

Of Hats and Head Coverings (1 Corinthians 11:1-17)
Published on September 25th, 2013 | by Rob Slane

[Before the article begins, here is 1 Corinthians 11:2-17 (NKJV)]

2 Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. 4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. 5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. 6 For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. 7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man is not from woman, but woman from man. 9 Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. 10 For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. 12 For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God.

13 Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? 15 But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

[Comment: My own take on the phrase “because of the angels” is that it probably refers to Isaiah 6:2 “Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.” Also, keep in mind the walls of the tabernacle were decorated with cherubim, but these were covered from public view.

The argument seems to be that if covering the head is good enough for angels, it should be good enough for women. I won't take a stand right now about head coverings for women, but this seems to be the meaning of “because of the angels.”]

[excerpts from article]

I am familiar with three popular interpretations of this passage. One is the cultural view. It basically says that the commandment for women to wear a head covering was confined to the first century and the cultural expectations of the day. The second interpretation is that Paul is referring throughout the passage to hair. And the third opinion is the one that holds Paul's

command for a woman to be covered as something that applies as much now as it did then, so whenever a woman attends church she must wear some sort of hat or covering on her head.

I have to say I have never been fully persuaded by any of these arguments. The idea that Paul was urging the women in the Corinthian church to dress in this way because of something going on in the culture of the day seems to me to be most unlikely. It doesn't sound very Pauline, does it? The hair argument doesn't do it for me either. The idea that Paul would put forth a whole command about hair, but then wait until almost the very end of the passage before even dropping the word hair into the argument seems to me a strange and somewhat illogical way of making the point.

And I have never been convinced by the argument that the passage compels women in today's church to wear something on their heads when they come to church. But I'll come on to the reasons for that in a while.

(. . .)

Joel prophesied that in this era – the 40 years from Pentecost to AD 70, there would be prophets. Not only this, but there would also be prophetesses. So if this interpretation of his vision is correct, you would expect to find prophetesses in this era.

It is not that there hadn't been prophetesses before of course. Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Noahdiah are all mentioned in the Old Testament as being prophetesses. Even in the New Testament, Anna is specifically mentioned as a prophetess (Luke 2:36).

The difference seems to be that between Pentecost and AD 70, there wouldn't be the odd lone prophetess, but rather many of them would be raised up. This is hinted at in the book of Acts, where it says of Philip the Evangelist that he had "four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy" (Acts 21:9). The fact that there were four in just one family – the same number as those specifically mentioned throughout the entire Old Testament – seems to indicate very clearly that the gift of prophecy was no longer a rarity amongst women at that time.

Now if this interpretation of Joel's prophecy and Peter's Pentecost sermon is correct, what does it mean as regards the hats? What it means is that when Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthian church, the gift of prophesying had been given to a good deal of women. And that almost certainly means that some of them were there in the congregation at Corinth.

Turning to the actual passage itself, one thing is very striking, especially given that some use the passage to insist that women ought to wear a hat or head-covering when they go to church. The fact is that this interpretation simply is not borne out by the passage. Whatever the passage is or isn't speaking of, it does not state that women should wear a head covering when they go to church. It does not say that they should wear a head covering when they are in a worship service.

What it actually says is that a woman should wear a head covering when she is doing one of two things: praying or prophesying.

I urge you to go and read the passage again. You will find that Paul says nothing of women needing to have their head covered when listening to the Word being preached. He says nothing of a woman covering her head when taking the Lord's Supper. He says nothing of whether she needs to have her head covered when she sings. Rather he mentions two things, and they are very specific things.

This might seem like – pardon the pun – hair-splitting to those who advocate that women should wear a head-covering when they attend church. Yet one thing we know about Paul was that he was never careless in his choice of words. Therefore, the distinction is really rather important, chiefly for two reasons:

Firstly, if Paul had intended that all women wear a head covering when they attend church, why wouldn't he have just said so? Why deliberately mention two very specific actions – praying and prophesying – if he had meant that they should wear a covering all the time during public worship?

Had he intended to mean that women should cover their heads when they attend church, what term could he have used? Fortunately we don't need to speculate because he used just such a term earlier in the same epistle when he meant "attending church". The phrase he uses is found in chapter 5, where he says in verse 4, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together...". When ye are gathered together! Had he intended to signify that women need to have their heads covered when they come into the assembly, surely he would have used this phrase – or at least something very similar. But instead he chose to pick up on two particular actions, which should at least give us cause to wonder why he did this.

