

2. Women's Headcovering: What and When?

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1 Corinthians

By Rev. David Silversides

Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 11:1-16
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Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian

22 Main Street
Loughbrickland, Co. Down
Northern Ireland
BT32 3NQ
UK

Website: www.loughbrickland.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/ldrpc

We turn in the word of God to the first passage which we read, 1 Corinthians 11, and this morning we look most at verses 5 and 6 and then verse 13 to 16. Verse 5 and 6 say,

5 But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. 6 For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.

Then in verse 13,

13 Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?

So on to verse 16. So our theme this morning is the women's headcovering in worship, what is it and when does it apply? Last week we began this subject and we said that we would spend two weeks on it looking at the question of women's headcovering, why, what and when, and we we said at that time and I say again, that we tackle this subject not to cause embarrassment or to provoke but simply because as a professing Christian people we want to know whatever the word of God says about anything so that we can bring our ways into conformity to it.

So last week, we looked at the question: why? Why should a man have his head uncovered and a woman have her head covered in congregational worship? And we saw that the reason the Apostle Paul teaches this is not because he was simply making a concession to the existing culture of his day. We saw that there is nothing in the passage which indicates that the apostle was speaking about some temporary concession to surrounding culture. We also saw the idea that it was merely a temporary affair to do with the culture of that time and place does not explain why he applies it to the subject of worship. And we also saw that the passage makes quite good sense without resorting to a purely cultural explanation, in fact, we saw the opposite, that the apostle urges this practice for very permanently valid reasons. He calls it an ordinance of God in verse 2.

He says it's based on the created order, man's headship over the woman; the process of creation, the sequence of creation, that man was created first and the woman created of the man; and the purpose of creation, that the woman was to be the helpmeet of the man, not the other way around. He also mentions the angels. The angels are as real and as interested in the affair of the church of God on earth now as they were when the apostle wrote.

So it's not a temporary matter that the apostle is dealing with and so we learned that men are to be leaders and the women are to follow. That's true in the home, that the man is to be the head and the actual official leaders in the church are to be drawn and that is why only men are to be ordained to office in the church. But we also learned that acceptance of this principle of the different roles of man and woman, the different role of man and woman in the home and in the church, that this acceptance of this principle is to find specific expression in congregational worship. In other words, that the man is to worship with his head uncovered and the woman with her head covered in congregational worship as a God-given sign and a way of expressing in accordance with the mind of God that they accept the difference of roles of man and woman. It's an expression of acknowledgment and of acceptance of what God says about the differing roles of man and woman. But this morning, we look at the what and the when. What is this headcovering and when should it apply?

So first of all, what the woman's headcovering is. What is the Apostle Paul talking about when he says that a woman should have her head covered? What is it about? First of all, it is not merely the woman's hair. It is not merely the woman's hair. There is a school of thought which maintains that what the apostle is talking about in this is that a woman should have longer hair than a man and you will find the system of thought so contorted as to scantily make sense at all. But then there is one other argument which is fatal to this position and that is this: throughout the passage, the apostle uses basically one word for "covered, covering, uncovered" until he comes to verse 15. In verse 15,

15 But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.

Now the word "covering" in verse 15 is a different word in the Greek text, it's a different word from the word "covering or uncovered or covered" throughout the rest of the passage and so the apostle is not saying that the covering that he's been referring to all along is the hair. He uses a different word, a word which means "to throw over or to cast over" when he is speaking of the hair.

Now if he meant to say, "This hair, that's the covering," he would have used the same word to show that he was talking about the same thing, but he doesn't. So he's not saying the hair is in the place of this covering that I'm talking about or the hair is this covering because he uses a different word to what he's been using all along to show that whatever place the argument about hair has, it's not the hair that is the covering.

The real argument is from the general to the specific. In verse 5 and 6 he says, "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head," that is, she dishonors her husband or if she's married, she dishonors the man who has been given God's authority to lead, "for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered." What he's saying is quite simply this: if a woman will not wear the specific covering appointed in worship, then why will she not go the whole hog and do away with the natural covering which is normally found on a woman in everyday life. If the extra covering for worship is set aside, why not do away with the natural covering that applied in everyday life? But he says if it's a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, and he may have in mind the fact that shaving the head was sometimes used as a mark of disgrace for an immoral or adulterous woman, he may have that in mind but in any case he shows later on that it is unnatural for a woman to be shaven, and so he's saying if it's a shame for a woman to be shaven, then let her also be covered. If it's a shame for a woman to take away, to remove the natural covering that she has every day all the time, then let her not remove the specific covering appointed for worship.

Then in verse 14 and 15, the apostle teaches that there is to be a difference in hair length. Verse 14,

14 Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? 15 But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.

