

IS IT A SHAME FOR A MAN TO HAVE LONG HAIR?

A *surface* reading of 1 Corinthians 11:3-15 would *seem* to indicate that Paul taught:

A woman who prays *without* a head covering dishonors her head.

A woman must wear a head covering because of the *angels*.

A man who prays *with* his head covered dishonors his head.

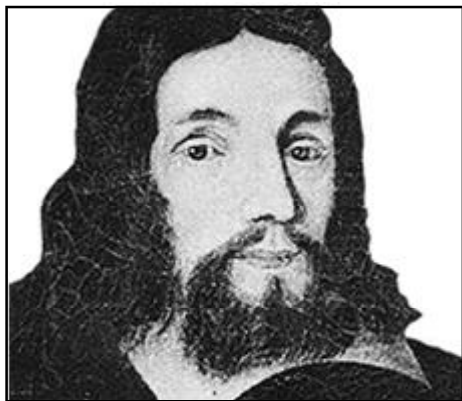
It is a *shame* for a man to have *long hair*.

But these statements (and others within this portion), not only have *no supporting scriptures*, they are *contrary to other scriptures*! For these reasons, to consider an alternate explanation is justified.

It is certainly possible that Paul was here setting forth customs that some of the believers at Corinth had adopted or were concerned about. Because the Greek language did not have punctuation^o like quotation marks^o it is not always clear when Paul may be quoting from *them*, or what *he* was teaching in response.

We have included pictures of some well-known Christian leaders from a variety of backgrounds who wore their hair long. Did they believe it was a *shame*^o for a man to have long hair? Evidently not.

Let^s start with John Huss (1372-1415), a fearless preacher and Reformer, who was



JOHN HUSS

burned at the stake for his faith. Was it a *shame*^o that he wore his hair long?

What about John Bunyan (1628-1688), jailed for 12 years for his Christian faith, a dynamic preacher and author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.^o Was it a *shame*^o that he wore his hair long?

Matthew Poole (1624-1679), a nonconformist theologian and biblical commentator, whose Commentary Charles Spurgeon rated as tops. Was it a *shame*^o that he wore his hair long?

Thomas Newton (1704-1782), Anglican Bishop, biblical theologian, author of *Dissertations on the Prophecies*.^o Was it a *shame*^o that he wore his hair long?

John Wesley (1703-1791), founder of Methodism, a dedicated gospel preacher who won thousands to Christ. Was it a *shame*^o that he wore his hair long?

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), Congregational revivalist preacher and missionary. Was it a *shame*^o that he wore his hair long?

Matthew Henry (1662-1714), minister of the gospel, best known for his Commentary on the entire Bible. Was it a *shame*^o that he wore his hair long?

Some are prone to read 1 Corinthians 11:14 as though it says: *Do not the SCRIPTURES teach that if a man has long hair it is a shame to him?*^o That is *not* what it says, obviously, for that is *not* what the Scriptures teach!

In the Scriptures, numerous men are mentioned as having long hair, with no hint that it was a *shame*.^o Absalom, for one, had long hair; yet *in* all Israel there was no one who was praised as much as Absalom for his good looks^o (see 2 Sam. 14:25, 26). How could this be said if long hair for a man was considered shameful?

The question is often asked: Did JESUS have long hair? I am not aware of any verse in the Bible that provides a description of his hair. That, in itself, tells us something. If the length of his hair was of great importance, as some suppose, surely this would be mentioned.



JOHN BUNYAN

Buddhist monks shave their heads. That is one extreme; the other extreme would be to never cut the hair (cf. 1 Sam. 1:11). Apparently the hair of the Israelite priests mentioned in Ezekiel 44:20 was somewhere between the two extremes and *well* trimmed.^o My hunch is: Jesus^s hair was probably not hanging down his back, but neither was it short.

There are groups that labor long trying to prove Jesus had short hair. Their publications use drawings of him with hair, neatly trimmed over the ears, like he just came from a modern barber shop. Their *proof text*^o is one single verse, taken in isolation: *...it is a shame for a man to have long hair*.^o

Why is this so important to them? Is it a desire to be scripturally accurate? Perhaps; God knows the heart. But there is always a



MATTHEW POOLE



THOMAS NEWTON

subtle incentive to be “right,” especially if one is trying to make others look “wrong.”

