

THE COVERING OF A WOMAN'S HEAD (1 Cor. 11).

In 1 Cor. 11:5 the apostle Paul says that “Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, dishonours her head - it is the same as if her head were shaven.”

Some groups in Christendom have concluded that the head covering mentioned here refers to a veil which women wore in Biblical times, and on that basis women are expected to wear a hat or scarf; or some form of covering over their hair when they meet with the church.

However, a careful reading of Paul's statement in its context reveals that he is referring to hair not veils or hats. Verse 15 plainly says that “long hair” is a woman's “glory” and is “given her for a covering” (A. V. margin says “veil”). This clearly reveals that the covering Paul had in mind was a woman's hair and not a veil or hat.

The statement that long hair has been “given” to women for a covering raises the question: “Given by whom?” And the answer is clearly: “By God.” A careful reading of 1 Cor. 11 reveals that Paul's teaching is based on the divine order established by God at the beginning. As recorded in Genesis chapters 2 and 3, man was made first in the image and glory of God, but woman was made second from man and is the glory of man. Woman became subordinate to man, making man “the head of woman.” Because man is in the image of God he must not cover his head with long hair, and because the woman is the glory of man, she must not wear her hair short like a man. To do so makes her look like a man and this is dishonouring to him and God.

Seeing that Paul's basis for his teaching is on Gen. 2 and 3, it is reasonable to conclude that from the very outset, when God first made man and woman; He made man with short hair and woman with long hair. Such were the original models of the male and female.

For this reason, long hair is a woman's “glory.” “If a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given her for a covering” (1 Cor. 11:15). In what way is a woman's long hair a glory to her? The answer is that by wearing it in accordance with the divine will and according to divine appointment, she gives glory to God. By not wearing short hair to look like a man, her long hair shows that she accepts her subordinate position, and this gives due honour to man.

Therefore, if long hair is given by God to women for glory, why cover and hide it? Long hair is something women can be proud about and not feel ashamed about, and therefore not feel they should hide it. However, both Paul and Peter caution women against trying to be noticed

and attracting attention to themselves by indulging in fancy and elaborate hair styles (1 Tim. 2:9-10. 1 Pet. 3:1-6). The desire to be conspicuous and the focus of attention is symptomatic of pride and ego, and to use the long hair appointed by God for this purpose would be very displeasing to Him. (The same of course would apply to fancy hats!)

Now, if Christian women in New Testament times wore a veil over their head, completely covering their hair at church gatherings, so that no one could see it; why would Paul and Peter speak against fancy and elaborate hair styles that could not be seen, and how could length of hair be an issue? It should be clear from this that Christian women did not cover their hair when they met with the church.

Nowhere in 1 Cor. 11 does Paul refer to a woman's hair being covered. All references are to the head being covered. A veil or hat covers the hair, but it is the hair that covers the head. Throughout 1 Cor. 11 a clear distinction is made between "head" and "hair," and no reference is made to a covering of the hair.

When the shape and outline of the head can be seen, as is the case with a short haircut, the head is not covered. It requires long hair to cover the shape of the head. So when Paul talks about a woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered, he is referring to a woman with a short haircut like a man which reveals the shape and outline of the head, and he says that this is dishonouring to her head i.e.man (v6). Paul is not referring to a woman who is not wearing a veil or hat. How could failure to wear a veil or hat over the hair, be the same as if all the hair was shaved off, as Paul says in v5? What possible comparison or connection can be made between exposing long hair and having it all shaved off? However, in a society where it was undignified and socially unacceptable for a woman to have her hair cut short like a man, it is not difficult to see why Paul would say it is the same as if all the hair was shaved off. From the divine point of view, a woman who commits an undignified act like cutting her hair short like a man, may as well go the whole hog and suffer the ultimate indignity of shaving it all off and make herself bald!

If the covering of the head relates to the wearing of a veil, Paul would have to be referring to men wearing veils when he said: "Every man praying or prophesying having his head covered ..." (v4). But men never wore veils and therefore Paul's statement would be meaningless and irrelevant if that is what he had in mind. He is simply talking about a man's head being covered with long hair. Verse 14 explains it: "If a man have long hair, it is a shame to him."

If Paul had a veil in mind and not hair length, he would have said:

“Does not nature itself even teach you that if a man wear a veil it is a shame to him?” But he didn’t. He said: “... if a man have long hair ...” Or, he would have said: “If a woman have a veil, it is a glory to her, for her veil is given to her for a covering.” But, instead, he said: “If a woman have long hair ... it is given to her for a veil (covering).” All the way through, the subject is hair length and not hats or veils.

