

# Women should cover their heads in meetings of the Church

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## **Women should cover their heads in meetings of the church**

*A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 13th February 2005*

I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you. Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head — it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice — nor do the churches of God. (1 Corinthians 11:2-16)

## **Introduction**

"What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." So says the preacher in Ecclesiastes (chapter 1 verse 9). What the preacher says is certainly true about attempts to pretend that

differences in role between men and women do not exist. There has been a big push in Western society in the last 100 years to erode the differences of role between men and women, and, not surprisingly, this has found its way into the church. Now, even among those who claim to believe the Bible, it is said that women should share the leadership of the home with their husbands, or have the dominant role. It is said that it is quite acceptable for women to be pastors. And, for their part, husbands, even Christian husbands, are meekly taking the "back seat" and allowing their wives to govern the household, and men are allowing women to govern in the church.

We see from this passage that there is nothing new in the attempt to erode the difference in role between the sexes. At least as far back as the New Testament times, as this passage shows, there have been Christians who have denied the difference in role between men and women, and have tried to push women forward to take roles that belong to men. Such people claim to be the friends of women, to be pro-women, to be "feminists", but in fact they are the enemies of women, because they try to push women into roles and responsibilities which they are not intended to bear, with tragic consequences for them and those around them.

It would appear that those women who rejected their role as subordinate to men were, in Corinth, expressing this in a very direct way in the way they dressed. They were throwing off the covering for their heads which it was accepted that women should wear as a sign of their submission to men. Whether that covering was in the form of some sort of a scarf, similar to that worn by Moslem women today, or in the form of long hair, is something which is debated. As I shall argue later, I think that the covering that Paul expected women to have was a covering of long hair, or if that was not possible, a garment. Either way, the point is that by removing their covering they were stridently saying "We are not going to live under the authority of our husbands, or that of men in general. We are going to 'wear the trousers' at home and in church".

Paul says that this is quite wrong. He says that women should show, in the way they cover their heads, that they accept the authority of their husbands, and of men in general. His arguments are based not on cultural considerations but on the whole order of creation and salvation. What he says has far-reaching implications, not just for the covering of heads in worship, but for family and church life generally.

As we study this passage, we can divide it into three sections:

1. The fact of authority in God's world, verse 3
2. Women should covering their heads in meetings of the church, verses 3 - 6
3. Why women should cover their heads, verses 7 – 15

## **1. The fact of authority in God's world**

After commending the believers in Corinth for having adhered to the teachings he had passed on to them, the apostle then in verse 3 lays down a fundamental principle: "Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."

Clearly what the apostle is talking about here is authority. Authority is built into the very warp and woof of the universe. Men are under the authority of Christ. He is their head. Women are under the authority of men, because man is head over woman. Christ is under the authority of God the Father, because God the Father is Christ's head.

So here is a very important principle: God has built this world with a clear authority structure. God the Father is over all things. Christ is subject to the Father's authority. Men are under the authority of Christ. Women are under the authority of men.

It should be noted that the fact that women are under the authority of men does not in any way indicate that women are inferior to men. We see this from the fact that the head of Christ is God the Father. In himself Christ is just as much worthy of praise and honour as the Father. He is as much God as the Father is God. But there is a difference in role between them. Christ's role is to submit to the Father, even though he is God as the Father is God. So also, as between men and women, men and women are both made in the image of God. Christ died for both men and women. Both men and women will be in the new world that God will make at the end of time. But within this fundamental equality there is a difference of role. Men have been given the responsibility of having authority, and women of submitting to that authority.

This is why it is not right that women should teach in the church, or become elders, because to do so would entail their exercising authority over men, which would be wrong. The teaching of Scripture on this is quite clear. I would refer you, for example, to 1 Timothy 2.11 – 14 and 1 Timothy 3.1 – 7 if you are not aware of this.

This is also why women should submit to their husbands. Again the teaching of Scripture is quite clear on this, in Ephesians 5.22 – 24, Colossians 3.18 and 1 Peter 3.1 – 6. If you are a married woman, you might lovingly speak with your husband in private if you think he is mistaken in some decision that he has for the household. But, unless his decision is directly against the clear teaching of Scripture, you should quietly and meekly submit to his decision and support him in it.

