

## Women and headship

*1 Corinthians*

By Pastor Edward Donnelly

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**Bible Text:** 1 Corinthians 11:2-16  
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### **Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church**

560 Doagh Road  
Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim  
Northern Ireland  
BT36 5BU

**Website:** [www.trinityrpc.com](http://www.trinityrpc.com)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/trinity560](http://www.sermonaudio.com/trinity560)

Studying this book together in our evening service and I want to read now the passage to which we will be coming later in our service, 1 Corinthians 11, and we shall read from verse 2 to verse 16. 1 Corinthians 11:2,

2 I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings just as I passed them on to you. 3 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. 4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. 5 And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head--it is just as though her head were shaved. 6 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. 7 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. 8 For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; 9 neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10 For this reason and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. 11 In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12 For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. 13 Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, 15 but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. 16 If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice--nor do the churches of God.

So reads the holy and infallible and perfect word of God.

Let us turn in the word of God to 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, the passage which we read earlier in our service and which we come in our week by week exposition of this epistle of Paul.

I was just thinking this evening what a strange and peculiar thing human nature is and how the Almighty must smile when he looks down on us. If I were preaching tonight on the truth of the covenant of grace, I might say I wonder will the people find it interesting. If I were preaching on the doctrine of election, I might say I wonder if their attention wander during the sermon. But when I deal with the subject of women's hats, I know that I will be heard with rapt attention from beginning to end. Why should that be, I wonder?

Here we come to a new section in 1 Corinthians, a section which stretches from chapter 11, verse 2, to chapter 14, verse 40, the end of chapter 14, and in this major section Paul is dealing with various elements in the worship of the Corinthian church which are not bringing glory to God. You remember how last week in chapter 10, verse 31, we said, "Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God."

Now there are certain elements in their worship which are not bringing glory to God and he's going to deal with these different elements from the beginning of chapter 11 to the end of chapter 14. He's going to deal with them one by one and what is the matter with which he begins? Hats. Verse 13, "Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?" And it may seem to us an amazingly trivial subject for Paul to give attention to. Here is the great apostle, this mighty theologian with his superb mind filled with great matters of doctrine, behavior and the church in crisis and what is he dealing with? He's going to discuss some very major topics, he's going to talk about the abuse of the Lord's Supper, disgraceful, selfish behavior at the Lord's Table, he's going to be dealing with spiritual gifts, what an important area that is for us today and we say, really in the middle of such topics, is this really very important? And we may wonder that the Holy Spirit has decided to include the discussion of the head-covering of women in worship as part of Scripture. We may say, "Is it as vital as all that? Is there some deep mystical significance in the hat which we need to learn and to be informed about?"

Well, I want to suggest to you this evening that perhaps the issue, the precise issue of the covering of the head is not the vital issue or the important issue in this passage. That's something we're familiar with and comfortable with. We're all committed to the whole Bible as the word of God. It's inspired, infallible. Were they hesitant to say about any part of the Bible, "Well, that was simply cultural. That doesn't apply to us today." Because we feel once you start saying that, where do you stop? How much of the Bible have you left? And yet at the same time, we all do recognize that certain teachings of the Bible are given to us in a cultural expression which was valid then but may not be valid today, and what we have to do is look behind that particular cultural expression to the principle which is always felt and valid for everyone.

For example in 1 Corinthians 16:20, Paul gives a firm apostolic commandment to all the Christians in the church, "Greet one another," he says, "with a holy kiss." Greet one another with a holy kiss and he repeats that command in Romans, 2 Corinthians and 1

Thessalonians, and Peter repeats the command in 1 Peter. So there in no less than five of the 27 New Testament books, we have an apostolic command that we are to greet one another with a holy kiss, and yet when I walk into the Session room on Sabbath morning, I don't see the elders rushing about to plant big smackers on each other's cheeks. We don't kiss each other at church although the Bible says we should kiss each other. In fact, many of us are feeling slightly queasy at the moment at the very thought of doing such a thing, and that is because we recognize that in the culture of the Near East, the kiss was a perfectly normal and acceptable greeting, it is not in our culture, and we obey that verse perhaps by a handshake, perhaps by a pat on the arm. Paul is saying in that verse, "Receive one another with love, with affection, with true brotherliness or sisterliness." It's not the precise expression of our love that matters, that may change from culture to culture and from century to century. That's why men in our culture don't usually kiss each other. The precise cultural expression doesn't matter, it is the principle that is of vital importance.

