

SHOULD WOMEN BE VEILED IN WORSHIP?

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Our common interest is to understand and teach truth. Truth is what is. It is an accurate description of reality. We do not think up truth. We discover it.

(Is there a group on earth to whom truth belongs? We like to think there is. It is that group of individuals who carefully and correctly search for it)

Jesus said, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth" (John 17:17). This verse identifies a source of absolute truth. God's Word describes reality without error. But, our interpretations of it are not absolute. When we read the Bible we read absolute truth. As soon as we add wording of our own, the *absolute* nature of truth comes into question. Our interpretations of any portion of the Bible are truthful only if they represent it accurately.

Because the Bible presents truth, it is worthy of our unending study. Our hunger and thirst for righteousness gives us a healthy appetite for a deepening understanding of God's will.

Because our opinions and interpretations are subject to error, they are in need of constant review. This is the means by which we grow in knowledge. This is also the way we demonstrate love for truth.

It is necessary that we focus our minds on these few thoughts about the nature of truth before entering a discussion of our topic, because the discovering of truth is our common goal. To know the truth is our most important quest. There is a difference between zeal for an opinion and love for truth.

Truth is not divinely funneled into any special corporate body. Truth is what is, and those who understand reality know the truth.

Today we are reminded anew that there is difference of opinion on whether or not the Bible requires that women be covered or veiled in worship. We have been expressing our contrasting opinions on this topic over several years.

This means that we have differing views of what is real in regard to covering for women in worship. I would hope that I would not be considered an opponent competing in some battle of words. Instead, please accept this as my contribution of information to help us move toward a greater understanding. Mine is one of a number of different opinions on this matter of headcovering.

Those who agree that women should be covered seem to disagree on the nature of the covering required. This indicates that all of us can learn. This presentation represents an attempt to introduce information and reasoning that I hope will be helpful in our search for truth.

There are two issues which deserve our attention. First, there is the dogmatic question, "Should women be veiled in worship?" Then there is the more pragmatic (practical) question, "What kind of covering is appropriate?" There is a third, important question: "Why?" These issues are closely related and inseparable. What can be gained by adopting a theology that will not be practiced? What does the practice say about the

belief?

The question before us is, "Does it remain necessary for women to be veiled in worship?"

The Nature and Source of the Teaching

Our answers will be found in an exegesis of I Corinthians 11:1-16, the only Bible passage dealing with this subject.

In seeking to analyze this passage we ask three questions: (1) What does the text say? (2) What does it say to whom it was addressed? What was Paul telling the saints at Corinth? And, (3) What does the passage say to us?

We begin by giving consideration to the *source* of Paul's instructions about veiling. He praises the Corinthians because they remember him and keep the "*ordinances*" as he delivered them. This is the wording of the King James Version. For the word "*ordinances*" we find a variety of synonyms in other versions. The Greek word means "that which is delivered" and can refer to a doctrine, an instruction, a principle, a rule of conduct.

I alert you to the contrast in wording between I Corinthians 11:2 and I Corinthians 11:23. In the latter verse Paul states, "For I have received *of the Lord* that which also I delivered unto you."

Verse 2 does not identify the source of the deliverance concerning the headcovering. We have no argument with the propriety of Paul's message to the Corinthians. It was inspired, God-breathed writing. However, it provokes the investigator to search more deeply into the origin and

SHOULD WOMEN BE VEILED IN WORSHIP?

meaning of the teaching or tradition. We must not only determine what this passage says, but we must seek to understand what it said to those who received Paul's instruction directly.

Caution about Linking Head-covering with the Lord's Supper

In addition to the difference in the identity of the sources for the teaching on headcovering and the instructions concerning the Lord's Supper, we note that I Corinthians 11:3 begins with a conjunction. The English King James Version uses "but," as does the New English Bible and the New American Standard Bible. The New International Version begins with the conjunction, "now." The Greek is "thelo de."

Whichever conjunction is preferred, a definite break in the subject material is evident. Whatever traditions Paul compliments the Corinthians for observing, it is likely that the veiling of women is not included.