But what about an unmarried woman? Who is her “head”? There are many indications in Scripture that an unmarried woman remains under the authority of her father until she gets married. Those women whose fathers have died, or who are widows, are directly under the authority of Christ as regards their domestic responsibilities. However, as regards church matters, all women, whether married, single or widowed, are under the authority of the male elder or elders who have been given the responsibility of leadership in the church.

## **2. A woman should show her submission to men by covering her head**

In verses 4 and 5 the apostle says, "Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head."

Paul is deliberately doing a word play on the word "head". He uses the word both to describe the literal head and also head in the sense of one in charge over you. He says that a man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head, by which he means the man dishonours the one who is the head over him, that is, Christ. By covering his head, he is denying his role as the one who has authority over women. He is, in effect, acting as if he were a woman. So he is thereby dishonouring the one who is head over him, Christ, because it is Christ who has given him authority over women. And a woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head. In other words, she dishonours the men who are over her.

Now, we need to address the issue of what is the head covering that Paul is saying that a woman should have. It is assumed by many that the apostle is speaking of the need for women to wear some sort of scarf or hat or veil. However, in verses 13 - 15 the apostle speaks about length of hair in precisely the same terms that he speaks about the covering or lack of it earlier in the passage. For a man to have long hair, he says, is a disgrace, whereas for a woman to have long hair it is her glory. Then he says, "For long hair is been given to her as a covering." The word that is translated "covering" in this verse is the same word that is translated "garment" in Hebrews 1.12. The verb from which it is derived is translated in most instances in the New Testament as "clothed". What the apostle is saying is that God has given a woman long hair as a garment, or as a piece of clothing. The word that is translated "as" is better translated "in the place of". So Paul says that God has given women long hair in the place of a garment. God has provided a woman with long hair to wear in place of having to wear a piece of clothing to cover her head.

Therefore, I believe that what the apostle is saying is that a woman should cover her head with long hair, or, if for some reason she does not or cannot have long hair, she should cover her head with a piece of clothing.

How does this interpretation square with verses 5 and 6? These verses say,

Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head – it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head.

These verses seem to imply that the woman's covering is something different from hair, and that if a woman will not wear this covering she should have her hair cut off. However, the literal translation of this verse is "if a woman does not cover her head, let her be shorn of her hair." You could legitimately paraphrase this verse in the following way, "if a woman does not cover her head [with long hair], she might as well have her hair cut right off. And since it would be a disgrace for a woman to have a skinhead, she should cover her head [with long hair]." So, I believe that these verses are not inconsistent with the interpretation that I have given.

But what is so significant about a woman covering her head, either with her hair or with a garment? The apostle says in verse 10 that the covering is a sign of authority on her head. The words "sign of" are inserted by the NIV. The literal

translation is that a woman should "wear authority on her head". Whose authority should she wear? I think we can safely say the apostle means not her authority but the authority of men. By covering her head, either with long hair or a garment, the woman is saying "I am recognising that I am under authority. I recognise that women are under the authority of men." Whereas by cutting her hair short and not wearing any other covering, a woman is saying "I am the boss. I am going to take the place that belongs to men."

### **3. Why a woman should cover her head**

In verses 7 to 15 the apostle gives six reasons why a man should not cover his head and a woman should cover hers:

#### **1) Because a woman is the "glory" of man**

In verse 7 the apostle says that "A man ought not to cover his head because he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man." As well as being in the image of God, a man is the "glory" of God. Because he is under God's authority, he displays the glory and honour of God. God's honour is shown by the fact that men are under his rule. In the same way, woman is the glory of man. The fact that woman is under the authority of man shows the greatness, the glory, of man. So women should not undermine this order by refusing to cover their heads.

#### **2) Because woman was created from man**

In verse 8 the apostle says "For man did not come from woman, but woman from man." This is a reference back to Genesis 2.21 – 22, which describes how God made the first woman, Eve, from one of Adam's ribs. The point is this: because man was made first, he has authority over woman.