The second reason that this apparent nit-picking is very important is, I believe, because the key to the whole passage seems to lay exactly in the two specific actions he mentions.

Let's take the easiest one of the two to begin with: prophesying. The Greek word is *proph* which literally means to publicly expound. In other words, what Paul has in mind is a woman who stands up and declares the Word of God to the congregation.

We must remember that this was a needful thing at this time. Most churches would have had little if any of the New Testament scriptures that we have, and so they therefore needed a more direct teaching from God. It seems that the raising up of prophets and prophetesses, foretold by Joel and confirmed by Peter at Pentecost, was for precisely this reason.

As an aside, there is therefore no cause for thinking that the role of the prophets or prophetesses went on beyond AD 70, or thereabouts. These were specially called people who played a needed role in the establishing of the church at that time, but once the canon of Scripture was completed,

there was no longer any need for such people to be called by God to perform this office. The last Prophet had spoken (Hebrews 1:1-2) and God no longer needed to use men and women to give further revelation.

It is therefore extremely difficult for those who advocate the “wearing of head-coverings” to church to argue this from Paul’s command that “every woman who prophesies” should have her head covered. When do women ever prophesy (publicly expound) in today’s church? Okay they do so in the liberal churches, but then that’s a whole different issue for a different day. But for churches that hold to Paul’s teaching that ministers must be men, I fail to see how they can then insist on women wearing a head covering, since none of the women in such congregations ever “publicly expound”.

But what of the praying? This is far more difficult, because it could be argued that the praying he has in mind is referring to corporate praying. If this were the case, at best those who advocate head coverings in the church could argue that women should wear them whilst praying, but there is no warrant to insist on this at any other time during a worship service.

However, there are a few good reasons why the praying mentioned here is not simply congregational prayer – women listening and praying silently when their minister or another church member prays – but is actually when a woman literally stands up to vocally pray herself.

Firstly, in all other instances where Paul talks about praying in this letter to the Corinthians, it is always tied to the “sign gifts”. Nowhere in this epistle is the word used to mean someone “praying” in the sense of listening to the prayers of another and assenting to them. It is likely, therefore, that the praying mentioned in verse 5 is therefore connected with the “sign gifts” and the gift of prophesying, rather than silent prayer.

Secondly, the “praying and prophesying” seem very much to be connected and therefore part of the same package, being used in respect to both men (verse 4) and women (verse 5). It would be natural from the way these verses are phrased to assume that the two elements go hand in hand. Therefore, if the prophesying mentioned is specific to certain men and women of that time, isn’t it natural to assume that the praying is similarly specific to certain men and women of that time, and not just talking about all women praying silently?

Thirdly, there is nothing whatsoever in the Old Testament that required a woman to wear a head covering when praying silently in the congregation. For Paul to come along and liken a woman who prays silently in the congregation without a head covering to an immoral woman, asking whether it is “comely that she prays to God with her head uncovered” (verse 13), wouldn’t he need to have some basis in the Old Testament for making such a heavy charge?

Fourthly, when he addresses the men and women that pray and prophesy, he always does so in the singular: “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 that is even all one as if she were shaven” (1 Corinthians 11:4-5).

However, three chapters later, when speaking about women in the churches, he does so in the plural sense: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak” (1 Corinthians 14:34).

What this seems to suggest, is that the women he is addressing in 1 Corinthians 11 are not the entirety of women in the congregation. When he wants to address women in general, he does so by speaking of women in the plural sense. But he does not do this in 1 Corinthians 11, instead using the singular sense, which gives the impression that he is addressing a very specific and separate type of woman to the rest of the women in the congregation.

Finally, notice the contrast between the command in the 14th chapter and what is stated in the 11th chapter. In the 14th chapter he tells the women that they must be silent in the churches. This appears to be a total contradiction of what he had said three chapters earlier, where he spoke of a woman prophesying. It seems to me that the only plausible explanation of this is that the women addressed in chapter 11 are not the same as those addressed in chapter 14. Is it not more likely that in chapter 11 he is addressing the prophetesses, foretold by Joel, who vocally prayed and prophesied in the church, whereas in chapter 14, he is addressing the generality of women who had not been called to this office?