It is evident from the general contents of the epistle to the Corinthians that there was considerable carnality, disobedience and disorder in the church. Reading between the lines it seems that some of the women were very assertive and domineering, causing the apostle to remind them that man is the head of the woman (11:3) and that woman should be in subjection to man (14:35).

A VIOLATION OF THE CREATION MODEL

As in the case of the women’s liberation movement, which maintains women are equal to men, and who cut their hair short like men as a visible outward sign of equality; it seems that women in the church at Corinth were doing the same. This was a violation of the original creation model in which God created woman with long hair and man with short hair. Such hair lengths were divinely designed as one of the outward signs of femininity and masculinity, and it was a shameful thing - an insult to God to change that by a man wearing long hair and a woman wearing short hair. To do so was to blur the boundaries and distort the distinction set by God between the original male and female model. (For the same reason, God regarded it as an “abomination” for a man to wear women's clothing and for a woman to wear men’s clothing Deu. 22:5).

Maybe some of the Christian sisters in Corinth concluded from the fact that male and female become “one” in Christ, that this meant they become equal. But it clearly doesn’t, because Paul makes it clear in 1 Cor. 11 that “the head of the woman is man.” This has been the divine order from the very beginning when God stated in Gen. 3:16 that man would “rule” over the woman.

Being “one” in Christ doesn’t mean being equal. Jesus claimed to be “one” with his Father but never claimed equality. He said: “My Father is greater than I.” Male and female being “one” in Christ means united in the same faith and hope - having access to the same presence, power, gifts, fellowship of God and eternal life. But in terms of rank or status, the man is clearly head of the woman. The woman is subordinate to man as Sarah revealed and acknowledged calling her husband “lord” (1 Pet. 3:5-6).

THE PYRAMID OF AUTHORITY

The divinely revealed order for the arrangement of society takes the form of a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid is God Himself; second in order is the Lord Jesus Christ. “God is the head of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:3). Next in order (excluding angels) is the man and then comes the woman. “The head of the woman is man.” Children of course, are subject to the woman and man, and the animal kingdom is at the bottom.

The rebelliousness inherent in the human family as a result of the first pair rebelling against God’s authority over them, is ever with us. And, in our modern society a wave of revolt is gathering momentum as a result of the rise of democracy and all that it involves. We have the spectacle of children revolting and asserting themselves against their parents; women asserting themselves against men by demanding equality; and the assertion of men against God and His son Jesus Christ. The true pyramid of God’s order is a very strong structure and brings stability and security into the families of those who honour and observe it. But when it is rejected, and children are allowed to assert themselves against their parents; women are allowed to assert themselves against men; and men are allowed to assert themselves against the Lord; the pyramid crumbles and all true relationship as appointed by God crumbles with it. Rejection of the divine system of authority creates a vacuum. The field is left wide open for sin to assert itself and usurp positions and authority contrary to God’s order. Bible prophecy predicts that the end time would witness tremendous rebellion, children disobedient to parents and so on. The reason for this basically, is because of departure from clearly defined guidelines of divinely appointed authority.

Isa. 3:12 says: “As for my people, children are their oppressors (i.e. wilful, arrogant, violent, rebellious), and women rule over them (which was the opposite to divine appointment Gen. 3:16). O my people, your leaders (by allowing this) cause you to go wrong and destroy the path you should take.” The Lord was against the leaders of the church for allowing His order of authority to be violated, and judgement on the whole church was threatened as a result. The blessing of the Lord therefore, depends on strict adherence to divinely established order.

“POWER ON HER HEAD”

Coming back to 1 Cor. 11: as far as Paul was concerned, long hair on a woman was one of the physical, visible, outward signs of

recognition of her subordinate position. It constituted “power on her head because of the angels” (v10).

Angels “hearken to the voice of God’s Word and do His commandments” (Ps. 103:20). They are therefore aware of God’s requirements concerning man and woman. Being the Lord’s “watchmen,” they are continually watching the congregations and reporting to the Lord the attitudes and behaviour (1 Tim. 5:21. Heb. 1:13-14. Ecc. 5:6). Women with short hair immediately betrayed and disqualified themselves, for it was a sign of insubordination - of seeking equality with man which was strictly forbidden. Such women immediately lost power in prayer and in relationship with the Lord and men. Angels, like men, are also made in the image of God. They are in fact, the “elohim” with whom God made man in their image. For this reason also, they would be offended at women seeking to look like man.

