



Head Coverings: History, Context, and Exegesis

May 4, 2014

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

A question: have you ever wondered why men remove their hats when they pray or come into a sanctuary, or many times when they go inside a home? Should a man wear a hat in church? Pastor Rodney Wilson wants to start a male-inism (as opposed to feminism) movement: men put on your hats! Fight the power! ☺ Just kidding...! However, I will admit at the outset that this is one area of Scripture I had to fight my personal bias going in. I was opposed at first, ignorant, and it took me weeks to be honest with the text.

- First, let me say what is very clear from the passage and get this out of the way: it is NOT a sin for a woman to wear a head covering, either in worship or in public. The question is not whether it is a sin to wear one, but whether it is a sin NOT to wear one.
- Second, let me tell you how I'm attempting to approach these VERY controversial passages. Like we always do! Who wrote it? To whom did he write? What's the context? What does the passage mean for us? What is GOD saying to His church now?
- Third, let's lay out something else that is not really debatable: from the time of the Apostles until approximately the mid 20th Century, Christian women covered their heads in worship, and many times in public as well. Look at the following quotes, easily corroborated by many sources:

The Early Church and Head Coverings

"The oral and written history handed down to us from the early Church is an example in these matters; we can look to the practical way they obeyed this command... In the second century, Hippolytus of Rome wrote the Apostolic Tradition—a collection of the customs of the early Church. It includes the statement "let all the women have their heads covered." Furthermore, the catacombs (a system of burial caverns under Rome where early Christians hid during times of persecution), are full of pictures of women praying with coverings and men without. Not only was it an apostolic teaching, but various early church fathers such as Augustine of Hippo, Saint John Chrysostom, Tertullian and others taught and encouraged it. John Calvin and Matthew Henry both taught and practiced the tradition of head coverings, and the protestant reformer Martin Luther's wife wore one. John Wesley taught it as well."

(Yohannan, K.P. *Head Coverings: What the Bible Teaches about Head Coverings for Women*. Believers Church Publications, 2011. Print.)

American History: Head Coverings

"During the nineteenth century, many Christians in the United States and western Europe began arguing that long hair constituted the only covering women needed. Others said that women only needed to wear a covering when in church. The middle class and wealthy women switched from veils and caps to ornate bonnets if they wore a covering at all. Bonnets became more a matter of fashion than of modesty or obedience to 1 Corinthians 11. By the turn of the twentieth century, the ornate bonnets of the nineteenth century had given way to ladies' hats. Until the mid-century, women in Europe and America typically wore a hat or scarf in public, but they were simply following tradition and fashion without realizing that there was originally a spiritual reason behind the practice. Similarly, until about 1960, western women wore hats when in church. But the meaning behind the hat was lost."

Bercot, David. "Head Covering Through the Centuries." Scroll Publishing, n.d. Web. 27 August 2013.

History Summary

So from Paul's time and the earliest church meetings until very recently, the passage I've called controversial wasn't so at all. Other than maybe the bit about angels, it was obvious and easy to understand for Christians of all denominations, cultures, and ethnicities; women/wives were supposed to cover their heads, at least in worship, because God said so. It is no longer so easy. Literally, churches have split and much damage has been done right here in 1 Cor 11; over a little bit of fabric on the head and more to the point, what it symbolizes.