The apostle argues from nature because although man is totally depraved, yet despite his sin he still has a conscience and he still has a sense of right and wrong albeit it blurred and desensitized in that conscience. So in Romans 2:14-15, the apostle talks about the Gentiles having the law in their hearts, not in the sense of loving it but in the sense of it still bearing upon their consciences so that they have an awareness that some things are right and some things are wrong; however blunted that sense of right and wrong may be and may become, there is still something of that light of nature in man. And he's saying that it is something that ought to be obvious that a woman is to have longer hair than a man. He takes that as something that we should instinctively realize is right.

Now this hasn't always been accepted. In the 60s and the younger ones wouldn't remember the start of these things, but in the 60s there was a trend away from all norms and so it became acceptable and, indeed, fashionable and required among the young that men have long hair and that trend, that fashion, was not neutral. Now I'm not saying that all fashion is wrong. I'm not saying there's a virtue in always being out-of-date, but that fashion was wrong. It did involve a hardening against the light of nature. That's why fashion must be examined by the Christian in the light of Scripture. Every fashion must be first of all examined by Scripture. If it measures up scripturally, then well and good, but if it doesn't, then it has to be rejected so that the Christian while he doesn't glory in being old-fashioned, he will not follow fashion if it is contrary to the word of God, and the unisex and gender-bender fashions are not neutral. They're not neutral. They're part of

man's rebellion against God's created order and the distinction that he has made not only physically but in role and in calling between man and woman, male and female.

So the whole unisex trend is an attempt as far as possible to play down God-given distinction and that's why it has come the length now that society, or at least the avant-garde leaders or the people who try to mould thought in society, would have us now believe that even homosexuality is simply an alternative way of life. It doesn't matter. The distinction between male and female is not God-appointed, God-given, and therefore to be acknowledged and observed consistently, it's just the way things are but it doesn't matter and that is what is involved in the unisex trend.

And the Apostle Paul is saying that it is unnatural for a man to have long hair whereas it is natural for a woman to have long hair and the natural distinction, the natural covering of the woman's head points to a distinction between man and woman, between male and female, and it points to the different roles to which they are called in home and in church, and the acceptance of that difference, the acceptance of the difference of role that the natural covering implies, is to be indicated by an additional covering of the woman's head in congregational worship, so that just as the difference in hair length indicates or is an obvious indication of the difference between man and woman, so also in worship the man's uncovered head and the woman's covered head is an indication that as the people of God we accept God's distinction and we accept the distinction of role that is implied. So the man comes to worship with his head uncovered, the woman comes to worship with her head covered, and that is a way of saying, "Yes, we accept the man is the leader, the woman is the follower in home and in the congregation of the Lord."

So what is required, then, is a covering of the head for the woman. So what form is this covering to take? There are people and it's a terrible thing but when people want to oppose something, they always try to make it look absurd and so they say, "Ah well, if you believe that, then the women will have to be dressed as they were in the Middle East, with a veil that covered not just their head but their faces." But it isn't true that women in the East always wore a veil that covered both head and face. It isn't true. Many of them wore a veil that covered the head and not the face, and the Greek language just as the English language, has a different word for face to head. If Paul had said, had wanted to say they had to have their faces covered, he could have said it. He didn't. He says their head must be covered.

And the word "covering" as used throughout this passage except verse 15, is a word that the New Testament uses elsewhere. The Apostle Paul uses it in Romans 4:7 where he says, "Blessed are they whose sins are covered," and that's the word, the same basic word. It's used in the Greek version of the Old Testament when David fled from Absalom and he came weeping with his head covered. It's used of the seraphim covering their faces in Isaiah 6:2. It's used of Shem and Japhet covering their father's nakedness in Genesis 9:23. It's used of the cloud covering the tabernacle in Exodus 40:34. So the apostle is saying that in worship, congregational worship, the women are to have something that covers their head, veil, scarf, hat, whatever, in order to show that they accept God's distinctions between male and female and the role assigned to each.

Well, secondly, when does this apply? When does the headcovering apply? When should men make a point of having their heads uncovered and women their heads covered? Well, first of all, it has nothing whatever to do with buildings. Nothing. It has nothing whatever to do with particular places. The New Testament church often met in homes. They didn't necessarily have particular meetinghouses. Someone with a big room would open their home and the congregation would meet for worship. There are no holy places in the New Testament. We have God's holy word, we have his holy day, we have his holy ordinances and we are to be a holy people. "Holy" means "set apart by God." And God has not set apart any place in the New Testament for his worship so this doesn't depend on a particular place. Sometimes when people are looking around a church building, a meetinghouse, the men feel they have to take their hats off even though there's no worship. Now that's superstition. That's superstition. There are no holy places. What this applies to is congregational worship wherever it takes place. So if this morning the electricity in Loughbrickland hadn't come back on and if we were without heat and if we had to the church hall and we'd all gone up there to worship, it would make no difference at all. Or if both these buildings were out of use and we had to borrow a hall or somebody with a big lounge said, "Why don't you meet in our lounge for worship?" it would make no difference at all. It has nothing to do with special places, it has everything to do with a Christian congregation met for corporate worship.

