



# The King's Congregation

## The Elders' Position on Head Coverings

Presented orally and in writing at the

Heads of Household Meeting,

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The issue of head coverings for women in worship is not new to us, for Pastor Burrow preached through the book of 1 Corinthians back in 2010-11, and he spent a great deal of time grappling with the correct understanding of the head covering passage in 1 Cor 11. But that was over a decade ago, and we have many new members who are not familiar with those sermons. Moreover, head coverings are becoming a hot topic, for various pastors and podcasters with whom we would generally agree are now actively advocating head coverings for women in worship, arguing that they are mandated by Scripture, unanimously sanctioned by church history, and an important measure of feminine godliness.

Our congregation is blessed with men and women who are zealous to please the Lord in all things and to stand against the unbiblical forces shaping modern American culture and increasingly the American church. But we must remember that standing for Christ means standing precisely where the Bible stands. We must therefore resist the temptation to reflexively do the opposite of whatever the godless culture and the compromised church are doing at the moment.<sup>1</sup> If we fall into that trap, we can easily end up being better than the culture, but still unbiblical, which means we are contributing to the confusion, and we cannot expect God's blessing.

On all issues, we want our thinking and practice to be shaped by Scripture. While church history is always relevant, Scripture alone is the final authority. This was one of Jesus' main points of contention with the scribes and Pharisees, who pointed to centuries of history and tradition to support their teachings. Jesus did not disagree that they had lots of history and tradition on their side; he simply pointed out that their history and tradition were contrary to Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

The early Protestant reformers also had to assert the supremacy of Scripture over the long history and tradition of the Church of Rome. Even within Reformed Protestant circles, representatives of our denomination, the CREC,<sup>3</sup> have argued the authority of Scripture over the history and tradition of many Reformed denominations that baptize the infants of believers, but refuse them a place at the Lord's Table. On that point, 1 Cor. 11 is the biblical battle ground, just as it is with head coverings.

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<sup>1</sup> Deut 12.32 "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."

<sup>2</sup> Mk 7.9 "[Y]ou reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition."

<sup>3</sup>The Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches.

When we turn to church history, we do not find a unanimous witness in favor of head coverings, as is suggested by many of its modern proponents. What we find is that the church has been all over the map, and for all sorts of reasons:<sup>4</sup>

- In Old Testament Israel, the only head covering command pertained to the priests, who were to wear turbans “for glory and beauty” as part of their uniforms (Exo 28.40).
- In the early church, several church fathers, joined by John Wesley in the 1700s, supported not just head coverings, but full face veils. This is curious, for the Greek word for face veil (*kalumma*) appears nowhere in 1 Cor 11, but only in 2 Cor 3.13, where it refers to a face veil worn by Moses.<sup>5</sup>
- In the Reformation period, many theologians believed Paul’s head covering command was based on societal customs of his own day, and thus imposed no moral obligation on Christian women of other places and times.<sup>6</sup> This explains why documents such as the Westminster Confession of Faith and its related Directory for Public Worship contain no requirement for head coverings.<sup>7</sup>
- Finally, head covering arguments from historical custom in general end up proving too much, for it has been very common for men and women, Christians and unbelievers, to wear all sorts of head coverings as part of their regular dress. This undermines the notion that these customs were driven by 1 Cor 11 or Christian concepts of modesty.<sup>8</sup>

Turning to 1 Corinthians, it must be acknowledged that Paul’s letter has been the battleground for many controversies, largely because the book is often difficult to understand. The Corinthians had lots of problems that Paul is addressing in a single letter. Moreover, Paul had received previous correspondence from the Corinthians in which they had asked him various questions and pushed back against Paul regarding some of his instructions. Unfortunately, we no longer have access to that previous correspondence, so we must often reason backwards from Paul’s responses to discern what the Corinthians were asking or arguing.<sup>9</sup>

Add to that the fact that 1 Corinthians was one of Paul’s earliest epistles and was written during a unique period of church history during which unique spiritual phenomena were occurring regularly within the church and during worship. One of those unique phenomena was women speaking Spirit-inspired prophecy in the worship service, which provides the context of the head covering passage in 1 Cor 11.

