



Head covering

Introduction

No doubt the headline of this article will already raise eyebrows. And understandably so. Many pitfalls lie ahead when it comes to head covering for women in the church. Hot heads (due to the head covered or not) and cold hearts. Proud face on one side (I'm right, after all...) and hurt on the other (should this be so...). And if you're not careful, a divide in the church with proponents and opponents and worse: slamming doors. Satan and the world are then laughing, and God's Name is dishonored. Precisely the opposite of what Paul wants to achieve in 1 Corinthians 11, where he writes about head covering.

This scenario has kept me from writing on this topic for a long time. Are we not called to be one as a church and congregation? Being one cannot be done other than by being the least. In God's Word, we are shown this path repeatedly. But to be one is to be one in Christ. And Christ reveals Himself in His Word. So, it is unity in His Word. Then, the church that is one in Christ must listen to the one word of God, in an attitude of humility.

Philippians 2:3: *"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves."*

So then, despite this, I present this article. The immediate cause is the fact that a shift seems to be taking place within the Reformed Churches. The hat was always taken for granted, but that obviousness is gone. More and more, the hat is coming off. Surely, this calls for reflection. How do we deal with this?

The Bible text, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

If we reflect, the starting point lies in God's word, namely in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. That is the Bible passage that is quoted when it comes to head coverings for women in the church. Now, I should be the first to say that this section is one of the more difficult sections in the Bible. To this day, it is being studied, and there are a lot of different explanations. One difference is whether Paul is influenced by Greek (Hellenistic), Roman, or Jewish customs (see below). Indeed, when it comes to head covering for women in religious matters, we see considerable differences between these groups. There is no single line. Paul does touch on these different traditions in various ways but then comes up with his own Christian line on these matters. It is, therefore, best to try to understand him in his direct speech. In doing so, I want to limit myself to the main line, and much will be left unsaid.

Let us first read this bible passage:

² Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.

³ But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.

⁴ Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. 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.

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. ⁸ For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. ⁹ Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.

¹⁰ For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.

¹¹ Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. ¹² For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.

¹³ Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered? 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. ¹⁶ But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.

Exegesis and interpretation - Context

1 Corinthians 11:2 begins a new section in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In the previous section (chapters 8-10), he talked about eating, drinking, and idolatry. In the following chapters (11-14), he talks about Christian worship.

First, then, it is striking that the subject here is an essential matter for Paul. This is evident in two ways. First, he speaks of a disgrace or dishonor (verse 3) when the practice is contrary to what he describes. Those are powerful words. But above all, the great importance of what he writes here becomes apparent when we realize that this section is connected to what follows here, which is the Lord's Supper. And indeed, none of us would argue that the Lord's Supper is a mediocre thing. Paul equates the two. This is evident in the continuing line of argument, for example, "I praise you" (verse 2) and then "but in this I do not praise you" (verse 17). But also, in both sections, he is passing on certain things and traditions (see verses 2 and 23). In short, Paul's concern in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is not mediocrity.

Passage as a whole

But what exactly is this matter of importance to him? Well, if we analyze 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, we see that the words man (or husband) and woman (or wife) predominate, appearing 14 and 16 times, respectively. In addition, 8 times, it talks about God and Christ. Paul is talking here about the relationships between man and woman in relation to each other and in relation to God in Christ. That is the subject here. He is talking about an order of creation, which is why this matter is so important.

Text for text

He begins this new section in verse 2 by praising the Corinthians for adhering to what he taught. He talks about '*ordinances*'. The Greek word used here ('παράδοσις') could also be translated as '*traditions*'. We tend to think negatively about traditions, but they have mostly a positive meaning for Paul. See, for example,

2 Thessalonians 2:15, '*Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.*' and

2 Thessalonians 3:6, '*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.*'(1)

Then, in verse 3, he lays the groundwork for the first thing he wants to address regarding worship, '*But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God.*' He is going to talk about the differences between men and women in worship. The relationship between man and woman, husband and wife, is an important topic in this first letter to the Corinthians. Paul already discussed it at length in chapters 5-7.

