemblies (1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:11-12).

a head covering, let her really be like a man – let her go to a barbershop and have her beautiful locks all shorn! <sup>8</sup>

Alternatively, some Bible scholars think that in verses 4 & 5, praying and prophesying (summarizing the full range of church service activities Godward and manward) is a general expression equivalent to “attending public worship”. As a congregation, we join together in prayer and in the transmission of God’s word as it is spoken by his appointed ministers. According to this point of view, head covering would be limited to the context of public gatherings of the assembly. The difficulty is that while the term “praying” can include the individual, inaudible prayers of the congregation, “prophesying” is by definition the audible expression of God’s thoughts to one another. It is possible that the congregational singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is included in prophesying. In the Old Testament, prophesying is sometimes equivalent to “praise” (1 Samuel 10:5-6; 19:23; 1 Chronicles 25:1).

Regardless of how head coverings may or may not apply to women’s ministry settings, both viewpoints are consistent with regards to their application in the public gatherings of the assembly. The two examples of women’s ministry mentioned in Footnote #7 (men not being present) only include half the symbolism of head covering. In the public gatherings of the assembly, the uncovered heads of the brothers in combination with the covered heads of the sisters provides the complete picture.

### Private Setting:

- In private or family settings, it is up to the personal exercise and conscience of the woman whether she wears a head covering. What is important is that our motives are pure and that we seek to do what best honors the Lord as we listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit who guides us into all truth.
- 1 Corinthians 11:5-6 could certainly apply to these kinds of settings. For example, some mothers might deem it appropriate to wear a head covering when leading the family in prayer and devotions while her husband is away on business, since he would normally take the role of spiritual leadership in the

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<sup>8</sup> H.A. Ironside, 1 and 2 Corinthians: An Ironside Expository Commentary (Kregel Publications, 2006), 187.

family. On the other hand, as in women's ministry settings, the complete congregational picture of head covering is not present in private settings.

- A general guideline which may be helpful for women who have difficulty knowing in which situation to wear a head covering is to simply do the opposite of the man! For example, a man would take his hat off during public Christian services, and a woman should do the opposite and wear a head covering. On the other hand, a man wearing a hat may have full liberty to pray individually while he is working, and a woman may likewise have liberty to pray in different settings without wearing a head covering.
- The topic of head covering should never be presented or understood in a way that causes feelings of fear and bondage or raises questions about dignity and worth. It is especially important not to be legalistic or forceful about the application of head coverings to ambiguous settings:

*For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15).*

*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty (2 Corinthians 3:17).*

*For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind (1 Timothy 1:7).*

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