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**WOMEN'S HEAD COVERINGS**

**“We have no such custom, neither the churches of God”—Paul the Apostle, First Corinthians 11:16.**

There are within the epistles of Paul “some things *hard to be understood*” (2 Peter 3:16). Most commentators would agree that 1 Corinthians 11:3-15 fits in this category. In this passage, it would *appear* that Paul commanded the practice of veiling for women. But then he says in verse 16: “We have no such custom, neither the churches of God”! How can this seeming contradiction be explained?

As we will notice in more detail, there are within verses 3-15 statements for which there are *no supporting verses* anywhere else in the Bible! Not only this, these statements are *contrary* to other verses in the Bible!

Some believe, consequently, that such statements were not Paul’s teachings at all. Instead, he referred to certain customs and teachings some had adopted at Corinth. These could have been spelled out in the letter he had received from them (1 Cor. 7:1).

We should keep in mind that in the Greek language there were no quotation marks, question marks, or punctuation as we know it now. See example. Consequently, verse 5 might just as well be translated: “Does every woman who prays or

prophesies with her head uncovered dishonor her head?”—a *question*. Or, if written like a statement, but placed within quotation marks, it would indicate that Paul was *quoting* what *they* believed. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain his concluding remark: “We have no such custom, neither the churches of God.”



An example of how a statement made in one verse may be clarified in a verse that follows, can be found earlier in this same book: “Set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church” (1 Cor. 6:4 KJV). It would *seem* that Paul was saying to do this, and some have mistakenly taken it this way. But just the opposite was the case, as we read in the very next verse: “*I speak to your shame*”! This is what *they* were doing—not what *Paul* was telling them to do. The *context* that follows makes this clear. So, adding the punctuation it could read: “Set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church? I speak to your shame.” Or, if intended as a statement, it could read: “You set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame.” We must keep in mind that punctuation is in the hands of the translators.

Christians generally believe that all essential doctrines are always based on two or more verses of scripture. This principle is, itself, based on two or more verses that say “in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established” (2 Cor. 13:1; Matt. 18:16; Deut. 17:6; 19:15). But in the passage before us, statement after statement is made for which *there are no supporting verses anywhere else in scripture*!

“Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head.” *No supporting scripture!*

“Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, dishonors her head.” *No supporting scripture!*

“If a woman’s head is not covered, let her also be shorn.” *No supporting scripture!*

“The woman ought to have power on her head, because of the angels.” *No supporting scripture!*

“If a man has long hair, it is a shame to him.” *No supporting scripture!*

“If a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her.” *No supporting scripture!*



But, even more important, not only do these statements lack any supporting scripture, they are *contrary* to the scriptures!

The Bible does *not* teach that a man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. Instead, the high priest in the Old Testament was to have his head covered as he ministered. “And he that is the high priest among his brethren....shall *not uncover his head*” (Lev. 21:10). Other priests that ministered unto the Lord wore turbans or hats (Exod. 28:4,40).

It was not wrong for Ezekiel to prophesy with something on his head. “The word of the Lord came unto me, saying...bind your turban on your head, and put your sandals on your feet.” After doing “these things,” he began to prophesy: “The word of the Lord came to me, saying....” (Ezek. 24:15-21).

When Moses came down from Sinai his face shone and “he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him....And till Moses had done speaking with them, he put a veil on his face” (Exod. 34:32,33). It was not wrong for Moses to prophesy with his head covered!

Elijah “wrapped his face in his mantel” as he stood in the presence of the Lord and spoke with him (1 Kings 19:13).

When David fled from Absalom, he “went up by the ascent of mount Olivet, and wept as he went up, and had his *head covered*...and all the people with him covered every man his head...and David said, O Lord, I pray thee...” (2 Sam. 15:30-32). It was not wrong for David to pray with his head covered.