In verse 3, Paul makes it clear that there is an order - God, Christ, men, and women. Paul speaks of the '*head*' of every man, every woman, and Christ. On the one hand, the word '*head*'

makes it clear that there is unity because the body and head are one. On the other hand, the word *'head'* makes clear that there is a difference. Particularly given the broader context of chapters 5-7, Paul speaks of authority and obedience in 1 Corinthians 11:3. Christ, the Son of God, submitted to the will of the Father, so the wife must submit to her husband and the husband to Christ.

In verses 4 and 5, Paul says that during prayer and worship, men should bare their heads, and women should cover their heads. By doing this, men will honor their head, Christ, and women will honor their head, the husband.

The first thing to note is that this is about *'honoring the head.'* Our supreme head is God; He must be given all honor. Worship is about honoring God. If a man prays and prophesies with his head covered, he dishonors and shames Christ and God. If a woman prays and prophesies with an uncovered head, she shames and dishonors men, Christ, and God. That shame is the same as if her head were shaved.

The second thing is that the phrase *'praying and prophesying'* probably refers to worship in general. This is because of the broader context (see above regarding the wider context of chapters 11-14). So, Paul is referring here to men and women participating in worship. (2) (see also below).

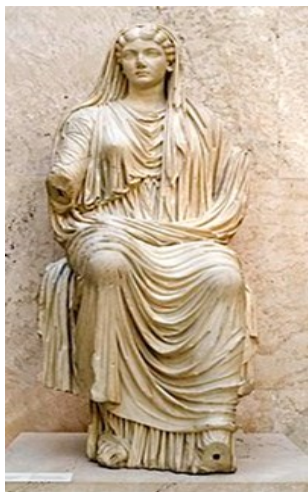


Much has been written about the cultural background of this advice.

First, some background about the city of Corinth. The city had been largely abandoned since 146 BC until Julius Caesar rebuilt it around 46 BC. It became an important administrative and trade center and had a mixed population of Romans (veterans and

freedmen), Greeks, Jews, Phrygians (present-day Turkey), and many other peoples. The population is estimated to be between 100,000 and 600,000 people, most of whom were slaves. It became such a large city because of its strategic geographic loca-

tion on a small land bridge between two large bodies of water.



Second, a few facts regarding the customs of men. Roman men wore their distinctive togas; this was forbidden for non-Romans. They often draped their togas over their heads, for example, in worshipping their idols. The toga became a sign of social status. Jewish men left their heads uncovered during worship. The use of a kippah occurs nowhere in the Bible and is clearly of later times since it first appears in Talmudic times, the 2nd century AD.(3) Many exegetes point to these customs as background for Paul's instruction here.

They point out that it could be that Paul forbade a man to wear a head covering because a toga was a sign of division, and there should be unity in the congregation. Or it could be that he forbade it because the Roman man wore it while worshipping their idols. Or they simply point to the Jewish custom of having uncovered heads during worship.

With regards to women, the customs of Jews, Greeks, and Romans in the 1st century are less clear, and studies even show conflicting results. Customs probably varied from time to time and from place to place. It may be that an uncovered head for a woman in the first century had sexual connotations. Furthermore, covering the head outside the home was probably the standard practice in Roman, Greek, and Jewish culture. Roman women wore a stola, and a cloak called the *palla* over it when they went out in public. Covering the head outside the house was probably also a sign of respect for her husband.

But is it important to know the customs of that time? Corinth was a melting pot with people from many cultures. Therefore, customs were probably fluid. Paul's argument is based on timeless relationships as established in creation. This is clear in verse 3 and even more evident in verses 7-12. Nowhere in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 does Paul mention social or cultural background.

