

## **A Consideration of The 'Head Covering' of 1 Corinthians 11**

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In this essay I attempt to answer the question: “Does 1 Corinthians 11 teach that women must wear a hat, scarf, or similar object in public worship?”

Excellent students of the Bible have come to a number of different conclusions about this matter, and I don't believe that I will be able to provide the definitive answer to this question. I believe, however, that it is worth revisiting the question, as many of the interpretations [other than in commentaries], on all sides of the issue, are largely unavailable today. These earlier interpretations of this passage were presented in books, sermons, letters, or articles that are no longer in print.

I will state at the outset that I believe that the passage (1 Cor 11) does not teach that women must (at all times) wear hats in public worship. The remainder of this essay will attempt to provide support for my position.

### **The Argument from Nature**

The first thing we should notice, whatever else the passage teaches, is that Paul is not dealing with a temporary cultural tradition or personal instruction. It is not acceptable to dismiss this passage by equating it with other instructions of Paul such as his advice to Timothy to drink wine (1 Tim 5.23) and to place widows on the list only if they are over sixty (1 Tim 5.9), and his injunction to greet one another with a 'holy kiss' (Rom 16.16).

Paul appeals to the fact that particular actions bring honour or dishonour (4-5), that the order of creation tells us what our behaviour should be (7, 8), that this behaviour is the natural<sup>[1]</sup> pattern as ordained by God (14, 15), and that it is a universal practice in the churches (16).

Therefore, whatever Paul is writing about is not local, nor is it to be considered temporary. What he is teaching is binding (“there is no other practice”) on the church and on us today. So it is important that we try hard to discover what it is that he is telling us to do.

### **Corporate Worship?**

Various positions have been presented about this passage. For example, since Paul mentions prophesying (teaching) these positions argue that he must be dealing with:

- public worship,

- a situation that is no longer applicable because prophesying has ended, or
- a setting other than corporate worship.

The view that this passage is dealing with a public-worship setting encounters difficulties. If Paul is speaking of involvement in the public meeting, then why did he not use the expressions relating to the public meeting as he does in 1 Corinthians 11.16,18; 14.26? Is he really dealing with a public assembly? If so, is he dealing with women who are taking on roles reserved for men elsewhere in his teachings? This raises the difficulty concerning why Paul does not tell the women to be silent, as he does in 1 Tim 2.12. It is very hard to explain away the apparent contradiction. Also, if this passage is dealing with public worship, then on what grounds can a covering be imposed on women who remain silent and do not prophesy or pray? In what way is a woman dishonouring her head if she remains silent? In addition, if a woman's head is covered is she allowed to pray (if not prophesy [teach]) in a public setting (in spite of the passage in 1 Timothy)?

In support of the second viewpoint, Matthew Poole in his commentary says: "We now have no such prophetess; so as I think that question about the lawfulness of women's going without any other covering upon their heads than their hair, must be determined from other texts, not this, and is best determined from circumstance; for God having given to the woman her hair for a covering and an ornament ..." I believe that Poole's view does not deal adequately with the emphasis of Paul on the universal nature of the behaviour that he is discussing.

Gary North, for example, argued for the third view - i.e., that this section does not deal with corporate worship,<sup>[2]</sup> and instead Paul is dealing with prophesying in some other context (e.g., fellowship meetings), and therefore there is no contradiction with 1 Tim 2.12. Some argue that since Paul asks (13) if it is proper for a woman to pray with her head uncovered, the instructions are placed in a more general context and therefore include all forms of prayer, whether or not they are in public worship. If this passage does deal with prayer in all contexts (in public worship, or not), then it raises a difficult question. If the passage is not dealing with public worship, can a woman pray anywhere (even in her home) without her head being covered? Also, the instructions about the Lord's Supper which follow may imply that Paul is dealing with corporate worship.

How are we going to determine which of these three views is correct? It will not be easy. Much more learned people than you or I have not been able to come to a convincing and defensible explanation, let alone obtain consensus. I suggest, however, that it is not necessary to solve the problem of what setting this passage is speaking about to come to an answer about the 'head-covering' issue.

## What Head Covering?

I propose we take the position that in this passage Paul is not dealing with veils, robes, hats, turbans, shawls, scarves, or any other form of man-made head covering. He is dealing with the natural head covering that God provides for man—hair. If we take this position, we can see that we don't have to deal with the issue of corporate worship, and we can leave those debates for another time. I believe that what Paul is dealing with is the relationship between the sexes and how this is to be demonstrated—i.e., what is the sign of this relationship.