A final indication that headcovering and the Lord's Supper are not included in Paul's reference to "ordinances" in Verse 2 can be noted in Verse 17. His introduction to the issue of the Lord's Supper observance takes on a negative tone. Verse 2 is complimentary. Verse 17 is not: "Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not." The compliment in verse 2 seems to be general, referring to a relationship between writer and readers. As such it is specifically transitional.

Whether or not headcovering may be included with the ordinances referred to in Verse 2 cannot be determined precisely. The Lord's Supper appears to be excluded.

The Origin of the Headcovering Tradition

It will be helpful to have a meeting of the minds on an answer to this question: "Where else in the Bible is there any instruction involving the headcovering of women in worship?" It is necessary to keep two concerns in mind.

We are talking about *headcovering in worship*, and the covering must involve *women*. This is the specific subject with which Paul deals.

Each of us recognizes that the Bible speaks of headcoverings for women, such as Rebecca, Leah, Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar and others. None of these instances refers to worship. There is also instruction concerning headcovering for the priest during the tabernacle rites, but this has no reference to the headcovering of women in worship.

Lacking biblical background for the origin of veiling women in worship, we investigated secular sources. I quote from the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1941 edition, Volume 5, pages 262, 263:

Covering the head at prayer, study or religious observances is not based on any law of the Bible or Talmud, but appears for the first time in Medieval Jewish codes. It is not so much a part of definite religious law as of custom.

Writing from the point of view of history, many scholars agree that there is no evidence in the sources to indicate that the custom of covering the head while performing religious duties originated in Palestine; they maintain that the practice was introduced at a comparatively late date in Babylonia.

Others contend it dates back to the mitre which the Jewish High Priest wore while officiating at the temple in Jerusalem. It was worn to distinguish Jewish high priests from heathen priests who wore no headgear. Others contend Greek and Roman priests did [wear headgear].

A second quote comes from a book by James B. Hurley, entitled *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, page 260.

The lack of any Old Testament legislation concerning the wearing of a veil of any sort speaks as forcefully against assuming universal veiling of women as does the evidence of women whose faces were visible. Any veiling which took place was a matter of custom rather than biblical requirement. Archaeology has

provided us with very little help in identifying Hebrew practice. There is, however, a monument of Sennacherib's which shows captive Hebrew women wearing garments like the Roman palla or the Greek himitation which are draped over their heads and extend to their feet.

At this point two important probabilities are apparent: (1) The women at Corinth were not practicing covering their heads during worship before Paul advised them to do so; and, (2) Paul's source of instructions for headcovering did not come from the Bible.

The Purpose for the Headcovering on Women

If we assume correctly that Paul's instructions are not based on Biblical precedent, and if the practice was not observed by the women at Corinth, why did Paul issue this requirement? It will help for us to ponder this important question.

According to I Corinthians 11:3-10, Paul asked the women to be veiled in worship because such practice acknowledged the hierarchy established by the order of creation. This specific purpose should be kept in focus.

The Romans and later the Germans were accustomed to praying while they were veiled. The veiling expressed reverence and a feeling of unworthiness. These are humbling sentiments, but they are not the reason Paul called for the veiling of women.

Elder Robert Coulter will remember a discussion he and I had with a young lady of the Denver, Colorado congregation who became convinced that she must be veiled. She wore a small piece of pretty, lacy netting on her abundant hair. It was cosmetic, or decorative in nature.

She testified that the covering was a great source of blessing to her because previously she had been too proud of her hair. She felt she brushed, combed and admired it too much. Placing a veil on it gave her a sense of release from excessive pride and made her feel closer to God.

SHOULD WOMEN BE VEILED IN WORSHIP?

Her attitude was appreciated, but she was in error about the purpose of veiling. Is it possible that many ladies in our congregations are quite fervent in their head-covering discipline without even knowing *why* they wear a "covering" in worship?

Perhaps most of our congregations have a good understanding about the purpose for veiling, but I can't help wondering. My doubts are based on the kind of veiling or covering that is used. This is important because the message communicated through headcovering is not told by saying words but by following through with *appropriate* action.