The Big Hermeneutical Caution and Concern: Interpreting Via Culture

1. Now to be sure, head coverings is a 2nd tier doctrine. That is to say heaven or hell doesn't hang in the balance. It doesn't rise to the importance of the triune nature of God, the deity of Christ, or the Gospel. But it IS a part of the Canon of Scripture and is no less inspired than any other part.
2. The question for us is really one of what to do with **culture**. Are we simply dealing with a symbol (a head covering) that's lost its significance today so another symbol (like a wedding ring), or just a wife's attitude would suffice?
3. Many say this issue is one of a wife's submission...the symbol used isn't that important. Such esteemed evangelical leaders as Wayne Grudem and John MacArthur take this position.
4. This subject is made all the more difficult because very, very few Christian women in the West wear head coverings anymore (although some wear hats).
5. Not coincidentally, in my opinion, the widespread jettisoning of this practice can be traced to the mid-Twentieth Century right around the rise of modern **feminism**. Many influenced by feminist ideology would not only see marriage as "a comfortable concentration camp," (quote from Betty Friedan, founder of N.O.W.) but abhor ANY symbols of a woman being under authority.
6. And this leads me to my concern and caution: current church tendency is to NOT see Scripture as **sufficient**, and when faced with a counter-cultural passage we are typically quick to say it no longer applies for the sake of cultural norms. For example:
 - The Bible takes a dim view of debt? So what! We don't live that way anymore. Debt is great!
 - The Bible says husbands lovingly lead their homes and wives walk in submission? We don't live in 1950!
 - The Bible says women shouldn't lead and preach? Paul was a chauvinist! There were uneducated Amazons in Ephesus!
 - The Bible declares homosexuality an abominable sin? They were talking about sexual assaults and didn't understand "orientation." C'mon now...love is love!
7. So often, we say of plain, obvious Scriptures, "I know it says that but it doesn't mean that."
8. **The danger is once everything becomes "that was then, this is now; it no longer applies," all standards get thrown out.** Marriage, family, what the Gospel is, the concept of sin and what is lawful or not--even the concept of grace can be distorted.
9. I don't know about you, but I have a healthy fear of the LORD and tampering with His Word:
 - *You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you. (Deut 4:2)*
 - *I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the*

book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. 20 He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:18-20)

10. And let us recall 2 Tim 3:16-17:

- *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

Some Thoughts on Context

- Almost everyone sees this passage as primarily dealing with church meetings. Why? Because prayer and prophesy are mentioned in verses 4-5, and prayer might be private at times, but prophesy is designed for the Body (1 Cor 14:3).
- This view seems to be confirmed later in the chapter:

But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. 18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part..." (1 Cor 11:17-18)

- There is some debate that the context may be broader, but at a minimum, whatever we learn about head coverings certainly would apply in Lord's Day worship.
- But there is another contextual consideration that is important exegetically for another reason.
- MANY people use 1 Cor 11:5 to essentially throw out New Testament commands concerning women's roles within the church. They say since she can pray and prophesy in worship, she can preach and be a pastor. But look at the passage carefully...it is about head coverings. As John Calvin wrote in his commentaries, "For when he reproofs them for prophesying with their head uncovered, he at the same time does not give them permission to prophesy in some other way, but delays his condemnation of that vice until another passage, namely 1 Cor 14:"

For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, 34 the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. 35 If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. 36 Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? 37 If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. 38 If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. (1 Cor 14:33-38)

- The passages above would seem to contradict 1 Cor 11:5 if women could publicly pray and prophesy in church services as opposed to elsewhere **in a context fitting to her design and God-ordained role.**
- The Bible does not contradict itself.
- We will cover women in ministry issues in detail later. But for now, at least in the 1st Century and early church, we can be reasonably certain that:
 1. Women/wives covered their heads when they prayed or prophesied.
 2. Women/wives were covered in church services as well (as history shows).
 3. Despite being covered in church services, any prayer and prophecy by women was done in such a way as to not be "shameful" "in the churches."

(Note: I recognize the inflammatory nature of women/ministry issues in our modern day. In fact, most of my sphere of influence and many people I love and respect hold opposite views. Nevertheless, please know my intention is to simply be honest with God's Word. I'm NOT out to cause trouble, hurt friendships, hurt churches, or intentionally be divisive. "My conscience is held captive to the Word of God." Martin Luther) -CCM

Walking through the Passage

1. *(1Co 11:2 ESV) Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.*
 - There are two uses in the New Testament for the word *paradosis* in Greek, translated as “traditions.” One means something man-made that attempts to invalidate what is handed down by God (Matt 15:3), and the other is literally a precept--something that IS in fact handed down by God. Here are two examples of the latter:
 - *2Th 2:15 ESV So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.*
 - *2Th 3:6 KJV 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.*
 - In this case in verse 1 Cor 11:2, the word implies in context, a **precept**, or as the KJV translates it, an *ordinance*; a law. Again, Paul’s language throughout this section makes clear this was no “take it or leave it” thing for the early “churches of God.” (v16)

2. *(1Co 11:3 ESV) 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.*
 - After a quick commendation, Paul begins to build a case for a tradition they hadn’t followed.
 - This verse is an unequivocal statement of God’s governing order. It is important to see that this truth is not based in culture. It was and is true and binding for all time.
 - Contrary to egalitarian opinion, the word “head” doesn’t mean “source.” It means “one who is in authority over.”
 - It is also important to note that this does not imply inferiority, but **role**. Christ is not inferior to the Father--they are one! However, He is subordinate to the Father within the Trinity. Similarly, women/wives (Greek, *gunē*, which can be translated “wife” or “woman” depending on context) is not inferior to man, she is designed by God as a helper and therefore submits to her husband.