As Christians, we believe Jesus lived a sinless life, died for our sins, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and provided eternal life. None of this depends on the length of his hair—long *or* short!

Arguing that Jesus had short hair is a side issue—certainly not an essential of the Christian faith. More important: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22,23). The *fruit* of the Spirit is far superior to *fruitless* rules about hair length.

Regarding the birth of John the Baptist, it was said: “He will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink” (Lk. 1:15; cf. 7:33). This wording suggests that John may have been a Nazarite. *If* so, he would have had long hair (Num. 6:1-5). Imagine Jesus saying to him, “John, you are a great man. But does not even nature teach that if a man has long hair it is a shame? You need to go get a haircut!”

The emphasis of Jesus was always on the *heart* (Matt. 5:8; 12:35; 15:18; etc.)—*not* hair.

In the drawing of Martin Luther (1483-1546), I don’t suppose anyone would want to claim his hair was “long.” However, some might not think it should be hanging down over his ears.

Without the sophisticated hair cutting equipment that is now available, it seems certain that men like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others, did not have the finely trimmed sideburns or neatly clipped exposure of the ears that is now common. In most cases, their hair probably hung down over the ears.

In the Old Testament, when someone would “tell” a closely guarded secret to another at close range, it was termed (based on the Hebrew), “uncovering the ear” (1 Sam. 20:2, 12; 22:8, 17). The inference is that hair was hanging over the ear.

I know a Texas pastor who drove some young people to a Christian summer youth camp. One young man—whose hair was somewhat long—was willing to go to the camp, even though he was not a Christian. Upon arrival, he was told he could not stay unless he got a haircut. The pastor ended up driving him back home, a considerable distance.

Clearly a Christian camp has to have standards and rules of conduct. But non-essentials should not be turned into essentials. Had this young man been allowed to remain, upon hearing the gospel, he might have come to Christ. But that opportunity was bypassed because of a fruitless dogma about hair length.

I am not suggesting that men grow long hair. I choose to have a short hair style. Bill Gaither chooses to have short hair, but Guy Penrod, who has often sung with the Gaithers, chooses to wear his hair long. I am content to leave that up to him, before God.

Suppose a man with long hair receives Christ as Savior. If he had been a member of a gang of long-haired men, to distinguish himself from a former lifestyle of crime and rebellion, he might choose to cut his hair, and rightly so. But that would fall short of any biblical command, like: “Except thou cuttest thy hair, thou cannot be saved!”

If there were any men with long hair in the crowd on the day of Pentecost, imagine Peter preaching: “Repent, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, *and go get a haircut*!” Maybe they could go to Delilah’s Barber Shop out in the Valley of Sorek.



MARTIN LUTHER



CHARLES WESLEY

Sometimes “division” is inevitable (Luke 12:51; John 7:43). But we are warned against divisions over non-essential points (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 1:10). It is hurtful when brothers and sisters in Christ are needlessly divided over teachings about hair length, some even being pressured to sign a loyalty oath.

I recall years ago watching *The Johnny Cash Show* on television (1969—1971). On one program he sang the gospel song “The Unclouded Day,” the first song he ever sang in public. That was when he was 12 years old at a little church in Dyess, Arkansas. The lady who accompanied him on the piano back then, did it again on the show: his mother. (That segment may still be viewed on YouTube.)

At the time the program aired, Johnny Cash wore his hair full and down the back of his neck. It bothered me that he had long hair. After all, didn’t the BIBLE say it was a shame for a man to have long hair? His hair was not really *that* long, but I didn’t know any better back then!

There are groups that insist “long hair” for a *woman* means hair that is *never* cut. But when the very *same* term is used in the *same* passage about a *man* having “long hair,” they change their definition! If a man’s hair appears to be longer than *they* consider appropriate—even though it may have been cut hundreds of times—that, to them, is “long hair”! This is a glaring inconsistency.

In present-day America, most men have comparatively short hair, and women, generally, have longer hair. The argument is made that “men should look like men and women like women.” I find nothing wrong with that. But let’s admit it: the hair of a man’s

beard would more closely identify him as a *man* than the hair on his head!

So, is a man who chooses to shave trying to look like a woman?

If one uses a “what-nature-teaches” argument, a good case could be made for beards, since most men, by nature, grow facial hair. Women do not.