The hierarchy of creation is based on man's being created before the woman. God recognized that the man He made needed a helpmate. He took a part (rib) from man and made a woman. Woman came from man. This sequence of events makes man the head of the woman.

The Meaning of "Head"

In this setting, "head" is to be understood not so much as "chief" or "ruler," as "source" or "origin." I do not state this dogmatically, but as a suggestion to help us understand the point of Paul's teaching. Specifically, head-covering has less to do with submission than declaring the creative order. The two are not the same. One may be based on the other, but they are expressed differently. Submission is expressed in the ongoing relationship between two people instead of by some religious symbol.

Christ is head of the church. The church includes both sexes. As head of the church, Christ is head of both man and woman. In I Corinthians 11, Christ is identified as head of every man, exclusive of women. There is a significant difference and that difference is found in the use of the word "head." Certainly women may be members of the church. It is stated that they may pray or prophesy. This means that Christ who is head of the church is

the head of the female members as well as the males.

When we think of Christ as head of the church, we think of Him as the chief or ruler. His word is absolute. His example is to be followed. His being is to be worshiped, and His message is to be taught. He is the head, the chief authority of the church for *all* members.

How is He the head of men only? It is in the order of creation. It refers to source. God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of man, and man is the head of woman.

Distinguishing Glories

Each individual is the glory of his/her head. Woman is the glory of man, who is the glory of Christ, who is the glory of God.

I Corinthians 11:7 is a key verse of this passage and study. "For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man."

So that we understand this verse as well as possible, I emphasize the reason for the veiling of women. Women were required to be covered because they were the glory of man. Man should have his head uncovered because he is the glory of God. In worship, God's glory must be manifest, man's must not. The glory of man was not to be in evidence during worship, so it required that women be covered.

The Nature of the Covering

Because of what it must accomplish, it is essential that we consider the nature of the covering. Both the object of Paul's instruction and the Greek word used suggest a concealing or hiding. The order of creation is acknowledged by the concealing of man's glory. If a woman's covering takes on a cosmetic nature, it attracts rather than hides.

Paul instructed that women must be covered as a symbolic recognition of the creative order. Paul did not suggest a symbolic covering, but a literal covering as

a symbol of the creative order. Man's glory had to be hidden or the creative order was ignored.

Customs change. I submit that those who are reluctant to depart from the custom Paul delivered would do well to address that custom along with current practices in closer detail. There is doubt whether the teaching of Paul to the Corinthians is being followed by any of our churches.

A number of commentaries and books on the nature of the head-covering worn during the time Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians have been examined — at least 20, if not more. There is some difference of opinion on certain features of the covering. All but one agreed that it *covered*.

Tertullian, an early apologist for Christianity, offered counsel on the matter of the headcovering. He lived A.D. 160-220. In his lively style he advised women,

Wear a rampart for your sex, which must neither allow your eyes to egress, or ingress to other people . . . if any are so deaf as not to be able to hear through a covering, I pity them. Arabia's female heathen shall be your judges, who cover not only the head, but the face also, so entirely that they are content to leave one eye free, to enjoy rather half the light than to prostitute the entire face.

This quote would indicate that the women addressed by Tertullian did not cover their faces; hence, his suggestion that they do so. It also describes the attitude of an influential early church father concerning the nature of the covering.

A commentary by Thomas Charles Edwards of Lincoln College, Oxford, published by A. C. Armstrong and Son in 1886 lists three reasons for *veiling the face*.

More recent writings include Harper's *New Testament Commentary*, written by C. K. Barret and published in 1968. It suggests that the veil "is to be understood as a headcovering concealing the hair and upper part of the body, not as a covering for the face."

Dr. F. F. Bruce in his book on I and II Corinthians writes,

SHOULD WOMEN BE VEILED IN WORSHIP?

What Paul has in mind is a veil which covers the whole head and in particular conceals all the hair; something worn on top of the head like a present-day cap or hat does not really come within the scope of this requirement.

