

Head Covering in the Worship of God

Malcolm H. Watts

IN 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, the apostle is dealing with the subject of public worship. He is particularly concerned to correct an abuse which has crept into church services at Corinth. It appears that when the Corinthians met on the Lord's Day they were inappropriately and unsuitably dressed. The men covered their heads while the women remained uncovered. Although this might be thought a rather small and external matter, Paul is aware of the fact that great principles are involved and therefore he strictly enforces the observance of scriptural rule. He makes clear that, 'a man indeed ought not to cover his head', but 'for this cause ought the woman to have power on her head' (1 Cor 11:7,10).

It is important to recognize at once that this is a distinctively Christian arrangement. In Jewish worship, the officiating minister always wore something on his head (Exod 28:36-38; 29:9), while the ordinary male worshipper used his cloak as a 'tallith' or 'prayer shawl' (See: Deut 22:12; Matt 23:5). One ancient Jewish authority says, 'Let him veil himself out of reverence towards God' (Schabbath, fol. 12:2). As for Jewish women, although they wore veils on certain occasions (Gen 24:65; Ruth 3:12), it seems they took them off when worshipping (1 Sam 1:12). Confirmation of this may be found in their own writings: 'In the days of those feasts (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles), men and women assembled together, to hear sermons, and cast their eyes upon one another' (Kiddush, fol. 81:1). Apparently, the same custom prevailed in Jewish synagogue services (although we understand that

on those occasions the women were separated from men).

Among the Greeks, there was diversity of practice. Plutarch, the Greek philosopher and biographer (46-120 AD), informs us that it was customary at funeral ceremonies for the sons of the deceased to appear covered and the daughters uncovered. In ordinary religious services, however, Greek men and women seem to have performed their sacred rites unveiled, perhaps to express 'the feeling of liberty with which man should appear before the gods of Olympus' (Professor F. Godet).

This makes nonsense of the so-called 'cultural argument', that the teaching of 1 Corinthians merely reflects the cultural custom of Paul's day and that therefore it is not binding upon us in the twenty first century. The plain fact of the matter is that the apostle is here sanctioning neither Jewish nor Greek usage. He is arguing on peculiarly Christian principles that, in the worship of God, men should appear uncovered and women should appear covered. Whatever may be done in other societies, Paul insists that this is the divinely prescribed practice for Christians and that it should therefore be followed in all Christian churches.

In order to enforce the due observation of this practice, the apostle proceeds most logically and adduces a number of reasons for it. We should take careful account of the following points he makes.

Head-covering is important because it is one of the Christian Church's 'ordinances' (v2)

The word 'ordinances' literally means 'things

delivered'; and it refers to those authoritative teachings and regulations which the apostle received from the Lord (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3) and then 'passed on' to the churches (2 Thess 2:15; 3:6 - in both these places the word is translated 'traditions'). He commends these Corinthian believers because hitherto they had acknowledged his authority and observed his rules. However, he was aware that there was a subject about which he had not yet given instruction and, as a result, something irregular was taking place at Corinth. That is why he now proceeds to give the church a further 'ordinance', this time relating to head-covering. The use of the word 'ordinance' shows that what we are dealing with here is not Paul's own idea, nor a preferred church practice: it is actually the Lord's sovereign appointment for public worship.

The Basis for the use of head-covering is to be found in the doctrine of headship (v3)

By the term 'head' (used here in a metaphorical sense) is meant 'lord' or 'master', someone who exercises authority over someone else (Judg 10:18; Col 2:10). Paul explains that, by divine appointment, there is a three-fold headship:

(i) 'the head of every man is Christ' (men have no superior but the Lord Jesus Christ, Is 9:6; Matt 28:18);

(ii) 'the head of the woman is the man' (women are in subjection to men, Gen 2:18; 3:16; cf 1 Tim 2:12,13); and - in the divine sphere -

(iii) 'the head of Christ is God' (Christ himself, as mediator, and for the purposes of redemption, has humbly accepted a subordinate position, Jn 14:28; Phil 2:6,7).

Thus, in God's order, the man has a position of authority over the woman. The church must recognize this. It must also bear witness to it. But how? Headcovering is the appointed symbol or sign of being under authority (see 1 Cor 11:10). It is quite

inappropriate for men to cover their heads because this would be an acknowledgment of a superior among them other than Christ; but it is entirely appropriate - and, in fact, most proper for women to cover their heads in the church, because, in doing so, they are able to demonstrate publicly their subordination to men.

