



### Head Covering For Public Worship

*An Exposition of I Corinthians 11:2-16*

by Dr. Michael P. V. Barrett

(President, [Geneva Reformed Seminary](#), Greenville, SC, USA)

The Word of God is the only rule for faith and practice. Christian conduct must be the reflection of Biblical standards rather than expedient conformity to changing style or habit. This principle is applicable to every area of Christian life, not the least of which is worship. The Westminster Confession of Faith the adopted sub-standard of the Free Presbyterian Church, makes a significant statement regarding religious worship: “the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men” (XXLI). I Corinthians 11 establishes some of the divinely revealed guidelines of acceptable worship. In this chapter, the apostle Paul deals with two essential aspects of public worship: head covering for women and proper observance of the Lord’s Supper. Unfortunately, the regulations concerning head covering have either been misinterpreted or through expediency relegated to the sphere of local Corinthian custom which has no applicability to modern, American Christianity. It is the position of the Free Presbyterian Church that the shifting customs of society do not influence or abrogate the imperatives of Scripture. Therefore, the mandate of I Corinthians 11 that women must worship with covered heads is as binding today as it was in the first-century church.

#### *The Authority of the Regulation (v. 2, 16)*

Paul begins by praising the Corinthian Christians for keeping the ordinances that he had delivered to them. Although the word “ordinance” may have the idea of tradition, it does not suggest that the requirements were of human origin or imagination. Indeed, these traditions delivered by the apostle constituted the revealed Word of God. The word designates that which was given to the apostle, who had the duty and authority to convey the received message to the people. Consequently, the word identifies the following context as being divinely revealed truth. To assign the passage to an ancient local custom with no present application is suspicious exegesis. Paul’s closing remark in verse 16 confirms the authority of the regulation. Paul is dogmatic; he will not tolerate contentiousness in regard to the matter of head covering. The apostle claims that the churches of God have no such custom. Although some expositors identify the “custom” as the contentiousness, it is more appropriate to associate the “custom” with the practice of head covering. The churches of God have no custom that permits Christian women to participate in public worship with uncovered heads; therefore, there is no room for contention or debate in the matter. It is significant that the apostle refers to the churches of God. The plurality of churches removes this from the sphere of localized custom. To identify as custom that which the Scripture explicitly says is not custom is untenable and dangerous. To ignore the authoritative imperative of God’s Word is disobedience.



## Penticton Free Presbyterian Church—Online article archive

### *The Existence of an Hierarchy (v. 3)*

There is an hierarchy in God's order. This hierarchy is the basis for Paul's instructions concerning the proper manner of worship. The imagery of the "head" represents the threefold hierarchy of man to Christ, woman to man, and Christ to God. The head is the governing organ; it is that to which all else is subordinate. The Headship of Christ is a frequent theme in the New Testament. In His anointed office Christ is the Mediator and Sovereign over all things (cp. Eph. 1:22). While Christ is the head of every man, God is the head of Christ. Because Christ is the "very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father" (Westminster Confession of Faith, VI11.2), this is a subordination of function. The use of the title Christ is appropriate for as the Messiah, Christ was chosen and anointed to perform His unique function (cp. Isa. 42:1). The subordination of function rather than essence that exists between the Father and the Son aids in understanding man's headship over women. Similarly, there is no essential inequality between man and woman, but there is a subordination of role and function. In God's order, man has a position of authority over the woman. This is true not only in the marriage relationship, but in the relationship everywhere. There is no doubt that the Gospel of Christ has done much to give the woman a position of honor. There is honor for both man and woman in their respective and different roles. God expects this created difference to remain valid and obvious in the church.

### *The Implications for Worship (v. 4-6)*

The difference between man and woman must be reflected in public worship. The terms "praying" and "prophesying" are important in this context as one of public worship. The word for "pray" is perhaps the most general term for prayer and is appropriate for public prayer. Although prayer is not essentially public, prophesying serves no purpose apart from the public context. In Paul's discussion of prophecy in contrast to tongues, it is clear that prophesying serves both to edify the church (I Cor. 14:4) and evangelize the lost (I Cor. 14:24). Prophesying is more than predicting the future or preaching the Word although these are important aspects of the word. If these were the only aspects of the word, women would have no legitimate right to participate for they are to learn in silence and have no authority to teach men (I Tim. 2:11, 12). In this context, however, the praying and prophesying are acceptable activities for women whose heads are covered. Part of public worship is the "singing of psalms with grace in the heart" (Westminster Confession of Faith, XX1.5; Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). It is significant that this form of praise — that is part of public worship — is designated as prophesying (I Chron. 25:2, 3).