While several other quotes were available, this will more than suffice. Ideas differ on whether or not the woman's covering concealed the face. There seems to be little question that the women were required to cover at least their hair and upper body. These observations are of value because they identify what Paul required by the covering, concealing man's glory when God is worshiped. They are also consistent with the Greek term Paul used for "covering" (*katakalypto*).

Headcovering Consistent with the Nature of Custom

Changes in the customary manner of covering have not been resisted. It is reasonable to allow for change in customs as cultures change, because that recognizes the nature of a custom. Traditions seek to maintain, but they eventually accommodate change. This is particularly evident where one appeals to a custom which *itself* has been the product of evolution as contrasted to an established law of God. I refer to the tradition of veiling women. It is likely that this custom grew from Hebrew enthusiasm to maintain recognition of the order of creation. The failure of the Corinthians to communicate such recognition was offensive to the sizeable number of Jewish Christians. This practice has the origin of a tradition; Paul called it a tradition; and it is maintained in the manner of a tradition. It seems no more than realistic to recognize it to be a tradition.

In Paul's day, this custom enjoyed every reason to be followed. It effectively communicated the order of creation. This was done by concealing man's glory when God's glory was honored. Consistent with changes that are characteristic of customs, there is

no longer concealment; man's glory is not only in evidence, but enhanced. It matters not, because the custom no longer communicates the order of creation. The general public does not grasp this message, and it is doubtful that our church sisters know why Paul delivered the teaching.

Because of the Angels

We arrive at one of the more interesting verses of this passage, verse 10. Because woman was taken from man, indicating that she is man's glory, she should wear a sign of authority on her head *because of the angels*.

Differences of opinion abound concerning whose authority is symbolized. Some insist that it is the woman's own authority. They argue that people wear signs of their own authority, such as a policeman wearing his badge. The authority referred to would be that which she shares with man over the rest of nature.

Others feel that it is a sign of man's authority over the woman. At any rate, it is worn "because of the angels." We will focus on this phrase briefly.

Paul's reference to the angels is puzzling. Many opinions are offered explaining who these angels are. The proposals fall into four general categories:

1. Bad angels who would be wrongfully influenced by exposed women. Tertullian writes,

What angels? If he [Paul] means fallen angels of the Creator, there is great propriety in his meaning. It is right that the face which was a snare to them should wear some mark of humble guise and obscured beauty . . . But even though they were females already contaminated, whom these angels desired, so much more "because of the angels" would it have been the duty of virgins to be veiled, as it would have been more possible for virgins to have been the cause of angels sinning: . . . So perilous a face, then, ought to be shaded, which has cast stumblingblocks so far as heaven.

2. Learning angels who used the covering of women as an example

of modesty.

3. Ministers who might be distracted by the sight of female exposure. To interpreters this is the weakest of the proposals because it is difficult to understand why ministers would be most distracted by women during worship.

4. God has assigned to angels the responsibility to be guardians of the order of creation.

Due to reverence for angels during Paul's time, it seems logical that this verse deals with celestial beings as opposed to ministers. Since we are less involved with identifying and honoring angels, it is likely that this phrase had meaning for the Corinthians that can no longer be ascertained specifically. Any suggestions, such as have been noted, are the product of inference based on slight evidence. They should be analyzed carefully and critically.

Equality in Fellowship

Verses 11 and 12 remind the Corinthians that in the matter of fellowship both sexes enjoy equality. Interestingly, Paul's basis for this conclusion still appeals to source, but the basis for equality moves beyond creation. He indicates that the first woman came from man, but thereafter man came from woman. God is the source of *all*. This suggests a two-faceted conclusion: that the veiling of women asserts the creative order specifically; and, even though the creative order is asserted, in the acceptance of members for fellowship both the covered and uncovered (women and men) are equal. God is the source of both. Both are to be regarded as a meaningful product of God's creation. There is no difference in rank.

What Nature Teaches

Verses 13-15 discuss what seems fitting and natural. Paul asks whether it is comely or fitting for a woman to pray uncovered.

