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Headcovering in Public Worship

Fashions change and tastes differ. Cultural variations abound among Christians of differing nationalities. The New Testament wisely makes allowance for such things and goes no further in matters of dress and appearance than to set down the principles of modesty (1 Tim. 2:9) and association-e.g., that we should be careful not to adopt any appearance that identifies us with grossly wicked people to whom a particular style or fashion is virtually a badge. This latter would seem to be implicit in Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:6, where it is probable that the shorn head refers to the mark of an harlot. Given these two principles, and accepting that in all things a believer is to adorn the gospel with humility and holiness, we can usually judge fairly easily which forms of dress and appearance are becoming to us as Christians. However, there is one item of Christian dress that the Bible does not leave to be judged in this way. That item is headcovering in public worship. The New Testament insists that it is required for women and banned for men. In this age of so-called sexual equality-a misnomer for the philosophy of radical feminism and anti-Christian humanism-this may seem strange. It is not strange. The Bible lays down these standards for very good reasons.

HEADCOVERING FOR WOMEN

Paul devotes half a chapter to the subject of headcovering (1 Cor. 11:1-16). He gives no indication that he is establishing a rule merely for the local situation in Corinth. He introduces such words as shame and dishonoring the head (ultimately Christ, v. 3). These ideas denote a moral issue of abiding significance, not some merely local question. Paul also makes a telling reference to the angels of God (v. 10) as a reason for a woman to cover her head in public worship. He says that nature teaches the same thing (v. 14). All of this strongly implies that Paul is laying down a general rule for all Christian churches, regardless of location or local culture. That conclusion is strengthened by what is said in verse 4. There the apostle forbids the use of a headcovering for men in worship. Both the Jews and the Romans had the custom of requiring men to cover their heads in religious worship. Clearly Paul was not addressing mere cultural questions. He was settling what is right and proper for Christians in whatever culture they live. We therefore take what 1 Corinthians 11 teaches as binding on us today.

In effect that settles the matter of whether or not women should wear headcovering in church services. No reputable exegete or commentator has the slightest doubt that Paul was insisting on the Corinthian women having a covering on their heads in public worship. We do not know of any Bible-believing church that would permit its men to wear hats or caps in public worship. Their reason is that 1 Cor. 11:4 prohibits it. No one doubts that that prohibition is still in force. By what stretch of exegesis or of logic can the parallel prohibition of women worshipping bareheaded be counted a merely temporary matter relating to the Corinthians but not to us? In the light of Paul's clear intention to establish a universal principle of conduct, how can we ignore the plain teaching that Christian women should wear a headcovering in public worship? In the Free Presbyterian Church, we do not. We joyfully accept it.

JUDGING BY GOD'S STANDARDS

One of the reasons for women's headcovering is the respective roles of men and women in creation and in the church (vv. 7-8). We must be careful not to define a person's worth or dignity by the godless standards of modern radical feminism or humanism. A woman's true dignity is in knowing and accepting the place her Creator and Redeemer has accorded to her. The same is true of a man. Woman's headcovering is an eloquent testimony to acceptance of God's standards, not man's. The basic principle is laid down in verse 3: "The head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." Clearly the apostle is not discussing the issue of what the world calls "equality" or "dignity." He is discussing the issue of government and authority in the Christian home and the church. Furthermore, the three clauses in verse 3 must always be taken together. In other words, Paul is not arguing for male authority over the woman without regard to man's submission to the authority of Christ. He rather is bringing men and women to the place of submission at the feet of the Lord. Our homes and churches would be much happier and healthier places if we all, men and women, fully acknowledged the Lordship of Christ and obediently served Him in the role and capacity He has given to us.



