

Are women supposed to wear head coverings in church?

(1 Corinthians 11:2-17)

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-17 Paul seems to teach that women are always supposed to wear head coverings in church. Many Christians today wonder, *Is this command still for today?* What are we to do with this? Here is the passage:

Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head,⁵ but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.

⁶For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head.⁷ For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.

⁸For man was not made from woman, but woman from man.⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.¹⁰ That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman;¹² for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.

¹³Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered?¹⁴ Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him,¹⁵ but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.¹⁶ If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. – 1

Corinthians 11:2-16 (ESV)

On the surface, this passage seems pretty clear: women must wear head coverings to church. The difficulty, of course, is that almost no Christian women in our modern day evangelical culture feel that this command still applies to them. And we here at Southland agree with them. How is it that we can, with a good conscience, ignore such a ‘clear’ command of Scripture?

There are many different kinds of commands in Scripture: some, like the sacrifices, have long been cancelled, while others like ‘Do not murder’ (Ex 20:13) and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Lev 19:18) are universal moral laws that will stand forever (Ps 111:7-8; Mt. 5:18).

Still others, however, occupy somewhat of a middle ground – it no longer makes sense to apply them exactly as-is in our day and age, though the underlying principle(s) on which they are founded still holds true. For example, Deuteronomy 22:8 commands everyone to ‘build a fence around your roof’ in order that the ‘guilt of blood’ not be brought on your house. The reason for this command is obvious: in ancient Middle Eastern cultures people built their homes with flat rooftops so that the roof doubled as usable space – a second storey for their homes. People used their roofs to sleep, eat, gather and, in some cases, work. Thus, in Deuteronomy, God’s command to always put a fence on your roof was a safety law intended to keep people from unnecessarily being injured or killed in falls from rooftops.

In our context today in North America however, very rarely would anyone build a house that has a flat rooftop. There are probably many of reasons for this, not the least being that such rooftops are impractical in our climate, where it is necessary that a roof be able to bear heavy snow loads in the winter time. Thus we build our homes with peaked rooftops

instead of flat, and as a result, our rooftops are unusable; no one ever goes onto their roof unless they have to fix something.

So does Deuteronomy 22:8 still apply to us today? Does God expect all of His people to still put fences up around their rooftops?

A strict literalist would say, 'We have to do exactly as the Bible commands – what right have we to change God's laws?' And they would be right when it comes to the universal moral laws that are contained in Scripture such as 'Do not murder,' 'Do not lie,' 'Do not steal,' 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' etc..

But any careful student of the Scriptures will recognize that some of the commands in Scripture are the result of universal moral laws being applied to *particular situations*. In the case of Deuteronomy 22:8 this is surely the case: it is extremely doubtful that anyone could argue cogently that every house that will ever be built for all of eternity – regardless of style, culture, climate or usage – must have a fence around its roof *as a universal moral principle*; or that houses having fences around their rooftops is intrinsic to the very nature of God and how He has created the universe!

No. The universal moral law underlying the command is this: all human life is valuable and must be treated as such. Therefore, appropriate precautions must always be taken to ensure that human life is not unnecessarily lost or injured. In a culture where people's houses have flat rooftops and where people spend lots of time on their roof, this universal moral law – that human life is precious and should be protected – takes the form of a culture-specific command to 'put a fence around your rooftop.'

In a context, however, where people don't ever go onto their rooftops, the culture-specific part of the command can be ignored. The underlying principle, however, will always stand: human life is precious, and in our workplaces and homes we should always ensure that all reasonable precautions have been taken so that human life is not unnecessarily lost or injured.

What does all of this have to do with 1 Corinthians 11:2-17 and women wearing head coverings at church?

Everything. Because the question now is, what kind of command is Paul's instruction that women should wear a head covering at church? Is it an intrinsic universal moral law – like 'Do not murder,' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself' – that will stand unchanged for all eternity? Or is it a culture-specific application of one of those universal moral laws, like Deuteronomy 22:8 and the command to 'put a fence around your roof?'

Let's see. If Paul's command to women to wear head coverings to church is a universal moral law, intrinsic to the very character of God and to the nature of how He has created the universe, then it will stand forever – it will always be true in all situations and places, in all cultures, and throughout all time periods (it will even continue to be obeyed in heaven!). That's what a universal moral law is.

Are head coverings on women an eternal law like this? No. How can I be so sure? Because you won't find the command anywhere in the Old Testament.

Does this make sense? If a law is a universal moral law, intrinsic to the very nature of God and the way He has created the universe, then that means it has *always* been true since the very beginning – it didn't just suddenly begin to be true in New Testament times.