I would argue that the same applies here with the woman covering her head. The detailed issue itself is not of vital importance but the principle behind it is extremely important and it is a principle which has very far reaching implications. And for those of our own congregation who have been pursuing this study with me, we remember one of the great problems in Corinth. We've heard it several times in our study since the autumn. These Corinthians were so excited with their new life in Christ, they were new men, new women, new creatures, everything was new, that they thought that the whole of their life should change from top to bottom; because they were Christians, nothing should be the same. You remember how we studied chapter 7 and Paul's teaching on marriage and we saw that some of the Corinthians were saying, "Those who are married should abstain from sexual relationships in marriage now that they've become Christians, or they should be divorced, or those who are engaged should break their engagements. Everything has to change because we're Christians," and Paul was saying to them, "No. What's wrong? Everything doesn't change because you're Christians."

Chapter 7, verse 17, each one should retain the place in life to which God has called him. Now here we have exactly the same issue. The issue that we met in chapter 7 and earlier we meet again in chapter 11, and the issue here is a number of believing women in the church who were arguing that they should be treated exactly the same way as men in every way. "Now that we have become Christians," they said, "there is no longer any significant difference before God between men and women. We're all one in Christ Jesus." And in particular these women were rejecting male authority and leadership and were claiming a position of leadership for themselves as women, and they were making their point by insisting on appearing at services of worship bare-headed, and that was the way in which these Corinthian women were expressing this rebelliousness, this discontent. "We're now Christians," they said, "Before we were Christians, we were under men's authority, now that we've become Christians, we're no longer under men's authority," and they were making their point, as I say, by appearing bare-headed in the church services. In the Near East of the first century, that was a very very unusual and powerful and striking statement, for in most parts of society at that time, a respectable woman would never dream of appearing in public without a veil. Just as, for example, in

some Islamic countries today, the women have to be veiled in public, and that was the case not everywhere in the first century but in most places in the first century. The modest woman, the chaste woman wore a veil. She wouldn't dream of being seen out in public bare-headed.

Sir William Ramsey has commented in these words, "With the veil on her head, she can go anywhere in security and profound respect. She is not seen, it is a mark of thoroughly bad manners to look at a veiled woman on the street, but without the veil, a woman is a worthless thing who anyone may insult. Her dignity vanishes along with the all-encompassing veil that she discards." So in their society in that culture, the veil, the covered head was a mark of womanliness, of modesty, of restraint and purity and it brought great security and respect, and these Corinthian women were causing a great stir, not only in the church but doubtless in the city by appearing bare-headed. It was an amazing thing, an exceptional, unusual thing and Paul regarded it as damaging and dangerous.

Now how does he respond? Well, in the time available to us this evening, I can't do more than give you a very very sketchy outline. Some of you, I thought I brought the book with me, some of you have the book, "Man, Woman and Authority," and I have written a couple of chapters in that book and in one of those chapters I give a detailed exegesis of this passage, so if you have that, consult the book for the details. But let me just try to outline Paul's argument. We have, firstly, in verses 3 to 6, a recognition of male headship. A recognition of male headship. We find this phrase occurring again and again in those verses: the head, the head, the head. That is referring to authority and Paul is saying that God, in his wisdom, has established in life structures of authority, where one is an authority over another and one is under the authority of another. These aren't accidental, they're not cultural, they are God-ordained where people have different rules and different functions, and these structures of authority established by God are not to be cast aside, they are not to be disregarded. They will never become out-of-date. They are permanent and valid. They are to be observed and respected.

Paul explains the structures of authority very simply. First of all, there is God and God has authority over Christ, and Christ has authority over the man, and the man has authority over the woman. That's the structure: God the Father, Christ the Son, the man, the woman. We see that in verse 3, "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." And he adds that last phrase to show us that this structure of authority does not imply any inferiority or any lesser worth or honor or value. It is not a degrading thing to be under someone's authority. It doesn't mean you're less than that person. It doesn't mean you're not worth so much. God the Father is the head of Christ and Christ submits to the authority of his Father, and yet in another respect, Christ is equal with the Father. He's of the same essence of the Father. He has got the same dignity of the Father. He's just as fully God as the Father is. He is not less in any way in his being. He's not to receive less honor. He's not less value. He is in no way inferior because he's under the Father's authority. Paul puts that in to encourage the Christian woman, "You may be under the authority of the man but remember that Jesus Christ the Son is under the authority of God the Father, and if the glorious Savior rejoices

to take that position of submission and subjection, then surely you, who are a sinner, can rejoice to take a position of submission." It doesn't imply inferiority in any way.

