

Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 11:2-9 - Ancient Head Coverings in Modern Worship

Well, this is going to be an interesting morning. We are talking about the use of head coverings for women in corporate worship. If you're like me, as you've read this passage over the years you probably have wondered why this is even in here and what we are to make of it. What I want to do is get through most of this passage this morning. Next week we will finish it up and I want to ask a bunch of questions about the passage to hopefully answer questions. By the way, if you have questions about the passage let me know and I can try to tackle them.

Let me begin by saying that, as we've seen over the last couple of months, the gospel of the Lord Jesus transforms every aspect of our lives. It transforms what we eat or don't eat. It transforms where we eat and where we purchase our food. Whether we eat or drink we do all to the glory of God.

It also affects what we wear and how we dress. Usually when we think of how we dress, what comes to mind is that we are to dress with modesty. Christian men and women are sons and daughters of the most high God, we royalty, and we are to wear things that honor our Father, the King.

Even in the OT God cared about what people wore - there are all kinds of OT Laws dictating what people could and could not wear. God's concern for his glory through what we wear continues. And so here we come to an unusual article of clothing that has a lot of significance: a covering that is worn on someone's head. It turns out, God cares about what may or may not be on our head.

As most of you know, my wife and I hold that the head coverings are not just a cultural thing that only applied to ancient Corinth, but that this passage is a timeless guide for Christian worship. And I think we see that from our passage.

So let me just state plainly what I think Paul is saying here:

Married women should wear a head covering when they pray or prophesy when the church is gathered together as a sign that they are under the authority of their husbands. Men should not wear head coverings when the church is gathered when they pray or prophesy.

Now, you probably know that that view is different than most people in modern Western Christianity. Most people would say that the issue of head coverings is a cultural thing that was only relevant to the Corinthians or maybe the first century church. I want to show you why I don't think that's the case from the passage.

But before we dive into the text, let me give you a little history of how I came to this conclusion and then jump into the passage.

Back in 2014 I attended a small conference on creation versus evolution up in Newport that was held at a Mennonite church. My son and I went and I think we were the only non-Mennonite folks there. I ended up chatting with one of the elders there and asked him what made a Mennonite a Mennonite. I really didn't know anything about their beliefs.

He said 2 things: 1) they are pacifists - they don't engage in combat and 2) they take the head covering passage literally. I asked him about the dresses and he said that there's nothing that says they all have to wear blue dresses, but the Bible does say to dress modestly and so he asks the ladies in his household to wear dresses.

I told him we were going to have a creation/evolution conference at our church and he was welcome to come so we exchanged contact information. And a couple weeks later he reluctantly emailed me a link to a sermon preached by a non-Mennonite pastor who believed head coverings should be worn today. And that night I read through the sermon and I'll be honest, I panicked. I had read through this section before but had always written off head coverings as just a cultural thing. This sermon challenged my view. It was a simple, straightforward explanation of the passage and I had no good objections to what he said.

So I did what any responsible person did and I just ignored the issue completely.

Side: If there's something in the Bible that's uncomfortable for you - don't ignore it. The Bible is **God's** Word. Every line, every passage is for God's glory and our benefit. If there's something that's difficult I would encourage you to wrestle with it and work it out.

That's what I should have done. I ended up ignoring this passage for a year until I was at camp working as a dean. And one day Robert McDowall came over to me with a gal who was working at camp and said "this lovely young lady has a question for you, Pastor Jason." And she proceeded to open up to **1 Cor. 11** and ask me whether or not ladies should wear head coverings.

At that point it was check mate. I told her that I had long believed it was just cultural but that I wasn't sure anymore. The passage doesn't indicate that it is a cultural thing, but something that God has implemented for all cultures.

Jodee and I studied the issue for a while and she became convinced before I did that this was something she needed to be obedient to and she began wearing a head covering.

And here's the hard part: for ladies, what you believe about head coverings is pretty obvious to everyone. Men, not so much because most of us don't things that cover our head in church. But for women everyone knows exactly where you're at and even the possibility of wearing a head covering can be very comfortable.