Once we get into the head covering passage itself, we encounter a further difficulty: The passage seems to conflict with other epistles of Paul, other chapters of 1 Corinthians, and even itself. Women are praying and prophesying during worship in 1 Cor 11, but Paul tells them to be silent during worship in 1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2. Moreover, in 1 Tim 2, Paul tells women how to dress in worship, and even how to wear their hair,

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<sup>4</sup>See CREC Pastor Adam McIntosh’s article, “Uncovering the Headcovering Movement, pt. 3,” Aug 23, 2023, in *Kuyperian Commentary*, online at [https://kuyperian.com/headcovering-pt-3/#link\\_ajs-fn-id\\_4-21943](https://kuyperian.com/headcovering-pt-3/#link_ajs-fn-id_4-21943).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>E.g., 1 Cor 7.1 Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.

yet says nothing about head coverings. Within 1 Cor 11, Paul sometimes refers to a woman's hair as her covering, but other times refers to an additional covering *over* her hair. What are we to do with all of this?

First and foremost, we must realize that when closely associated Scriptures seem to fight, it is a sure sign that we are missing an interpretive key, and once we find it, the Scriptures will line up and complement one another. But discerning an interpretive key is often a long, laborious process – and during that process, we must resist the temptation to take unbiblical shortcuts, including: (1) picking verses we like and waving off the rest; and (2) commandeering verses to push an agenda we like or to push back against an agenda we don't like. Unfortunately, the “head covering” / “women praying and prophesying” passage of 1 Cor 11 has been shortcut central for centuries.

The interpretive key that enables us to see how all the Scriptural pieces fit together is the New Testament's presentation of Christ's first advent as a new exodus,<sup>10</sup> and the following forty-year period from 30-70AD as a new wilderness period.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, just prior to 1 Cor 11, Paul tells the Corinthians in so many words, that they are in a new wilderness period:

#### 1 Cor 10

<sup>1</sup> [B]rethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup> all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup> all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup> But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

<sup>6</sup> Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. <sup>7</sup> And do not become idolaters as were some of them .... <sup>8</sup> Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did ...; <sup>9</sup> nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted ...; <sup>10</sup> nor complain, as some of them also complained ....

<sup>11</sup> Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages\* have come.

\* The “ends of ages” does not refer to the end of history upon the second coming of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 15.22-24), but to the end of the Old Testament era upon the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD.

Consider the parallels between the old and new exodus, and between the old and new wilderness periods:

- In the old exodus, God through Moses delivered his people from Pharaoh. In the new exodus, God through Christ delivered his people from Satan, the ultimate Pharaoh, who ruled by the power of sin and death.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Lk 9.30-31 And behold, two men talked with [Jesus], who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease [(lit., *exodus*)] which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

<sup>11</sup> Rev 12.5-6 She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness

<sup>12</sup> Heb 2.14-15 Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

In the lead-up to the old exodus, Pharaoh killed the baby boys of Israel.<sup>13</sup> In the lead-up to the new exodus, Herod, the king of the Jews, killed the baby boys of Bethlehem, with Satan pulling his strings.<sup>14</sup> In the old exodus, Egypt was a geographical country holding God's people captive. In the new exodus, Egypt was the spiritually apostate city of Jerusalem which was holding God's people captive.<sup>15</sup>

- After the old exodus, God's people went into the wilderness of Sinai.<sup>16</sup> After the new exodus, God's people went into the wilderness of the Roman empire.<sup>17</sup>
- Both the old and new wilderness periods were times of hardship and testing to teach God's people to trust and obey God wholly.<sup>18</sup>
- Both the old and new wilderness periods saw the writing and completion of foundational sections of Scripture: With the old wilderness period, it was the Pentateuch; With the new wilderness period, it was the New Testament.<sup>19</sup> While those sections of Scripture were being written, God sustained his people by speaking to them infallibly through Moses during the old wilderness period and through many, diverse vessels of divine speech during the new wilderness period.<sup>20</sup> This is where head coverings come into play – we will come back to this later.
- Both the old and new wilderness periods saw God sustain his people through a plethora of unique miracles that ceased at the end of those forty-year periods. During the old wilderness period, God sustained his people through miraculous provision of manna, water from the rock, clothes that did not wear out, and feet that did not swell.<sup>21</sup> During the new wilderness period, God sustained his people through miraculous gifts of healing, miracles, tongues, and interpretation.