Long hair gave a woman power and authority in the presence of God because it was a sign or token of her acceptance of God’s will and being subordinate to man. Obedience to God’s order gives us power of access to His presence in prayer!

Length of hair is the main external distinguishing mark between the two sexes. When a woman cuts her hair short like a man she tends to look like a man. When a man lets his hair grow long like a woman he tends to look like a woman. This is clearly displeasing to the Lord. He created the man male and the woman female, and obviously wants the two sexes to be clearly distinguished. Length of hair is one of the main distinguishing marks from the outward point of view. At various times in history it has been the fashion for men to grow their hair long and sometimes it is difficult to know at first glance if they are male or female. The converse is true of women who cut their hair short like a man. When the sex of a person is not clearly identifiable, the person ceases to appear male or female and will be referred to derogatorily as “it.”

Long hair on a man tends to make him look effeminate - womanish. It erodes a divinely intended distinction between male and female. This conclusion ought not to be dismissed lightly, for God does not treat it lightly. In the New Testament the sin of being effeminate is so serious as to be placed alongside fornication and homosexuality (1 Cor. 6:9). In Paul’s day, short hair on women was evidently characteristic of prostitutes and therefore it was vital from this point of view as well to avoid giving the impression that Christian women fitted into the same category.

AN APPEAL TO NATURAL CUSTOM

Paul is adamant: “Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man have long hair it is a shame to him” (1 Cor. 11:14). Long hair on males is degrading and shameful, and short hair on women is the same.

Paul’s argument from “nature” is an appeal to natural custom - common sense - reason. In Paul’s day it was the natural custom for long hair to cover a woman’s head and a man’s head was not covered because he wore short hair.

Now, some contend that in 1 Cor. 11 Paul teaches that the women in his day should wear a veil simply because it was the contemporary custom to do so. They say that Paul’s appeal is only made in order to conform to the social custom of the day. They agree that God never instituted or commanded the wearing of a veil, which means Paul’s reason for insisting that women wear one is not because the Word of God commands it, but because human tradition or custom required it.

A careful reading of Paul’s argument however, shows that his appeal to natural or social custom is not the main reason for what he advocates. It is merely an after-thought. He says: “Doth not even nature itself teach you.” Paul knew that his conclusions were based on Old Testament revelation (v7-9) as well as direct revelation. But, there was additional evidence as well - evidence which could be deduced from natural custom and common sense. Thus, his words: “Doth not even nature itself teach you.” Natural custom of hair length reinforced and supported the point that Paul had set out to establish from the beginning of this chapter, namely, that it was degrading for a man’s head to be covered with long hair and for a woman’s head not to be covered with long hair.

Today of course, natural custom is contrary to God’s way. It is less enlightened than in Paul’s day. We are in the era of the rebellion - the age of anti-custom, anti-common-sense, anti-establishment, anti-authority. Long hair on men and short hair on women is one of the outward signs of the times and many people are unwittingly influenced and controlled by the fashion and tendencies of the world. If Paul was alive today, he could not appeal to natural custom or common-sense in this matter. It is all now contrary to Scripture and offensive to God. As children of God we must ensure that we are not conforming to the fashion of the world when it conflicts with clearly defined guidelines established in the Word of God.

HOW LONG IS LONG?

Paul states that “long hair” is degrading on a man. But, the question is: “How long is long? How short is short?” How do we decide?

Well, Paul’s statement “Doth not even nature (natural custom) itself teach you?” is really the answer. If we can ascertain the natural custom of hair length in New Testament times we can get some idea on the matter. Roman emperors set the style for the empire before, during and after the time of Christ. Their hair was well cropped. A short hairstyle was characteristic of most of them. Neither General Pompey nor Emperor Trajan wore long hair, nor did Julius Caesar, nor Caesar Augustus. King Herod Agrippa 1 of Judea, a Jew by religion, also did not have long hair.

PROBLEM

Some Old Testament Israelites, like Samson and Absalom, wore long hair. This being so, why should long hair on men be forbidden today? Well, Samson was commanded by God to leave his hair uncut (Judges 13:5). His long hair, therefore, had nothing to do with social custom. Samson was a Nazarite from birth (Judg. 13:1-7). The Nazarite vow allowed Israelites not of the priestly tribe of Levi to assume in effect, a priestly status in Israel. (The High Priest wore a turban upon which was a gold plate inscribed: “Holiness to the Lord” (Ex. 39:30. Cp Ex. 28:36-37. Zec. 3:5). Instead of this, the Nazarite wore a crown of hair, symbolic of his consecrated separateness).