His questions about what *nature* teaches would give the impression that Paul considered them to be

SHOULD WOMEN BE VEILED IN WORSHIP?

rhetorical. The answers would be apparent without the need to verbalize. Those who showed good judgment and were conscientious would agree that it is fitting for a woman to cover her head when praying, and that it seems natural for a man to have short hair and a woman to have long hair.

What is "Nature"?

What is there about nature that would teach that long hair on men is disgraceful but long hair on women is glorious?

Is Paul saying that nature as a *creative and controlling force of the universe* teaches this?

Were we to allow nature to teach us which of the sexes should have long hair, we could be confused. It is probable that without some fashioning both sexes would end up with lengthy locks. Were nature to determine how we should look, few, if any, of our faces would be as soft, smooth and effeminate looking as they are.

Since the Nazarite vow called for men to leave their hair *uncut*, it follows that men were improving on "nature" by cutting their hair for many centuries. It was considered the right thing to do, but it was not the way nature would have handled it. Hence, it would appear that what nature *does* and what nature *teaches* differ!

To what does Paul appeal when he cites that nature supports the teaching he was delivering?

"Nature" is referred to in two ways: (1) The definition already cited, a creative and controlling force of the universe; and, (2) taste built upon custom. Paul appeals to the second of these descriptions of nature. He indicates that it looks better for men to have short hair and the ladies to have long hair. Why? Because society was used to it. Long hair was identified with femininity. It was bothersome, if not deplorable, to see men disregard their masculinity in favor of adopting the appearance of a female. Our tastes today are similar.

This distinction is not taught us

by the natural forces of the universe. There is no basis to conclude that these tastes are inherent. They are customary. They are part of our psychological and social *conditioning*.

In this context Paul observes that a woman's hair is given to her instead of a covering. This statement deserves attention.

Is a Woman's Hair Her Covering?

Some feel that after the considerable discussion about the need for women to be covered in worship, recognizing and symbolizing the order of creation, Paul concedes that this responsibility is met by their own hair. Appeal is made to Old Testament precedent and definitions such as Leviticus 10:6 where Aaron's sons were ordered not to "uncover" their heads. This meant that they were not allowed to let their hair hang loose. This same wording is giving in reference to the high priest in Leviticus 21:10.

The most significant passage to support the opinion that a woman's hair may serve as her covering is found in Numbers 5:18. This passage describes the bitter water rite which was used to determine whether a woman was adulterous. The verse says that a priest shall uncover the woman's head. This process of uncovering was little more than loosening the woman's hair from the top of her head, allowing it to hang or flow down. Some conclude that women who wear their hair up in some form, which would prevent its flowing and becoming tangled, would be considered covered.

There are problems with this interpretation, in my opinion.

This viewpoint seems hard to reconcile to Paul's observation that the uncovered woman should *also* be shorn. Paul seems to be saying that if a sister insists on exposure by refusing an additional covering, she should express her compulsion to be seen to its ultimate by cutting her hair, too.

Further, Paul identifies her hair as her glory. Biblically and historically there is ample evi-

dence that the women used to weave strips of precious metals into their hair when doing it up. Undoubtedly, it was attractive. If the purpose of covering the woman was to conceal man's glory in the presence of God, how could a woman be considered covered when her glory (and man's) had been enhanced?

Third, the word Paul uses for covering in Verse 15 (*peribolaion*: *peri*, around; *boli*, a throw) differs from that used previously in the chapter. It speaks of a garment thrown around one. If the hair put up is her covering, according to Old Testament reference, and loosening it would be uncovering, we have a contradiction in terms. Hair worn up would not be like a garment thrown around.

What could be meant by Paul's reference to hair being a woman's covering?

It would appear that Paul is drawing some logic from what seems natural, fitting, tasteful. He suggests that because a woman naturally looks good with more hair on her head, it gives all the more reason to be consistent by adding a covering during worship. What nature teaches by way of example, man should be willing to adopt. If nature gives woman a covering, man's practices should conform. Paul cites nature to *support* his call for an expression of the order of creation. He does not give it as a *reason* to wear a second headcovering, but only as evidence of its propriety.