If men exercise their right to worship with any covering upon their heads, they disgrace their head, Christ. Conversely, if women exercise their right to worship without a covering upon their heads, they disgrace their head, man. Any violation of God's established order is ultimately an affront against God Himself. Although the requirements for man and woman are stated with equal clarity and authority, they have not received equal obedience. Whereas there are few men who would be so irreverent as to wear a hat during worship, there are many women who demonstrate equal irreverence by worshipping with uncovered heads.



## Penticton Free Presbyterian Church—Online article archive

---

Head covering for women is distinctively Christian. In the Jewish community men were to pray with their heads covered. In the pagan Greek community, both men and women worshipped with uncovered heads. The new Christian practice established by the apostle was contrary to the customs of the first-century world. Conformity to custom was not an option that the apostle allowed for either the ancient or modern church. The uncovered head for men and the covered head for women became a symbol of the divinely established order in Christ. Symbols are designed to represent spiritual reality. Although the reality exists independently of the symbol a willful rejection of the symbol represents rebellion against the reality.

Indeed, failure to comply with the requirement not only constitutes apparent rebellion against God's order, but it degrades the woman herself. If the woman participates in worship with uncovered head, she is one and the same with one who has been shaven. Paul uses two synonyms to describe what ought to be done to the one who dishonors her head. The word translated "shorn" implies the cutting short of hair with shears whereas the word "shaven" implies the use of a razor. There are two possible implications connected with this extreme cutting of the hair, both of which involve great shame for the woman. It may be the mark of prostitution. It has been suggested that shorn hair was the "scarlet letter" to identify publicly those who had been guilty of sexual impurity. That would be shame for the woman who professed faith in Christ. If this is the imagery, it was a shame no more severe than worshipping with the head uncovered. On the other hand, it may represent the extreme behavior that is the logical extension of the act of improper worship. If the woman sets aside the head covering in worship and thus erases the symbol of her subordination to man, she might as well be consistent with her expressed attitude and shave herself thus completely removing what Paul identifies as her glory (v. 15). For woman to abandon her God-given role and usurp the authority and function of man is to leave a position of honor and to bring shame upon herself. To avoid the shameful implications the woman ought to have her head covered.

### ***Arguments for Obedience (v. 7-15)***

In order to substantiate his claim of woman's subordination and his demand for the appropriate symbol in public worship, the apostle argues from two facts: creation and nature. The difference between man and woman is by virtue of creation. Man has the duty or obligation not to cover his head (a symbol of subjection) because he is the image and glory of God. Genesis 1:27 indicates that the woman also is in the image of God, but Paul adds that man is the glory of God and woman is the glory of man. This glory refers not to divine majesty but to that which brings honor. Man was the climax, the crown of God's creative work. He enjoyed a position of honor before God that woman did not share because there was no woman. The creation of woman was different and constituted woman as the glory or honor of man. It is a position that belongs exclusively to woman. Verses 8 and 9 give the reasons for the thesis of verse 7. Woman is the glory of man because her origin was from him and man's origin was independent of her. The purpose of woman's creation was directly connected to man (Gen. 1:18-22) but the purpose of his creation was independent of hers. That Paul concentrates on creation rather than marriage



## Penticton Free Presbyterian Church—Online article archive

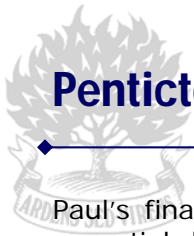
places the same responsibility on both single and married women.

Because of the woman's place dictated by creation, she ought to have power on her head (v. 10). The word translated "ought" both here and in verse 7 is a strong term expressing obligation or duty; consequently, there is no option or choice in the matter. The expression "power on her head" requires explanation. The word "power" has the idea of right or authority. It is the same word that describes the teaching of Christ in contrast to the scribes (Mark 1:22) and designates the right or privilege given to believers in Christ to become the children of God (John 1:12). By a figure of speech called metonymy, the word "authority" designates the symbol of that authority, the head covering. It is the head covering, the symbolic recognition of subordination, that gives to woman the right, authority, and privilege to approach God and participate in public worship. Recognition of proper place and function in God's order is essential to acceptable worship. Head covering is a symbol of that recognition.

The final statement of verse 10, "because of the angels," adds a sober thought to the obligation. Because the word "angels" can have the simple idea of messenger, some have identified the angels here as the ministers of the church (cp. Rev. 2:3). This adds little to the verse, and it is best to interpret the word in its usual sense as the supernatural created beings. On other occasions Paul suggests that these angelic creatures are witnesses to man's activity (I Cor. 4:9; Eph. 3:10; I Tim. 5:21). Job 38:7 indicates that the angels (sons of God) were witnesses of creation. This fits nicely with the context. Women are to worship with covered heads not only for public testimony before men, but also as testimony to the angels who witnessed their creation and know their ordained position.