Separation and dedication are repeated descriptions of the Nazarite vow. God instructed that the visible token of His separation was that he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow” (Num. 6:5). When his hair was cut it indicated that his vow had either been violated or terminated (Num. 6:18). The important point to note is that the hair ultimately had to be cut off and put in the fire under the sacrifice of the peace offering. It is tragically ironical that the token of the Nazarite’s separation - his long hair - should be cited by some people to justify conformity to this evil world, when the very intention of the vow was to teach separation from the world and dedication to the things of God. Only those unaware of the importance of the special circumstances of the Nazarite vow would seek support in the example of Samson for the wearing of long hair today.

It is noteworthy that even the priests of the kingdom will be forbidden to wear long hair: “Neither shall they shave their heads, nor suffer their locks to grow long; they shall only poll (trim) the hair of their

heads” (Ezk. 44:20).

Long hair in Scripture is always associated with the female. “But if the women have long hair, it is a glory to her ...” (1 Cor. 11:15). “And they had hair as the hair of women ...” (Rev. 9:8). The intended contrasts here must relate to the appearance of the hair, i.e. its length.

The case of Absalom might be regarded as an exception to this: “And when he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king’s weight” (2 Sam. 14:26). The weight of his hair was about 5 pounds. It was because his hair weighed so much that he cut it every year. This exceptional growth of hair was in fact, the very vehicle of his death. How else could a man remain suspended alive - caught by the head in the thick branches of an oak? (2 Sam. 18:9-10). Irregularities in worship and conduct were frequent among David’s sons. Absalom is never set out in Scripture as a man to follow. Rather, he was the epitome of ego and vanity - a character who was base, immoral (2 Sam. 16:21-22), wicked, deceitful and treacherous. He rose up against his own father and sought to usurp his position of leadership and authority. He is not an example to be emulated, and only those hard-pressed for evidence could seek support in the hair length of Absalom to establish a rule of conduct.

DID JESUS HAVE LONG HAIR?

Many artists have depicted Jesus with long hair, and the image on the Turin Shroud shows a figure with long flowing hair. Artists however, have only created their own impressions based on traditions and not on the Word of God, and the Turin Shroud has never been proved to have had any connection with Jesus.

The fact is that no Jewish religious leader who honoured the Word of God would have worn long hair. Jesus said he came “not to abolish” the Word of God but to “fulfil.” And, as we have seen, that Word states that the priests shall not shave their heads or let their locks grow long (Ezk. 44:20).

In Roman times the Talmud (Ta’anith 17a) specified a priest’s hair was to be cut every 30 days, and (Sanh. 22b) that its style was to be the “Julian,” that is, the short hairstyle worn by Julius Caesar.

Long hair was pagan; the pagan gods were so imagined. The ancient pagan Assyrian kings were long-haired. Israel was to be separate from this way, and Jesus, as a true Israelite, would have conformed.

Could Jesus, like Samson, have been a lifelong Nazarite? If Jesus had

been a Nazarite, he would have appeared quite different from the average Jew. His long hair would have made him quite conspicuous and stand out in a crowd but this was not the case (Lk. 4:30. Jn. 8:59; 10:39). “He has no form nor comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2). If Jesus had been conspicuous by having long hair, there would have been no need for him to have to be identified by Judas to the authorities (Matt. 26:48. Mk. 14:44).

Jesus characterized himself as one who drank wine (in moderation of course!) Matt. 11:18-19; 26:29. Lk. 5:29-33. Mk. 2:16. Jn. 2:1-11. But in the chapter of Nazarite regulations, any use of wine or any other product of the grape is prohibited (Num. 6:3). Those under the Nazarite vow were also forbidden to come into contact with a dead body (Num. 6:6-9), but Jesus came in contact with the dead, so he could not have been under a Nazarite vow during his ministry. (Don't be confused by his title of “Nazarene” for it simply designated a person who grew up in the city of Nazareth as the context reveals (Matt. 2:23). In Acts 24:5 the Christian church is called “the sect of the Nazarenes” but this clearly did not mean that all the Christians had long hair and were under the Mosaic law of the Nazarite vow!)

