

Principles of Worship: Head coverings

- 1 Corinthians 11:1-16
- These next four chapters, 11-14, could be called “Principles of Worship.” Three weeks ago we began with verses 1-3, and saw that the underlying principle for any discussion on head coverings is found in verse 3: the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” So let’s stand on that foundation and see what Paul has to say on this matter of head coverings. Let’s look at this text with three main points: Culture, Creation, and Common Sense.
- **Culture (verses 4-6)**
- In the culture to which Paul was writing, women displayed their femininity and their submission in part by what they did with their hair. Jewish women would never be seen in public with their hair down. Only their husbands saw them in the privacy of their own home with their hair down. And in church, they would never be seen without a covering on their head. Some believe Paul is just talking about having their hair piled up on top of their heads, in a bun, and that was their covering. But if their hair is their covering, then when Paul says men should not have a covering, that would mean that men have to be bald. Some of you men, if that’s true, are more biblical than the rest of us. I know the saying; God made only so many perfect heads; the rest he covered with hair! But the logic of this passage lends itself to some type of covering that a woman wore on top of her head, or perhaps on top and on the sides. Some insist this is a veil that women wore, but the word for veil is not used by Paul., Whatever the head covering was, women were to wear it in worship, and men were not to wear it. Their heads were uncovered, even if they had hair covering them. Why are men told not to wear a head covering?
- One cultural reason is that Roman men in pagan ceremonies would pull the top part of their togas over their heads as they prayed. Paul wanted the Christians in Corinth to separate themselves from the

pagan customs of the culture and that many of them, now saved by Christ, used to practice when they were pagans. But there is a more important reason, and it has to do with authority.

- A Christian woman in that culture showed her submission to her husband by covering her head. For a woman to enter worship without a head covering, or to set it aside when she prayed or prophesied, was the same as saying, “I am my own woman; I do not need to submit myself to my husband, nor will I do that.” Paul says in verse 5 that she dishonors her head, and that she might as well have her head shaved. What does that mean? It was humiliating for a woman to have short hair or a shaved head. In that culture, it was common for women who had committed adultery to have their heads shaved, or their hair cropped very short. It set them apart as disreputable. Paul says a woman without a head covering is announcing to the church that she is also disreputable, a woman who has rejected the created order. You see, a head covering then was a sign that said, “I am his” with an arrow that pointed to her husband. Not like the t-shirts that some might wear that says, “I’m with stupid.” No, the head covering, as Paul says in verse 10, “is a symbol of authority on her head.” “Because of the angels.” What? This is a point over which there is much controversy, and I will not bore you with the alternative arguments as to what this means. I will simply tell you what FF Bruce and many others I respect say about it: Angels are, Bruce writes, “guardians of the divine order.” Not guardians of the galaxy, although they do that, too. But angels are guardians of the divine order, and are the most submitted of all the beings created by God. And, Bruce adds that an angel would be offended by women who are not submitted to their husbands. Paul says this woman, verse 5, “dishonors her head.” I believe there are two meanings to that. She dishonors her husband, who is her head. But she also dishonors herself, as she has been given by God, along with man, authority to subdue all of creation, and she will, along with men, one day judge angels. Why would she cast off submission to her husband and

thereby stoop to a lower position than what she has been given in God's created order? That brings us to the next point.

- **Creation (verses 7-10)**
- Paul next argues the authority issue from creation. The head covering was a cultural issue, but what it symbolized, a woman's submission to man, was a biblical issue of the first order. Indeed, it goes back to creation. Simon Kistemaker describes the logical flow of Genesis 2, before the fall, like this: "God created both Adam and Eve. Adam did not create Eve. God first made Adam and then Eve. God made Eve out of Adam. God created Eve because of Adam." In this way, God revealed his design and purpose for the sexes. I would suggest two principles we see in the creation order. First, men and women are absolutely equal before God and in Christ, as Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Second, though we are absolutely equal in salvation and inherent worth and value, we have been given different roles, just as God and Christ have different roles while being equal in inherent worth and value. This matter of authority and submission is so important, the Godhead displays it, and it is woven into the very fabric of the universe.
- Verse 7 is an important truth, that man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. When a man is leading and loving his family, he is the image of God, and the glory (reflection) of God. When a woman is submitting to and loving her husband, she is his glory, or his reflection. In fact, I believe the closer we get to doing what God has called us to do as husbands and wives, the more our spouses reflect the glory of God that they see in us. I believe a loved wife becomes more beautiful over time, more feminine, more at rest, more confident in her God-given calling. And I think the same thing happens to a husband who is loved and respected by his wife: he grows in masculinity, in strength, in peace, and in confidence in his God-given calling.

- Before we get to the third point, common sense, let's see that Paul adds this important "nevertheless" in verses 11-12. **Read them.** This is a perfect balance for what precedes it. Paul is not minimizing what he has said, and certainly not contradicting the creation order. But he reminds us that a man out of order can go one of two ways. He can undermine God's design for marriage and the family by abdicating, by refusing to lead. When he does this, in effect he puts his head covering on and asks his wife to be the man of the house. OR, he can rule and reign as if he IS God, and not a man under Christ. Instead of lovingly leading and tending the flock to which he has been called, he becomes an unbearable tyrant who demands his own way.
- The woman is not independent of the man, and the man is not independent of the woman. No, all things are from God. And the husband is not God. God is God. And the woman is not God, either. Both the husband and the wife are to live in mutual love and service to one another, even as the man is leading and the wife is following. Remember when we talked about this in chapter 7? **Marriage is for givers.** It only works to the glory of God and the great joy of the husband and wife when both fully give themselves to serving the other.
- **Common Sense (verses 13-15)**
- Paul calls on us to think these things out and apply common sense to the question, "Can we tell by creation that men and women are different?" Oh yes. The French say, "Vive la difference!" It is a celebration in differences, especially in the differences between men and women. Paul says, "doesn't nature itself teach us" about these things? By nature, we think of women as having longer hair than men, and men as having shorter hair. By nature, we think of feminine traits for women and masculine traits for men, and when men display feminine traits and women display masculine traits, we naturally recoil, or shake our heads, or wonder what has happened to twist things in a way that nature doesn't twist them. We could even appeal to Romans 1 if we take this to the next step, where Paul writes, "For

this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another..." (Romans 1:26-27)

- Think these things out. And understand that this passage is not teaching us about head coverings, because that was the way in that culture that someone knew which women were submitted to their husband's authority. We do not have to require head coverings. **No, this passage is not about what is on top of your head, but what is IN your head. How you respond to God's design and calling.**
- Finally Paul ends with, "If anyone is inclined to be contentious..." Or, "If anyone just likes to argue..." Do you know anybody like that? Hey, don't look at me that way, God has softened me over the years. No, Paul is referring to the person who cannot be told anything, and lives to argue. You tell them the sky is blue and they will start in on a scientific reason why it really isn't. Paul says, "If you decide to disagree and cast off everything I have said to you about authority, know this: you are on your own. You who are contentious will stand alone in this.
- Let's summarize, then. **Culture?** We are wise to live in harmony with the standards and practices of the Christian culture where we worship. If you moved to another country and went to a church where all the women wore head coverings, then feel free to wear head coverings! It is no sin. The culture in American Christianity, largely, is that head coverings are not necessary. **Creation?** We are wise to live in harmony with the created order, where husbands and wives are absolutely equal in inherent worth and value, but have been given different roles to fulfill to the glory of God. **Common Sense?** Let's hold onto it, no matter what the culture is doing. Let men be men and women be women, as we see in the natural order of God's creation.
- Prayer in