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<sup>13</sup> Exo 1.15-16 Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives ... and he said, “When you do the duties of a midwife for the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstools, if it is a son, then you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live.”

<sup>14</sup> Mt 2.16 Herod ... put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under; Rev 12.4, 9 [T]he dragon stood before the woman ... to devour her Child as soon as it was born ... [T]he great dragon ... [is] that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan

<sup>15</sup> Rev 11.8 [T]he great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.

<sup>16</sup> Exo 19.1 [A]fter the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, ... they came to the Wilderness of Sinai.

<sup>17</sup> Rev 12.5-6, 17 She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness ... And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who ... have the testimony of Jesus Christ; Acts 8.1 [A] great persecution arose against the church ... at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered; 11.19 Now those who were scattered ... traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch

<sup>18</sup> Deut 8.2 [Y]ou shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not; 1 Cor 10.6-11 (quoted earlier).

<sup>19</sup> Gen 5.1 [T]he book of the genealogy [lit., generations] of Adam; Mat 1.1 The book of the genealogy [lit., generations] of Jesus Christ; Deut 12.32 Whatever I command you, ... you shall not add to it nor take away from it; Rev 22.18-19 If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues ... in this book; and if anyone takes away from ... the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life; 2Pet 3.15-16 [O]ur beloved brother Paul ... has written to you, as also in all his epistles, ... in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.

<sup>20</sup> Exo 33.11 [T]he LORD spoke to Moses face to face; Acts 2.17 “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy”; 11.27-28 [P]rophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar; 1 Cor 12.8-11 [T]o one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, ... to another prophecy.

<sup>21</sup> Deut 8.2-4 [T]he Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness ... He ... fed you with manna ... Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years.

<sup>22</sup>Cessation of the wilderness miracles did not mean that God ceased to ever work a miracle thereafter (such as healing someone of cancer). However, the *gifts* to work those miracles, as well as the routine prevalence of those miracles, did cease.

- Both the old and new wilderness periods ended with God demonstrating his sovereign power through the destruction of a major, unbelieving city that was standing in the way of God's people fulfilling their conquest commission. With the old wilderness period, it was the walled city of Jericho that stood between Israel and her conquest of the land.<sup>23</sup> With the new wilderness period, it was apostate Jerusalem, which had been opposing God's gospel and persecuting God's people for forty years, that stood between the Church and her conquest of all the nations pursuant to the Great Commission.<sup>24</sup>

With this biblical framework in mind:

- We can understand why in 1 Cor 11, Paul is addressing the phenomena of women speaking officially during the worship service, for God during the new wilderness period was speaking supernaturally through men and women, young and old. Peter, on the day of Pentecost – immediately after the apostles had miraculously spoken the word of God in the native tongues of all those present (Acts 2.7-11) – explained that the prophecy of Joel was being fulfilled:

Acts 2<sup>16</sup> “[T]his is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup>‘And it shall come to pass in the last days,\* says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams. <sup>18</sup>And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy.’”

\* The “last days” here are the last days of the Old Testament era, the end of which was marked by the destruction of apostate Jerusalem in 70AD, which also marked the end of the new wilderness period. This is why the Apostle John, writing very late in that period, says: “Little children, it is the *last hour* … we *know* it is the last hour” (1Jn 2.18 (emphasis added)).

- We can understand why in 1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2, Paul says women are not to engage in official speech during the worship service, and why Paul says nothing about head coverings.<sup>25</sup> In 1 Cor 14.34-35 and 1 Tim 2.11-12, Paul is addressing natural, official speech, whereas in 1 Cor 11.4-5, Paul is addressing supernatural, official speech where God is speaking through men and women, in which case women are to cover their heads. 1 Corinthians was one of Paul's earliest epistles, written when the unique miraculous phenomena of the new wilderness period were occurring full throttle. 1 Timothy, by way

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<sup>22</sup> Acts 2.17; 1 Cor 12.7-10.