One other complication is that this is the only place in the Bible that talks about this issue. We have exactly 15 verses on the subject. But here's the deal: there are a whole host of other issues the Bible only mentions once. No marriage in heaven - 1 time. Baptism for the dead - 1 time. Eating meat sacrificed to idols - just here in 1 Corinthians. Jesus being of the priestly order of Melchizedek. The Millennium...

I say that because the Bible only needs to say something once for us to know what God wants. So we need to wrestle with this.

Remind: Married women should wear a head covering when they pray or prophecy when the church is gathered together as a sign that they are under the authority of their husbands. Men should not wear head coverings when the church is gathered when they pray or prophesy.

That's really technical, but I think it's important. The issue is not the building we're in, but when we gather together.

So I want to start with some grace this morning.

1) We need to be gracious with each other about head coverings. This is important. **Read 16**

The reason that Paul is even addressing this issue is because this has always been a difficult issue. It's always been tough for people to wrestle with this issue of head coverings being a sign.

And because of that people can become contentious. Quarrelsome. Argumentative.

We're not going to do that. Head coverings are not a salvation issue. I do think it is an obedience issue, but you have to wrestle with that. We're not going to do church discipline because a guy wears a hat in church nor are we because a woman doesn't wear a head covering. We're going to be gracious with each other and give space to work this out.

Let's just slowly walk through this passage. This will probably feel more like a Bible study this morning, but I think just walking through this will be helpful.

Vs. 2 - Read

One of the initial questions about head coverings is whether or not this is a cultural issue or an issue of obedience. Part of that question revolves around the word "traditions" that we have here in **Vs. 2**. If you have NIV it says "holding to the teachings." ESV has "traditions."

The Greek word used here means an authoritative teaching that is passed down. We tend to make a distinction between traditions which are optional, and commands that are required. So a lot of people will look at this and on a quick read say that this is just a cultural **tradition** so we can set the discussion aside.

But it's not that easy. The Bible often uses the word "tradition" to mean a God-given command.

2 Thes. 3:6: "...keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us." The traditions the brothers need to walk in are commands from God.

2 Thes. 2:15: So then brother stand firm and hold to the traditions - the authoritative teachings - as you were taught.

The only times that the Bible paints traditions as bad or unnecessary it specifically says they're bad. Jesus condemns the Pharisees over and over because they hold to the traditions of men/elders/their own man-made traditions.

Here, Paul actually commends them for keeping this teaching, this tradition. If you've been paying attention, there's very little Paul has commended the Corinthian church for, but this is one of the things they're getting right.

So if the church is doing this correctly, why is Paul bringing this issue up? It seems that even though they are getting the head coverings correct, they don't understand **why** they are doing it. They don't understand why men would not wear one and women would. **Read 2-3**

So he says good job, **but** he wants them to understand why they're doing what they're doing. It seems they're just going through the motions. That's not good. That's creates confusion and legalism.

So this whole section is actually explaining why women wear head coverings and why men do not.

The first thing we see is that this whole discussion is based on the God given authority chain that is present even in the Trinity. **Read 3-5**

So several things here. First, we need to understand that there's a chain of authority happening. It goes God the Father, Jesus the Son, the husband, and the wife.

And that word "head" implies authority. God the Father is not more important than God the Son. And the husband is not more important than his wife. The members of the Trinity have equal glory and power. And men and women are made equally in the image of God. **But** there are roles. The Son submits to the Father, just like the wife submits to her husband.

The Father is the head of Christ, Christ the head of the husband, and the husband is the head of the wife. So there's a little play on words here that is important to this discussion. And for husbands and wives, what we do with our physical head relates to how we honor or dishonor our spiritual head, our spiritual authority.

Head coverings point to roles bigger roles within marriage and the Trinity. Husbands do not wear a head covering when we pray or prophecy because it would dishonor our head, which is Jesus.

Paul says it's just the opposite for a woman. If a woman prays or prophesies with her head uncovered it would dishonor her husband. Part of the head covering issue is whether or not we are dishonoring the authority above us.