So was this really Paul’s teaching that a man dishonors his head (whether meaning himself or Christ) if he prays to God with his head covered? For years, a prayer practice of mine has been to walk and pray. This provides physical exercise; and the accompanying prayer provides a spiritual dimension. Often I have worn a hat to protect from the sun. Does a hat prevent my prayers from getting through? Does this “dishonor my head”? I find these ideas superstitious and farfetched.

Does a woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonor her head? Hannah did not have a veil covering her face when she prayed. Eli the priest noticed “her mouth...only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard” (1 Sam. 1:12,13). She was not doing wrong; her prayer was honored and answered!

Some suppose women in the Bible went about with faces veiled. Not true. We do read that Rebecca “took a veil and covered herself” (Gen. 24:65). If this was a face-veil, or possibly some other form of decorative clothing, its use had significance primarily because she was about to meet the man who would become her husband. Prior to this, she did not have a veil on, as when she talked to Abraham’s servant.

Judah supposed that a certain woman who “covered her face” with a veil was a harlot (Gen. 38:14,15), a fact which indicates that women *in general* did not wear a veil covering their faces.

Sarah did not wear a veil over her face, for “when Abraham was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair” (Gen. 12:14). When Jacob saw Rachel, he kissed her. She had no veil over her face (Gen. 29:10,11). The clothing God provided for Eve did not include a veil.

The fact that women in the Bible used jewelry such as earrings, nose rings, and jewels for the forehead (Ezek. 16:11,12) also shows they did not go about with their heads hidden behind a veil. Paul’s comment about a woman’s braided hair (1 Tim. 2:9) could have little point—one way or the other—if the hair was covered.

I know of a few churches in which some of the women wear a head covering, but other women in the church do not. This continually raises questions: Who is obeying God? Who is more spiritual? I have never seen any good fruit come from this practice, but it has caused confusion and division.

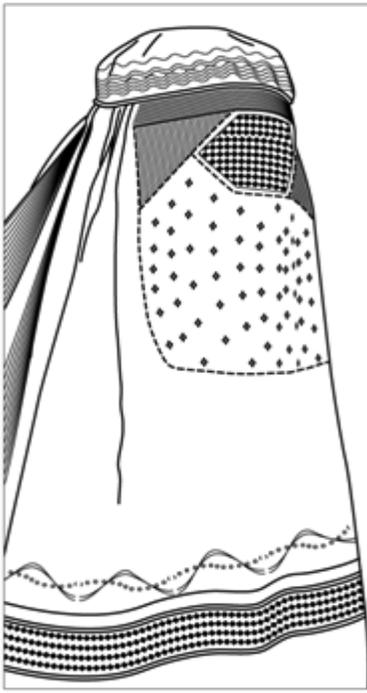
The wording of 1 Corinthians 11:10, as it stands in our English text, says a woman should have a covering on her head “because of the angels.” This has resulted in a long list of guesses by expositors—none being very satisfactory. Some assume honorable women at Corinth wore a head covering, so Christian women were to do this as a testimony to other people. But that is not what the text says. It says “because of the angels”!

Some suppose that if a woman prayed or prophesied with her head uncovered, the very sight of her *hair* might have caused angels to be tempted to lust! This belief may stem from an idea held by some rabbis—that angels (Gen. 6:1,2) once got possession of women by their hair. We can only say that if angels are in danger of being led into lust because they see a woman’s face or her hair in a church meeting, their moral stability is very weak! If this is the case, why the mention of when women are praying or prophesying? What about other times?

There are a number of verses in the Bible in which angels talked to women, but in no reference are we told that these women put veils on their heads (Judges 13:3,9; Lk. 1:28; etc.).

A few times I have been in homes of people who believe women must always have something on their heads before they can pray. If prayer is to be offered over food or upon leaving the home, each woman or girl must quickly look around the house to find a towel, a scarf, a handkerchief—something to put on her head so prayer can be offered! I am not putting anyone down for this. They have been taught this is what women must do. God looks on the heart.