3. *(1Co 11:4 ESV) Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head,*
 - As we’ll see below, because man is the glory of God (formed by God first out of the dust of the ground, Gen 2:7), he is not to be covered when he prays or prophesies. Again, please note that this instruction is rooted in God’s governing order.
 - According to Scripture, when a man covers his head in worship he dishonors **Christ**, his Head! In other words, “Man you aren’t a woman so don’t dress like one. That dishonors Christ!”
 - His physical, uncovered head is a symbolic way **God has chosen** to reveal His own glory in the church, since man is made in His image.
 - Of note, women are also made in God’s image, but again, with a different role.
 - Let’s establish that symbols, at least to God, can be a mighty big deal. What is Baptism and the Lord’s Supper if not physical symbols that represent deeper, spiritual realities? And let us not forget the symbol of the blood on the doorposts during the Passover (Exodus 12). Surely, the

death angel didn't need a physical symbol to know who belonged to God! Yet, one was commanded at the risk of death.

4. *(1Co 11:5 ESV) 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.*
 - Since a man needed to be uncovered, a wife/woman needed to be distinct and be covered. No androgyny in the Bible! 😊
 - Really understand what Paul is saying here. Apparently, some Corinthian men wanted to be covered (a Jewish tradition) and some Corinthian women wanted to not be covered. There was **rebellion** on both sides.
 - Paul is saying that a man is in rebellion against Christ by covering, and a woman is in rebellion against her husband by uncovering, during times of prayer and prophesying, or worship.
 - The word for cover in these verses (vv3-6) in Greek is a word that means *to be veiled or unveiled*. This was, based on grammar, context, and history, a literal, physical material covering.

5. *(1Co 11:6 ESV) 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.*
 - Paul literally says to the wives and ladies, "Stop trying to be men. But since y'all want to be men, you might as well shave your head to look like one! Oh, that's too much for you? Good! Cover your head then!"
 - Now everyone take a deep breath. A temptation right now might be to get all **cultural** in our thinking. Well then let's take that quick detour:
 - Is our culture confused about the sexes? Uh huh!! Is the church supposed to model God's order? Uh huh!! And yet even in the church, roles many times are reversing as we surrender more to man's perversity and opinion.
 - And other cultures are also confused about the sexes too! Holding up culture as a standard is a losing game. We must look to Scripture.
 - The divine hierarchy apparently needed to be reestablished in Corinth. That hierarchy was to be reinforced visually. Just because we no longer do it doesn't mean it wasn't done, friends.
 - Paul's language here, "disgraceful," leaves little room for argument. At least to Paul, this wasn't a small matter.

6. *(1Co 11:7 ESV) 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.*
 - This passage takes us back to **Genesis**. Paul uses creation order as part of his defense of head coverings.
 - As we've already said, both male and female are made in God's image (Gen 1:27), but to woman was given another part to play: just as man is God's glory, she is man's glory.
 - Remember, according to Scripture, even before the fall woman was created for the man (Gen 2:20), from the man (Gen 2:21), brought to the man (Gen 2:22), and named by the man (Gen 2:23). Yes, I know this sounds horrible to many modern ears; it just happens to be true. 😊
 - And she is beautiful! She is man's glory! God's design is perfect! She isn't inferior; she is created with divine purpose!
 - However, in worship, that glory must be veiled, symbolically, that only God's glory shows. For a woman to be uncovered or to otherwise flaunt herself was to cast off the authority over her, place herself in man's place, be immodest, and promote man's glory.

7. *(1Co 11:8 ESV) For man was not made from woman, but woman from man.*
- Again, Paul uses creation order for his defense of head coverings and both man's and woman's roles within the church.
 - This is similar to Paul's reasoning in 1 Tim 2:12-14:

1Ti 2:12-14 ESV I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. (13) For Adam was formed first, then Eve; (14) and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

8. *(1Co 11:9 ESV) Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.*
- Same reasoning.

