

Head Coverings and Heaven Hosts – Because of the Angels

I Corinthians 11:2—16

² Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. ³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵ but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. ⁶ For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. ⁷ For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; ¹² for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. ¹³ Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, ¹⁵ but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶ If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. – I Corinthians 11:2-16, ESV

Creation Truths & Cultural Application

In 2008, A.J. Jacobs wrote a humorous book called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. For one year, Jacobs followed every biblical commandment very literally – although sometimes he really followed orthodox rabbis' interpretations of the Bible's commands. He did not wear fabrics of mixed fibers. He did not trim the edge of his beard. He played a ten-string harp. The resulting best-selling book was basically a mockery of people who take the Bible literally. Four years later, Rachel Held Evans followed Jacobs' best-seller with her own best-selling book, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband 'Master'*.

These best-selling books are really designed to mock and ridicule anyone who would want to take the Bible seriously as God's authoritative guide for faith and life. They

make it seem like the most absurd and out-of-touch thing to do to base your life on the Bible. And today's passage would be one of their favorite punching bags for ridiculing the Bible. Rachel Held Evans even mentions it in her book's subtitle – "Covering Her Head." These books and other critiques like them make two massive errors: First of all, they don't distinguish between the Old Testament ceremonial, dietary, and cleanliness codes and even the Old Testament civil law – all of which served a specific purpose for God's people before Christ came, as a preparation for the Gospel and the coming of Christ, and the enduring principles of God's unchanging Moral Law, summarized in the Ten Commandments. Then, secondly, they also fail to distinguish between the truths and principles taught by Scripture and the right discerning application of those principles in different cultural contexts. Of course, the real problem is that these authors and other critics of the Bible and Biblical Christianity don't really want to live according to God's standard; they want to live according to their own. So, they mock and ridicule, so they have an excuse to say, "I tried that, and I don't accept it."

But what do we do if we want to take the Bible seriously, and we don't think the rigidly literal approach is really the right idea? What if we honestly desire to live under God's authoritative rule? According to Section 6 of Chapter I of the Westminster Confession, we believe "*The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added*" But how can we properly understand how to apply the truths from the Scriptures to our lives? This requires some studying, thinking, and Holy Spirit-guided discerning. Section 6 of Chapter I of the Westminster Confession goes on to say, "*Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.*"

So, we need the Holy Spirit and, in many cases in life, we need to follow the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word. In other words, we need to pray and think and not just make wooden application of things that are complex. That process of thinking through application is more profitable if

we understand more clearly the original cultural context of the passage in question and the Biblical author's original intent. We need to study to discern the AIM – Author's Intended Meaning.

I. Head Coverings

So, let's dig in a little more on these Head Coverings:

⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵ but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. ⁶ For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. ⁷ For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. (ESV)

There's been a lot of ink spilled about what kind of head covering the Apostle Paul meant. Was the woman's hair given to her as a covering, and so Paul is just saying that a woman should not cut her hair? Is he saying that the woman should wear her hair up on her head, putting her hair up as a covering? Or is he talking about some kind of veil that would completely cover the woman? Or was it just a shawl of some sort?

My own understanding, which may not be perfectly correct, but which I have struggled with and think is true, is that Paul is referring to a kind of shawl worn around the woman's shoulders and that, when she would stand up in the assembly to pray, or, if she was a prophetess, when she would stand up to prophesy, she would cover her head with the shawl, as a sign of submission and humility. In other words, she was not praying or proclaiming as one having authority but as one under authority.

Prophesy, by the way, was a foundational gift, given to the early church, which ceased after the completion of the Scriptures, which were still being given by God when Paul wrote I Corinthians. Prayer, in this sense, I believe refers to women praying

during a time of gathered corporate prayer, like during a church prayer meeting.

But, as I explored the cultural background of life in Corinth, I learned some other things that were helpful and illuminated my understanding of this passage even more clearly. Corinth was a city full of prostitutes and sexual immorality, like many of the large port cities of the Roman Empire. For women to walk around the city was a risky proposition, especially with a large population of drunken sailors passing the time while their ships were being transported across the Isthmus of Corinth. A woman who walked the streets of Corinth with her hair uncovered, especially wearing her hair down, was sending signals that she was available and interested in relations with a man. It was considered not only immodest but dangerous. To have your head covered indicated that you were taken, that you belonged to your husband, and it told other men to stay away.

This makes even more sense when we understand the cultural significance of a woman having her head shaved. *“every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head.”* Why was it so shameful for a woman’s head to be shaved? Because this is what was often done when a woman was caught in adultery. This is why Paul connects these two things: having the head uncovered, especially if the hair was worn down, indicated a desire or willingness to commit adultery, while having the head shaved indicated a woman who was already found guilty of adultery.

So, why would women come to church with their heads uncovered, if it was so shameful? Most likely because women only covered their heads in public and not in their homes. The early churches were all in people’s homes, homes sometimes modified or converted to accommodate larger gatherings, but house-churches. So, they might have felt like it wasn’t really public, and so they didn’t need to cover their heads. But it was a bit like wearing your pajamas to church. It was choosing comfort over standards of decency and modesty. That seems to be the most likely explanation.

