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"She Should Cover Her Head"

- 1 Co 11:6

1 Co 11:12-16 clearly states that women should have their heads covered while praying or prophesying. It also ranks among the most difficult of all passages in the NT. The intent of this article is not to give an exhaustive analysis of this passage, and so no attempt will be made to deal with every issue that surrounds this passage. Rather, this article will show whether or not Paul sees head covering as a normative church custom; or indeed, whether Paul sees this as a valid custom for any church, even for those of his own time.

Interpreters of this passage have found themselves in one of two camps when deciding what relevance this passage has for the church today. On the one hand, there are those who see this passage as having relevance for churches in Paul's day (though perhaps not all churches in Paul's day) and either no relevance for today or a modified relevance for today. Those in this camp include Christian feminists who see absolutely nothing in this passage to speak to the church today, as well as traditionalists who see an abiding principle of headship and submission but no binding custom of head coverings for women. In the other camp are those who see not only headship of men and submission of women, but also a command from Paul that head coverings for women are to be a custom of church practice throughout the ages.

Concerning the position of those in the first camp, it is unwise to explain away NT commands using the guise of cultural relativity. Cultural relativity is a very dubious principle upon which to operate. It can, in fact, be used to dismiss any or every part of the NT. Needless to say, we can't have that!

But even if one wanted to make an exception to the rule that commands in Scripture cannot be considered culturally relative, there still is no basis for doing so in this passage. There is absolutely nothing in this passage to suggest that Paul sees a cultural limitation to his injunction about head coverings. On the contrary, every reason Paul gives for his injunction is arguably timeless and universal in scope. His reasons include the chain of headship (God-Christ-man-woman, v 3), the priority of creation (vv 8-9), the angels (v 10), and nature itself (v 14). None of these things is temporary or culturally limited, but rather timeless, and indicate that Paul's injunction must be seen as timeless. Moreover, Paul calls this practice a "custom" of the church (v 16), and a "tradition" which he has handed down and to which he expects churches to hold (v 2).

Those of the second camp (i.e., those who see head coverings as a binding church practice) obviously enjoy the luxury of being able to argue the previous points. They also have the advantage of taking Paul's words at face value and can apply the passage without compromising hermeneutic integrity. Theirs is the stronger position based upon the preponderance of evidence. However, four or five points of grammar in this passage force a look at a third position.

Before positing the third position it will be necessary to look at several key elements of Paul's argument in this passage. First, it is notable that Paul takes one tone from vv 3-10, but from vv 11-16 takes quite another tone. Verse 11 seems to be the pivot point of the two tones. The key phrase in v

11 is "In the Lord, however." In the passage immediately preceding this phrase Paul makes several observations that, after v 11, he seems to balance. For instance, in vv 8-9 Paul seems to be arguing that man is completely independent of woman and, indeed, that woman is completely dependent on man ("for man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man"). Paul's point seems to be two-fold: 1) man does not rely upon woman for his existence, and 2) woman does rely upon the man for her existence, and, indeed, her existence is for the very purpose of benefiting man.

Yet, beginning with v 11, Paul seems to add balance to what he said in vv 8-9. Paul argues in v 11 that, yes, while it is true woman is not independent of man, "in the Lord" neither is "man independent of woman." The statement in vv 8-9 is true in itself, but does not go quite far enough. Man and woman are *interdependent*; neither one can claim independence. Paul expands upon this in v 12. In essence he says, yes, it is true that woman was made from man, but "also the man is born of the woman"-hence, interdependence, and hence, vv 8-9 are balanced by vv 11-12.

One last balance seems to be between v 7 and v 12. In v 7 Paul seems to argue that man was made in the image of God but woman was not. Instead, she was made in the image of man. The phrase "image and glory" is what is technically referred to as a hendiadys (lit., "one through two") and means simply that Paul uses two words to refer to one thing. So, when he says that man was created in the "image and glory of God" and that woman was created in the "glory of man," he means the same thing in both instances (Paul uses only one word, "glory," in the second phrase to represent the entire phrase "image and glory"). However, the idea that woman was made in the image of man (not untrue in itself, but misrepresentative of the fact that both man and woman were made in the image of God-see Ge 1:27) is balanced in v 12: "But everything comes from God." If v 9 makes the point that woman has her source in man, v 12 places it in proper perspective by pointing out that "everything" (i.e., both man and woman) have their source in God.