"Ah but," you say, "why only congregational worship, then? Why not family worship? Why not private worship?" Because the Apostle Paul wrote this to a church. He includes it in the ordinances for the church. The Lord's Supper is the next ordinance that he deals with in this chapter and it applies to a church in its congregational setting. And in verse 16 he says, "we have no custom, neither the churches of God." He doesn't say church, that is, the people of God in all their lives, but the churches, that is, the people of God met in particular local assemblies or congregations and not everything that applies to congregational worship applies everywhere else, so in chapter 14 he says that the women are not to ask questions in the church but they are to ask them in the home.

So this applies to congregational worship. That means for us that it applies to all gatherings intended for the whole congregation. It applies to the Lord's Day services. It applies to the prayer meeting. It applies to the gatherings for worship when we have missionary meetings or when we have our annual congregational meeting. Whenever the whole congregation is gathered or should be gathered or it is the intention that the whole congregation gathers and worship takes place, that is when this applies. But what about the prayer or prophesying? Here we come to another difficult one, another sensitive subject, but it has to be tackled. In verse 5, "every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven." Verse 13, "Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?" Is the Apostle Paul, then, saying that it's alright for a woman to be vocal in church provided she has a headcovering? Is that what he's saying, that she can speak as long as she has a veil, a scarf, a hat, whatever?

I don't think it is what he's saying at all and let me explain why. Prophecy was a gift of occasional inspired utterance. We don't have that gift today. No one has it today, but there were people who had it in the New Testament times before the Scriptures were complete and that gift was given to women as well as to men. Acts 2:18, thy daughters, thy handmaidens shall prophesy. Acts 21:9 mentions Philip's daughters who prophesied. But that gift, we do not read of that gift, the exercise by a woman in congregational worship. It was exercised elsewhere in private in the home, whatever, but in the gatherings of the church, there is not an instance of a woman prophesying in the church and in chapter 14, the Apostle Paul says that the women are to be silent immediately after dealing with the subject of prophecy. He says "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets," verse 32, "for God is not the author of confusion but of peace as in all churches of the saints. Let your women keep silence in the churches."

It is inconceivable that the apostle believed that women should prophesy in the church and if he didn't believe they should prophesy, then these verses do not mean either that they should lead in public prayer. There is no necessity of thinking that when he says, "If a woman prayeth or prophesieth," that the prayer is audible prayer and in verse 13 when he simply mentions prayer, he says, "It is comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?" So he may not have in mind audible leading in prayer at all, but it may be that in Corinth they did, that the women did audibly lead in prayer but that the Apostle Paul deals at present with what was happening in Corinth and in chapter 14, having sorted out the question of the headcoverings, in chapter 14 he then deals with the question of women being silent. You see, when you turn to chapter 14 and verse 34 to 35, you will see that it is quite impossible that the Apostle Paul approved of women leading in prayer in the Christian congregation. Verse 34,

34 Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. 35 And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

Now he's not just talking about chattering as I think that view of the passage is an insult to women. I think men are equally capable of inappropriate blathering as women. He's not talking about chattering, he's talking about a permanent principle that the women are to be silent. He doesn't give exceptions, they are to be silent in the church, and he even says that they are not to ask questions. Asking questions is that form of initiative which is most compatible with submission but he says, "No, not even asking questions." So it is quite impossible that the apostle is saying they can't ask question but they can lead the congregation in prayer. That's unthinkable.

When we turn to 1 Timothy 2:8, the apostle says, "I will therefore that men pray every where," literally, the men pray every where, and the word "men" in that place is not the word that means man as opposed to the animals, he deliberately uses the word which means men as opposed to women. There are two different words. If he wanted to say man in the sense of mankind or humankind as we're supposed to say now, he would have used the other word but he doesn't. He uses the word which means men as opposed to women.

And in verse 9, he gives the contrast, "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel." So congregational prayer is to be led whether it's by the minister or by others, it is to be led by men, not women.

You see, the biblical rule is quite simple. The biblical rule is astonishingly simple. When we sing the Psalms, all voices join together, men and women, and that's right. The Scriptures teach that. Can't go into it now but they do teach that. When all the voices join, men and women join together, but when one voice leads the whole congregation whether in the reading of the word, the preaching of the word, or in offering prayer to God, that voice must be the voice of a man and not a woman. Now that's simple. A child can understand that. It's simple. Singing the Psalms, all join together in unison, but where one voice leads all, it must be a man's voice and not a woman because that's the way God says it must be because it honors God the Creator who made man male and female and with different roles, equally vital but different roles to lead in both home and in church as well.

