

## **The Head Covering - A Biblical Perspective**

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### **The True Women's Lib**

The women's "Liberation" movement in society today is sadly behind the times. It has been one of the distinctive characteristics of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ that, wherever it has been preached, it has elevated womanhood from the degradation of heathenism to a place of nobility beside the man. Heathenism almost always has debased the woman; the gospel liberates her and entrusts to her a God-given ministry, uniquely fitted to her design and characteristics.

Of course, every flourishing fashion or movement in the world tends to overflow into the Church. The evidence of this may be seen in the styles and patterns of behavior that are becoming more common among believers. One of the most general of these is the increasing number of women who appear at assembly meetings without a head covering.

Some believers were discussing this one day and an "elder" happened to join them. When he heard their conversation had to do with the head covering, he dismissed the matter with the remark, "It's inconsequential." One can hardly blame many of these women who go with uncovered heads into an assembly of believers when they have not been taught by their spiritual leaders what is scripturally correct.

The question arises, "Is it tradition or truth?" Putting aside personal preferences for a few moments, let us try to find from Scripture what is taught on the subject, specifically from 1 Corinthians 11. It will be a help to the interested reader to have the Bible open for reference.

### **Three Symbols**

Some suggest that the first section of the chapter actually belongs with chapter 10 and is not church truth at all. Paul's discussion of matters that affect assembly gathering, they assert, does not begin until verse 17, "when ye come together." But this is missing the design of the chapter. The first section (vv. 1-16) begins with "Now I praise you." The second begins with "I praise you not" (v. 17).

There are three symbols in this chapter: the head, the bread, and the wine. The first portrays our relationship in the mystical Body, the last two teach us concerning the sacrifice of His physical body. Can we take the liberty of saying that one of these is inconsequential? If so, which one? Can we omit the bread or wine next week at the Lord's Supper? Such a flagrant departure would not be tolerated. Then by what principle of interpretation can the other symbol be relegated to the growing list of "inconsequentials" we hear about these days?

A reading of 1 Corinthians 11 readily shows that there are two distinct lessons in the first section of this chapter which deal with the head. First, there is a lesson in headship; second, a lesson in glory.

### **Headship**

Verse 3 sets the foundation for the lesson in headship. It teaches the divine order of authority. It is significant that even here the Spirit of God does not put the woman first, although that would be the logical order in the ascending scale of authority in the spiritual realm. "The head of every man is Christ: and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God."

Obviously there is no thought here of inferiority-superiority. The statement "the head of Christ is God" stands directly beside "the head of the woman is the man." We know that Christ is not inferior to God -- He is God. The issue is order, just as we have alphabetical order. Names beginning with the letter "A" in the telephone directory are not more important than names beginning with any other letter. So in His universe God has established order -- world order, home order, and assembly order. "Let all things be done decently and in (according to the) order" (1 Cor. 14:40).

In Ephesians, the headship of Christ is related corporally to the whole body of the Church. In 1 Corinthians, His headship in the assembly is related individually to the believer. In verse 4, the covered head of the praying or prophesying man is seen to be dishonoring to his head ("and the head of every man is Christ"). Here the simple words "to cover" are used. Thus Christ must not be dishonored by His symbolic concealment, the covered head of the man.

The woman is warned in verse 5. The uncovered head dishonors her figurative head ("and the head of the woman is the man"). The reason the man is not to be held in dishonor will be developed in the lesson in glory: "Forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God" (v. 7). The word "dishonor" is a superlative, "to thoroughly put to shame." In the context, when a man appears with his head covered, or a woman with her head uncovered, it is an implicit denial of the divine teaching regarding headship, whether intentional or otherwise.

### **Glory**

Now the Spirit leads Paul to press the issue and to show its solemn overtones by giving a lesson in glory, and strong reasons for compliance with this word of instruction. Glory might be said to be a visible manifestation of inward nature. The glory of a rose bush is the rose. That is not all of the rose bush, but the bloom is the manifestation of its nature. By the rose we learn the nature of the bush. The reason for the uncovered head of the man is given: "Forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God." Image is not likeness; these are distinctly different ideas. Likeness is similitude, being like; image is representation, whether like or not. The Lord Jesus is never spoken of as "being in the likeness of God." He cannot be "like" God since He is God.

Man must not, then, cover his head in the assembly because he represents God as His image. Further, he is the glory of God. If image is representation, then glory is manifestation. God's authority must not be hidden. This is the twofold reason for the uncovered head of the man.

The woman is not spoken of as the image of man, but as his glory. Here it is not representation, but manifestation. The glory of man must not be manifest in spiritual exercises, therefore that glory must be covered. No glory but God's is to be seen in the spiritual realm. Thus when the man sees the women's heads covered, he is reminded that his glory is covered there too. His public ministry is to be done so God alone receives the glory.