Verses 11 and 12 are a warning against drawing the wrong conclusion about woman's position of subordination. Galatians 3:28 teaches that in the sphere of faith all share the same benefits of salvation whether male or female. Although in the created order woman's position is subordinate, it is not an inferior or less dignified position. The relationship between man and woman is complementary. The word translated "without" in verse 11 means separate, apart, or by itself. It suggests the interdependency that exists between male and female which is best served when men and women move within their proper spheres. Both creation and natural generation support the thesis of interdependency. Both woman and man owe their existence to the other. The preposition "of" in verse 12 expresses the idea of source or origin. At creation woman came from man. The preposition "by" expresses the idea of mediation or agency. In natural generation man comes through the woman. Paul concludes that all this has its source in God.

Having established woman's subordinate role, Paul commands his readers to determine for themselves the appropriate application (v. 13). He asks whether it is a suitable or proper act for a woman to pray without the symbolic head covering. The word for praying is the same as in verses 4 and 5; therefore, the context is still dealing with public prayer. Although Paul does not explicitly answer the question with a yes or no, the answer is implicitly clear. It is not proper behavior for a woman to participate in public worship without the head covered.



## Penticton Free Presbyterian Church—Online article archive

---

Paul's final argument is from nature (v. 14, 15). Nature itself teaches that there is an essential difference in appearance between man and woman. The word "nature" can have various senses in the New Testament: natural endowment, natural disposition, natural order, or species. The idea of natural disposition or characteristic is the appropriate sense here. Paul is essentially appealing to the general consciousness that recognizes that according to the natural disposition of things a man should not have "long hair." For a man to have this kind of hair is a shame to him. The word "shame" literally has the idea of "without honor." The position that rightly belongs to man is sacrificed if he has "long hair." A proper understanding of "long hair" is essential to the context. There are two words for hair: *thriks* which is hair as hair and *kome* which is fixed hair. *Kome* is the word used in this context. There is nothing in the word that dictates length. Rather, it represents that hair which is ornate, a hairdo. It is that coiffure that belongs exclusively to the woman. It is contrary to nature for a man to have a distinctively feminine hairstyle. Whereas this *kome* is dishonorable for man, it is the glory of the woman. Even apart from the matter of precise length there is to be a clear difference between masculine and feminine hairstyle. To erase this distinction within the natural sphere is rebellion against God's ordinance established at creation. Just as the hairstyle in every day life identifies male and female, so in public worship the use of head covering symbolizes their respective positions before God. If the distinction is part of the natural sphere, it is fitting for the Christian woman, who acknowledges and enjoys her God-given position, to wear the divinely ordained symbol of that position in public worship.

The final statement of verse 15 has been the source of a common misinterpretation of the whole passage. Some interpreters claim that the only head covering intended is the hair. Therefore, if a woman worships with hair on her head, she is in perfect compliance with Paul's instruction. The context is clear that there must be a distinction between men and women in public worship in regard to their head. In verse 6 Paul explicitly says that women ought to be covered whereas in verse 7 he says "a man indeed ought not to cover his head." If it is proper for women to worship with hair on their heads, it is improper for men to worship with hair. It is preposterous to interpret the passage as saying that women must have hair, but men must be bald while worshipping. Although preposterous, it is the only logical conclusion possible if the head covering is simply the hair. God does not require the absurd. Rather than stating an absurdity, the final statement provides an additional reason for God's demand for head covering. This statement is part of Paul's illustration from nature and must be understood in that context. In every day life apart from public worship the *kome* has been given for a veil. The normal significance of the preposition "for" is substitution. Consequently, the *kome* has been given in the place of a covering. Proper understanding of this statement depends on the meaning of the word translated "covering." The word is *peribolaion*, a compound word whose component parts mean 'to put around'. Although the word occurs only here with reference to the head, its transparent meaning of "wrap around" together with its usage elsewhere suggests the idea of a veil that would enclose the entire head. For instance, in Hebrews 1:12 the word is used of a vesture or mantle that would be wrapped around the body. Similar references to clothing occur in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (cp. Ezekiel 16:13; 27:7). This veil, which would hide the face, would be a mark of degradation and humiliation. Even in the sphere of nature this mark of second-class citizenship has been



## Penticton Free Presbyterian Church—Online article archive

---

replaced by the *kome*, the mark of glory. It is not this sign of degradation that Paul requires in worship. It is significant that this word does not occur in the specific instructions of verses 5 and 6 regarding the head covering for women. There the apostle does not specify a particular kind of covering. He demands simply that something be on the head during the period of public worship. That temporary covering, rather than being a mark of degradation, is the symbol of authority that entitles the woman the place of worship.

In simple terms the message is clear. If the hair is woman's glory, then the Christian woman ought to cover her glory in the place of public worship where attention is to be directed to God and away from self. No flesh should glory in His presence (I Cor. 1:29).