

WHAT GOD WANTS HIS WOMEN TO BE LIKE

By Paula and Nate Wilson

Week 5 – Headcoverings - Leader's Notes

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, my quotes from various commentators come from E-Sword (excellent freeware available at www.e-sword.net), and Greek and Hebrew word definitions are from Strong's concordance.

v.2

It is generally believed that some of the women in Corinth had abandoned the practice of covering their heads during worship and that Paul is here rebuking them for that. It seems odd, however, that Paul commends them in verse 2 for holding to the traditions he has taught only to launch into a diatribe about headcoverings in the very next verse. I think it is helpful to back up all the way to I Cor. 7:1, where Paul mentions that the Corinthians had written to him with questions about certain matters. He then goes on to address whether or not to marry, food offered to idols, the rights of apostles and then, in chapter 11, headcoverings. Looking at it this way, it appears that whether or not women should cover their heads to pray was a question the Corinthians had asked Paul in a letter, and he commends them here in chapter 11, verse 2, for asking his advice on the matter and following his teaching.

v.4

- Men still remove their hats for church, prayer and in the presence of our nation's flag. Why do men in our culture observe the practice stated here in verse 4, while women claim that the practice in verse 5, of a woman praying with head covered, is not for our culture?
- A.T. Robertson, in his Word Pictures in the New Testament, says, "The Greeks (both men and women) remained bareheaded in public prayer, and this usage Paul commends for the men."
- (<http://entrewave.com/view/reformedonline/Headcoverings%20in%20Public%20Worship2.htm>) "There was a cult in the Greco-Roman world where *both* men and women covered their heads during the pagan sacrifice. This practice, however, was not something that influenced the apostle's teaching on public worship at all. Jewish men began to cover their heads in the public service of the synagogues probably a few generations *after* the close of the N.T. canon of Scripture. The priests who ministered in the temple service covered their heads during their ministrations. This practice, however, should not be considered a contradiction to Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 because: (a) the priest sacrificial duty's were ceremonial; (b) the priests were not worshipping in a public service with their families but were serving God by themselves as a special class set apart; (c) The turban on the head of a priest has a completely different meaning than [sic] the veil on the head of a woman. (d) The priests were wearing a special uniform. 'Essentially a uniform draws attention to the office or function of person, as opposed to his individual personality. It emphasizes his job rather than his name' (G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 138)."

v.5

When would a woman engage in this praying and prophesying?

- Paul is not apparently referring **only** to public worship services, because in verse 18, he begins discussing behavior in public worship. A.T. Robertson says, “It is public praying and prophesying that the Apostle here has in mind.”
- Other classic commentators generally agree that public worship is the context. Matthew Henry believed these verses concern “public assemblies.” Albert Barnes believes this is “in the church.” John Gill says, “This is to be understood of praying and prophesying in public, and not in private; and not to be restrained to the person that is the mouth of the congregation to God in prayer, or who preaches to the people in the name of God; but to be applied to every individual person that attends public worship, that joins in prayer with the minister, and hears the word preached by him, which is meant by prophesying; for not foretelling future events is here meant, but explaining the word of God, the prophecies of the Old Testament, or any part of Scripture, unless singing of psalms should rather be designed, since that is sometimes expressed by prophesying: so in 1Sam. 10:5 "thou shalt meet a company of prophets coming down from the high place, with a psaltery, and a tabret, and a pipe, and a harp before them, and they shall prophesy". The Targum renders it thus, **ואנון משבחין**, "and they shall sing praise"; upon which Kimchi observes, that it is as if it was said, their prophecy shall be **שירות**, "songs" and praises to God, spoken by the Holy Ghost. So in 1Sam. 19:23 it is said of Saul, that he "went on and prophesied". The Targum is, he went on, **ומשבה**, "and praised". And again, "he stripped off his clothes also, and prophesied". Targum, **ושבה**, "and praised", or sung praise. Once more, in 1 Chron. 25:1 it is said of Asaph, and others, that they "should prophesy with harps, with psalteries, and with cymbals"; which Kimchi explains of Asaph's singing vocally, and of his sons playing upon musical instruments... Not that a woman was allowed to pray publicly in the congregation, and much less to preach or explain the word, for these things were not permitted them: see 1 Cor. 14:34, but it designs any woman that joins in public worship with the minister in prayer, and attends on the hearing of the word preached, or sings the praises of God with the congregation, as we have seen, the word prophesying signifies....” (It seems to me – Paula – that his OT examples indicate that the prophesying could occur in situations other than public worship.)
- On the other hand, Adam Clarke seems to think the passage teaches the covering should be worn all the time, not only as a sign of authority, but also “because it was a custom, both among the Greeks and Romans, and among the Jews an express law, that no woman should be seen abroad without a veil. This was, and is, a common custom through all the east, and none but public prostitutes go without veils. And if a woman should appear in public without a veil, she would dishonor her head - her husband. And she must appear like to those women who had their hair shorn off as the punishment of whoredom, or adultery. Vincent (Vincent’s Word Studies) says, “Among the Jews, in ancient times, both married and unmarried women appeared in public unveiled.” (This contradicts the idea that Paul is supporting the covering of women at all times for the purpose of modesty.)
- If you conclude that this passage can only be understood as “all the time, because Paul says that we are to ‘pray without ceasing’ (I Th. 5:17),” you are left with the question, “What about praying in the shower or when I’m lying in bed?” The next sentence is often, “Paul must not have been talking about a physical covering, because I obviously can’t wear one in the shower.” I submit, however, that it is wrong to refuse to obey at all simply because you