What the apostle says here is balanced, however, by what he says in verses 11 and 12. "In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God." There is no place for male chauvinism in Christianity. Men need women, just as women need men. And in Christ, the barriers between men and women break down, because we are all, male and female, sinners, and we are all, male and female, saved the same way, through faith in Christ.

### **3) Because woman was created for man**

In verse 9 the apostle says, “neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” This is a reference to Genesis 2.18, where God said, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” None of the animals would do as a helper for man, so God made woman for man to be a companion and helper and friend. This does not imply the inferiority of women, but it does imply a role which is subordinate to men.

### **4) For the sake of the angels**

The apostle says in verse 12, “For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.” The angels are present in our gatherings. They see what we are up to. They have a very keen sense of the right order of things. If they see that we are not upholding God’s order, they will be shocked.

### **5) Because of nature**

In verses 13 – 15 the apostle says,

Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.

He says that even nature shows us that it is right for a man to have short hair and it is right for a woman to have long hair. In virtually all societies in all time it has been recognised that it is appropriate for men’s hair to be short and for women’s hair to be long. The main exception was Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when it was fashionable for men in the “upper” classes to have long hair. It is perhaps no coincidence that men at this time were also often effeminate and spoke deliberately in high pitched voices like women.

### **6) Because this was the universal practice of the churches**

In verse 16, the apostle says, “If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God.” What Paul was saying here was not an isolated position. It was one which was held by all the other churches, including those in other places which were not planted by

Paul. Someone who argued against this position was arguing against the universal New Testament practice.

So we see that the arguments that the apostle uses for head covering are arguments from the basic principles of creation. They are not arguments based upon what is culturally expedient, and therefore they are not arguments that we should ignore today.

### **Lessons for us**

1. If you are a woman, and you have short hair, let it grow if that is possible, and, in the meantime, or if it is not possible, wear a covering in church to show that you accept the authority of men.

2. If you are a man, and you have long hair, have a hair cut. And do not wear a head covering or a hat in church. This is not a matter of petty legalism. The apostle himself is very insistent that a man should not wear a head covering in at meetings of the church, and we should take note of what he says.

3. In general, if you are a woman, do not try to look like a man. I expect we are aware of the feminist “uniform” of dungarees, tee shirt and working men’s boots. If you are a woman be proud (in the right sense) of being a woman. Wear clothing which accentuates and draws attention to your gender, without being immodest or indecent. Wear dresses or skirts, or, if you wear trousers, wear ones which are obviously feminine, with obviously feminine tops. Do not dress not like a man.

4. If you are a man, do not try to look like a woman. Sometimes you are going down the road and you look at a person and you think to yourself, “What is that? Is it a man or is it a woman?” The man has adopted a feminine hair style, and dedecked himself with necklaces, earrings and jewellery, and is wearing a strange sort of open neck shirt, and you have to look long and hard several times to work out if he is male or female. If you are a man, honour Christ by showing that you are glad to be a man. Make it so that at first glance everyone knows what gender you are.

5. If you are a woman, submit to those men who are over you, whether they be your father, your husband or the elders of your church. Do so with meekness and willingness, modelling yourself on the way that Christ submits to his Father in everything.



6. If you are a man, exercise leadership over those women who are under your authority in a loving, humble, considerate and Christ-like way, not in a pompous and self-important way, but with a servant heart. Remember that you yourself are under Christ's authority.

7. Whoever you are, come to Christ for grace to live as he would have you to live. What we are talking about here goes right against the grain of twenty-first century Western thinking, and indeed right across the grain of how all of us, in whatever age, would naturally want to live. If you are a man, you can only exercise Christ-like leadership in a loving way with the power of the Holy Spirit. If you are a woman, you can only submit to your husband, and to other men to whom you should submit, with the power of the Holy Spirit. If you are not a Christian yet, come to Christ. Ask him to give you the Holy Spirit. Ask to be born again. And if you are a Christian, seek Christ for more grace to live as he would have you to live.

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