No Other Custom

Our analysis of I Corinthians 11:2-16 closes with a discussion of verse 16. The wording here stimulates much opining. Many have been critical of the rendition of the King James Version which states, "But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God." Other versions read much like the New International Version, "... we have no other practice. . . ." These statements contrast with each other.

As much as I was able to deter-

SHOULD WOMEN BE VEILED IN WORSHIP?

mine, the King James Version actually stays truer to the Greek. Marshall's Interlinear gives this order of words, "If but anyone thinks contentious to be, we such custom have not, neither the churches of God."

Which custom is Paul referring to? We have at least three options: (1) the custom of *not* veiling; (2) the custom of veiling; and, (3) the custom of being contentious.

The first option is questionable because of the poor grammatical construction it implies. Extended, it infers that Paul is saying, "We have no such custom of not veiling, neither the churches of God." To use such a string of negatives, even though the implied is not stated, represents a flaw in writing style uncharacteristic of Paul. One would think he would state his position more clearly and in better form.

The second option is doubtful because it would have Paul undermine his own teaching. In fact, those preferring this interpretation use it for that very purpose, to nullify all that Paul taught in the foregoing verses.

Some reject the third possibility because they feel it should have been unnecessary for Paul to inform the Corinthians that other churches of God are not customarily contentious!

The third option seems most logical to me because Paul could be encouraging the Corinthians to cooperate without being argumentative. This was a call for unity, disallowing contention.

Conclusions

Having commented on this passage dealing with the veiling of women, I offer these conclusions:

1. The veiling of women in worship was a custom delivered by Paul to the church at Corinth. Its adoption by the Corinthians would unify its practice in the churches of God.

2. In origin, this custom has neither Biblical command, origin nor precedent. It probably came from the Hebrew/Jewish community and was regarded to be a symbol which asserted the hierarchy established by the order of creation. This was the custom's *singular* message.

3. The headcovering was to conceal the glory of man where and when the glory of God was honored in worship. In order to fulfill this requirement and to make the symbol effective, the covering had to conceal, not decorate or otherwise enhance to attract attention.

4. The appeal to what seems fitting and natural is based on what custom dictates. Nature as the creative and controlling force of the universe would not teach what Paul concluded. In I Corinthians 11:14, 15, Paul appeals to nature based upon psychological and social conditioning.

5. A custom which by its nature is symbolic must communicate a message or its purpose is lost. This means that the *message* is more important than the custom. When the custom no longer communicates what is intended its practice is without its original value. Subsequent values assigned may lack Biblical support.

6. The evolution of the custom delivered by Paul is evident. Its beginning is not definitely known. It probably had not reached Corinth before Paul's letter. It continues to evolve in meaning and practice, having shifted from concealment in Paul's day to adornment today. Also lost is agreement on what the tradition seeks to communicate.

7. Since the message communicated by headcovering is no longer understood or received by the community at large, and since headcoverings no longer cover, indicating that Paul's teaching is nowhere observed, there remains

neither biblical nor logical reason to support its maintenance. Patronage is not an acceptable alternative to obedience. It remains to recognize what is. None fulfills Paul's directive to the Corinthians concerning headcovering. There is no need to do so.

A Note about Authorities

The use of extra biblical authority, though legitimate, is often questioned. In an effort to allow evaluation of the sources quoted, a description of the author's attitude in their selection may be helpful.

Quotations included were considered to be a consensus of the respected commentators. Admittedly, there is always subjective influence in making selections, but that is not cause for dismissal. They deserve attention. At times varying opinions were given, such as the descriptions of the covering for women during Paul's day. These allow consideration of a variety of viewpoints. Also, both older and more recent sources were quoted.

Conscientious attention was given to assure that the extra biblical information used did not conflict with or attempt to change the language of the Scripture. None was chosen as an alternative to the Bible. All was offered in support of biblical wording and message.

Citing historical background is a legitimate mode of scriptural interpretation. History books do not enjoy the status of absolute truth in the manner the Bible does, but they are a source of information about what was. They assume added value where no biblical information is available.

For further consideration of my personal attitude toward truth, please refer to the introduction.

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