

Head Covering in Worship

In conservative circles, women always wear a hat or cap in the worship service. Sometimes you find even a sign above the church door. Why is that? Is that only a valuable tradition? In other churches, mostly in the left wing, no one wears head covering. They believe that there are no valid arguments to do so. It was only true for the past, but that is no longer the case. What is true? For some, it can be a wrestling. Particularly, when you are one of the few that wears head covering. Let us consider whether there is a Biblical foundation to answer this question.

What does the Bible say about head covering?

Does the Bible actually say anything about head covering? Is it not just an idea of the conservative ‘brothers’? No. Scripture does certainly mention it. What? For this, we should go to 1 Corinthians 11. There it says, “Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every *woman* that prayeth or prophesieth *with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head*: ... For this cause ought the woman to have power [head covering] on her head” (1 Cor. 11:4-5,10). What does this text argue? A man must not cover his head during prayer or prophesying. A woman ought to do it. If she would not do this, she dishonors her own head. Both make themselves to shame if they do the opposite. The word “dishonoureth” has the meaning of “put to shame” or “make ashamed.” Even as God confounded, literally put to shame, the wise in this world by choosing the weak (1 Cor. 1:27). Another example is that they used the Lord’s Supper in Corinth as a feat of gluttony. All had been eaten when other members of the congregation came. Hereby they put themselves to shame (1 Cor. 11:22). In the same way, men and women make themselves ashamed when they either cover or uncover their head. Thus, we do find Biblical foundation for head covering during a worship service.

Some believe that this passage argues for women wearing a hat or cap in church. That view seems logical. We are used to it. But is that true? In these texts we do not find the words “hat” or “cap.” It is about covering or concealing one’s hair. The word in the original text has a link with waves that cover a ship (Matt. 8:24). In Biblical times, head covering was usually a veil or headscarf.¹ This reminds me of an American student during prayer meetings. She always had a scarf with her. During a prayer meeting she covered her hair with it. As simply as that. We are not used to it, but what God asks is simplicity, no fashion or coverings of esteem. The Biblical ground for head covering clear, is it not? The discussion finished. Or not? No. This conversation about head covering just starts with this foundation.

Arguments

We should ask ourselves: why does God believe that a woman has to cover her hair during worship? For in this passage, Paul presents a long argument to ground it. He mentions for reasons, namely:

- i. A man is the head of the woman;
- ii. The creation order of man and woman;
- iii. Presence of angels;
- iv. An example from nature.

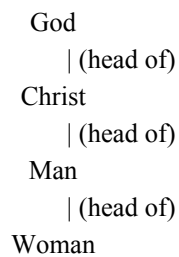
Man as Head

Head covering is not ‘just something’ God requires of the female gender. There is definitely a thought behind it. The first argument is that the *man is the head of the woman*. Nowadays, this is often seen as old-fashioned. Our society argues that men and women are the same. However, Biblically men and women are equal, but they have a different role. A man is the head of his wife and family. The woman subject to her husband. How does Paul present this argument? “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the *head of the woman is the man*; and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor. 11:3). What does it *not* say? That a man can be a tyrant and his wife a slave. That is certainly not

¹ <https://www.historischnieuwsblad.nl/christelijke-vrouwen-kozen-soms-voor-sluijer/>

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a Biblical view. A husband must be a loving leader (Eph. 5:25). He should love his wife in such a way, as Christ loves His church. It is a self-denying love that goes until the end (Eph. 5:25). At the same time must his wife obey him in all things that are *lawful* and *reasonable* (Eph. 5:22).² Notice this: The headship of a man is not standing on its own. Paul places it between two other matters. On the one hand, “the head of every man is Christ.” Thus, a man is subject to Christ. He has to give an account to Him. On the other hand, the text says that God is the Head of Christ. This does not mean that the Father is the head of the Son. Thus, not in the divine Being. But this means that God the Father is the head of the Messiah. The Messiah is the One that has been sent to save people. Between these two things, we read that the man is the head of his wife. What does this have to do with head covering? God wants to show the difference between man and woman. This is particularly a matter in authority. Whether one is head or not. What does the apostle say, “For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as *he is the image and glory of God*: but the woman is the *glory* of the man” (1 Cor. 11: 7). In other words, a man is directly placed under God. He directly reveals God’s glory. However, the woman belongs to the man. She is the glory of her husband. Let this be clear with a visual representation.