Paul says that this order is naturally expressed in cultural terms. If a man dresses like a woman, what is he doing? He is dishonoring the authority which God has given him. He is dishonoring the place God has given to him. He is dishonoring the head under whom he is placed, Christ. Verse 4, "Every man who prays or prophesies with his head," veiled, with his head "covered dishonors his head." And for a woman to dress like a man, in other words, to appear with uncovered head, that means that she is dishonoring the place God has given to her, the role that he has assigned to her and the head under whom she is placed, verse 5. He says, "That is exactly what you Corinthian women are doing. You're rejecting God's structures of authority."

And he quite bluntly points out to them in verse 6 the implications of what they were doing. In those days, the only women to appear bare-headed in public would be prostitutes and he's saying to these women, "You know, you're behaving like prostitutes." And if a woman was guilty of some particularly shameful offense, adultery for example, she would sometimes be publicly shamed and her hair would be shorn very short. He says to the Corinthian woman, "Is that the way you want people to look at you? Is that the way you want people to regard you?" Verse 6, "If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off." If you don't want to be treated like a prostitute, then stop behaving like a prostitute. "If it is a disgrace," verse 6, "for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head." If you've any respect for your own womanliness and your own dignity, you must recognize male authority in worship. The recognition of male authority.

Then, secondly, in verse 7 to 10, we have the reason for male authority. The reason for male authority. Paul says it is not something which is cultural. That's what people would say now. Many in the feminist movement would say, "Well, in past centuries men had the authority, but now we're not living in the first century, we're not living in the time of Abraham, we're living in the modern world, and so we have to reflect the modern world and what was true and valuable then has got no reference to the world today." But Paul doesn't argue from culture, nor is it the result of sin. So what if feminist writers say, "Well, the authority of man over the woman is a result of the entrance of sin into the world, and when we go into the church and they're taken away and their sins are forgiven, that authority no longer applies." But note Paul's argument is from creation, from the creation of Adam and Eve, before sin entered the world, when the world was perfect, when the world was sinless, when the world was exactly as God wanted it to be. Before man fell, before the devil tempted him, what was the position in the perfect world designed and ordered by God? Verse 8, "man did not come from woman, but woman from man."

Now God could have created the man and the woman simultaneously. He could have made a man out of the dust of the ground and at the same time have made a woman out of the dust of the ground so that they both would have been created at the same time. But he didn't choose to do that. It's a simple fact that God made the man first and he had a reason

for so doing, and after he made the man, he then, secondly, made the woman. That wasn't an accident, Paul says, that was deliberate. The man is first. We can't get away from that. He could have made them independently. He could have made the man and then he could have gotten some more dust of the ground and made the woman. But he didn't do that. He chose to make the woman from the man, took the rib out of the man's side and made the woman from the man. Again, why did he do that? Paul says the woman came from the man both in the sense of time and in the sense of deriving the raw material of her body from the man. That is the reason, he says, why the man comes first, because he was made first and the woman was made from the man, and if we believe the opening chapters of Genesis, we can't deny that.

Again in verse 9 he says, "neither was man created for woman, but woman was created for man." Now let's understand what Paul is saying here. He's not speaking, I must stress, he's not speaking to every individual Christian woman who's sitting listening to me tonight. He's not saying, "If you can't get a man to help, your life is wasted." He's speaking about man in general and woman in general. The man could not carry out his task without the woman. He couldn't reproduce. He couldn't fill the earth. He couldn't be a steward over God's creation as he should be. He was incomplete. He was imperfect in that sense. He needed the woman and the woman was created to be a helper, to be a partner, a colleague, a coworker with the man. They're not enemies. They're not opponents. They're not independent of each other. The woman is made to follow the man's leadership.

