

1. Women's Headcovering: Why?

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? Chapter 11 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 and beginning of chapter 11. In chapters 12, 13 and 14 we have a lengthy section dealing with spiritual gifts. But here in chapter 11 we have a section addressing two questions, the question of women's head covering in worship and the question of the Lord's Supper. 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.

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." 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. For that reason sometimes this passage of Scripture is either studiously ignored by ministers and preachers or else it is addressed or opened up as something that would be described as a row. By God's grace I do not want to ignore this passage but I also trust there will be no row either. 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 ministers can have certain themes to which they give disproportionate attention. This is not the case here. It is over seven years since the Lord called me to labour among you in the word of God; that means that morning and evening services held here there must have been some 700 sermons preached from this pulpit. If you add to that the bible studies the number of sermons or expositions amounts up to something around a thousand. 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 and we intend to do so over the course of two weeks which amounts to 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. 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 will take notice of and what we will not, 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 from this passage of Scripture you are free to raise it with me and talk about it with one requirement: I will talk with anybody upon any subject provided 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. 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. 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 women but not men are to cover their heads in certain situations of worship, that much is clear and obvious. We need then 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 the apostle is speaking about the women's hair or is he simply using the hair as a natural day to day covering and 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? To which situations of worship does this apply?

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, 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 what the apostle is teaching here 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 offence 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 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 to do so. 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 fit in and cause no unnecessary offence beyond the necessary offence 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. 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.” 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 or culture if there is a reason for doing so in the text. 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. 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 temporary connection doesn’t address the fact that there is a particular reason for the woman to have her head covered in worship.

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 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 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 straight forward sense and reading. 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 or reason that is forthcoming. If you forget about culture and the Middle East and forget all about concession to culture, 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.” I suppose some could object that he means the churches of his time, but I say it suggests universal application.

There are, however, 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 commended the Corinthians for keeping the ordinances he delivered to them on the whole, but he is preparing the way for the fact that in two things they had defected - the question of head covering and in certain aspects of their observance of the Lord's Supper. So the question of head covering is one of those ordinances delivered to them.

Some have argued that the word *ordinances* here is weak. 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.

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.

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. 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 women's head covering than we can set aside what he says about the Lord's Supper 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 women is the man; and the head of Christ is God.”

He introduces this subject of the women's head covering with these fundamental principles; he is not saying it would be a good thing, 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 every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.” What has that 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, “but the man is the head of the woman.” He is not saying 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. 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 dishonours 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 showing disrespect for the authority committed to him by the king. It is incompetence. It is failure to accept responsibility and use the authority the king has given to him. It is not humility of mind it is dereliction of duty. So it is with a man, if a man fails to take the lead in the home and if he fails to be willing as his gifts allow, to take on the leadership roles in the church, then it is not humility it is neglect, irresponsibility. I’m not saying of course 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. The man who prays with his head covered is saying, “I don’t accept God’s arrangements” and he dishonours Christ. But the women praying uncovered dishonours 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 dishonours her head, that is the man. That is the first line of argument.

Then there is the creation.

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. We are immediately faced with a puzzle here, how can we say man is the image and glory of God when Genesis says that God made man in the image of God, male and female 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. 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. 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 make Adam and Eve both at the same time? No, he didn't, he could have made them both 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 2:2, made the woman and brought her to the man. There was a sequence the man first then the woman. The apostle is saying that that was an indication given at creation that leadership, government was to be by the man and not the woman. Then in verse 9 we have the purpose of creation.

Verse 9, "Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man."

God made the man and made the woman to be a helpmeet for the man, not the other way around. The man was not made a helpmeet for the woman but the woman was made a helpmeet for the man. 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 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 is true in the home and it is true in the church. The apostle is not so putting the women down as though 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.

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 and true in the church, or it should be. 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. Woman was made of the man, his rib, but for there to be men on the earth they must be born of the woman. 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. 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.

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. 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 the heirs of salvation. 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 to 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 made man male and female; this is what the man is to do this is what the woman is to do. 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 that God Has made me a man and the responsibilities appointed to me as a man” and the woman 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.”

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 facts apply as much to us today in Loughbrickland as they did in Corinth in the first century AD.

Well now, what are the lessons. Firstly, God has appointed in all ages that man is to lead. That is true in the home; that God’s saving grace to sinners does not obliterate what was established in 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 doesn’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.” When a church goes the length of actually not only permitting women to lead but 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

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exaggerating, 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. 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. 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.

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 they must be willing to take on leadership functions if not leadership office in the church of God - we look at that more next week. 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, the men have become such spiritual wimps; it is because the men have lost a manly, godly willingness to lead.