

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **Actions speak louder than words: Head Covering**

I should like to ask you to take an early opportunity to read 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. What I have to say will largely draw from statements in those verses.

The main principle we are to consider today can be briefly stated: When a man prays, he should have his head uncovered; conversely, when a woman prays, her head should be covered.

Many people feel, and even teach, that Christian behaviour can be, and indeed should be, adapted and governed by prevailing social practices, as the individual chooses. To arrive at that conclusion, the authority of Scripture, particularly its teaching on God's order, must be set aside. Let us see, then, what Scripture says, and why we should comply with it. In doing so, I wish to consider three main points:

1. The contrast between Judaism and Christianity.
2. God's order for man as a race, and for Christians.
3. The principle and practice of head covering.

### **1. The Contrast between Judaism and Christianity**

There is, indeed, a tremendous contrast between Judaism, a sensual religion, and Christianity, in which sensual matters are rare. Because of that, such rare items must be significant, otherwise they would not have been introduced.

In the instructions to the people of Israel, sensual matters predominated. If you read Hebrews 12:18-21, it is made plain there that the use of the five natural senses was essential in Jewish ceremonies. The writer speaks about a mountain that could be touched. The people of Israel were forbidden to touch it, but, physically, it was touchable. Their sight took account of the darkness, the cloud and the fire. The tempest and the trumpet were discernible by hearing. The sacrifices, the flesh, the herbs, the bread, could all be tasted by those who were qualified to do so. Again, the same items could all be detected by smell. The five natural senses of touch, sight, hearing, taste and smell were all needed to gain a good understanding of the lessons God taught them. Judaism was earthly, temporal and sensual.

Christianity, in great contrast, is heavenly, eternal and spiritual. To emphasise these distinctions, few of the major Christian concepts appeal to or are discernible by the five natural senses. Baptism involves the use of actual water. The tasting and consumption of blood as a separate physical entity is strictly forbidden. The Lord's Supper uses actual bread and wine. Wherever public prayer is offered on earth, it can be heard. The Rapture will be indirectly detected by the sense of sight. It will be visible to unbelievers left behind that the Christians are no longer to be seen on earth. The Appearing in power and great glory of the Son of God will be seen by every eye in the universe. All of these matters are extremely important, and, exceptionally in Christianity, use one or more of the five natural senses.

Consistent with this, in Christianity there are only two items of dress code laid down; head covering (1 Corinthians 11:3-16), and also the need for modesty in clothing (1 Timothy 2:9-10). The point is, how does the concept of head covering, today's subject, rank compared with other Christian matters? Let us think seriously about it, with the word of God as our sole reliable guide?

### **2. God's order for man as a race, and for Christians**

When a man prays, he should have his head uncovered. Likewise, when a woman prays, she should have her head covered. Men in general and women in general are spoken of in the verses in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. The instructions apply to those who are unmarried as well as to those who are in the married state. This is not just a matter of custom or habit. God has established a certain order in creation which we should recognise and observe. Let us think it through.

1 Corinthians 11:3 makes a plain statement. God is Christ's head. Christ is man's head. Man is woman's head. The Creator has most evidently so constituted man and woman by nature to fill distinct places in society. These roles are entirely in harmony with their allotted place in creation. We learn from Genesis 2:7 that man was first created. Then, from Adam's rib God made a woman and brought her unto the man to be a help meet for him (Genesis 2:18, 22-23).

1 Corinthians 11:3-16 give us an exquisitely guarded and balanced presentation of the truth of the relationship of man and woman. This is the deduction which the Spirit of God builds on this in 1 Corinthians 11:10: "For this cause [therefore, in view of her place in creation] ought the woman to have a token of the authority of man over her on her head". She is to recognise man's headship. She is to have on her head the sign of his authority over her, that is, a covering on her head when she prays.

Since man is the image and glory of God and Christ is his head, it would be dishonourable and shameful to Christ his head, if he were to have his own head covered when praying or prophesying. But, the woman was created for man, and of man, therefore her head must be covered when she prays, for man's glory as such must not be seen. Christ's glory, and not man's, is to be displayed.

We may easily enough, if we choose, delete, at a stroke, the thought of subjection from the marriage ceremony, but we cannot delete it from the infallible Word of God. We would not be inclined to yield to the temptation to reject the concept of subjection for the woman, if we were to keep in mind the beauty and charm in which it is presented in the scriptures. Properly understood and applied, there is no thought of inferiority of either person, character or service.

### **3. The principle and practice of head covering**

I need now to deal with two issues relevant to head covering. First of all, 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 makes quite clear that head coverings, or the lack of them, are a sign. Secondly, the question arises, by whom are the signs intended to be observed? As the word itself suggests, a sign signifies, or signals, a person, or a quality of that person, by the way that they act. Clearly, God Himself knows our hearts, and the actions prompted by our hearts. God knows our willingness to be obedient to Him by, among other things, our willingness or unwillingness to obey his clearly revealed will, recorded in Holy Scripture. Moving down a step, and whether or not we realise it, we are under constant observation by the angels (see 1 Corinthians 11:10). Our actions are observed by them and give them a clear sign of our obedience or disobedience to the God Who has blessed us so abundantly.

