

SHOULD WOMEN COVER THEIR HEADS IN CHURCH?

By Denver Cheddie

1 Cor. 11:3-15

3 But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman *is* the man; and the head of Christ *is* God. 4 Every man praying or prophesying, having *his* head covered, dishonoureth his head. 5 But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with *her* head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. 6 For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. 7 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. 8 For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. 9 Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. 10 For this cause ought the woman to have power on *her* head because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. 12 For as the woman *is* of the man, even so *is* the man also by the woman; but all things of God. 13 Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered? 14 Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? 15 But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for *her* hair is given her for a covering.

In 1 Cor. 11:3-15, Paul definitely states that a woman ought to cover her head when praying or prophesying, and that men are not to. If anyone doubts that this is what Paul said and meant, I suggest that they read their Bibles again. Paul speaks of a physical covering. The covering is not the woman's hair as some suppose. 11:5 says that for a woman to have her head uncovered is ***just as if*** she were shaved. It was just as bad as, not identical with. Verse 10 speaks of a physical sign or symbol of authority on her head. Also this covering was specifically for when she was praying or prophesying. This really cannot refer to her hair. It has to refer to some physical covering.

Admittedly there is much in this passage that is difficult for us to understand, although those difficulties more than likely did not exist with the original readers. Why did Paul mention angels in verse 10? Why does he appeal to nature in verse 14, and what does nature mean? Most answers to these questions are speculative at best. Does the word "head" mean authority or source? Paul seems to indicate both in the text (vs. 8,9,12 cf. vs. 10) and scholars are divided over it.

The Real Issue

The real issue that impinges on us is whether this command was specific to the Corinthians by cultural constraints, or is it applicable to all believers of all time? I believe that principles are timeless and applicable for all time. Commands are subject to change.

There are quite a few instances in the Bible where God altered, amended or annulled his commands. The food laws are one such case. The divorce law was another example. God allowed divorce because of the hardness of man's heart, but it was never his plan. He only did it because He did not want man to get out of hand. That is the reason for many commands, just to keep sinful man in check (1 Tim. 1:9). To further illustrate this point, consider that in 1 Cor. 7:27b and 1 Tim. 5:14, Paul seems to give two opposing commands. In the first case, ***do not seek to be married***. In the second, ***get married***. But they were given to different audiences at different times.

But all the Old Testament commands were based on the principle of love for God and man (Matt. 22:38, 39). Commands were means of making principles practical to people in given situations. Believers were never intended to live by commands. Commands vary according to condition,

circumstance and culture. They are not timeless. So because Paul commanded the Corinthian women to cover their heads, that does not necessarily mean that women today need to do likewise.

The Believer's Public Testimony

In 1 Cor. 11, Paul appeals to our better judgment (vs. 13) and nature (vs. 14) to prove his case that women should cover their heads. Failure to do so would be just as if they were bald (vs. 5). What does nature mean? Does nature teach **US** that? It obviously did to the Corinthians. Does nature refer to the "fact" that women's hair grow more naturally than men's? Then what about Samson, Absalom, and Marge Simpson?

I think nature in this context refers to the culture and customs prevalent at the time. Women generally covered their heads. It was tradition. It is believed that only prostitutes and idol worshippers deviated from this norm [1], thus for believers to not follow tradition would seem to identify them with heathens. Considering that in 1 Cor. 8-10, Paul constantly emphasizes the importance of the Christian's public testimony as a message to the unsaved, it comes as no surprise to see that trend of thought continue in chapter 11 and even as far as 14:24.

It is very possible that what was more important to Paul was the principle that the believers' public testimony be above reproach, and as a result he urged them not to deviate from socially accepted customs. In our day when the head covering is not part of western culture, enforcing it may actually hinder the gospel rather than help it. So how could the principle applied to us actually mean the opposite of what the scripture says? I refer you again to 1 Cor. 7:27 and 1 Tim. 5:14. Commands change, but principles remain.

Submission to Authority

Today it is a custom that men wear pants not skirts. In ancient times, men wore what looked like dresses. David did not cut off piece of Saul's Levis or Armani (1 Sam. 24:4, 5). In Scotland, some men wear kilts which to me, look like skirts. For them that is and was normal. But if a man wears a skirt to church today in a western society, that would definitely cause a stir, perhaps even an offense. It could hardly be just an innocent act that does not really mean anything. More than likely it exposes certain homosexual tendencies, which by the way is sin. This is what it was like for a woman in Biblical times to not wear a head covering. For women today, it means very little. Back then, it could be nothing other than open rebellion. The principle is submission to authority.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe the following principles still apply today: 1) the public testimony of believers is important to the gospel message, 2) women are to submit to their husbands. I do not believe however that this requires women to still cover their heads in church.

[1] See Bonnidell & Robert G. Clouse, Ed., *Women in Ministry, Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1989) for the debate over this issue.

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