Numerous men in the Bible are specifically mentioned as having beards: Aaron, Mephibosheth, David, David’s servants, Ezra, Ezekiel, and Jesus himself. Yet the Bible stops short of making this a *commandment*. Why, then, should one obscure question—something supposedly taught by nature against a man having long hair—be made into a commandment?

Did nature teach the people at Corinth, a *Greek* city, that long hair was a shame for a man? How so? At the time Paul wrote, if the trend among Greeks was short hair for men and long hair for women, this was certainly not the case historically. Probably no name is better known in Greek literature than Homer. He wrote favorably about men as “long-haired Greeks.” In ancient Greece, the heads of slaves might be shaved, whereas long hair for men symbolized wealth and power.

Clearly, nature did not teach Greeks it was a “shame” for a man to have long hair—even several of their mythical gods and heroes had long hair, including Zeus, Achilles, Apollo, and Poseidon.

Looking again at our passage in question (1 Cor. 11:3-15), it appears that the distinction about a *woman* having long hair, but a *man* short hair, was intended to support the previous idea: A woman who prays with her head uncovered, dishonors her head; but a man who has something on his head when he prays, dishonors his head.



JONATHAN EDWARDS



MATTHEW HENRY

It is agreed that the words translated “man” and “woman” in this passage, can also be translated “husband” and “wife.” It is also generally agreed that when we read “the head of the woman is the man,” it would refer to a woman’s *husband*—not just any man. Not her son, not a male relative, nor a man down the street.

When we read, then, that a woman (wife) who prays with her head uncovered, dishonors her head (husband), what sense does that make? Back over the years my wife prayed, publically, hundreds of times. She was not wearing a head covering. I am unaware that this *ever*—not even once—shamed or dishonored me.

In our passage in question, we are told that “the head of every man is Christ.” If a woman having a “head” (husband) required a head covering as a sign of submission, why wouldn’t a man also need a head covering, since he has a “head” (Christ)?

Does a man who prays with something on his head dishonor Christ? My neighbors know that I often do my errands around town on a little red 50 cc motor scooter. I wear a helmet. Because my head is covered, must I never pray during this time? Would that shame my head? How?

The Scriptures themselves mention men such as Moses, David, Elijah, Ezekiel, and the Jewish priests themselves, praying or prophesying with a covering on their heads.

Even today, when Jewish men pray, they wear something on their heads, commonly a brimless cap known as a *kippah*. The most sacred place of prayer for them is the “Wailing Wall” in Jerusalem. They wear caps there, and provide them for visitors. One was placed on my head when I entered the site in 1978. Did I dishonor my head by praying with a little cap on my head?

If a woman dishonors her head by praying or prophesying without a head covering, as some suppose Paul was teaching, we are faced with a serious conflict in Scripture. Consider this:

Timothy was at Ephesus when Paul wrote to him (1 Tim. 1:3). Some women there were using elaborate hair styles. Some who were rich braided strings of gold through their hair. Such practices drew attention to the *outward*, rather than a woman’s *inner* beauty. Paul instructed Timothy to deal with this (1 Tim. 2:9). Here are his words from several translations:

“...not in braiding with gold.”

“...not with elaborate hairstyles or gold.”

“...they should not have fancy hairdos.”

“...not braided hair or gold.”

“...should not draw attention to themselves by the way they fix their hair.”

It is generally understood that these instructions pertained, especially, to the adornment of women during the worship services. *If* women’s heads were covered, what difference would it make what their hair style was, since *no one could see it anyway*?

Requiring a woman to wear a head covering is not a Christian custom; it is a Muslim custom. Millions of Muslim women are required (*by law*; in some countries) to wear a head covering. In our view, if a woman



JEWISH HIGH PRIEST

chooses to wear a head covering of some kind, that should be up to her. She should not be forced by law to do so.

The Bible talks about *ōholinessō* (Heb. 12:10,14; 1 Thess. 4:7). But "*true holinessō* (cf. Eph. 4:24) must come from the heart. I am not aware that wearing a head covering *ever* made any woman more holy than others. It is sad that some Christian groups have reduced the high standards of holiness down to issues about hair.

At least one church father opposed women wearing wigs. Because wigs in those days were made from the hair of another woman, the reasoning was this: If a bishop laid hands on the head of a woman wearing a wig and prayed a blessing on her, the blessing would not go to that woman. It would go to the woman whose hair it originally was!