N.B. On the cross, Jesus refused to receive the sponge that had been dipped in vinegar (wine turned sour by fermentation). The reason for not receiving it was not because he was under a Nazarite vow, for previous to this, as we have seen, he did drink wine. The reason for not receiving it on the cross was because he refused to dull the pain and suffering by anaesthetic. He would not alleviate the pain of the cross by artificial means but preferred to suffer the full pain required in his ultimate test of obedience unto death.

Or, as Davis' Dictionary of the Bible says: “The Roman soldiers when in camp drank a thin, sour wine called acetum vinegar, both in its pure state and diluted with water. In the latter condition it was termed posca. It was probably a drink of this sort which the Roman soldier offered to Jesus on the cross to quench his burning thirst (Mk. 15:36. Jn. 19:29-30). This draught, which Jesus accepted, was different from the sour wine, previously offered and refused, which was mingled with a bitter substance or more definitely with myrrh, which is astringent (severe): Matt. 27:34. Mk. 15:23.”

ALL WOMEN OR ONLY SOME?

We now turn to the question: Does Paul's instruction concerning long hair for women who pray and prophesy only apply to those who pray in church and prophesy? Were the rest allowed to wear short hair? Well, what does Paul say? "Does not even natural custom itself teach you that ... if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering (veil)."

In New Testament times it was the custom for all normal women to have long hair on their head and not just the Christian ones who prayed and prophesied. The majority of women in the city of Corinth were not Christians and therefore never prayed or prophesied in the sense Paul refers to, but they still wore long hair because it was the contemporary social custom and they would have been frowned upon had they refused to conform.

Every Christian is supposed to pray (both male as well as female). If therefore, long hair was only necessary for the women who prayed, all Christian women would have to have long hair!

In 1 Cor. 14:1 Paul tells the Corinthians to desire the gift of prophecy. If all the women in the congregation took his instruction seriously and knew it was wrong to prophesy with short hair, they would all make sure their head was covered, so that when the gift was bestowed they would be ready and able to exercise it.

So then, short hair on a woman was socially unacceptable in Paul's day and he points this out when he says: "does not even nature teach you." But, more important still, it was unacceptable to God and the angels. A woman with short hair had no "power" or authority in her Christian service before God, and it was dishonouring to her husband to attempt to minister with her head not covered. Thus, a woman who insisted on having short hair like a man lost authority and respect in both society and the church.

NO COMPROMISE

Verse 16 says: "But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God." This is how it reads in the King James Version and on the face of it can appear to mean that Paul is saying "If anyone disagrees with what I have said and wants to argue about it, well, forget it, because it is not very important and doesn't really

matter.”

Common sense of course, disallows such an interpretation. Paul was not the kind of person to spend so much time, and go to such lengths as he does in 1 Cor. 11, establishing certain principles and teaching and then turn around at the end of it and say it's not important and doesn't really matter. If it didn't matter and was completely inconsequential - a non-issue, he would never have wasted time writing about it!

The sense of what he says is this: “If anyone is disposed to argue about this, we refuse to recognize any other custom or practise, and the same applies to all the other churches of God as well.”

Paul intended to stand firm on the teaching and instruction he presented and refused to yield to any other that differed. It is clear from this that Paul's teaching on hair or “covering” was not relating to some temporary local custom which has long since ceased to have any relevance to us. The principles he outlines are universal and eternal. They remain the same to all people in all times and are therefore equally applicable today. It would therefore be a serious matter to teach that Paul's instruction on hair in this chapter no longer applies. It would be tantamount to taking away from the Word of God or making it null and void. Paul clearly states that he refused to recognize any other rule or practise from what he taught in 1 Cor. 11. He refused to accommodate any other custom. He refused to allow changing fashions of the world to change his teaching. There was clearly to be no compromise on this issue! And, as he says in 1 Cor. 14:37: “If any man thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things I wrote to you ARE THE COMMANDMENTS OF THE LORD. But if any man wants to be ignorant, then let him stay ignorant.”

Christians who study their Bible, recognize that what Paul says about “covering” or “hair” abides for all time. Therefore, groups who believe that Paul was referring to a veil which covered a woman's hair, insist that women wear a covering (hat) to church. And they are quite right to do so if Paul was referring to a covering of the hair.

But, if Paul was referring to length of hair: short hair for men and long hair for women, then what he says must be practised by Christians today.