Now, it probably goes without saying, but these roles are not cultural. The Father is always the head of Christ, Christ is always the head of the husband, and the husband is always the head of his wife. This is not just true in Corinth in the first century. The principle that Paul is getting at here is timeless.

I mean, just before someone prays publicly, what do all the guys who are wearing hats do? Take off their hats. Why? If you ask most people they'll say it's out of respect. Where do we get that idea from the Bible? It's right here.

What Paul is saying is that if men pray with something covering their physical head it dishonors Jesus, who is their authoritative head. Paul doesn't even tell us why right here expect that it mirrors the headship within the Trinity. And the opposite is true for wives: they should cover their heads.

Now, another issue here is who should be wearing a head covering? The Greek word for man and husband are the same word. And the Greek word for wife and woman are the same word. So this gets a little complicated.

Some would say all women need to wear a head covering when praying or prophesying. The word should be translated women meaning all women would need to do this. Some would say only wives. Which of course brings up what do men do? Is this only applicable for husbands or all men?

I think there are good arguments both ways. But as of now I think this corresponds only to married ladies and married men. Why is that? Because it seems as though there's an authority structure on display that is only universally true in marriage.

Widows are not under any man's authority and there are many times when single women are not under any man's authority. **Look over at Eph. 5:22-26** for a moment.

Here we see this same kind of language that Paul is using about roles but it is specifically in the context of marriage. **Read 22-26**

So marriage is this picture of Christ and the Church. The husband plays the role of Christ and the wife plays the role of the Church. The husband lovingly leads and has authority. The wife submits and follows her husband's lead. And in that way marriage is a living, breathing picture of Jesus and the Church.

That picture only happens in marriage. So I think Paul has in mind this head covering issue for husbands and wives. I say that, but I still think it's okay for all men to take off their hats when they pray and I think it's okay for all women to wear a head covering when they pray.

But the best I can tell the requirement is only in marriage. Okay, **back to 1 Corinthians.**

The other question is: when does this apply? When does a wife need to wear a head covering? When does a husband need to make sure he's not covering his head?

Some people say that this is all the time. A women needs to wear her head covering all the time because we should be praying without ceasing. And a man shouldn't be wearing a covering ever because he should be praying all the time.

But the best I can tell is that this is in the context of when we gather together in the local church on Sundays. Remember the building is not the issue, it's gathering together that's the issue.

And it seems as though with this transition in chapter 11 we're now focused on things that happen in the local church: Head coverings, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts in chapters 12-14.

So it's when the local church is gathered and when she is using her words to pray or prophesy in the gathering of the local church. What does it mean to prophesy? **Look at chapter 14:2-3.**

We'll get into spiritual gifts in a while, but here we see what it means to prophesy. We're not talking about receiving a message for God about the future. We're talking about encouragement. **Read 2-3**

The person who prophesies - notice he doesn't say a man, he says generically the person or the one - does so to upbuild, encourage and console the congregation. This is when someone might stand up and encourage the congregation with a Bible passage or encouraging word or exhortation or something to comfort.

That's a regular part of church life, Paul says that was happening in the church **and** that it's okay that a woman does that, as long as she wears a head covering. And it's okay that a man does that as long as he doesn't wear a head covering.

So let me give you a bigger picture here. We know that according to **1 Tim. 2-3** women cannot teach or have authority in the congregation. They also can't be elders. But it seems clear according to **1 Cor. 11** that they can pray in the congregation. And by pray I mean they can stand up and use their words out loud. It also seems clear they can stand up and use their words and encourage or comfort the congregation. Not a sermon; there's no preaching here, no teaching. They're not exercising authority. Not becoming a pastor. Just praying for or encouraging the group.

But, think about this: if that lady got up and started encouraging or praying people might think "Oh, she's in charge. She's got authority some here." And now people are thinking we've got lady pastors or preachers. What would be a really obvious way she could indicate to everybody that she's not exercising authority? What's a way she could indicate she is submitting to her husband's lead and doing this with her husband's blessing?