If we consider the cultural context of behaviour in Corinth, and Jewish practice, in Paul's day we will find support for the view that what is under consideration is the proper length of hair for men and women, and not a man-made covering. Greek men of Paul's day wore their hair long. Paul seems to be saying that this is not proper; it is contrary to nature. Tertullian, writing about 204 AD, supports Paul's statement: "Hence let the world, the rival of God, see to it, if it asserts that close-cut hair is graceful to a virgin in like manner as that flowing hair is to a boy."<sup>[3]</sup>

Jewish men of Paul's day covered their heads with the *tallith* or shawl when praying.<sup>[4]</sup> Paul likely would have done this himself in the synagogue, or he would have been driven out. Converted Jews probably continued this practice for a time after the Apostolic age. In addition it appears that priests in the OT were to keep their hair short, and yet were to wear a turban covering their hair.<sup>[5]</sup> They wore the turban even when they went into the inner court where prayer was offered. The use of the *tallith* is likely an extension of this practice. Therefore, it seems that the issue Paul is dealing with is not man-made coverings, but hair.

There are commentators who are unwilling to accept the conclusion that hair is to be understood as the covering for women. They generally quote verse 5 and the first part of verse 6 and contrast the 'uncovered' woman with the one with the 'shaved head' or 'hair cut off'. They assume that Paul is making a distinction between only two things—a man-made covering and short hair. They bypass the latter part of verse 6 and miss the contrast Paul establishes by saying that it is a shame for a woman to have cut (short) hair instead of *long hair*. They conclude that Paul must be talking about a veil, robe, hat, turban, shawl, or scarf.

Consider the following translation of the passage ( 4-7, 10, 13-15) with the substitution of 'long/short hair' (in italics) for the word covered/uncovered:

(4) Every man praying or prophesying with *long hair* [down over his head having anything] dishonours his head [i.e., Christ]. (5) Every woman praying or prophesying with *short hair* [uncovered] dishonours her head [i.e., the man], for it is just as though her head were shaved. (6) If a woman does not have *long hair* [a covering on the head], she should have her hair shorn; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair shorn or shaved off, she should have *long hair* [let her head be covered].<sup>[6]</sup> (7) A man ought not to

have *long hair* [cover his head], since he is the image and glory of God. ... (10) The woman ought to have [a sign of the man's] authority on her head [i.e., ought to have *long hair*]. ... (13) Judge for yourselves; Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with *short hair* [uncovered]? (14) Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has **long hair**,<sup>[7]</sup> it is a disgrace to him, (15) but that if a woman has **long hair**, it is her glory? For **long hair** is given to her for [i.e., as<sup>[8]</sup>] a covering.<sup>[9]</sup>

Paul brings into the discussion a consideration of the length of hair (in verses 14-15) as an explanation of what he meant by *covering* in the preceding verses. He is explaining that long hair is the covering to be used by women while praying and prophesying to show their submissive position. If Paul's reference to hair length does not explain the covering that women are to have, then his example from God's natural order has no relevance for the preceding.

Tertullian in his essay entitled *On the Veiling of Virgins*<sup>[10]</sup> argues that young women of marriageable age should cover their faces with a veil to keep young men from lusting after them. In this regard he says: "So perilous a face, then, ought to be shaded, which has cast stumbling-stones even so far as heaven." He tells young women to "Put on the panoply of modesty; surround yourself with the stockade of bashfulness; rear a rampart for your sex, which must neither allow our own eyes egress nor ingress to other people's. Wear the full garb of *woman*, to preserve the standing of *virgin*." He uses the passage we are considering as an argument concerning why women are to wear a **veil** on their faces, he says:

Turn we next to the examination of the reasons themselves which lead the apostle to teach that the female ought to be veiled, (to see) whether the self-same (reasons) apply to *virgins* likewise; so that hence also the community of the name virgins and not-virgins may be established, while the self-same causes which necessitate the veil are found to exist in each case.

He argues (incorrectly) that Paul is speaking of the angels in Genesis 6 who were tempted by women, and that Paul wants women to wear a veil so that the angels won't be tempted again to sin with women. He concludes his argument with a challenge to women, by pointing to the example of Arabs. Their women not only covered their heads with shawls of some kind, but veiled their faces. He said that since they did this, Christian women should also.

Regardless of what we may think about the necessity of young women veiling their faces today, or about the Biblical accuracy of Tertullian's arguments, it is clear that Tertullian was aware of contemporary clothing practices. It is interesting therefore to consider what he has to say about the *head* (as distinct from *face*) covering.

If, moreover, the apostle further adds the pre-judgement of "nature" that redundancy of locks is an honour to a *woman*, because hair serves for a covering, of course it is most of all to a *virgin* that this is a distinction; for their very adornment properly consists in this, that, by being massed together upon the crown, it wholly covers the very citadel of the head with an encirclement of hair. The contraries, at all events, of all these (considerations) effect that a *man* is *not* to cover his head: to wit, because he has not by nature been gifted with excess of hair; because to be shaven or shorn is not shameful to him ...

It seems to be clear that Tertullian, although he argued (from 1 Cor 11) for young women to wear facial veils, also understood that a woman's hair provided the primary covering for her head. In addition, he does not say that a woman must wear a robe, hat, turban, shawl, or scarf on top of the hair. He did say however, that even if a young woman wore a man-made covering on her hair, it was not enough—if the face wasn't covered.