So what is it to be? We have three alternatives:

1. If the “covering” is a veil over the head, then Christian women should wear such and not hats today. The fact that present custom is different is immaterial. Paul flatly refused to acknowledge or accommodate any other custom.

2. If the covering is a hat, then Christian women are under an obligation to wear hats which cover their heads to meetings.

3. If the covering relates to long hair, then Christian sisters are duty-bound to not have short hair like a man, and brethren must not have long hair like a woman. What is it to be then: veils, hats or hair?!

OBJECTION

It might be argued that God is interested neither in the clothes one wears nor the length of hair. Rather, it is the inward state of the heart that matters. Well it is true of course, that God dwells with those of a “poor and contrite spirit” (Isa. 66:2). But the passage continues: “and trembles at my Word.” A believer with a right “heart” will want to obey God’s Word, and will not wilfully disregard God’s instruction that long hair on a male and short hair on a female is unacceptable.

There are many Biblical passages which show a relationship between one’s appearance and “heart.” Note the following:

1. 1 Tim. 2:9-10: “... women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold pearls or costly attire, but by good deeds as befits women who profess religion.” The assumption here is that there is a characteristic dress - “modest,” which befits a heart of godliness.

2. Pharisees enlarged the borders of their garments, but Jesus, “who knew what was in man,” said that the motive was merely “to be seen by men” (Matt. 23:5). The appearance was directly related to the heart!

3. An Israelite who rounded off the hair of his temples (Lev. 19:27) profaned his separateness from heathen (unbeliever’s) practise. A profession on his part that his heart was acceptable irrespective of his appearance would not dismiss the fact that he sinned in his appearance.

4. A priest who let the hair of his head hang loose profaned the sanctuary of his God (Lev. 21:10-12). It would be idle for the priest to seek to justify his appearance on the grounds that his heart was right before God. A believer whose heart is godly will “perfect holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1). In so doing, hair length and dress will not be excluded from Scriptural guidelines and commandments. He will not assume an artificial distinction between “inner” and “outer” man.

The long hair innovation in more recent times was apparently introduced by a pop group - “The Beatles.” Since then it became the hallmark of many groups in rebellion. The anti-authority spirit in society quickly seized this fashion and many groups that were basically anti-

establishment adopted it. It became for many, a “sign” of rebellion.

Long hair on men still carries a social stigma among some employers who regard it as a bad sign of character and damaging to their public relations. In many areas of most countries it is viewed as incompatible with Biblical faith. To adopt the long hair fashion is clearly to follow a gentile custom which immediately identifies with the world. All Christian brethren ought not to become so identified. “Be not conformed to the world ...” (Rom. 12:2).

Wise men will see the issues - the need to “guard the deposit” entrusted to them and to resist the innovations that the world seeks to impose upon the church, making it weak, wishy washy and worldly.

May the grace of God teach us “that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope ...” (Titus 2:12-13).

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES ON 1 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 11

Some traditional commentators, in order to support the common view that the “covering” in 1 Cor. 11 is a veil, make a big issue of the fact that the word “covering” in v15 is not the same as that used in v6.

The Greek word used in v6 is “katakakupto” and in v15 the word is “peribolaion.” It is argued that the distinction between the two words proves that there is a distinction between the hair and a veil. It is maintained that the word used in v6 means to “cover fully” which cannot be applied to hair, and the word used in v15 means “something thrown, cast, wrapped around one, like a vesture or mantle” which applies to hair. And so one commentator concludes by saying: “The point in v15 is that as the hair represents the proper covering in the natural realm, so the veil is the proper covering in the supernatural.” Ironically, those who believe this often do not require the women to “cover fully” their hair or head with a hat when they meet with the church.

Unfortunately, the aforementioned commentator (like all others) provides no Scriptural evidence to support the proposition that the veil is the proper covering in the supernatural. Did God command Eve to wear a veil after she sinned? Did He tell her that she could never approach Him in prayer unless she covered her hair? No! And there is no record of God commanding such a custom anywhere else in Scripture. As far as the Old Testament is concerned, the only references to veils are in Gen. 24:65. 38:14, 19. Ruth 3:15. Song Sol. 4:7. Isa. 3:23. But none of these verses

teach that the wearing of a veil was instituted or commanded by God. The custom was clearly a man made human tradition. And the fact that a priest could see a woman's lips moving as she prayed in the temple as we read in 1 Sam. 1:13, reveals that women were not required to wear a veil when they prayed.