Verses 7-9 explain Paul's statements in verses 4-6. Both men and women are created in God's image. They have the same value; they rule together as subordinates under God. But there is an order to their creation. The man was created first in God's image, and the woman was an aid to the man. She was created for man's sake and his cause. And therefore, man reflects God's honor and brings glory (praise) to God. The woman brings glory to her husband. In other words, they have different roles and functions. But at the same time, they are both needed, in their distinct roles, to be vice-regents under God and to honor and praise God (see verses 11 and 12 and Gen 1:26-27).

In verse 10, Paul mentions angels. This is variously explained. A possible explanation is the following one. Angels worship in heaven and honor and praise God just as we worship and praise God from earth. Angels also witnessed creation (Job 38:7) and God's wisdom in the church (Eph 3:10). They are also sent to patrol the earth and report to God (Zechariah 1). They are God's helpers and messengers. In Revelation, they are also the ones who pour out God's wrath. Therefore, seeing the honor, duties, and responsibilities of the angels, let us obey God's clear commands.

Verses 11 and 12 counterbalance the previous verses. They could be misinterpreted. Paul may have seemed to suggest that women are inferior to men. But now he adds that we must remember that men are dependent on women. Man and woman are a unity; one cannot exist without the other. Both are God's creatures. Women are in no way worth less!

Paul concludes with an additional argument from nature in verses 13-16. He reasons from nature here, but this argument is not the main argument, it is a supplementary argument. Also, note that nowhere in this passage does Paul refer to culture. His entire reasoning is based on Scripture and is underscored by reasoning from nature.

There is a view that the head covering is the woman's hair. This is based on verse 15, '*her hair is given her for a covering.*' But this is entirely non-logical reasoning. If indeed hair

is the head covering, then men should shave their heads and be bald. Furthermore, the advancement of the argument in verses 2-15 makes this view impossible.

Paul ends in verse 16 by making the remark that the ones who question this custom are in the minority. Paul recommends the tradition of head covering for women during worship.

The role of culture - Principle or custom?

The various interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11 all go back to the question of whether Paul's instruction is culture-bound or not. Or, as R.C. Sproul puts it, is it a matter of custom or principle. In this case, however, it is not a matter of culture since Paul refers to the order in creation. And the order in creation is an order for the whole of mankind and for all times. It is part of the covenant of creation (also called the covenant of works) and valid for all mankind. (4)

History and hermeneutics

David Silversides wrote an excellent article with quotes from pastors and theologians throughout history. This article makes it clear that throughout history, (5) it has always been clear that women should wear a head covering during worship. This is remarkable. In addition, see, for example, the pictures in the article on the website of "scroll publishing". (6) The opinion on head covering for women only changed in the 20th century. There seems to be a connection between this changing opinion and a different approach in hermeneutics after the Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism. But this discussion is beyond the scope of this short article.

A few quotes

Quote. *'The wearing of fabric head coverings in worship was universally the practice of Christian women until the twentieth century. What happened? Did we suddenly find some biblical truth to which the saints for thousands of years were blind? Or were our biblical views of women gradually eroded by the modern feminist movement that has infiltrated the Church...?'* (7)

Quote. *'Hair wrapping has stood the test of time for a reason, because it works,' said Maria Sotiriou, the founder of UK brand Silke London. "To call it a resurgence would be to say it was lost at some point -- instead I think there is now, more than ever, a sharing of knowledge between cultures.'*

Quote. *'From my later study of church history, I discovered that Christian women continued to maintain this practice through all centuries up to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.'*

Final thoughts on the position of men and women

Paul harkens back to Genesis 1:27, 2:18-24 and Psalm 8. Genesis 1:27 makes clear that man is created in the image of God. Psalm 8:5 tells us about the honor and glory that belongs to that, *"For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor."* Reading Psalm 8:6, Genesis 1:26, and 2:20 makes clear that this image of God and the corresponding honor and glory lie primarily in ruling and reigning. In this, the woman has her own position and task; she is help to the man. However, the distinct positions of husband and wife are often misunderstood. There has also been much abuse of power on the part of the man in history, resulting in a swing to the other side. Also, in the church of Corinth, the positions of husband and wife were not well understood. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 14:34: *"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."* There seems to be an emancipation movement in the church of Corinth against which Paul takes a stand.