It is interesting, also, in this respect to consider the Nazirite. In Numbers 6.5 we are told that a person who took a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite was to let his hair grow long. This instruction provides support for the view that long hair is the sign of submission in a religious context. Patrick Fairbairn says the following about a Nazirite:

The next thing exacted of the Nazirite was to leave his hair unshorn. And this was so different from the prevailing custom, yet so strictly enjoined upon him, that it might be regarded as the peculiar badge of his condition. ... Thus he was said to bear "the consecration (literally the separation, the distinctive badge) of his God upon his head." The words readily suggest to us those of the apostle Paul in 1 Cor 11.10, and the appointment itself is perhaps best illustrated by a reference to the idea there expressed. Speaking of the propriety of a woman appearing with long hair, as given to her by nature for a modest covering, and a token of subjection to her husband, the apostle adds, that "for this reason she must have power upon her head"; i.e., (taking the sign for the thing signified, as circumcision for the covenant),<sup>[11]</sup> she must wear long hair, covering her head, as a symbol of the power under which she stands, a sign of her subjection to the authority of the man. ... Hence it was counted even a shame, a renouncing of the proper standing of a man, a mark of effeminate weakness and degeneracy, for men like Absalom, to cultivate long tresses. But the Nazirite, who gave himself up by a solemn vow of consecration to God, and who should therefore ever feel the authority and the power of his God upon him, most fitly wore his hair long, as the badge of his entire and willing subjection to the law of his God.<sup>[12]</sup>

Additional evidence that Paul is speaking about hair as the covering for the head can be obtained from 1 Timothy 2.9 (see also 1 Peter 3.3). Women are instructed by the Apostle to wear simple hair-styles in public worship, which would not draw attention to themselves. This instruction would be meaningless if their hair was covered with a shawl or scarf, since no one would have been able to see their gaudy or extravagant display.

In 1 Cor 11 (4-7, 10, 13-16) it is the length of the hair that is important to Paul. If a woman wears her hair short, it is as if she were shaved (bald). He is saying that men are to have short hair and women are to have long hair. There is to be no debate on this as far as Paul is concerned. God's natural order, and not prevailing custom, is to be the determining factor.

Since, as I believe, Paul tells us clearly that the covering for a woman is to be her long hair, we are relieved from trying to figure out what the head-covering should be (a veil, robe, hat, turban, shawl, scarf, etc.).

The principle that Paul is teaching, and one that is unacceptable to many in our culture, is that a woman is to show her submission to man (and God) by the length of her hair (1 Cor 11.7-12). Godly women will wear their hair long, and always appear distinctly feminine, to show that they are willing to submit to men who are God's agents of authority. Long hair is to be a reminder of a woman's position relative to man's.

Simply, this passage has nothing to do with hats or other man-made coverings. It has everything to do with a permanent and God-ordained distinction between men and women that is to be demonstrated by the respective length of their hair.

[1] In Rom 1.26 Paul uses the term 'against nature,' and here he uses the same word for *nature* to make his point.

[2] Gary North, "The Covering for the Woman's Head: Another View," *Banner of Truth*, 1971, p 26.

[3] Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume IV*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.

[4] Alan Millard, "*Discoveries from the Time of Jesus*," Lion Publishing Co., Oxford, 1990, pp. 20,32. See also the OED's definition: "the garment or mantle (in modern times frequently assuming the form of a scarf) worn by Jews at prayer." The OED makes reference to works published by men who had visited Palestine, including: Purchas *Pilgrimage*, Beaton *Jews in East*, and Bonar & M'Cheyne *Mission to Jews*.

[5] Ex 28.36-38; Ezk 44.17-20.

[6] Paul is stating a logical conclusion. The Greek expression *ei gar* can be translated "if, whether, that, if only, surely, since ..." Other translations could be: "Since it is a disgrace for a woman to have short hair, she should have long hair." or "Surely it is a disgrace for a woman to have short hair; therefore, she should have long hair."

[7] Instances marked in bold are shown as in the original.

[8] Paul uses *anti* which means that her hair is provided for (Mt 5.38; 17.27; 20.28; Rom 12.17; Eph 5.31; 1 Thes 5.15; Heb 12.2, 16; 1 Pet 3.9), instead of (Lk 11.11; James 4.15), or in the place of (Mt 2.22), a covering.

[9] Verse 15 uses a different word for covering. While "covering" is certainly a valid translation the interesting thing is that this word also supports the translation: robe,

garment, or mantle (e.g., Heb 1.12). It seems that Paul is saying explicitly that a woman's long hair is given to her as a shawl.

[10] Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, *Fathers of the Third Century*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI., pp. 27-37.

[11] Gen 17.10.

[12] Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture*, Vol 2, Tibbals & Sons, New York NY., 10 th edition, p. 369.