But when we take a close look at what is recorded in 1 Corinthians 11, items like hats, scarves, or doilies, are not the subject. The veil mentioned in the Corinthian text covered not only the top of the head, it hung clear down over the face! The Greek word is *katakalypto* (Strong’s Concordance, 2619). *Kata* indicates the idea of “down”; *kalypto* has the meaning of “to cover wholly, to conceal.” In its noun form, the word is *kaluma* which Bullinger defines as “a covering...a veil hiding all the



face except the eyes and falling upon the shoulders.” That the *kaluma* covered the face (and not just the top of the head) is clearly seen in the example of Moses who “put a veil [*kaluma*] over his face” (2 Cor. 3:13). So was Paul saying women must wear the *kaluma* veil? Surely not. His words are refreshing and liberating:

“We have no such custom, neither the churches of God”!

Citing the Corinthian text, some believe a woman’s long hair hanging down can serve as a replacement for the veil.

They define this “long hair” as hair that is untouched by scissors. Ironically, many of these women with uncut hair pile or braid it on top of their heads—it does not hang down nor cover any more of the head than that of a woman with shorter hair!

A preacher I knew years ago who insisted that “long hair” means hair that is untouched by scissors, considered it a standard of holiness. When his 20-year old daughter, after wrestling for years with long hair, had her hair trimmed, he was very upset. He told her if she died before it grew back out she would go to hell! This is radical teaching, hurtful and fruitless.

Then, adding insult to injury, when the Corinthian text says it is a shame for a man to have long hair, the definition of “long hair” is quickly *changed*—it becomes hair on a man *they* consider long, even though it *has been cut*. The inconsistency should be apparent.

So what about the statement it was a *shame* for a man to have long hair?

It was not considered a shame for Absalom, David’s son, to have long hair. “Now in all Israel there was no one who was praised as much as Absalom for his good looks....and when he cut the hair of his head—at the end of every year he cut it because it was heavy on him—when he cut it, he weighed the hair of his head at two hundred shekels according to the king’s standard” (2 Sam. 14:25,26).

That Absalom had “long hair” cannot be disputed. We notice also that it was not cut because of a divine commandment against long hair, but because it became too heavy. Everyone in Israel thought he was good looking. Evidently none thought his long hair was a shame or disgrace.

In primitive times, men like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, etc. probably had hair that many today would consider “long.” Without today’s sophisticated hair cutting

equipment, we can be sure they were not able to have the finely trimmed sideburns or the neatly clipped exposure of the ear that is now common. In most cases, the hair probably hung down over the ears. Jonathan told David, “My father will do nothing either great or small, but that he will show it me [margin: *uncover my ear*]” (1 Sam. 20:2, 12, 13; 9:15; 22:8,17).

Gesenius’ *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon* shows that the Hebrew wording used in these verses means “to uncover any one’s *ear* by taking away the hair, as done by those who are to disclose some secret thing.” Based on this usage, Jonathan, David, Samuel, and Saul all had hair hanging down over their ears.

If it was considered a shame for a man to have long hair, what about Samuel and other Nazarites who had uncut hair? (Num. 6:2-5; 1 Sam. 1:11). Samson’s hair was so long Delilah could weave his seven locks on a hand-loom! (Judges 16:13,14). Samson’s sin was not having long hair; it was when his hair was cut off that the Lord departed from him! (verses 17-20).

This is not to say we think men should grow long hair. The proper length of a man’s hair might be determined more by the customs at a given time or place. Accordingly, we believe men should look like men and women like women. Yet, it should be admitted that a *beard* would more closely identify a man as a man, than the hair of his head. Many men in the Bible are mentioned as having beards, yet there is no *command* to do so. It is not a salvation issue, nor is hair length, as such.