can't figure out how to obey perfectly. If you feel God wants His women to wear a headcovering at all times, then you should obey as closely as you can.

- “head uncovered” and “head covered” is found in extra-Biblical Greek literature:
 - “Philo’s Special Laws,” (died AD 45) describing a woman whose kerchief had just been removed from her head by a priest (pagan), and
 - Plutarch (about the same time as Paul) uses a similar expression (*kata teis kephales*) to indicate covering the head with part of the toga.

v.6

- Many people believe that verse 15 teaches that long hair is the headcovering and that no other covering is necessary. Read verse 6 substituting “have long hair” for “cover her head.” It becomes a pointless argument – “if she doesn’t want long hair, then let her cut it short – no big deal.” It simply doesn’t fit with the rest of the passage.

v. 9

- Paul appeals to creation here, some 4,000 years earlier and quite a different culture.

v. 10

- Some say that the headcovering is for modesty or femininity, but Paul says that a woman should have a symbol of **authority** on her head.
- Again, extra-Biblical Greek literature: Diadorus of Sicily, 1.47.5, written between 60 BC and 30 BC refers to a statue of a woman with three crowns on its head. Thomas R. Schreiner says, “Here the three crowns which Diadorus calls kingdoms all represent someone else’s authority – the authority of the woman’s father (who was a king), husband (who was a king), and son (who was a king). In no case is the woman’s own authority symbolized by the crown she wears.” (Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, chapter 5, p. 127. For what it’s worth, I don’t particularly recommend this book ☺, but this chapter can be found at http://www.cbmw.org/images/onlinebooks/rbmw/head_coverings.pdf?virtuemart=f90aa27d5171caf83af3dd63d004ae4e.)
- What does the phrase “because of the angels” mean? There are several ideas on this, but I think the one that makes the most sense is the idea that angels themselves are supposed to remain under God’s authority, and when they see women praying and prophesying with their heads covered, it reminds the angels not to rebel as some did in the past. (Some commentators believe the headcovering helps protect women from angels who might be tempted to marry a human, as in Genesis 6:2-4.)
- A.T. Robertson, in his Word Pictures in the New Testament, comments on the angels: “This startling phrase has caused all kinds of conjecture which may be dismissed. It is not preachers that Paul has in mind, nor evil angels who could be tempted (Gen. 6:1), but angels present in worship (cf. 1 Cor. 4:9; Psalm 138:1) who would be shocked at the conduct of the women since the angels themselves veil their faces before Jehovah (Isaiah 6:2).” Albert Barnes, Marvin Vincent (Vincent’s Word Studies), Adam Clarke, John Gill, JFB (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown) all agree with this interpretation.