Without going verse by verse through the rest of the passage, I believe that this offers the most reasonable explanation for what is contained in the remainder of the passage. It explains why she needs to have “power” on her head – because she is doing something that for all intents and purposes appears to show her usurping the authority of her husband or father.

Imagine sitting in the church of Corinth at the time of Paul’s writing. In front of you sit Mr & Mrs Crispus. Mrs Crispus has been given the gift of prophesying and praying in tongues, but her husband has not been given these gifts. What might it sound like if she just gets up and prophesies (publicly expounds), but her husband is not able to because he does not have the gift? It would sound like she is in authority over him and not the other way around. The whole point of the covering – the veil – is therefore to show the rest of the congregation that although she has been given the gift – the temporary gift – she is still under the authority of her husband. In other words, the covering displays to all that what she is doing is in no way usurping his role.

This is also one further argument as to why the praying is not “ordinary” congregational praying. In a silent prayer situation, the woman is not actually doing something that looks like she might be usurping the authority of her husband or her father. She only needs the head covering in cases where she is doing something that ordinarily she would have no authority to do so. So if Philip the Evangelist is in a congregation with his four daughters, and his 16-year-old gets up and begins praying or prophesying to the assembled people, she needs a covering on her head in order to tell the congregation that her gift is temporary and that she still recognises her father as

the authority over her. But if she merely sits and prays silently, she is not doing anything that might lead someone to believe that she is usurping his authority, and therefore she does not require the head covering.

I think that this may also help explain that oddest of verses, “For this cause ought the woman [again notice the singular sense] to have power on her head because of the angels” (verse 10). Why does she need to do this “because of the angels?” I think the most reasonable explanation can be found by comparing the passage with Psalm 8. In verse 3 of 1 Corinthians 11, it says that in terms of authority, the pecking order is God, Christ, Man, Woman. In Psalm 8, it says that man has been created a little lower than the angels (verse 5). Therefore, the point being made may well be that if a woman stands and prophesies or prays without some visible form of recognition that she is not usurping the authority of the man, what she is in effect doing is putting herself above man in the order of authority, and therefore on a par with those who were created a little higher than man: that is, angels.

Let me end by summarising the views given in this piece:

- The prophet Joel foretold of a day when God would raise up people’s sons and daughters to prophesy
- The Apostle Peter confirmed on the day of Pentecost that Joel’s prophesy was coming to pass
- Joel’s prophesy stretches from the inauguration of the New Covenant church (Pentecost) to the destruction of the Old Covenant church (the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70)
- Therefore, the period of prophets and prophetesses was for this 40 year period only – the church’s wilderness wanderings – and not beyond
- There would therefore have been specially called prophetesses in the church at Corinth and other churches at that time and they would have stood up to pray and prophesy in the congregation
- The passage in 1 Corinthians 11 does not say anything about a woman needing to wear a hat or head covering to church, to a service, in the Lord’s Supper, listening to the preaching, or singing
- Rather, it speaks specifically of a woman wearing head covering when she does one of two things: praying and prophesying
- Both the praying and the prophesying were “sign gifts” given to specially called women in the period of Joel’s prophesy
- The reason a prophetess would need to wear a head covering was that unless there was some visible sign for all the congregation to see, it could well appear that she was usurping the authority of the man who had authority over her – either her husband or her father
- The reason she needed to wear this “because of the angels” was because man has been created just beneath the angels. Therefore putting herself above the authority of the man effectively places herself on a par with the angels.

Rob Slane lives with his wife and five home-educated children in Salisbury, England. He is the author of *The God Reality: A Critique of Richard Dawkins' The God Delusion*, and a soon-to-be-released book, *A Christian & an Unbeliever discuss Life, The Universe & Everything*. He is a regular contributor of worldview pieces for Samaritan Ministries International and for the Canadian magazine, *Reformed Perspective*. He also blogs once or twice a week on cultural issues from a biblical perspective at www.theblogmire.com. - See more at: <http://americanvision.org/9476/hats-head-coverings/#comment-416636>

<http://americanvision.org/9476/hats-head-coverings/#comment-416636>