Creation Order

The second argument that is given lies in creation. The *man has been created first*. Then the woman. The woman was created as help and assistant for her husband. Paul writes, “For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man” (1 Cor. 11:8-9). It was God’s good pleasure to first create the man, then the woman as a helpmate. This does not mean that a woman would be inferior. For *together* they are called “human” (Gen. 5:2). For this reason, the woman is the glory of the man (1 Cor. 11:7). What then is the relation between this and head covering in a worship service? The creation order and the role of men and women should be visible. Therefore, a man ought not to cover his head in church, but a woman should.

Presence of Angels

A third point that Paul mentions is that a woman should have something on her head *because of the angels*. He writes, “For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels” (1 Cor. 11:10). The word “power” means something like “an authority.” The same word is used for the Lord Jesus. He taught as One having authority (Matt. 7:29). In other words, head covering is a sign related to authority. In other words, to be under authority (Luke 7:8). In this text, a reference is made to angels. Why? In some cases an angel simply means “messenger.” Other times it refers to ministers of congregations, “Unto to the angel of the church ... write...” (Rev. 2:1). In this case, I believe, it refers to beings that we call angels. Spiritual beings in heaven. They serve for the salvation of the elect (Hebr. 1:14). What has this to do with the head covering of a woman? God sends angels to report what happens on earth (Zech. 1:10-11, Job. 1:7). There is joy in heaven when a sinner repents (Luke 15:10). On this basis, we could say that there are angels present in the worship service. They see everything that happens and report it. That is also applicable to head covering of women. If a woman would not do this, it makes them sad. For them, it is a sign that she does not want to subject herself to authority. It reminds them of the rebellion of the devil in heaven. Therefore, this is another

² She does not have to obey in all things. The man is namely subject to God and His Word. If the man requires something of his wife that is unbiblical, then his wife has the right to reject. Even more strongly said, she is required to do so.

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reason the woman should have a sign of authority on her head. It makes visible to angels that she submits herself to authority as God meant it to be.

An Example from Nature

The last example that Paul uses for head covering is *one of nature*. He compares then covering one's head with the length of hair. For a man covering his head is the same as long hair. For a woman is rejecting to wear head covering similar to cutting her hair short. Nature shows that it is unnatural that men have long hair and women short. The apostle calls it "a shame" (1 Cor. 11:6). It is a shame for a man to let his hair grow long. Similarly, it is a shame when a woman has short hair. The opposite is true too. Long hair for a woman is a symbol of honor. It is one of the distinction marks in nature that God has given. When a woman cuts her hair short, this distinction is erased. This is an important lesson for our society that argues that all differences between men and women needs to be wiped out, which includes the length of hair. Let us keep the Biblical path: men with short hair and women with long hair. Paul makes his argument for head covering even sharper. If a woman does not want to cover her hair, she should even cut it. As strong as that. He says, "For if the woman *be not covered*, let her also *be shorn*: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered" (1 Cor. 11:6). For him, it is as much shameful for a woman not to be covered as that she would have hair that is cut short. Thus, we have seen four arguments of Paul to demonstrate why a man must not cover his head during the worship service, but a woman ought.

Objections

In the past years, there have have quite often been discussions about head covering. Some argue, "The passage says nothing about a church service. Thus, it is not clear when a woman should cover herself." Or they say, "Hair is also called a covering for a woman. It is sufficient that a woman has long hair." Are these objections correct? Let us focus on them.