Observances of this rule will not only denote acceptance of the principle: it will also bring honour to the Lord Jesus Christ (vv4-6) Christ)

The context has already implied that Paul's concern is about public assemblies of the church. This is now made quite certain by the use of the two verbs, 'praying' and 'prophesying' (v 4a). However, it should not be assumed here that the references are to leading in prayer and to preaching the Word of God. It is more likely, in view of verse 5 (compare: 14:34 and 1 Tim 2:8,12), that the words suggest no more than joining in congregational worship (In 1 Sam 10:5 and 1 Chron 25:1-3 'prophesying' denotes 'the singing of inspired praise'). Now, what the apostle goes on to say is this: if a Christian man worships with 'his head covered', he is acknowledging a superior among men (or even among women!) and in this way he 'dishonoureth his head (the Lord Jesus Christ)' (v 4b). Similarly, if a Christian woman worships with 'her head uncovered' she is repudiating the badge of subjection and thereby she 'dishonoureth her head' (that is, the man) (v 5a). The apostle is little short of being horrified at the thought. He says that such a woman might just as well lay aside all other indications of her sex and rank. 'It is one and the same thing as if she were shaven' (v 5b). Now should she find that embarrassing and even shameful, Paul has only one further thing to say: 'Let her be veiled (or, covered)' (1 Cor 11:6). In the light of Paul's teaching, it ill becomes any of us to treat this matter lightly and fail to comply with the biblical requirement. Shall we dare to rob the Lord Jesus Christ of his honour and glory?

Scriptural support for this practise may be found in

the early chapters of Genesis, in the divinely inspired accounts of creation (vv7-9)

The man ought to appear in church with his head uncovered because, by virtue of his original constitution, he is 'the image and glory of God' bearing a likeness to God in his supremacy and dominion (1 Cor 11:7); but with the woman it is otherwise, for she was intended to be 'the glory of the man', revealing, or making known, something of his honour and dignity (v 7b). The difference between them may also be seen in the fact that man had priority in creation. As Paul expresses it, 'the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man' (1 Cor 11:8). The allusion is, of course, to Genesis, chapter 2. There we read that 'the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground'; and then, from 'the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman' (Gen 2:7,22). Later, we read that 'Adam called her woman, because she was taken out of man' (Gen 2:23). Furthermore, there was an evident difference in purpose and function. 'Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man' (1 Cor 11:9). According to the same ancient record, man was not made for the sake of the woman: the woman was made as an 'help meet' for the man (Gen 2:18). And this, Paul contends, is yet another reason why men should be in authority and why women should show a true and proper respect. Women should therefore declare their acceptance of God's Will revealed in the Scriptures by covering their heads whenever engaged in acts of public worship.

Conformity to this law is especially required because holy angels are present in our public assemblies observing everything that is done (v10)

Thus the apostle writes: 'For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels'. Their presence at worship was revealed - although somewhat obscurely - by their figures being embroidered into the tapestry of the Tabernacle and carved on the walls of the Temple (Exod 26:1;

1 Kgs 6:29), but there are clear statements to the effect that they are invisibly present and that they are adoring spectators. Hence, that scripture which speaks of us celebrating God's praises before 'an innumerable company of angels' (Heb 12:22) and that other scripture which says that, through the ministry and service of the church, God's diversified wisdom, in an infinite display of glory, is made known to 'the principalities and powers in heavenly places' (Eph 3:10; cf 1 Cor 4:9; 1 Tim 5:21; 1 Pet 1:12). This is a strong reason why the woman should have on her head 'power' or 'authority' (that is, the head-covering, 'the sign that she is under authority'). It is 'because of the angels'. Although unseen, these celestial beings are present and, by disregard of this important command, we should not offend them by unworthy and improper behaviour.

Appeal can be made to nature which makes known to us what is right and becoming (vv11-15)