v. 15

- “Hair is given to her ‘instead of’ (Jay Green’s interlinear), ‘for’ (KJV, NKJV, NAS, ASV, ESV) or ‘as’ (NIV) a covering.”
- The Greek word is *anti* – instead or because of (rarely, in addition to), for, in the room of. The “rarely” apparently refers to John 1:16: “grace *anti* grace,” where *anti* is translated “for” in the KJV. It doesn’t make sense to say grace is *instead of* grace, so the ESV and NASB translate it “upon” – “grace upon grace,” and the MSG translates this phrase, “gift after gift after gift.” This makes the most sense in the I Corinthians passage as well. It is illogical to think that Paul spent several verses insisting a woman should wear a head covering only to end by saying, “but long hair is good enough.” Furthermore, verse 6 makes no sense if the covering is only long hair. Therefore, it makes more sense to read verse 15, “...her hair is given to her in addition to a covering.” Thayer adds “before” as a possible definition for “anti,” which also makes sense in that the hair is given “before” a cloth covering.
- There is no definite article before “covering,” as in “hair is given to her as THE covering. In fact, the Greek word for “covering” is here “peribolaion,” rather than “katakalypto,” as earlier in the chapter. If long hair is given as a substitute for the covering discussed earlier in the chapter, would Paul not use the same word for covering? Choosing a new word for the covering in verse 15 indicates that it is, in fact, a different covering than the one to be used when praying or prophesying.
- (<http://entrewave.com/view/reformedonline/Headcoverings%20in%20Public%20Worship2.htm>) “God’s forbidding of those men who take the Nazarite vow to cut their hair (Num. 6:5) raises an obvious question regarding Paul’s statement about long hair being a shameful and against the created order. If it is wrong or shameful for a man to have long hair, then how could God command the Nazarites to let their hair grow long? There are a number of reasons why the Nazarite vow should *not* be used to overturn the teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. First, it was well known to the Israelites that the Nazarite vow was extraordinary and that the long hair of the Nazarite had nothing to do with effeminacy. The long hair symbolized an increased [sic] of the Spirit’s power, which increased faith, virtue and grace. The hair pointed to a greater consecration unto God. **Second, God who established the natural order of things has the right to make exceptions to the normal order of things; we do not.** [Emphasis mine – Paula] Third, there are positive elements regarding appearance that God can or could changed [sic] that do not contradict the moral law in any way. God created Adam and Eve with a difference in appearance. Eve had long beautiful hair and Adam had short hair. Jehovah could have made the difference hair color (e.g., men- black hair; women- pink hair) but He chose hair length as the difference. Thus, while under normal circumstances men should have short hair, exceptions can be made for Nazarites and for those who couldn’t cut their hair for health reasons. This point, however, does not mean that we can overturn Paul’s command because of customs or personal opinion.”

v. 16

- “We have no such practice.” What practice? A surface reading of this verse seems to indicate that the cloth headcovering discussed earlier in the chapter is, in fact, NOT the practice of the other churches of God and hence should not be the practice at Corinth, either. But, it makes no sense to think that Paul would spend a whole paragraph advocating the use of headcoverings only to turn around and say it’s not the thing to do after all.

- Furthermore, to claim that at the time this passage was written the churches of God did NOT require their women to be covered would be to deny all historical evidence to the contrary, including art on the walls of the catacombs and early church writers like Tertullian, Hippolytus, Chrysostom, Jerome and Augustine.
- A.T. Robertson (Word Pictures in the New Testament) (“THE authority on New Testament Greek grammar and usage” according to Nate), Adam Clarke, John Gill, JFB (Jamieson, Fausset & Brown - “a conservative, classic commentary,” says Nate), Albert Barnes and John Calvin all agree that the “custom” referred to in verse 16 is that delineated in verses 4 and 5, men praying covered and women praying uncovered. The churches had no such custom; rather all agreed that the opposite should be the case – women praying covered and men praying uncovered. (Let Her Be Veiled has quotes from early church fathers and some pictures from the catacombs as well.) Susannah Wesley is said to have had the practice of covering her head to pray at home: “Susannah Wesley, the mother of revivalists John and Charles Wesley, was the mother of nineteen children. With all the demands on her she still had a sanctuary. She sat in a kitchen chair and threw her apron over her head. The children knew not to bother their mother when the apron was over her head because she was in her sanctuary talking to God.” (<http://www.chapinbaptist.com/sermons/20051106.html>)
- (<http://entrewave.com/view/reformedonline/Headcoverings%20in%20Public%20Worship2.htm>) “Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 214. Leon Morris also gives the correct interpretation of verse 16. He writes ‘But Paul has no intention of arguing the matter with any who is given to wordy battles (*contentious, philoneikos*, is one who loves strife). Such are capable of prolonging an argument indefinitely. In the face of such an attitude Paul points to universal custom. *We have no such custom*, i.e., such as women praying or prophesying with head uncovered. Exactly whom he means by *we* is not clear, but the addition, *neither the churches of God*, shows that what he has just outlined is the habit throughout the Christian churches.’ (*1 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958], 136). Alfred Plummer agrees. He writes: “There are people who are so fond of disputing that they will contest the clearest conclusions, and the Corinthians were fond of disputation. But the Apostle will not encourage them. If such should question the dictates of decorum and of nature in this matter they may be told that the teachers have no such usage as permitting women to be unveiled, -a thing unheard of in Christian congregations. It is possible that *ameis* means only himself, but he probably means that he knows of no Apostle who allows this.’ (*First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* [Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1978 (1911), 235].”
- (<http://entrewave.com/view/reformedonline/Headcoverings%20in%20Public%20Worship2.htm>) “Some people who not want to submit to Paul’s teaching on head coverings seize upon the word “custom” in verse 16 and argue that a custom is a culturally-conditioned, temporary practice. This argument should be rejected for the following reasons. (1) Paul’s argumentation in support of the imperative (“let her be covered”) cannot be reduced to a support for a merely local, temporary custom. Appeals to the creation ordinance of covenant headship, the purpose of the man and woman, the teaching of nature or general revelation and the observation of angles [sic] render such an argument absurd. (2) The statement that every church everywhere does *not* allow women to worship without the head covering proves that the use of head coverings was trans-cultural. Keep in mind that Greek women were not accustomed to wearing head coverings in their rituals. (3) The Greek word for custom (*sunetheia*) in verse 16 denotes the habitual practice of the churches and not a mere custom in the sense of a Dutch wooden shoe festival. Paul K. Jewett (who is certainly no friend of