And it's not a question of competence. It's not a question of competence. You say, "Well, I know a woman and she could do all these things wonderfully well." Maybe you do. It makes no difference whatsoever. If this woman you have in mind is so competent, she'll be even more competent in the roles that properly belong to her as a woman. It's not a question of competence, it's a question of God the Creator who has established different roles being honored by his redeemed people in their congregational worship.

So either Paul uses the phrase "praying and prophesying" as a general term equivalent to worship, praying being to God, prophesying expressing the communal aspect of truth being conveyed, or else he's simply referring to what was going on in Corinth which he would sort out later in the epistle. In other words, here he's saying, "Okay, this is what you are doing, but the women must have their head covered." Then in chapter 14, he's saying, "Now let's look at what you're doing and the women should be silent." He's done that before in connection with eating meat offered to idols. In chapter 8 he says, "If it offends the weaker brother, don't eat the meat that was sold in the marketplace having been offered to an idol beforehand. And don't go to the idol's temple, it'll offend your weaker brother," and we think that both things were equally on that level, but then in chapter 10, he goes on to show that going to the idol's temple to eat was wrong anyway. So the apostle deals with one thing and then he deals with the other. He gives an impression, perhaps, that something is alright until he comes to deal with it and then he sorts it out. So it is here. He's saying, "Okay, in Corinth this is what you do," and the women perhaps were vocal in Corinth, he's saying, "Let's sort out the headcoverings first," then in chapter 14 he's saying, "Now that we've got that sorted out, the women should be silent in the churches."

What this does not mean, then, is that provided a woman wears a hat, she can do all. There is a view that as long as a woman wears a hat, she can do anything in the church, but the sign of submission is not a ticket to show a complete lack of submission. The sign of submission is not a ticket to show a lack of submission. In other words, if you wear that hat to show a sign of submission, it doesn't matter whether she submits after that. It's the other way around. The woman is to have the sign of submission, the headcovering,

and she is to practice that submission by being silent in the church, and she will be blessed, blessed as she does so.

That brings this, thirdly and lastly very quickly, to the bottom line. The bottom line. Verse 16,

16 But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.

There is a time when the debate has to stop. There is a time when men and women are to be confronted simply with authority, the authority of God, and the Apostle Paul says if a man is contentious, then don't endlessly debate. A man who is contentious is someone who loves a debate and an argument and even though his arguments are responded to adequately over and over and over again, he'll still argue. Such a man must be resisted with authority lest he lead the church into endless wrangling and debate. The meek Christian who wants to know what the Bible teaches and who is struggling with it, there should be endless patience, endless time spent instructing the meek who want to know and follow the word of God, but the man who just likes an endless debate and won't give in, there's a cut-off point for the sake of the unity of the church.

So Paul says, "If any man be contentious, neither we, the apostles with divine authority, nor the churches who follow us, the apostles, have any such custom," but how do we respond to this? How do we respond? Well, I think we should respond this way and I speak to all: as a church, as part of the covenantal church, we have a glorious past and a long history but let us not be afraid to admit that though we have clung tenaciously to some aspects of the biblical pattern of worship, in other things we have slipped. Let's face it and let's put ourselves in the position of the Corinthian church and let's not think we're beyond that. The Corinthian church, the apostle says, "I'm glad you're following the ordinances." In many things he approves of what they're doing. He says they're doing well, they're doing right, "but in some things you're not right. These are the things that need putting right." Let's not be afraid to put ourselves in that position as a congregation here in Loughbrickland and say, "We're in the position of the Corinthian church, some things we hold to and rightly so, but there are some things we've let go that are biblical and let's get back to them." I know it's rather awkward, it's difficult sometimes, it's difficult in situations where others don't agree with us and so on, but let's not be afraid to be put right by the word of God.

Conformity to the word honors God and it's the path of blessedness. I'm not telling you these things to make you miserable, I want us all to honor God and I want us all to be blessed. I don't want any human yoke put upon you, least of all a yoke that I've made. I don't want to impose anything upon anyone in this congregation but what is according to the word of God, but the yoke of Christ is blessed. His commandments are not grievous. None of them. None of them to the people of God. So whether we're thinking of headcoverings or the place of women in the church or in any other matter of our practice, let us remember what the Lord said to Israel of old and it applies to us as well, "These commandments which I command thee this day are for thy good." For thy good so let's

not fight against anything that the word of God teaches, and as a part of that church for which Christ died to redeem, let us honor our King Jesus because he is worthy and because we love him. Amen.