Using the principle of Romans 14:17, I believe we can correctly say: “The kingdom of God is not about a beard, long hair, short hair, a woman wearing a head covering or a man not wearing a head covering, *but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.*”

Another portion of the Corinthian text in question says: “A man indeed ought not to cover his head.” Why? “For *he* is the *image* and glory of God, [but the woman is not].” But what some cite as the supporting scripture, Genesis 1:27, falls short of saying this: “God created man in his own image, in the *image* of God created he him; male *and female* created he them.” See also Genesis 5:1,2. Not just the male was created in God’s image, so was the female. But, regardless, what would any of this have to do with a head covering? God made no head covering for Eve.

The Corinthian passage, as it stands, is inconsistent with itself: A woman must wear a covering because she has a head (her husband). But man has a head too: Christ. So, why wouldn’t *he* need to wear a head covering also? And since Christ has a head (God), *then he would too!* These things sound more like false teachings some were promoting in Corinth, not the words of Paul. Elsewhere he says that *in Christ* there is no difference between men and women (Gal. 3:28). Was he here making a difference—requiring women to veil for worship?

In Second Corinthians Paul again mentions a veil, drawing an analogy from the time when Moses covered his face with a veil. Unbelieving Israelites, he pointed out, have a veil over them in the reading of the Old Testament; but when one comes

to Christ *the veil is taken away* (2 Cor. 3:13-16). As a result, “we all”—men and women who have come to Christ—“we all, with open [unveiled] face behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed from glory to glory” (verse 18).

If, as Paul wrote, the *spiritual* veil has been removed in Christ, why would the bondage of a *literal* veil remain and be required for women while praying or prophesying? If in *First Corinthians* he was requiring women to wear a *kaluma* veil, why would he use an analogy in *Second Corinthians* that conveys an entirely different meaning?

We have given reasons to question that certain statements in 1 Corinthians 11:3-15 reflect the teachings of Paul. Because the Greek had no punctuation, one cannot prove from the wording itself which statements represented a custom at Corinth to which Paul *referred*, as compared to his own words. I think it is safe to conclude that the statements contrary to other scriptures were not those of Paul.

But the solution to this whole dilemma is quite simple. Following the mention of head coverings, length of hair, practices “because of the angels,” suppositions about a man being in the image of God, while the woman is not, etc., we come to the bottom line, Paul’s concluding words in verse 16:

*“But if any man seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.”*

*The Pulpit Commentary* has paraphrased Paul’s words: “If you Corinthians prefer these abnormal practices in spite of reason, common sense, and my arguments, you must stand alone in your innovations upon universal Christian practice.”

Admittedly, there are some translators—supposing that Paul actually commanded the veiling of women in worship—who have *inserted* the word “other” into their translations, thus changing the meaning: “We have no *other* custom, nor does the church of God.” This, in our view, is an unfortunate addition.

Here are some of the translations of 1 Corinthians 11:16 that do *not* add the word “other”:

King James Version: “We have no such custom, neither the churches of God.”

English Standard Version: “We have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.”

Aramaic Bible in Plain English: “We have no such custom, neither does the church of God.”

God’s Word Translation: “We don’t have any custom like this—nor do any of the churches of God.”

Jubilee Bible 2000: “We have no such custom, neither the congregation [called out ones] of God.”

American Standard Version: “We have no such custom, neither the churches of God.”

Douay-Rheims Bible: “We have no such custom, nor the church of God.”

Panin Numeric New Testament: “WE have no such custom, neither the churches of God.”

The Jerusalem Bible: “It is not the custom with us, nor in the churches of God.”

Darby Bible Translation: “We have no such custom, nor the assemblies of God.”

Weymouth New Testament: “We have no such custom, nor have the Churches of God.”

Young’s Literal Translation: “We have no such custom, neither the assemblies of God.”

Modern Language: “We do not observe such a practice, neither do the churches of God.”

But translations aside, if any want to argue or be contentious about this by insisting that Paul commanded the veiling of women, who does it? There are thousands of churches that do not require women to wear coverings over their heads and faces while praying. If this were indeed God’s *command*, these churches (and the women involved) would be disobedient to that command. How, then, can it be explained that these are blessed and used of God, if they are actually living in disobedience?

—Ralph Woodrow

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