### **The School of Angels**

The reason for the woman's covering is also twofold. First, it is a natural one. Verse 8 shows that the man had precedence in the natural realm and is therefore an image of God, "for Adam was first formed" (1 Tim. 2:13). The woman, as steward of the coverings, aids the man in his responsibility.

Second, a spiritual reason is given in verse 10. "For this cause ought a woman to have power (a sign of submission to authority) on her head because of the angels." Why is this? Ephesians 3:10 gives a clue as to the importance of angelic observation. God uses the Church to teach them something of His manifold wisdom. How can these spirit beings learn the significance of the Lordship of Christ, the place of the Church and of the individual believer? Such things are an utter mystery to them. God shows them by object lessons or symbols.

Just as Aaron is a type of Christ in certain ways, though completely unaware of it himself, and just as the Lord used a little child to teach the disciples a lesson on entrance into the kingdom, although the child was oblivious to his role, so now, though we may be unaware of it, we are under the scrutiny of spirit beings. We are being used by God as object lessons to make known the glorious truths of authority and submission which otherwise would be unintelligible to them. How solemn! Yet Abraham grasped a higher truth when he said, "The Lord before whom I walk."

When a woman comes into a church gathering with her head covered, she performs a ministry to the hosts of heaven. She becomes to angels an object lesson of submission to divine headship. What a rebuke she is to the wicked angels! Their sin is that of rebelling against divine authority. What a delight to the obedient angels, as they see also the man's head uncovered portraying the unshielded glory of God and His accepted authority!

However, there is an assurance in verse 11 that positionally there is no thought of superiority because of gender. Paul states in verse 12 that even though the first woman came out of the man, ever since every man has come into the world by a woman. We are together, "in the Lord."

### **The Double Cover-Up**

Some excuse their uncovered heads by citing verse 15, "Her hair is given her for a covering." Since she has hair, these assert, that is enough. Surely a careful reading of the text would show such an interpretation to be a weak avoidance of the truth as it is set out. Notice that for the woman there are two glories involved. She is a glory: "The woman is the glory of the man" (v. 7). But she also has a glory of her own. Her hair is a glory to her (verse 15). For the glory that she is (the glory of the man), God has given her a natural covering, her long hair. For the glory that she has (her hair), she must submit her will to cover that with another covering which she places over her own glory.

For all who can receive the ministry of the Word, there is a responsibility to obey. Elders and ministers of God's Word are also accountable to give needed instruction and not to shun to declare the whole counsel of God. If we fail to address ourselves to these matters, we should not be surprised when aberrations appear regularly, even brazenly, among us.

### **Long-Haired Men**

Long-haired men are not left out of these solemn verses (1 Cor. 11:1-16). In this day when even some believers follow this fashion, a word might be timely. Verse 14 teaches that it is contrary to the natural order for a man to have long hair. Why is this? Verse 15 shows us. Long hair is a glory for the woman. Therefore, for a man to be wearing this glory is a paradox in the sight of God and of the angels. The glory of the woman must not be seen in the Church, whether displayed by women or men.

To raise this subject usually calls forth some argument. Some say that the Lord Himself had long hair. Did He? How would we know from Scripture? Of this we have no certain knowledge. In any case, if those who so argue really desire conformity to Christ, it is clearly taught in Scripture that for the present it is moral likeness to His Son that God desires, not physical. The Spirit is working in our lives to transform us in heart and conduct to the Lord. Speculation is no excuse to contravene the clear instruction of the Word of God.

From where does this fashion of long haired men come? Not the Beatles, as many think. In Revelation 9, the hordes of hell erupt from the pit. They are seen as having the "faces of men and . . . the hair of women." Just as the Lord is transforming His saints into a moral likeness to Christ, so the arch-enemy seeks to conform a multitude into a likeness which portrays a confusion of God's natural order. Confusion of the sexes has always been a mark of depravity through the ages. It frequently has called forth the judgment of God.

Whatever long hair on men may have meant to our grandfathers or early brethren, we cannot say, but in our day it is the badge of rebellion. We must remember, too, that when men wore their hair longer a century ago, the hair of women was much longer, thus maintaining the distinction between male and female.

This is not to say that every man who wears his hair long is rebelling against God. Many are not consciously doing so, but in the light of Scriptures under consideration, they may be, all unwittingly, making themselves object lessons for the adversary against Scripture's standards.

### **How Long is Long?**

Some questions naturally arise out of the examination of this subject. Man's penchant for rules would have him prefer that the Lord lay down in inches "how long is long." The Lord wisely has not done so in this case, nor in many areas that affect our lives. The great principle of the Christian life is "faith." If a sincere desire is present, together with a submissive will, it will not be long before the exercised soul will know if the Holy Spirit is being grieved or not.