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A SYMBOL OF CHRIST'S AUTHORITY

In elaborating on this basic statement of principle (v. 3), Paul adds another in verses 4 and 5: men who pray or prophesy with a covering on their heads dishonor their head, even Christ. Women who pray or prophesy without a covering on their heads dishonor their head, the authority God has placed over them. Here is the importance of the headcovering. To reject it is rebellion against God's order of government in His church. It is as bad as a woman coming to God with a shorn head, which was the shameful badge of the harlot (vv. 5-6).

"BECAUSE OF THE ANGELS"

There is another reason for the headcovering. It is worn as a symbol of submission to authority "because of the angels" (v. 10). The reference to angels reminds us that in worship we are dealing with an unseen world and that we should order our behavior not in accordance with the prevailing ideas of this present evil world, but with the enduring standards of rectitude that God has ordained. Angels are present at the church's worship, and they cannot dismiss inappropriate attire as a matter of little importance. Rejection of God's ordinance regarding headcovering is inappropriate in the sight of angels because it savors of rebellion against the divinely ordained structure of authority. The angels personally witnessed the havoc such rebellion wrought in their own ranks and in the garden of Eden. Thus they cannot regard as unimportant any rejection of something that God has established as necessary to the church's worship.

Furthermore, the angels' very presence in our worship services teaches some very important lessons. We may consider two. First, it teaches us that a headcovering for Christian women in the worship of God is not demeaning to women. Angels are superior in rank to humans (Psa. 8:5), and they cover themselves before the Lord (Isa. 6:2). How then can any Christian woman look upon God's ordinance that she wear a head-covering as an imposition, or injurious to her dignity? The second lesson is that we should gladly accept every ordinance of God for our worship and service. Though superior in rank to men, angels willingly submit themselves to be servants of believers (Heb. 1:14). Clearly then, no Christian woman should reject the God-ordained symbol of her submission to His authority as an infringement of liberty or a denial of her dignity.

ALL GLORY TO CHRIST

The real beauty of Paul's teaching that women must, and men must not, cover their heads in public worship is that it lays all human glory and authority where it properly belongs: at the feet of Christ. A woman's hair is her glory (1 Cor. 11:15). It is right that she should cover it in worship, for there all the glory must be Christ's. Men declare the same truth by not covering their heads. To this day men remove their headcovering in the presence of superior authority. So it is here. By different actions, men and women join together in testifying that all glory and honor belong to Christ.

AN OBJECTION

Some object that a woman's "hair is given her for a covering" (v. 15) and she needs no other. This is to fly in the face of all Paul says. Those who believe that the covering of which he speaks is merely the woman's hair need only substitute hair for the covering in verses 5 and 6 to see how meaningless and impossible their argument is. Paul has made it clear that he is speaking of a covering placed on the head. In verse 4 covered literally means "having something on his head." That is Paul's theme. Nature gives a woman a veil in her hair. "It is a glory to her because it is a veil. The veil itself, therefore, must be becoming and decorous in a woman" (Charles Hodge).

Actually, there may be an additional thought in verse 15, which literally reads, "Her hair is given her instead of a covering." In this verse covering is a new word. In Hebrews 1:12 (its only other appearance in the New Testament) it is translated "vesture." It signifies something thrown all around a person, and Paul may be saying that Christian women have no need to wear the demeaning total coverage some religions impose on their women.



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THE SOLE CHRISTIAN CUSTOM

The only proper response to a biblical teaching is joyful acceptance and submission. If people want to contend against us despite what 1 Corinthians 11 says, then our answer must be the same as Paul's: "If any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God" (v. 16). The apostle ends all argument with a statement of divine authority. He says that the churches of God have no such custom as women engaging in public worship without a headcovering, or men doing so with one, no matter what other groups may think about our practice.

A JOYFUL GOSPEL TESTIMONY

In the Free Presbyterian Church we believe we should obey God rather than men-or women! That is why we follow the only custom on this matter that God ever established in His church-that men should not engage in public worship with their heads covered, and women should not do so without their heads being covered. To us this is no legal bondage but a joyful gospel testimony to the sole glory of Christ in His church.

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