9. *(1Co 11:10 ESV) That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.*

- So then God's governing order and creation order serve as foundations for why a woman "ought to have a symbol of authority on her head."
- This phrase is literally "power on her head." Again, for most of Christian history, the symbol of a wife's submission and a woman's understanding of embracing her role was a head covering...something "on her head." A ring wouldn't work because 1) it isn't on the head and 2) men wear them too! ☺
- Paul now brings in a very hard to understand additional reason for coverings: "because of the angels."
- There are many interpretations here. The one I find most plausible is put forth by John Calvin...that angels, as ministering spirits who perfectly obey God's commands and order, are present as we worship and would be offended at any disregard of God's design and will. Also, Satan and all demons, who fell because of rebellion and pride (Isa 14:13-14), would be publically **rebuked** by this symbol of order and obedience.
- Let us also recall, that even angels cover parts of themselves in the presence of God:

Isa 6:1-3 ESV In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. (2) Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. (3) And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

- Here is a critical lesson: whatever "because of the angels means," it ain't cultural!

10. *(1Co 11:11 ESV) Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman;*
- Lest any man think he can take sinful advantage of his position by mistreating his wife, Paul speaks this truth: we are interdependent.

11. *(1Co 11:12 ESV) for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.*

- Same thought as above. Men and women are both joint-heirs in Christ, just with differing roles. We must not confuse role/order differences with intrinsic value before the LORD.

12. *(1Co 11:13 ESV) Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered?*

- Of course, Paul is obviously leading them to an answer of “no.” But he calls this church to consider his teaching objectively.
13. *(1Co 11:14 ESV) Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him,*
- Another part of his defense of head coverings is nature. He appeals to men looking like men and women looking like women--a natural, normal thing that shows differences in divine design.
14. *(1Co 11:15 ESV) but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.*
- Some say a woman’s hair is her covering and that no other is needed. But the word here for covering is different in the Greek than in verses 3-6.
 - Besides that, it’s reasonably obvious that if a woman’s hair is her symbolic covering, none of this argument would have even been necessary in the first place (since most women have hair!) and Paul has lost his mind, fussing over nothing! ☺
 - Bringing up a woman’s hair was Paul’s way of showing an example from nature: since women are naturally covered (longer hair) and men are not (shorter hair) that demonstrates women should also be symbolically covered.
 - It was also a way of affirming **modesty** in worship...a women covering “her glory” if you will.
15. *(1Co 11:16 ESV) If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.*
- Paul ends his defense of head coverings by appealing to normative church **practice**. Essentially, he’s saying that if anyone wants to keep arguing about this, this is what we apostles teach, and what all the churches of God do.
 - History bears this out quite convincingly, I think, again up until the mid-twentieth century or so.

Conclusions

1. The biblical tradition/ordinance of head coverings is rooted in God's government, creation order, angelic observance, creation itself (nature), and normative church practice.
2. Symbols are important as visible, outward signs of internal realities (ex., the Lord's Supper and Baptism).
3. Although many hold to a cultural hermeneutic, it's hard to make that case from Scripture alone, especially when eternal and spiritual reasons for the practice are given by Paul in the text.
4. As a result of this text, which is actually reasonably straightforward, Christian women (not just wives) covered their heads during worship for the entire history of the church until very recently, and many in the world still do.
5. As a result, we affirm the practice as honorable and biblical. No CRCC woman should feel ashamed to wear a head covering, and none should malign or criticize said sister if her family chooses head coverings. We also affirm men not covering their heads in worship, which as we’ve said is much less controversial, and just looks....WRONG! ☺
6. However, given the newness of this doctrine to many of you, we do not feel we should attempt to mandate the practice for the greater good of the unity of this local body, and therefore leave it to each household to wrestle with the Scriptures and come to their own conclusions.
7. We pray that our attempt to simply be honest with the Scripture is a blessing to you, even if the conclusions run contrary to cultural norms.

8. We also pray to Christ that Satan, who is the father of rebellion, **would not be allowed to use a passage of Scripture that teaches AGAINST rebellion in the church, to CAUSE rebellion in the church!** Either in word, deed, or attitude. ;)

Amen.