Paul begins this section in a rather guarded way, carefully qualifying what he had written earlier. He seems aware of the fact that some people might take this matter too far. The man would then become an absolute despot and the woman a mere chattel. This would be a complete travesty; and, of course, a total misapplication of his teaching. No-one should fail to understand the apostle. Men and women need each other (1 Cor 11:11) and their mutual dependence is divinely ordained (1 Cor 11:12). That point now clarified, the apostle resumes his argument and writes: 'Judge in yourselves: is it comely (or fitting) that a woman pray unto God uncovered?' (1 Cor 11:13) Why, he continues, even 'nature' (the constitution or disposition of things, cf Rom 1:26) is able to 'teach' us that 'if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him' but 'if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her' (1 Cor 11:15,16). Is that not true even today? Among men, the wearing of 'long hair' is still reckoned a mark of effeminacy, whereas 'long hair' on women seems to suggest modesty and reserve. The apostle concludes concerning

the woman: 'her hair is given her for a covering' (v 15b). In the Greek this is a different word from that occurring in the preceding verses. The apostle does not mean that a woman's hair is an adequate covering. He means that God's Will is clearly impressed upon nature. A woman's hair, provided by nature, shows the propriety of wearing a second head-covering. Nature 'teaches' women something. But what? It teaches them to cover their heads. As one early Church Father remarked, in the worship of God a headcovering is worn in addition to long hair to express the voluntariness of the woman's submission.

Head-covering was the custom approved by the apostles and observed in all the apostolic churches (v16)

Before finishing, the apostle anticipates that some will object to his teaching on this subject. He was not wrong about that. People are still objecting! However, they should understand one thing: they are opposing God's Word; they are acting contrary to general practice; and they are disturbing the peace of Christian churches - 'If any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God' (1 Cor 11:16). It is undoubtedly the teaching of God's Word that, in public worship, men should have nothing on their heads and women should wear a hat, beret, or some other covering. Church reformation requires that we attend to this matter. 'If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them' (Jn 13:17).

The Testimony of History

'Christ is the Head of the Christian man - (for his head) is as free as even Christ is, under no obligation to wear a covering... (The woman)...ought not to appear with her head uncovered on account of the angels.'

Tertullian (AD 145-220)

'That is from nature itself, that we women should cover our heads, and we men should uncover our heads. Nature would that women should be covered:

she is taught to be covered even from thence (1 Corinthians 11).'

Chrysostom (AD 347-407)

'A woman ought, seeing her hair is given her of God, to follow this his institution, and to imitate her Maker, and cover her head: which if she will not do, as much as is in her, she throws off the natural veil.'

Peter Martyr (1500-1562)

'Let this passage be carefully observed. St Paul says that the veil is for a sign and testimony of a higher power. If a woman renounces the covering which God has given her, surely, she is exposing herself recklessly. This is also why modesty is a woman's chief virtue. Women must have the decency not to come to the public assembly with their heads uncovered...Does not nature itself teach that if a woman have no head-covering, it is a shame to her?...When he says "her hair is for a covering", he does not mean that as long as a woman hath hair, that should be enough for her. He rather teaches that our Lord is giving a directive that He desires to have observed and maintained.'

John Calvin (1509-1564)

'How is the public worship of God to be ordered and administered in the church? All the members of the church being met together as one man (i) in the sight of God (ii) are to join together in holy duties with one accord (iii) the men with their heads uncovered, the women covered.' John Cotton (1585-1652) 'As the apostle saith, 1 Corinthians 11:10, "the woman ought to have power on her head, because of the angels"...Yet usually women come hither with a shameless impudence into the presence of God, men, and angels. This is a practice that neither suits with modesty, nor conveniency.'

Thomas Manton (1620-1677)

"For this cause ought the woman to have power", that is a covering, "on her head because of the angels" 1 Corinthians 11:10... Methinks, holy and

beloved sisters, you should be content to wear this power or badge...'

John Bunyan (1628-1688)

'The apostle tells us (1 Corinthians 11:10) that the woman was "to have power on her head, because of the angels". Which place, especially the latter clause of it, is diversely interpreted. But I think all agree in this, that this power which they were to have on their heads was a veil or covering, which at other times, but most especially in the congregation, women ought to wear on their heads... But the men were uncovered in their assemblies, as the apostle tells us (v 4) to signify that they had nothing over them, but were superior to all visible creatures, and subject only unto God.'

Ezekiel Hopkins (1633-1690)

'For a woman to appear or to perform any public religious function in the Christian assembly,

unveiled, is a glaring impropriety because it is contrary to the subordination of the position assigned her by her Maker and to the modesty and reserve suitable to her sex.'

Robert L Dabney (1820-1898)

'Do you think you and I have sufficiently considered that we are always looked upon by angels, and that they desire to learn by us the wisdom of God? The reason why our sisters appear in the House of God with their heads covered is "because of the angels". The apostle says that a woman is to have a covering upon her head, because of the angels, since the angels are present in the assembly and they mark every act of indecorum, and therefore everything is to be conducted with decency and order in the presence of the angelic spirits.'

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)