If God originally made man with short hair, and woman with long hair, then the truth of the matter is the very opposite to what tradition says. The truth is that the hair represents the proper covering in the supernatural realm, and the veil is the natural (natural man's traditional) covering. God's covering is much better than man's, and Adam and Eve were taught this from the very beginning when they attempted to cover themselves with fig leaves. The fig leaves were not a divinely appointed covering but purely human invention - a vain tradition, and had to be removed in order that God's appointment be obeyed.

DISTINCTIONS WITHOUT A DIFFERENCE

Now, as for making a big issue out of two different Greek words in 1 Cor. 11: it should be pointed out that it is quite common in Scripture for different words to be used in relation to the same thing, and many examples could be given. It is fatally easy to make academic and technical distinctions without any real difference being involved at all. The two ideas of "covered fully" and "wrapped around" amount to the same thing. If one wraps cloth or a garment around a particular part of the body then it is obviously covered! For example, in Gen. 38:14 reference is made to a woman (Tamar) who "covered" herself by "wrapping" herself with a veil.

Anyway, did the traditional Greek veil "fully cover" a woman's head? According to most authorities it didn't. It simply covered the hair but not the face. The only reference to a veil covering the face is the account of Moses who covered his face to conceal the glory of God (2 Cor. 3) and the Scripture referred to above in Gen. 38 which resulted in the woman being regarded as a harlot (v15): "When Judah saw her he thought her to be a harlot because she had covered her face."

Now, if the Greek veil only covered the hair, then it covered no more of the head than what the hair itself covered! Therefore, the hair itself was just as effective a covering of the head as the veil. And this is the point that Paul makes in 1 Cor. 11:15: "her hair is given to her for a covering (veil)." The Greek word "anti" which is translated "for" denotes "over against" or "opposite!" Hence it is used as "instead of" or "in the place of," and denotes "equivalence!" Therefore, the Emphatic Diaglott,

Rotherham and other translations render it: “Her hair has been given to her instead of a veil.” Darby says: “in lieu of a veil.” Others say: “a substitute for covering,” or “in place of a veil.” This settles it. God originally gave woman long hair instead of a veil. She therefore does not need a veil; her long hair is her divinely appointed covering and badge of femininity and sign of subordination to man.

As already pointed out, the Greek word for “covering” in v15 is “peribolaion.” It is derived from “peri” which means “around,” and “ballo” which means “to throw.” Hence, it denotes something “thrown around.” The word only occurs in 1 Cor. 11:15 and Heb. 1:12 where it is translated “vesture,” which of course, was a “covering” of the body as was the veil of the hair. It covered just as effectively the part of the body it was placed upon as the veil covered the hair. Like the veil, the “vesture” was also just a piece of cloth - a temporary appendage and not a permanent fixture. Hair however, is a permanent fixture on the woman (very few women go bald!) and constitutes a much better covering of the head! God’s coverings are indeed the best!

The passage in Heb. 1:12 is a quotation from Ps. 102:26 and the word “vesture” there comes from the Hebrew word “lebush” which simply means garment, apparel, raiment, vestment, covering etc. It occurs about 35 times in the Old Testament and it is clear that it relates to clothing which covered the body.

Therefore, Paul’s usage of “peribolaion” in relation to a woman’s long hair is simply teaching that what a garment is to the body (i.e. a covering), so also is the hair to the head.

Now, if a woman’s long hair is as good as a cloth garment that covers, there is obviously no need for her to wear a cloth garment over her hair. As the Diaglott puts it: “Her hair has been given to her instead of a veil.” Paul, once and for all, in this statement, makes it clear that a veil is an unnecessary appendage on a woman. God never instituted it from the beginning and still does not require it. The practise of nuns cutting or shaving their hair off and wearing a covering or hood over their head is a double error which is to be expected of the apostasy. They have missed the whole point of Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 11.

By way of conclusion, it should be pointed out that, although a veil was unnecessary as far as God was concerned, it was a foregone conclusion on the basis of what Paul taught previously (1 Cor. 8 and 9:19-23) about conforming to contemporary customs in order not to give offence, that Christian women would be expected to do so in relation to veils (or burkkas) whilst in places where it was the custom to wear them.

Some time ago I visited a Jewish synagogue and was required to wear a cap before gaining entrance to the service. I readily conformed to the custom even though I knew it was not commanded or required by God. By so doing I gained the respect of the Jewish assembly and had opportunity to witness to them.