Consider, for example, the other universal moral laws: it has always been wrong to murder. There has never been a time in history when it was okay to murder someone. Likewise, it has always been *right* to love your neighbor as yourself – there has never been a time when loving your neighbor as yourself was wrong. It has also always been wrong to steal – there has never been a time in history when stealing and cheating and taking advantage of people was ‘okay’ with God.

None of these universal moral laws suddenly ‘started’ in the New Testament. No – they are universal moral laws that are rooted in God’s character and the created order of things, which means they have always been, since the very beginning.

And since the universal moral laws are from the beginning we can find them all recorded in the Old Testament, which records for us the beginnings of everything. For example, in Genesis 4 God punished Cain for murdering his brother Abel; therefore we see that murder was wrong from the very beginning. And then, in the Ten Commandments, we have explicitly recorded the eternal moral commands concerning adultery, stealing, lying and covetousness (Ex 20:12-17). These are universal moral laws that have been in effect since the beginning of time, and hence we find them enshrined from the very beginning, in the Old Testament.

This is very important: the New Testament did not add any new universal moral laws. How could it? Such laws could hardly be universal if for thousands of years they did not apply to anyone! If anything, the only thing the New Testament did was *cancel* a bunch of laws, the temporary ones that are no longer needed thanks to Jesus’ work on the cross.

So what about head coverings for women? Where is that command in the Old Testament?

Nowhere.¹

Which means that God didn’t expect all women everywhere to wear head coverings in Old Testament times . . . which means that Paul’s command to the women of Corinth to wear head coverings is not an eternal law that has been in effect since Adam and Eve, but rather a situation-specific command that applied to a particular people (the Corinthians) at a particular point in time (first century AD).

Does this not make sense? Imagine an isolated tribe living in the jungles of the Amazon: now imagine that according to this tribe’s customs it is considered highly disrespectful and offensive for a woman to wear any kind of covering on her head. Only a very rebellious and angry woman would ever do such a thing. Now imagine that a missionary comes to this tribe; would we expect this missionary to force these women to wear head coverings, thus offending the rest of the tribe, and promoting rebellion against the leadership within the ranks? Of course not! And we thereby show our implicit realization that Paul’s command to the Corinthian women to cover their heads must be tied to the culture of that day.

What was happening at Corinth that would cause Paul to command the women to wear head coverings?

One of the big problems in the Corinthian church (and many scholars agree on this point)² was that many of the women had what Gordon Fee calls an ‘over-realized eschatology.’ Some cultural background will first be needed in order to explain this . . .

¹ There are a number of examples in the Old Testament where women wore head coverings, but no explicit commands that they must do so. These are two very different things. I could cite a number of examples of things people did in the Old Testament that aren’t universal commands which we all must follow today. For example, the men in the Old Testament all wore robes, not pants. Does this mean that all men today are required to wear robes instead of pants? Ridiculous. The farmers in Israel all plowed their fields using oxen or horses – not tractors. Does this mean that farmers today are required – as a matter of principle – to plow their fields with animals instead of tractors? Ridiculous. There is a huge difference between things people did in the Old Testament just because that’s how society functioned at the time, and things people did because God commanded that they must.

Christianity had an enormously liberating effect on women. In Judaism (from which Christianity was born) women were not allowed to worship with men; they were not allowed past the outer courts of the Temple in Jerusalem, and in the synagogues they were kept separate from the men and not allowed to participate in most of the proceedings. In Roman society and religion too, women were in a lot of respects held to be inferior to men and did not enjoy many of the privileges and respect that men did.

Then Jesus came along: He talked to women, had women in His regular entourage, treated women with a respect and dignity they were not always accustomed to, and just generally raised the status of women by His interactions with them. As a result of His example, His disciples and the leaders of the early church immediately accepted women as full participants in church life after Jesus' ascension back to heaven. The apostle Paul could even make what, for his day, would have been an astonishing statement about the status of women, saying, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:28 ESV).

We see examples of this female liberation throughout the New Testament: women and men praying together, women prophesying, women serving, and women being honored in the Church. Many modern readers fail to realize just how revolutionary this shift was for women living in the first century AD.

But of course, as with everything good that God does, there is always an abuse waiting somewhere in the wings. Some women, in some of the churches, took their new found freedom too far and began spreading heresies, as well as behaving in inappropriate ways that brought shame on the Church.