Superstitious ideas like this discredit the real message of the gospel.

As we consider 1 Corinthians 11, we should keep in mind that meanings can vary based on translation. When we read, for example: *ōWe have no such custom, neither the churches of Godō* (verse 16), some translators *add* a word: *ōother.ō* They assume, incorrectly we believe, that Paul commanded head coverings for women. So they put, *ōWe have no OTHER custom,ō* thus changing the meaning drastically.

The use of question marks is also in the hands of translators. *ōDoes not nature teach you that if a man has long hair it is a shame to him?ō* (verse 14), could be translated: *ōNature does not teach you that if a man has long hair it is a shame to him.ō* Period.

Since, by *nature*, the hair of either a man or a woman will grow long if left uncut, understanding this as a statement, rather than a question, is certainly possible.

Another viewpoint we will notice and this also involves translation has to do with the word *ōhair.ō*

The normal word translated *ōhairō* is *thrix* (Strong's Concordance, 2359) and always, *unmistakably*, means hair. It is used 15 times in the New Testament: Matthew 3:4, 5:36, 10:30; Mark 1:6; Luke 7:38, 44, 12:7, 21:18; John 11:2; 12:3; Acts 27:34; 1 Peter 3:3; Rev. 1:14, 9:8.

But in 1 Corinthians 11, *entirely different Greek words* are used.

Listed below are these two words with the numbers from *Strong's Concordance*:

ō...if a man has *long hair* [*komao*, 2863]

ō...if a woman has *long hair* [*komao*, 2863]

ō...her hair [*kome*, 2864] is given to her for a covering.

According to *Strong's Concordance*, *kamao* is simply another form of *kome*. These two words, in turn, are based on *komizo* from the *primary* word *komeo* (to tend, i.e. take care of, to provide for) *ō Strong's Concordance*, 2865. There is nothing inherent in the word itself about hair!

It should also be pointed out that *mákros*, a Greek word for *ōlong,ō* appears nowhere in the passage.

Because 1 Corinthians 11 repeatedly uses the word *ōhead,ō* translators conclude *komeo* must have something to do with *hair*. Consequently we *commonly* find definitions like *ōlocks, as ornamental,ō* *ōwear tresses of hair,ō* *ōhave long hair,ō* etc.

However, because *komeo* means *to take care of, to provide for*, an argument can be made for the following:

It is honorable for a husband to provide and care for his wife. Not being shorn or cut off from his care, serves like a protecting garment wrapped around her. To not provide and care for his wife is a dishonor to him.

With this view, the word *ōhairō* is totally absent from the passage!

I will also suggest the following, without dogmatism, for consideration:

Some of the Corinthian believers had come into a teaching about wearing or not wearing a covering on their *heads*. Apparently they were thinking in terms of the *fleshly, literal head*. Paul summarized their teaching (notice the word *head* is used repeatedly) as follows:

A man who prays with his *head* covered, dishonors his *head*.

But a woman who prays with her *head* uncovered, dishonors her *head*. It would be the same as having her *head* shaved.

She needs to have her *head* covered because of the angels.

Even nature teaches that it is a shame for a man to have long hair on his *head*, but long hair on the *head* of a woman is her glory.

Paul, using a play on words, counters this teaching by providing a much greater meaning for the word *ōhead.ō* He starts right off with these words: *ōI want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is Godō* (1 Cor. 11:3).

This is *foundational* to what follows. It lifts the word *ōheadō* to a much higher meaning than a person's *fleshly, literal head*. In so doing, Paul rejected their ideas about material head coverings as false, assuring them: *ōWe have no such custom, nor do the churches of Godō* (verse 16).

We have included pictures of a variety of men, Christian leaders in various fields, who wore their hair long. Problems in a portion of 1 Corinthians 11 regarding interpretation have been pointed out. But let it be clear: We are not saying men should grow long hair, or that women should have short hair. That is an individual matter, having nothing to do with the gospel message, one way or the other.

Our conclusion, based on recognized principles of biblical interpretation, is simply this: a passage such as 1 Corinthians 11:3-15 that is inconclusive, capable of varied interpretations, and lacks supporting verses, is not a sound foundation upon which to build fruitless and divisive doctrines. - RW

For additional information, see the companion article: WOMENS HEAD COVERINGS, which will be included in the initial mailing of this article. It is also available under *%Articles+* on our website:

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