<sup>23</sup> Josh 6.1-2, 20; Mat 24.1, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Mat 23.34 “I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city”; 28.18-20 “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”; Luke 13.33-34 “[I]t cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem”; Acts 8.1 [A] great persecution arose against the church ... at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Cor 14.34-35 Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church; 1Tim 2.11-12 Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.

of contrast, was Paul's next-to-last epistle, written late in the new wilderness period, when its unique miracles were waning, and Paul was giving instructions for the church going forward after the new wilderness period had ended. In 1 Tim 2, Paul discusses God's creational order, just as he does in 1 Cor 11. He also discusses the dress, and specifically the hair, of women during worship, yet says nothing about head coverings. This is because God was no longer speaking supernaturally through women during worship, so the women were to remain silent:

1 Tim 2 <sup>1</sup>I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, <sup>2</sup>for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence ... <sup>3</sup>I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; <sup>4</sup>in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, <sup>5</sup>but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works. <sup>6</sup>Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. <sup>7</sup>And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. <sup>8</sup>For Adam was formed first, then Eve. <sup>9</sup>And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. <sup>10</sup>Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control.

- Finally, we can understand that in normal circumstances, a woman's glorious hair is her covering (1 Cor 11.15).<sup>26</sup> But during the new wilderness period, when God was speaking supernaturally through women during worship, such a woman was to have an extra "symbol of authority on her head" in the form of a separate covering over her hair (1 Cor 11.5, 10). The reason goes back to God's creational design for man, woman, and marriage. Man and woman were both created in the image of God, but as different forms of glory: Man was created directly by God to be the glory of God, and woman was created by God from man to be the glory of man (1 Cor 11.7-9). Man was also created to be the head of woman (1 Cor 11.3). These creational differences show up especially in marriage and in the church. In marriage, every husband is the head of his own wife (but not of every woman in general), and every wife is the glory of her own husband (but not of every man in general).

The peculiar temptation of fallen men is to be their own glory, rather than receiving the glory God created for them – their wife. The peculiar temptation of fallen women is to be their own head and covering, rather than receiving the head and covering God created for them – their husband. In the church, which is the household of God, Christ is the head, and he is represented locally by the pastor and elders, both during worship and in the governance of the church.<sup>27</sup> To give visible expression to all of this during the new wilderness period, whenever God was speaking supernaturally through a man during worship, that man was to have his head uncovered (1 Cor 11.3-4, 7). But when God was

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<sup>26</sup> The Greek word translated "long hair" has the more basic meaning of fancy or beautified hair, of which "long" would be a common, but not essential, component. Paul's point is that even nature teaches that beautified, glorious hair is a God-designed glory to women, but a shame to men (1 Cor 11.14-15). Think of David's seditious son Absalom, who was known for glorious hair and self-glory, two things that should never characterize a man (2 Sam 14.25-26; 15.1-5).

<sup>27</sup> Eph 5.23 [T]he husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; 1 Tim 3.1, 15 A bishop [overseer] must be ... one who rules his own house well, ... for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God? ... I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God; Heb 13.17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account.

speaking supernaturally through a woman during worship, she was to have an additional “symbol of authority on her head” in the form of a separate covering over her hair, thus signifying that she was not using God’s supernatural speech as an excuse to throw off God’s creational design toward her husband (or her father, if she was not yet married) and toward the congregational husbands (the pastor and elders) who were representing Christ (1 Cor 11.3, 5-6, 8-10).

In conclusion, the head covering requirement of 1 Cor 11.5-6 and 10 applied only to the unique circumstances of the new wilderness period from 30- 70AD, and does not apply to Christian women today. However, God’s creational design for men and women in the family and in the church does apply (1 Cor 11.3, 7-9, 14-15; 14.34-35; 1 Tim 2.11-15), as do Paul’s instructions for women’s dress and adornment during worship (1 Tim 2.9-10). Otherwise, Christian women wearing items in their hair or on their head for beautification purposes are a matter of sanctified Christian discretion.