covenant headship or Presbyterian orthodoxy) agrees. He writes: “Therefore the apostle’s remark (v. 16) that the churches of God have no such custom (*sunetheia*) of women unveiling themselves during public worship cannot mean that he regarded the whole matter as a mere custom. Though one may argue that such is the case, one cannot say that this is what the text means. Quite the contrary, this particular custom, in the thinking of Paul, was part of the apostolic tradition which he had given them and by which they were bound. This, in fact is the note on which he opens the whole discussion, praising them for holding fast traditions (*paradosis*) ‘even as delivered them to you’ (v. 2)” (*Man as Male and Female* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], p.118).”

- Matthew Henry seems to stand alone in proclaiming that the custom of women praying covered was merely a cultural phenomenon. In his Concise Commentary, he says, “It was the common usage of the churches, for women to appear in public assemblies, and join in public worship, veiled; and it was right that they should do so. The Christian religion sanctions national customs wherever these are not against the great principles of truth and holiness; affected singularities receive no countenance from any thing in the Bible.” This, however, flatly contradicts Romans 12:1-2, which says we are NOT to conform to the world. Furthermore, it is a logical fallacy to say that we don’t have to obey a Biblical injunction if it conflicts with our current culture, because we are to go along with our culture as long as it doesn’t conflict with the Bible, as Henry here asserts.

Additional thoughts:

- If head coverings are a cultural sign only, what is the principle that still applies today and how should we apply it to our culture?
 - Wedding rings are worn by both male and female.
 - Feminine dress is just that – feminine, not a symbol of authority, as in verse 10.
 - Taking your husband’s name is a good practice and can certainly communicate that you are transferring your subjection from your father to your husband. However, it is not a physical symbol and is not on a woman’s physical head. This symbolism seems important to the Apostle Paul, as he spends two verses explaining the spiritual head of both man and woman and then goes on to say that this spiritual principle should be applied with a physical sign on the physical head of the woman. Verses 3 and 4 lose their significance completely if the cultural symbol is not actually on the physical head of the woman.
- It’s very hard to put on your headcovering and pray if you are not in a right relationship with your husband!
- Several decades ago, all women wore a hat or veil to the public worship of God. As in many areas, Biblical teaching on the matter was largely dropped early in the 19th century, and women forgot **why** they wore hats to church. The wearing of hats to church degenerated into merely a fashionable thing to do, and as a result, eventually passed out of fashion. The vast majority of American women no longer wear hats or any other kind of headcovering to church. I have often been asked why I wear a hat or headcovering; few people assume that it is merely “to make a fashion statement.”
- A quick perusal of the children’s book The Usborne book of Living Long Ago: Everyday life through the ages reveals that women in ancient Greece and Rome did not necessarily cover their heads in public, but the pictures of women in Christianized Europe showed many with covered heads.

- It is fallacious to say, “Since most people don’t understand the meaning of the symbol God has commanded, I no longer have to obey the command.” The same logic would cause us to say, “Because most people don’t see my modest dress as having a religious basis, I don’t need to bother with modest dress.” Or better, “Since most people don’t understand that we wear clothes to illustrate our sinful nature and need for a sacrifice to atone for our sins, we shouldn’t wear clothes at all.” God has a reason for signs and symbols, and it is good for us to appropriate these Biblical symbols and meanings as we create a Christian culture in this world.
- One last question: How does this apply to single women? In this passage, the Greek word *aner* is translated both “man” and “husband,” and one Greek word (*gune*) is translated both “woman” and “wife.” Thus, it is difficult to say that this passage refers only to married women. It has been interpreted to apply to any woman of marriageable age by ancient and classical commentators, and I believe this is fitting.

Conclusion:

It seems clear to me that this passage teaches that women should have a **physical** symbol of authority on their **physical** heads. Nothing but a hat, veil or other cloth covering makes any sense. I think it’s worth considering why we balk so much at the thought of wearing a headcovering. Could this show our rebellious and insubmissive attitude? If you think that the passage is somewhat unclear, so that we cannot determine for sure whether God wants His women to wear a covering during prayer, you should err on the “safe side” and wear a covering with a submissive attitude towards both God and your husband.