By wearing a head covering. **Vs. 10** says that the head covering is a symbol of authority. Not that she has it, but that she's acting under his authority. **Read 10**

If a husband were to have his head covered when he prayed or prophesied it would actually be saying "Hey, I'm abdicating my authority to my wife."

So the head covering is a sign that a woman is not trying to exert power or authority over the congregation. She's not trying to lead or preach or be a pastor. She is speaking in the congregation but all the while submitting to her husband.

Okay, one more observation in **Vs. 5. Read**

So Paul says that if a woman does not cover her head when she prays or prophesies she is dishonoring her physical head. It'd just be like getting up and praying or prophesying with a shaved head or sporting a man's haircut.

All throughout history, in basically every culture, women wear long hair and men have shorter hair. Women's hair is even molecularly built to be longer and nicer. The cultural exceptions to women wearing long hair basically prove the rule.

Even now one of the dead giveaways that a woman is a practicing lesbian is what she does with her hair. She tries to look like a man - it's a very obvious statement about gender roles and the Bible says it's shameful.

Notice the connection Paul makes. He says that if a woman has long hair but won't cover it when praying or prophesying it's shameful; she might as well cut it short or shave it off. That's pretty strong language.

And some of the ladies are like "Well, I'm not going to shave my head or get a man's haircut!" Paul says "Then cover your head when you pray or prophesy." **Read 6**

His logic is pretty straightforward.

The man is just the opposite. When a man gets up and prays or prophesies in the midst of the gathered church his head is to be uncovered and a woman's is to be covered. This brings honor or dishonor to their own physical head.

Now we get into some of the why questions. Why does God want men to remain uncovered but women covered? There are 4 reasons that Paul gives.

Notice he begins with the word **for**. Why should a woman cover her head? For this reason:

1) Covering displays God's order of creation. Read 7-9

So when we read through Genesis 1 and 2 we find out that God had a purpose when he made Adam before Eve. Just the order that they were created gives an indication that Adam would lead and Eve would be a loving helper.

Men do not cover because they are directly the glory and image of God. Women **do cover** because they are the image and glory of man. And you say, what does that mean and what difference is there between being made in the image of God and the image of man?

All that means is that man is made directly in the image of God - God made Adam first. And women are indirectly the image God God - because they come from man.

I want to be very clear that both men and women are made in the image of God. Paul's point here is kind of a technical one. He's teasing out this idea of the headship of the husband. And we see headship - authority - in the simple fact that he was made before Eve.

Turn to Gen 2:18-25. We know that both men and women are fully made in the image of God. Gen. 1:27 says as much. But Paul is summarizing this passage which talks about the order of creation. What he's saying is that the head covering reflects this reality here. **Read 18-25**

So Eve was made for Adam and after Adam. Adam leads, and Eve is his loving helper. This is what God designed. Paul, in 1 Corinthians, says that's actually part of what the head covering reflects. **Look** back there. **Read 7-9**

So Paul says that part of this whole head covering thing is to reflect what we call the creation order. Man was made first and then the woman. Husbands lovingly lead and have authority over their wives and wives graciously submit to that lead.

Let me ask: Is that reality a cultural reality or a timeless reality? It's timeless. Since the Garden, God has designed men to lead and women to follow.

The order of the Trinity is timeless, the length of hair is timeless, and creation order of husbands leading their wives is timeless.

Okay, we're going to come back to this next week. Let me say a couple of things.

I really wrestled with how best to present this passage. I hold to a very minority view in the modern western church. If we were to rewind the clock 80 years, this would not be a controversial issue. I know that, but I believe this is what the passage teaches.

I want to encourage you this week to dig into this passage. Ask the hard questions. Wrestle with this. Look online and at commentaries. And can I give you some helpful advice? Don't just be satisfied by hearing what you want to hear. Be willing to consider everyone's take before coming to a conclusion.

Every part of our lives is for the glory of God: Even what we do or do not wear on our head is a matters to him. Dig into his Word to see how to bring him glory.

Pray