Now, every marriage on earth is intended to be a reminder and representation of the relationship between Christ and the church. This is particularly true of Christian marriages. The love of every husband for his wife is intended to be a picture of the love of Christ for the church. Every wife is intended to act in submission towards her husband as the church submits to Christ. The angels, observing these representations, give glory to God. Head covering is part of this picture. In a secondary way, but very importantly, men generally, who cannot see God and do not read the scriptures, read our lives. They then judge the revelation that God has given of Himself by the way we so-called committed Christians act before them. Overall, and supremely, angels and men do learn, and are intended to learn about the relationship between the Christian church and Christ, Who is its Head by what they see in those of us who profess to be committed Christians.

A man indicates his obedience to God's commands by having his head uncovered when he prays, whether in private or in public. Conversely, he would signify his disobedience to God's word by having his head covered when he prays, whether in private or in public. Likewise, a woman indicates her obedience to God's commands by having her head covered when she prays, whether in private or in public. Conversely, she would signify her disobedience to God's word by having her head uncovered when she prays, whether in private or in public. Preference or prejudice does not come into it. Neither does understanding, although that clearly helps. When prayer is being offered, whether in private or in public, it is a sign of obedience to God for a man to have his head uncovered and for a woman to have her head covered. Conversely, it is a sign of disobedience to God for a man to have his head covered or for a woman to have her head uncovered while praying, whether in private or in public.

To confirm these points to your own satisfaction, please read carefully the following scriptures: 1 Corinthians 4:9; Ephesians 3:10-11; Ephesians 5:22-33; 1 Timothy 2:11-14; 1 Peter 1:12 and 1 Peter 3:7.

In the Fall, described in Genesis 3:1-19, the serpent tempted Eve to take of the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:1-5); she was the one who took it, and ate thereof, and also gave unto her husband, who likewise ate of it, (Genesis 3:6). Because of this, God said to Eve, "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children, and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall reign over thee" (Genesis 3:16). We aren't left to make our own deductions from these facts. The Spirit of God refers to this deception of Eve by Satan in 1 Timothy 2:11-14. He gives it as a reason why women in this present church period are not to usurp authority over the man.

When a woman's head was uncovered or shaven in the Old Testament, it was a mark of shame (see Numbers 5:18) . So, in 1 Corinthians 11:5 we read that the Apostle says that if a woman prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, it is just the same as if her head was shaven. Since having her hair cut off or shaven is a universal mark of shame, she should have her head covered. She must have no mark or indication of shame on her in the presence of the Lord.

In fairness, we must recognise that some would say that 1 Corinthians 11:15 means that a woman's hair is the intended covering for her head, and that no further covering is needed when she prays. The literal words used in the text make the matter plain and clear. 1 Corinthians 11:15 teaches that long hair is given to a woman by nature. It is not the covering for her head the Apostle is insisting on in these verses. Woman's head, and her long hair, that is, hair which has been allowed to grow to its natural length, and which is her personal glory, are both to be covered when praying.

### **Let us recapitulate**

God gives us instructions in the Bible. If an instruction from God is clear, I must obey it, even if I do not understand it. Even if I do not want to do it. Even so, God has made every provision for us to understand it, if we really work at it. Thankfully, Scripture expounds the truth so clearly that we can be given a clear understanding of the principles involved. However, even if we do not fully understand it, the word of God is certainly clear enough as to how we are to conduct ourselves. That is sufficient for the obedient Christian who desires to please his or her Lord and Master.

Some have taught that head covering is a minor matter, connected only with low moral conditions at Corinth in the first century. This is despite the fact that the Apostle dealt with it immediately prior to and leading into his teaching on the Lord's Supper and the exercise of gift in the church. Furthermore, Paul's plain statement, "for this reason", in 1 Corinthians 11:10 alludes not to contemporary society, but to creation and headship, which is a continuing important factor in God's dealing with mankind.

The statement in 1 Corinthians 11:16 "...we have no such custom..." is sometimes misconstrued to mean that this concept is relatively unimportant, and that we only need to comply with those portions we ourselves consider to be of first-ranking importance. One of the many objections to that sort of approach is that if it was left to us we would be tempted to down-grade the importance of bits we don't want to comply with, and overemphasise the bits we like and want to do. At this late stage in the history of the world, and of the Christian church, we cannot afford to dispense with the clear teaching of Scripture on the grounds that it is "politically incorrect" for the 21st century. Man's customs and fashions may change, and, indeed, keep on changing. "The word of the Lord abideth for ever" (1 Peter 1:25)

We get further help in 1 Timothy 2:8-11. This states that it is the men who are to lead and speak in any mixed gathering of Christian men and women for prayer or teaching. We recognise their different roles in life, whilst maintaining the truth that men and women are personally equal in the Lord, as 1 Corinthians 11:11 highlights. He is not saying that rather than cause controversy, let's forget about it. He is not saying that it's not all that important. He is not saying that it doesn't really matter. Oh! No! Just the opposite!

What he is saying is this. Head covering is not a side issue. It is a "commandment of the Lord" to every Christian man and woman (1 Corinthians 14:37). Obedience to that commandment is not only a duty, but a great privilege. John 14:15 records the Lord's own words, "If ye love me, keep My commandments". The controversy is over. It is no longer a subject for debate. It is a settled matter. God has spoken. It is our place to obey it, do it, put into practice what God has made plain in the Scripture of truth.

May God give us the grace and the courage to put into practice what, deep down, we know to be right, because it is God Who says it.

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