### **For Today?**

Is this for today? The relevance of these verses (the bread and wine symbols do not suffer from this argument) is sometimes brought into question. It is implied that this was a Corinthian problem and applied only to that church. However, all the teaching of this epistle is clearly directed in its introduction. It was written to the Corinthian saints "with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord." Paul is not afraid to address cultural problems in Corinth. But in this chapter there is no mention of culture. Instead, he takes us back to creation to show us the basis for the order being discussed. Chapters 11-14, which form a unit, close with the warning, "If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord."

### **Other Questions**

Sometimes the size of the head covering for women is the question. The word used to describe this covering is a superlative, and means to "amply cover." Tiny bows and almost invisible nets cannot be said to "amply cover." They may enhance her glory, not cover it.

Another query is sometimes raised regarding wigs. Do they cover? Yes, they cover the woman's natural glory, but they obviously defeat the spiritual purpose by providing an imitation glory. The onlooker sees a facsimile of her glory uncovered, and not a badge of submission.

At what age should a girl be expected to wear a covering over her hair? Should teenagers? Perhaps this could be easily resolved by asking how young should a boy be before he does not wear a covering? Perhaps it has been argued that these youngsters do not pray or prophesy and are therefore exempt. However, none can gainsay the exhortation to fathers to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Submission to the Lord is to be taught our children by example, by precept, and when necessary, by chastening. All parents would agree that it is easier and happier for all if this be learned at the earliest age.

### **But When?**

On what occasions this scripture applies presents a more difficult problem. Obviously it includes church gatherings where the elders would be held accountable before the Lord. A meeting of the local church is not determined by geography, however. It is possible to have church order in a house (as the early church met), or to have home order in a church building (as with a wedding). Church order could be in effect in a field or forest, as with many during times of oppression. What determines the order is who God would hold responsible if anything went wrong. In world order, God holds government to be responsible. In home order, it is the husband or parent. In church order, the elders are held to account. There are, however, other occasions when a woman may exercise an oral ministry by prayer or testimony from the Scriptures. The principles laid down here would apply to such. Further instructions are found elsewhere in Scripture; for instance, in 1 Corinthians 14, governing the woman's silence in the assembly. Chapter 11 must be read in the light of these subsequent controls. But remember that devotion to Christ, not mere duty, is our guide.

When there is uncertainty as to the wearing or not wearing of the covering, it would seem, in the light of 1 Corinthians 11:10, that the exercised sister will not wish to risk grieving her Lord. Private home situations are clearly distinct, since in the home and family context the order of rule is not directly through the elders, but through the husband and father in the home.

### **Ire and Fire**

It is a strange thing that there are few Scriptures that stir up the fire in some saints like this one. This may be the reason why the earlier part of 1 Corinthians 11 is taught less than the remainder of the chapter. Likely the apostle also felt the ire of some when he refers in verse 16 to the possibility of contention. It was the custom of the Jewish men of that day (and today) to cover their heads in the synagogue. It was also the custom of the Greek women to enter the temple with their heads uncovered. But, says Paul, "We have no such custom." The New Testament Church was distinct from the heathen temple; consequently, it stood in contrast to social and religious customs of the day. Christians were to behave differently in these matters.

### **Suffering Loss**

The rebellious spirit can always find an argument and present picayune excuses which seek to discount both the relevance and personal application of this section of the Scripture. When we know that godly Moses suffered a soul-grieving loss as a result of spoiling a type of the glorified Lord, it should make us all tremble lest we too should be guilty of

presenting to the eyes of believers, unbelievers, and the watching spirit world a distorted picture of our beloved Lord, His authority and glory.

### **Hair or Heart?**

In conclusion, let it be clearly understood that while outward form should convey inward condition, it is not always necessarily so. A woman, with the most adequate head covering and modest apparel, may be as cold as an iceberg in her devotion to the Lord, and all the while proud of her conformity to a set standard. Likewise, a short-haired man may be greatly grieving the Lord in other significant areas of his life. The long-haired youth, or the girl with uncovered hair may, in their hearts, be devoted to the Lord to the measure of the biblical light they have. They may be deeply committed to His cause and living blameless lives in the wicked society around them, but through spiritual infancy, or the failure of the elders and the teachers, have never learned the solemn implications of 1 Corinthians 11.

While the outward sign does not necessarily convey spirituality, nor the absence of it bespeak carnality, it is axiomatic that the submissive heart, willing to learn and to please the Lord who bought it, will be brought into the light of the Word of God suddenly or little by little, and will never risk a compromise.

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