The first objection is that this *passage does not clearly enough make mention of a church service*. Thus, head covering is not needed. But what do we read? "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered..." (1 Cor. 11:5). It is about the times of prayer and prophesying. "Do you see," opponents argue, "at that time, women prophesied in the congregation. For such activities it was necessary to have headcovering, but not for a woman sitting in her bench." However, Paul writes a number of chapters later, "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak" (1 Cor. 14:34). Can it be that the apostle would argue first: your women are allowed to prophesy and pray publicly in the congregation, if they are covered. A bit later he would then say: your women must be silent in the church? That is contradictory. What then does praying and prophesying mean? The annotations on the Dutch Statenvertaling give the answer, "That is, who in the congregation hears the common prayers, or the explanation of the prophetic scriptures; for that a woman would publicly pray or explain the Scriptures in a gathering, is forbidden to her" (1 Cor. 11:5, annotation 5). Thus, this text speaks of public prayer or preaching. In other words, it is in a church service as we are used to. Furthermore, some argue that having head covering is only applicable to a Lord's Supper service, because the last part of this chapter speaks about this matter (1 Cor. 11:17-34). However, here the same arguments are applicable. Prayer and prophesying take place during a church service, and not only in a Lord's Supper service.

Another objection is, "*Hair is a covering for a woman*. Therefore, to have long hair is sufficient for a church service. She does not need extra covering." It is indeed true that hair is called a covering (1 Cor. 11:5). However, let us use this argument and read it into our text. You can decide whether this could be justified or not, "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her [*short hair*] dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman [*has short hair*], let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her [*have long hair*]" (1 Cor. 11:5-6). For argument's sake, the words "head uncovered" have been replaced with "short hair." Do you see how illogical Paul's argument then is? If a woman has short hair, it is the

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same as if she has cut it short (vs. 5). An illogical comparison. Or, if she has short hair, then she has to cut or shave it (vs. 6). That is certainly strange at the least. How can one that has short hair, cut it? Then the whole argument of Paul is flawed. Another point of attention. The word for *hair* as covering is similar to a “vesture” (Hebr. 1:12). It is like a coat that covers her. However, the word for head covering means something like *concealing*. The argument that long hair can be the replacement for head covering in a worship service cannot hold water.

A third argument is that *this would only apply to the time of Paul*. In that time, it was usual for a woman to wear a headscarf. It would have been against the culture when a woman refused to wear it. This is no longer the case. Because in our society women no longer wear a headscarf. Is this argument valid? Certainly not. Look at the reasons that Paul mentions. How many are cultural and only valid for the time of Paul? The man as head is still applicable. It reflects the bond between God and Christ. The argument of the creation order was not only the case in that time, but certainly now. It is not true that the angels are no longer present in the worship service. Finally, it is still an honor for a woman to have long hair. Therefore, this objection falls flat.

The last objection some mention is that this passage is *only applicable to married women*. “See,” they say, “Paul speaks of a woman as a glory of her husband (vs. 7). This is not true for unmarried women or girls.” This is far-fetched. The word for woman used here, is always used for the female gender. The opposite of the male gender. Think of the word gynecologist (the same word as in our text). That is a doctor for women. Does he or she only treat married women? No, also unmarried women and girls. Furthermore, the text speaks about “every woman” (1 Cor. 11:5). Let us say that head covering would not be true for unmarried women or girls. Is that person then allowed to speak publicly in the congregation? (1 Cor. 14:34). There, namely, the same word is used. I doubt that. Or is only a married woman in the Lord (vs. 11)? Are unmarried women and girls then excluded? That cannot be the case. Thus, this passage is about all women and girls, married or unmarried, young or old. Head covering is to reveal a difference between a man and a woman.

With this, we have answered various objections. The Bible makes a clear distinction between men and women. Both have their unique position and role. That is visible in how they are present in the worship service. Do we want to submit ourselves to the commandment of God? The issue lies deeper. If we are a woman, why do we cover our head? Is it because of tradition? That is a valuable one, but not sufficient. Or is it because we love the LORD and want to obey Him? That is what it is ultimately about. Because we can wear head covering, but in our heart still be in enmity with Him. Let each woman only do this because of a heartfelt desire to serve God. Then God will receive all the glory.