B. Cultural or Natural?

Since wearing a head covering showed modesty and respect and loyalty for your husband, the need for women to prophesy or pray with heads covered does seem to be reflective of important moral truth. But, in our culture, wearing a head-covering shawl is not really the best way to communicate this truth. I think that when a wife sits with her husband, when she supports her husband in leading their children in worship, when she is respectful in how she treats and speaks about her husband, and when her husband is tender and affectionate in how he treats his wife, this communicates the same vital truth: She is not independent of him, and he is not independent of her.

Consider the language of verses 8-12:

⁸ For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; ¹² for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.

Remember the beautiful language from Matthew Henry's Commentary on Genesis 2 last week:

“The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.”

And, just as woman was taken out of man, so now every man is born of a woman. So, we belong to each other. In our wedding vows, we give ourselves to each other, and we are no longer our own. Christ has purchased us, and Christ has given us to each other. And we should make that obvious in our worship and our conduct on Sunday morning.

How do we violate this? Well, not in this church, but I have known of and seen in other churches some unhealthy patterns that seem to me to be the modern-day equivalent of violating Paul's words about head coverings for women. In some

churches, families don't sit together, and husbands and wives don't worship together. Sometimes, in some churches, the husbands and wives split from each other right after worship, and the men gather together to gripe about their wives, while the wives get together to gripe about their husbands. This is wrong. I'm thankful I haven't seen that here. Also, in some churches, it seems like women dress for church to make themselves look attractive to other men, and some women can even be inappropriately flirtatious with men, or men can have inappropriate wandering eyes. That is wrong, too.

I. Male and Female

Also, very briefly, beyond the issue of head coverings and shame, I think it's inescapable that Paul is also emphasizing here the creational differences between men and women in general, and that these should be obvious and clear:

¹³ Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, ¹⁵ but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

Now, I don't think Paul's words are necessarily about the length of hair specifically, but rather about being masculine and feminine in our hairstyles, which we could extend to our clothing and conduct. In the beginning, God created people male and female, which Jesus Himself confirmed, and we in the church should be a living display of healthy and authentic masculinity and femininity. I don't mean culturally stereotypical displays of "toxic masculinity" or machismo, or women who must all be soft-spoken, weak, and acting helpless. That's the distortion of God's good creation by sin and the fall. I mean robust, healthy, diverse, individualized, authentic men and women who live as men and women.

Men don't have to hunt and be good at sports. Women don't have to be experts at cooking and sewing. Men can enjoy cooking. Women can be better at managing the bills and finances. This has nothing to do with any of those shallow, foolish, cultural stereotypes, but rather with the glory of God's good creation, redeemed in Christ.

And on Sunday morning, when we gather for worship, it should be obvious in how

we worship that we are God’s glorious creation, bearing His image as male and female, and redeemed by Christ, under His headship, as His redeemed people. Everything we do should make this clear – because of the angels.

III. Heavenly Hosts: Because of the Angels - *For the Angels?*

Wait – because of the angels? Isn’t that the strangest, most unexpected and unexplained thing Paul says in this whole passage: *That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.*

What do you mean by “because of the angels,” Paul? You weren’t even talking about angels. What can this mean? Is it important? I think it is.

Three possible explanations have been proposed:

1. That Paul isn’t talking about angels at all, but messengers. The word *angeloi*, translated “angels,” just means “messengers,” because angels are heavenly messengers. So, this proposal says Paul is concerned that the Corinthians might cause a controversy if messengers from other churches visit them and see their disorderly worship, with women acting like men. This seems unlikely. “Because of the messengers” is seemingly even more out-of-place than “because of the angels.”
2. Paul is telling women to be modest by covering their heads so that the angels who observe their worship won’t lust after them. Yes, that is seriously a proposed explanation, but . . . No. Just no. Moving on, then . . .
3. What the second proposal might get right is the idea that Paul has in mind the fact that we are not alone when we worship. We are joined by and watched by angels.

In Ephesians 3:8-11, Paul says this: *“To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things,¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly*

places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord” – ESV

Paul says that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God is now being made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, to the angels.

And then Peter writes this, in 1 Peter 1:10-12:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.- ESV

Here’s what I think: Angels long to look into the things of salvation, and they get an opportunity to do so every time we gather for worship on Sunday morning. Because, in our gathered worship, which is not like the angels’ worship around the throne in heaven, we rejoice in a treasure: the beauty and power and glory of the Gospel.

Worship as Witness

Our worship gathering is a witness, to the angels and to a watching world.

The angels don’t know anything about redeeming love, about God becoming one of them to offer Himself as a sacrifice to redeem and restore them. They learn the Gospel from watching the church. And if they see disorder, selfishness, apparent immorality, rebelliousness, will they be able to rejoice over our worship? Will they be able to “look into” the things of the Gospel in such a chaotic scene – and, of course, what of a watching world that needs to see Jesus and the plans and purposes of God for people lovingly and powerfully displayed?

We are a living display as a gathered people and as husbands and wives within this gathered people every Lord’s Day morning. So, how we worship and how we worship together matters – “because of the angels” and for the sake of the nations, but, ultimately, for the Glory of God!

