

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Introduction

In some parts of the world, the issue over women wearing hats in church, and particularly at the Lord's Supper, is a very controversial one. Some ladies logically put on hats in private devotion and even when grace is being said before a meal. It is a topic for fierce debates in churches and hostile letters to magazines. In some churches, ladies without hats are assumed to be unconverted, and are addressed from the pulpit accordingly.

Going to make a few preliminary comments. In giving my own personal understanding of the passage, I want to make it clear I have the deepest respect for others and their opinions. There is no question of scorn or ridicule. Some of those who take a different line of interpretation are outstanding in their godliness and desire to be faithful to scripture. I recall visiting Stornaway Free Church on the Isle of Lewis in 1991. Of the 1500 congregation, 1000 were English speaking and 500 Gaelic speaking. There was not one lady without her head covered. Most churches, including evangelical churches, would not be able to hold a candle to that congregation in zeal, generosity and godliness. Although I may not hold this view, I would certainly defend anyone who does hold to it if they think it is correct.

The problem is not one of obeying the Bible or not, but of interpreting it, especially in deciding how to apply things from first century culture and practices to our time and culture. E.g. few of us take the reference to a "holy kiss" (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:26) literally. We transfer the meaning to our modern day handshake, which is our sign of love and friendship in the twentieth century.

It is a difficult and dangerous area. Where do we draw the line? It is so easy to say that anything in the Bible that we don't like was just first century culture, or how they thought about God then. People use that argument about women's ministry. But the issue of male leadership was not just found in first century culture – it was rooted in creation, and therefore has permanent importance.

Our approach is going to be to start with the historical context, and look at what the instruction meant then, before we consider what it means today. Then going to draw out the permanent teaching of this passage.

The teaching of Paul on woman's head covering

Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of every woman is man, and the head of Christ is God (1 Corinthians 11:3). Three pairs, each with a subordinate and each with a head or leading party. Paul envisages that both men and women pray and prophesy, but do it differently. Man with his head uncovered, else he dishonours his head. He is under the authority of no other human being. But if the woman praying and prophesying has uncovered head, she dishonours her head. Indeed she might as well go all the way and shave it all off. The woman

does so under submission. Thus the veil or head covering was a sign both of submission to husband, and of her authority to pray and prophesy. Proof that she was gifted to do so.

The man's head is uncovered because he was created in the image and glory of God. But woman was created in the glory of man. Man was not created for woman, but woman was created for man. Therefore woman ought to have sign of authority on her head, because of the angels (1 Corinthians 11:10). "Angels" αγγελιο may mean agents of God who are at worship, or messengers or visiting preachers.

Yet man and woman belong together. Man is not independent of woman, and woman is not independent of man. Woman came from man, and man is born of woman. There is partnership of the sexes in the Lord. Neither exists without the other.

It is not fitting for a woman to pray uncovered. Nature shows that while long hair is a shame to man, it is a glory to woman. Woman's hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wishes to be contentious, Paul and his associates did not have any other practice in church than this one (1 Corinthians 11:16).

The problem is in the interpretation. The Eastern veil is not an equivalent of the modern day hat. The veil was a sign of subordination, whereas the hat is not. It neither compares in function, appearance or purpose. Therefore the veil had a local and temporary significance. N.B the passage also suggests that woman took part in public worship – there is nothing in the text to suggest that they only took part in ladies meetings or family prayers.

Hence the usual interpretation is that the veil Paul refers to was a covering in the ancient east which was a sign of subordination. In Paul's day no respectable woman would have appeared without a veil. It was not only a sign of subordination to man, but also a guarantee of protection and dignity. With the veil on, a woman could go anywhere in security and receive profound respect. Without a veil, she could be insulted because she had left behind her modesty and chastity. Generally an unveiled woman was an immoral woman, an adulteress or prostitute.

New Christian women, rejoicing in the liberty of the Gospel, had discarded their veil and covering. Perhaps they found the veil an encumbrance when they wanted to take part in the service in prayer or prophesying. So the church, and the woman, and the name of Christ, had been brought into disrepute, especially in the licentious city of Corinth. It also seems that the women had thrown off their husband's authority as well. Therefore Christians must observe the conventions of society, lest we be misunderstood.

The modern hat does not stand for what the Eastern veil did. It is not a symbol of male authority in home and church. But the principle of the authority of the male still remains. It is rooted in creation. We lack visible symbol today indicating the woman's status, unless you count the wedding ring.

Some are unhappy with this interpretation. They cite the reference in v.15 to long hair as a covering. So they say that the covering Paul demands is not a material veil at all, but long hair. In Greek society there was the practice of cutting off hair to offer to the

gods. So a Christian woman growing her hair long demonstrates that she is not worshipping idols, and instead she re-acquires her God-given veil.

In neither of these interpretations is the western hat equivalent to what Paul has in mind. It is important that we should begin with first century background, and consider what this passage meant to the first readers, in their time and their society.

Another example of the problem in changing culture is the reference to women not wearing men's clothing (Deuteronomy 22:5). Does this rule out ladies wearing trousers? It may be a reference to the magical practices of ancient religions to cure infertility, or changes of clothing in ancient Syrian religion – a practice leading to gross moral degeneracy. C.f. Transvestism is associated with moral corruption today. In fact, the Hebrew in this passage is so general that it can refer to anything which is worn or carried, including weapons, jewels, implements and vessels as well as clothes.

In light of this, it is impossible to be dogmatic and insist all ladies must wear hats in church if they are going to be faithful to Scripture. Clearly there are differences in interpretation by people equally faithful to Scripture. The matter must finally be left to the individual conscience.

There is much to be said to being nicely and neatly dressed in God's house, and for divine worship. Some may feel that if they were meeting royalty, they should be equally well dressed for divine worship, and if that includes a hat, so well and good. But let it not be said this is required by Scripture for everybody.

Positive teaching by Paul

Back to the important relationship of man and wife in marriage and church. Equal in status before the Lord. Neither male nor female, but all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). As Matthew Henry puts it: When God made woman, he did not take her from man's head for her to dominate; He did not take her from his feet lest he trample on her; but from his side, to be his companion, comfort and love.

Marriage is a partnership of equals. Each needs the other and each compliments the other in God-ordained relationship of marriage. Equal in status, yet in function the male is the head, both in the family and in the church. Yet there is still mutual dependence. The male is not to be a dictator. He has the responsibility of loving care. In his headship, the husband is to love as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it (Ephesians 5:25). He is the leader, and she is the follower. The sign of her acceptance of his loving authority is head covering or long hair. Is the equivalent sign in our culture the wedding ring? Or perhaps there is no visible equivalent. But the fact of woman's divinely appointed status, which is the main thing, still holds good in every church and every family in every generation.

There is place also for proper and respectful behaviour within worship of the church. Each must observe his own and proper place. The real issue is not "hat or not", but our worship, that it is real, quiet and modest. Also important there be respect for social convention so that disrepute is not attached to the church and its worship. We must shy away from shocking or disturbing others. If we must err, better to err on the

side of caution than the side of laxity. Worship above all is to be Christ-centred and God glorifying, and in line with the Word of God.

There is place also for tolerance about difference in interpretation about secondary matters, provided on both sides there is loyalty to the Lord and to His Word. **Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Live in harmony with one another.** (Romans 12:10,11,16).