

Faith Community Church Practice of “Head-covering”

Our Practice.

Someone observed and asked, *“I notice at your evening prayer meetings that only men pray. Are women not permitted to pray; and if not, why not?”*

That is an accurate observation and a very good question.

We invite both men and women to pray at our prayer meetings. As we do, we are very glad when the men take initiative to lead in order to establish a good “prayer meeting momentum.” This seems to be in accord with Paul, when he exhorts, *“Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension”* (1 Timothy 2:8).

Women are encouraged to pray in our mixed (male/female) gathered meetings for worship and instruction, but if a woman desires to pray audibly in the meeting she should do so with her head “covered.”

The Passage: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul takes up to deal with matters relating to “edifying worship” in the gathered church to the glory of God, which occupies the next four chapters of this letter. In verses 3-16 Paul takes up to clarify or correct and confirm a general practice of the churches respecting activity in worship, i.e., the wearing of “head-coverings” while praying.

Paul does not issue any commands in vv. 4-6, but simply describes a specific situation which produces shame or dishonor. It involves how a man and woman are attired while they are involved in a specific activity in worship, i.e., **“praying or prophesying.”**

“Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head” (v. 4). If a man, any man, prays or prophesies with his literal head covered he dishonors—humiliates--his spiritual head, in this case, Christ. **“[B]ut every woman [wife, ESV] who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head . . .”** (v. 5). In the case of a woman (wife) praying or prophesying, if she does so with her head uncovered, she disgraces her head, the one who has authority over her, which is her man, i.e., her husband. Paul says that the woman who prays with her head uncovered **“is one and the same with her who is shaved”** (v. 5)!

Paul later repeats what he said in verses 4-5 in verses 7 and 10, giving a reason in both instances.

The Practice for the Man. **“For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man** (v. 7).

In verses 8-9 Paul supports what he says by referencing God’s creative order and design for the woman with respect to the man. **“For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake.”**

The Practice for the Woman. **“Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head . . .”** (v. 10). “[T]he focus on male headship over women in verse 3 shows that Paul wants women to wear a head covering in order to show that they are submissive to male headship” (Schreiner). The creative distinction in male/female roles and responsibilities is to be visibly reflected in the worship of God’s people. The wearing of the “covering” is a visible acknowledgement of her creational relationship with her man as she exercises her public activities in worship.

Interestingly, Paul adds another reason in verse 10, i.e., **“because of angels.”** In some way the “celestial household” is interested in, or even instructed by, the worship of the saints below. In Jewish tradition and in the early church angels were said to be present a sacred gatherings and sacred times, to watch over and to join with the saints in their spiritual exercises. Having a holy concern for the dignity and decorum of the worship of God, they may observe or attend as “interested auditors” of the community’s worship who, like God, would be offended by any shameful displays during worship,” being sensitive to what commends the created distinctions and order God has appointed.

In verses 11-12 Paul clarifies that the distinctions between men and women do not erase their interdependence or their individual accountability to God.

The Principles [Supporting the Practice].

We believe the practice that is called for is one in which created distinctions and order are to be visibly reflected in gathered worship. *“The principle that underlies the practice cannot be dismissed as cultural . . . The principle still stands that women should pray and prophesy in a manner that makes it clear that they submit to male leadership”* (Schreiner, 129). Of course, the covering is simply “symbolic.” But that does not mean it is not important (for example: the symbolic “elements” of the bread and wine of the Lord’s table observance).

The major argument made against this practice is that Paul is merely addressing a “cultural practice.” Yet Paul’s supporting arguments make no reference to “culture” at all, but to the redemptive order (v. 3), the creative design (vv. 7-9), the celestial (angelic) interest (v. 10), and “nature itself” (vv. 14-15). These arguments, in our view, transcend the culture. Additionally, Paul sets his instructions for this practice in the context of the **“traditions”** that he **“delivered”** to them (v.2), and he declares at the end of his instructions that **“we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God”** (v. 16). This was the prevailing and recommended practice in *“the churches of God”*.

Paul rhetorically asks in verse 13, **“Judge for yourselves.”** *“I have presented the matter clearly to you, now [act].”* **“Is it proper [“appropriate,” “fitting”] for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?”** **“Is it proper . . . ?”** We may ask, *“Proper’ to whom?”* *“Fitting’ for whom?”* Whose assessment matters in this? This word (*ᾠρεῖται*—“to be fitting”) appears seven times in the NT and in every other instance it has reference to what is *divinely* appropriate, not what is *socially* approved. The context is important. Here it is the worship of God to whom all things owe their existence.

The Particulars.

When and where should a woman cover her head? She should do so whenever she “prays or prophesies” in a “gathered assembling” of the saints for the purpose of worship and instruction. A “gathered assembling” includes our more formal Lord’s Day meetings and the less formal weekly meetings or studies of the mixed (male/female) church body, whether such meetings take place in the church building or private houses.

In meetings where *only* women are gathered together, e.g., ladies’ studies, conferences, or prayer meetings, no covering is required.

What kind of “covering”? Paul does not use a word for a specific article of clothing. He uses a general verb that means “to cover” (*καταλύπτω*). It is *not* a veil, something that hides the face. It is simply something that covers the head, which could be a scarf or shawl.

Our Perspective.

We understand that some will not be convinced about this practice. We realize that other faithful churches, in accordance with their understanding of the Scriptures, do not require head-covering when women pray in

public assembly. Our desire is not to hinder or discourage public prayer by the women of our church. We want our women to pray. Yet from our present understanding of the Scriptures it appears that this early practice of the churches remains the proper practice for churches as one that gives witness to a conscious recognition of the created roles and responsibilities of men and women in the public gatherings of God's redeemed people.