Without going into detail, some Biblical considerations regarding the role of women. First, it is important to see that God Himself is called a Helper in the Bible. Would the position of a helper then be inferior? Second, we all, men and women, are constantly pointed to Christ, the Head of His people. Christ gave everything out of obedience to His Father and in love for His people. He even gave His life... We are all called to follow Christ in

humility and obedience. Third, man and woman are created in God's image but have different roles. One complements the other. But one without the other is nothing. Both are there for each other and are one in Christ. In our time, as in the time of the letter to the church in Corinth, the richness of these things is not adequately understood.

Paul points implicitly to these things in this section in 1 Corinthians 11. So, the God, Christ, men, and women relationships are an institution of creation and are therefore of great importance to him. Now, in this context, the head covering comes up. The head covering for the woman has everything to do with this creation order (see also above).

The woman is asked to put on that head covering while praying and prophesying. Since Pentecost, women have a full position amid the meetings of the church. What Joel prophesied has been fulfilled (Acts 2:17-18). In Christ, there is freedom. However, respecting the order of creation, offices with governmental duties are reserved for men. Thus, in the face of the emancipation movement, Paul emphasizes the full position of women in freedom, respecting the order created by God. As a sign of this, the woman will put on a head covering in worship services, but the man will not. They are of equal worth (verses 8 and 9), they are one in the LORD and need each other (verse 11). The woman is the image-bearer of God in the man, for the man is firstly the one who rules, the woman has her own position in relation to the man (verse 7). Thus, man, first, pictures God's glory and honor. The woman does so in and through her husband. What riches, but also what responsibility on both sides! All this is depicted by the woman's covered head and the man's uncovered head in the meetings. The head covering pictures her proxy, her authority. In obedience to Christ and her husband, therein is her honor.

Following Paul's argument, this is a matter of significance for all times. After all, the basis is God's order of creation. Paul then gives his argument extra strength by referring to what is taught in nature, i.e. everyday life in God's creation (verse 14).

Conclusion

Thus, 1 Corinthians 11 gives us much to think about and reflect upon. But note! The head covering is derivative. What matters is what is behind it. Maintaining the sign without experiencing and living out the signified is an empty shell. Then we get into witticism. The letter without the Spirit kills. Freedom in Christ comes first. That freedom is lived out in obedience. And let that be portrayed. Thus, the head covering in the worship services has a rich symbolic meaning and is a constant message and proclamation. Everything is focused on following Christ.

The conclusion is inevitable for me: according to Paul's words, women should wear a head covering during worship. I hope and pray that this paper is not offensive to anyone. I am aware that this is an unpopular view in present-day culture, but how could I go against the Word of God and thus against my conscience?

Sources

This list of used sources is not exhaustive. I've mentioned only some of the English sources I used and not the Dutch.

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Footnotes

- (1) The Lord Himself also speaks about tradition. In Matthew 15:2,3 and 6 and in Mark 7:3,5,8,9 and 13, we read the same word 'παράδοσις'. He talks there negatively about tradition, but that has another reason. The Jewish leaders made human tradition an unbearable yoke and a law. For Paul, tradition is biblically based and a matter of honoring God in the right way.
- (2) Paul does not make the point here that women are allowed to pray and or prophesize during worship. See therefore elsewhere in Scripture. See: 1 Tim 2:8-18, 1 Tim 3:1-2,4,12, Titus 1:5-6 and 1 Cor 14:34-35.
- (3) The kippah is mentioned in Talmud Shabbat 156b and in Kid-dushin 31a.
- (4) See 'Knowing Scripture, R.C. Sproul, chapter 5, pages 114-127.
- (5) See: ["Is Headcovering Biblical?" - David Silverside \(the-highway.com\)](https://www.the-highway.com)
- (6) See: [Head Covering Through the Centuries | Page 1 of 1 \(scrollpublishing.com\)](https://www.scrollpublishing.com)
- (7) By R.C. Sproul

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