Perhaps he's playing a little bit with words here. The man's literal physical head symbolizes his invisible spiritual head, and the man's head is God. So when he comes to worship, to stand in the presence of God, he doesn't cover his head for God is his head. It would be wrong to cover God in the worship of God. But the woman's head symbolizes her invisible head and her head is man, and so when she comes to worship God and stand in the presence of God, says Paul, she is, as it were, to cover the symbol of her head. This, then, is the reason for male authority or headship because God has created man and woman in this way.

Then, thirdly, in verses 11 and 12, we have a restriction on male headship. A restriction on male headship, a very necessary one because men are often selfish insensitive bullies and they can take this structure of creation and use it to abuse and intimidate women, and instead of the woman being satisfied and fulfilled, she is oppressed and kept down, and that has happened throughout history, it's happening today and it's happening in many Evangelical churches. Selfish men are taking one strand of biblical teaching and making it a cloak for their own wicked selfishness and pride, and so Paul puts in here a balancing restriction, in the Lord however. He says we're not talking here about human tradition or brute force. Men and women are new creatures in Christ. We live together in mutual dependence. We need each other. We belong together. We are not enemies.

The woman is not independent of the man, nor is the man independent of the woman, and he's thinking here of some male chauvinist who is strutting about and looking at women and saying, "We're heads over you because we came first. We came first." And Paul says,

"Listen, friend, I'll take you to some lady and I'll bring you face-to-face with her and I dare you to say, 'We came first,' and the lady I'll take you to is your mommy." "For as woman came from man, so also," so also, "man is born of woman." The first man came first and all other men ever since have come so, for all other men who have ever lived have come from a woman. Do you see the wisdom, the balance of this man? To puncture a balloon of male superiority? The woman is not only wife, she is mother.

So Paul sets this, you see, this doctrine of male headship in a beautiful balancing context. He says, "It is true that man is the head, that's true. The man takes the authority, that's true, but listen," he says, "remember we're in the Lord and we need each other and we're dependent on each other, and you men, remember that you owe your very being to a woman to whom you owe honor and respect." We need each other. We value each other. We recognize that we're all creatures since everything comes from God.

Our time is moving but let me just note before we apply this passage how in verses 13 to 16 Paul makes two concluding appeals. The first one is to common sense in verse 14 and 15, "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?" I don't think he's there talking about relative hair length, he's telling us that nature teaches us that there is a clear distinction between men and women. There is a clear distinction between men and women. Generally speaking, in most societies the effeminate man and the very masculine woman are not respected. They are regarded as objectionable. Most societies feel it is wrong for a man to be very very effeminate in his appearance and his behavior, and equally so that it is wrong for a woman to be very very macho and aggressive and masculine in a bad sense in her behavior. Even in days of so-called equality of the sexes, I don't meet many women who would be pleased to be told that they were the rulers of their homes. If you went to them and said, "Well, you certainly have your husband well under your thumb," I don't think they'd say, "Well, thank you very much! That's very kind of you to say." "No, no," they would say, "No, no, no, he's the head of the house," whether it was true or not. That's the point Paul's making. To these unwomanly women, he says, "Listen, what you're doing is not admirable. It doesn't commend itself to people, it doesn't appeal to the innate nature of people." People don't need to be taught the Bible to know that in the relationship of the home in the mind the man leads and the woman follows. It's in the very nature of things.

Then, secondly, in verse 16, he appeals to church practice, "If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice--nor do the churches of God." He says, "You Corinthians, if you persist in this disorderly practice, you should realize that the worldwide Christian community is against you. You're out on a limb here. You're a minority. Not only the apostles but the churches of God are against you on this."

Now how do we apply this passage to ourselves, very briefly? Well, it's a great pity that it has been limited among Evangelicals to a discussion about hats. In the first place, many hats that ladies wear in fact are the very reverse of the veil that Paul talks about here. The veil in Corinth was meant to cover the head. Some of the little hats that are worn draw attention to the head and draw people's eyes to the head. They're not meant to remove it

from view, they're meant to make it all the more visible. I have to be careful in what I say tonight because I see one or two hats in the congregation. I certainly see a very splendid straw hat down there on one lady with a very nice flower on it, so I'd better not be too critical about hats.

What is Paul saying to us? Let's listen to Charles Hodge of Princeton. Charles Hodge says a costume which is proper in one country would be unseemly in another. The principle insisted upon in this passage is that women should conform in matters of dress to those usages which the public sentiment of the community in which they live demands. In other words, that women should be in the terms of the culture in which they live, womanly women. They should not outrage the sentiment, the feeling of the community in which they live. They should not give a rebellious appearance.