This was certainly a problem in the Corinthian church. As respected scholars like Gordon Fee and John Piper have documented, one of the problems in the Corinthian church was that some of the women had come to have what I mentioned above, an 'over-realized eschatology.' In other words, they had come to believe that since the age of the Holy Spirit had begun, the kingdom of heaven had been *fully* realized in them already – no need to wait for the future day when Jesus will return and our bodies will be resurrected. They believed that they had become like angels already, and had taken Paul's teaching that men and women are equal in Christ to the extreme that there are no differences between men and women. [Incidentally, this also helps to explain why there was teaching at Corinth that marriage was unspiritual, and sex – even within marriage – was also unspiritual (see 1 Corinthians 7).]

The Christian message most certainly affirms that men and women are equal. But equal does not mean the same! (When is the last time you heard of a man getting pregnant?) Equality in Christ does not mean that men should act or dress like women, nor that women should act or dress like men. The consistent teaching of Scripture, confirmed by our experience, is that men and women are equal but different.

In their uninhibited zeal and newfound freedom, however, these women had begun crossing the line into impropriety and were doing away with some of the customs of *their day* that distinguished men from women – like taking off their head coverings in church. In their boldness these women were actually puffing themselves up and causing themselves to stand out in inappropriate ways; they were the feminist activists of their day, using their clothing, behavior and lack of a head covering to make bold social statements whenever they went to church. The spirit behind their behavior was not right, and it was disrupting the worship of the church and putting Christianity itself in a bad light in the surrounding society.

Thus, in 1 Corinthians 11:2-17, Paul hammers home the point that, though equal in the Lord, men and women really are different, and should act and dress accordingly when at church.

² See Gordon Fee's *The first epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1987), pp. 10-13, 269-270, 516. Fee names a number of other scholars who have also made this point. See also John Piper's *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (a book whose conclusions in some cases we do not agree with), p. 129.

Objection: But Paul grounds his case that women should wear head coverings at church in the created order of things. How can something based in the created order of things not be binding on us today?

It is true that Paul grounds his argument that women should wear head coverings in the created order of things (see verses 7 – 10 and 14). The key question here, however, is whether creation dictates that women wear head coverings or whether creation dictates that we use culturally appropriate expressions of masculinity and femininity.

I would say the latter. When God made Adam and Eve did He tell Eve to put on a head covering immediately? No! The Bible says that Adam and Eve were both ‘naked’ (Gen 2:25). The first time we see Adam and Eve putting any type of clothing on was after they had sinned (Gen 3:7), and even then we don’t see God telling Eve to wear a head covering.

Thus we see that from the beginning God did not expect women to wear head coverings specifically. The only thing God has required of men and women in this regard, since the beginning, is that women behave and dress like women, and men behave and dress like men (Deut 22:5) – however that may play out in the various cultures and contexts throughout time.

The cultural milieu of the Corinthian church in Paul’s day.

In any time period, the conventions which govern fashion are a thing in constant flux, forever shifting and changing. As such, not much is known about the specific practices involving head coverings in Corinth at the exact time when Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. What is known is that in the ancient world the wearing of head coverings was a common thing that came into vogue at various times and in various places throughout the Graeco-Roman Empire. Some groups expected the men to wear head coverings; others expected women to wear them. Still others felt that such were optional for both men and women. It is not important to determine which group did what. The important thing to note is that the early church adopted a convention (1 Cor 11:16) *already in use in society* and gave it a distinctively Christian hue.

Thus, when churches asked Christian women to wear head coverings at meetings, it would not have been viewed as an unusual request by any in the surrounding society. In the cosmopolitan cities of Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece no woman would have felt uncomfortable or out of place while wearing a head covering. Head coverings were everywhere.

Today, however, the situation is quite different, at least in the West. Making a woman wear a head covering in many church contexts today wouldn’t cause her to blend in, but rather to stand out – the exact *opposite* of Paul’s intent. So here we have an example where following the letter of a command could actually constitute disobedience to the spirit behind the command. Paul wanted the women of Corinth to be known for their godliness and respect, not for their belligerence and bravado. In today’s Western culture, however, head coverings do not communicate godliness and respect, as Paul intended them to do.

Conclusion: In this paper I have shown that the head covering command found in 1 Corinthians 11:2-17 is not an eternal moral law which needs to be obeyed by all women, in all places, for all time, but rather a culturally specific application of the deeper moral law that women should behave and dress like women, and men should behave and dress like men – however that works itself out in a given culture and context. Paul’s concern in passages like these is that the worship in the church be orderly and respectful, and that the testimony of the church not be harmed in the surrounding society. Thus, women in our churches today need not concern themselves about wearing head coverings.