Now in our society today, for a woman to be bare-headed is perfectly acceptable. In fact, it is almost the norm. It doesn't have any of the connotations that it had in Paul's time. It isn't a mark of an immoral woman. It isn't a mark of disgrace. It has come to be perfectly acceptable in society and so I believe as most of you women here I presume believe, that for a woman to be bare-headed in worship is not a contravention of this principle. What Paul is talking about here is an attitude of rebelliousness, of resentment, of rejection of male authority, and in first century Corinth that meant the bare head, but that doesn't apply today.

I should also say that as we come to this passage, we should have respect for Christians who interpret the passage differently because it's perfectly possible to argue from this passage that the requirement to keep the head covered is still valid today. I don't share that interpretation but it's not a foolish interpretation. It's not a far-fetched interpretation. You could argue good reasons behind it and I hope in our congregation, and I would hope in all congregations, there would be a spirit of toleration and love for Christians may have conscientious differences about the application of this passage of Corinthians. I would never like to see women who were bare-headed being criticized as rebellious, nor would I like to see women who wore head-coverings being laughed at as out-of-date or staid. Both of those reactions would be wrong. Let's focus on the main teaching. Paul is saying to these Corinthian women, "Be glad to be women. Behave as women. Accept yourselves as created by God with dignity, with value, with a special role to which you are designed."

One of the ways, I believe, in which women show this rebelliousness today is in those women who seek office as elders or as ministers in the church. I think that's coming very close to the bare-headed women of Corinth who were not content with the role assigned to them by God but who were saying, "We want to be the same as the men with no difference in any respect."

More generally, this passage applies to us all in many many different ways. To the rich and the poor. To the citizen and the politician. To the employer and the employee. Paul is saying to us all, "Serve God in the role which he has assigned to you. Don't be discontented. Don't be rebellious. Don't be jealous of others." These Corinthians were

saying, "Jesus destroys the structures of daily life." Paul says, "No, he doesn't. He transforms them. He doesn't change the structures but he changes you." Because you're a Christian doesn't mean you can be cheeky to your boss. Because you're a Christian doesn't mean you can be jealous of people who have more money than you do. Because you're a Christian doesn't mean you can be disrespectful to a politician whom God has placed in authority over you. Jesus doesn't destroy these structures but he transforms them and he transforms us in them. He doesn't take us out of life, he enables us to serve God where we are.

You've heard the saying "far off fields look green." These women in Corinth thought that the fields in which men lived looked green, they wanted to escape. I think we can all understand that. Have you things from which you would like to escape? Perhaps things in your own personality? From your circumstances? Your family? Your work? Your life? Just break out of these things? Paul says, "No, no. Let Christ change you where you are and work in you where you are and turn the desert into green fields." That's the meaning of the passage. That's far far more.

Let us bow in prayer.

*Heavenly Father, we cannot know what was in the hearts of these Corinthian Christian women and why they were behaving in this disorderly and rebellious and even shameful way. Perhaps some of the men in the congregation had behaved very insensitively and cruelly towards them and their behavior was an understandable reaction and yet, Lord, Paul has come to them and has wisely and persuasively and authoritatively spoken to them of their role given to them by God. Lord, we confess to you that at times we all would like to be god in our own lives, and at times we're foolish enough to think that if we could control our own lives, we could make ourselves happier. We look at this or that in ourselves, in our loved ones, in our circumstances, and we wish that they were different. Lord, help us to see your sovereign overruling, to see that your purpose is to use us where we are, in the roles assigned to us, with the opportunities given to us, not to spend our lives daydreaming or wishing for the impossible and the unreal, but coming even tonight to the Christ who can meet with us, who we are and where we are now, and can change us now and can use us now in our present position and our present circumstances. Lord, that would be far more to your glory than any perfect world that we might be able to create for ourselves. So Lord, help us this evening, each one of us, to come to terms with who we are now with all our strengths and weaknesses, and to look away from ourselves to the Christ who says, "I make all things new." Help us not to waste time in idle wishing but, Lord, to exercise faith in your transforming grace, and that even in what seems to us to be a desert, you can work and bring green pastures. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*