So, why does Paul make statements in vv 7-10 that he later must balance in vv 11-12? Before answering this question it will be necessary to reconstruct the occasion of Paul's response in this section of his letter. The best starting point is in v 16. There Paul gives us a clue as to what is going on. He says, "If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice-nor do the churches of God." It seems relatively clear from Paul's words that someone (or, perhaps more likely, some group) was insisting that the church take a specific position on women's head coverings. Most standard translations (including the NASB and the NIV) render Paul as saying, "we have no other practice." This would indicate that the "contentious" group was insisting that women should not wear head coverings. Paul then would be correcting this group by appealing to a universal church custom of head coverings for women. What is so surprising (and what is the very thing that caused me to rethink this passage) is that the Greek word translated "other" in v 16 (*toioutos*) never means "other" anywhere else; and, in fact, means only "such" ("we have no *such* custom"). Needless to say, this drastically changes the meaning of Paul's words. If Paul is saying "we have no such custom of women wearing head coverings," then obviously the "contentious" group was insisting that women should wear head coverings.

Moreover, when viewed this way, it becomes increasingly clear why Paul would make several points before v 11 only to counter them after v 11. It also explains why at the beginning of this passage Paul praises the Corinthians for not giving in to the pressure of the contentious group but, instead, for "holding to the teachings just as I passed them onto you" (v 2).

Based upon this information we may assume the following to be true of the Corinthian situation. The

"contentious" group had been trying to get the rest of the Corinthians to adopt a custom of women covering their heads with some kind of garment when praying or prophesying. The Corinthians, uncertain as to what to do in this situation, include a section about this teaching in a general letter which they wrote to Paul (see 7:1 for evidence of this letter). In the letter they may have said something to this effect: "There is a group of Christians who have come to us and told us that we are supposed to have our women wear head garments during the meeting. We don't recall you saying anything about this. So far we have not changed the way we have been doing things, but we would like to get your thoughts on this teaching." To which Paul replies, "I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings just as I passed them on to you." In other words, "I praise you for not changing the way I taught you to do things, especially in light of the fact that you were under pressure by this group to modify your meetings."

Paul then begins to outline in vv 3-10 the building blocks upon which those in the "contentious" group have built their teaching that women need to wear garments as head coverings. The important thing to remember here is that Paul does not disagree with the building blocks used by those in the "contentious" group to develop their theology of garments as head coverings. On the contrary, he agrees that a woman does indeed need a head covering when praying or prophesying. Everything that Paul says through v 10 is something that Paul firmly believes. He believes that woman was created in the image of man; he believes that woman is dependent of man and that man was created independent of woman—he believes all of this to be true. But he does not believe it to be the whole truth. Yes, woman was, in a sense, created in the image of man (v 7) (it was from Adam that Eve was created), but ultimately she, too, was created in the image of God (v 12). Yes, woman is dependent upon man for her initial existence (v 9), but so is man dependent upon woman for his further existence (vv 11-12).

So, while Paul does not disagree with the theological foundation of those in the "contentious" group, neither does he think they have gone far enough in building their theology. At best they have a lopsided view of woman's status before God. Likewise, Paul does not disagree that, on the basis of male headship, women should have a "covering" on their heads when praying or prophesying. His disagreement is with the application of this principle (i.e., the type of covering).

All through this passage (vv 3-10) Paul has been insisting that a woman must have a "covering" on her head. The Greek word he uses here is *katakalyptos*. Here he is in agreement with those of the "contentious" group. They, too, have been insisting that a woman have a covering on her head. But then Paul shifts his tone in v 11: "In the Lord, however," and from that point on begins to explain how this principle correctly applies to the church.

In vv 13-14 Paul asks the Corinthians two questions: 1) "Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?"; 2) "Does not the very nature of things teach you that . . . if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?" The two questions are to be answered as a set. The second question is intended to buttress the first. In other words, by answering the second question first, the answer to the first question should then be obvious. A wise sales manager might ask his sales team: "Is an increased sales effort something that we might want to implement?" and then buttress that with: "Don't we want to see an increase in our bonuses next month?" By answering the second question first (yes, we do want to see an increase in bonuses), the answer to the first question then becomes obvious (yes, and increased sales effort is something that we might want to implement).

Paul uses the same reasoning here. To answer the second question first: yes, a woman's long hair is her glory. The implied follow-up is, Why would a woman want to cover that which is her glory? This

makes the answer to the first question obvious: yes, it is proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered!

But here Paul is thinking about a different kind of covering. Up until this verse Paul has consistently used the word *kataluptos* ("covering") to insist that a woman be covered while praying or prophesying. Paul agrees with the contentious group that a woman does need a covering. What he disagrees with is their application. The contentious group insisted that the covering be a garment (a veil or shawl), whereas Paul is arguing that, in the case of the church ("In the Lord, however," v 11), the covering is the woman's own hair. Long hair, Paul argues, is the glory of a woman (v 15). he further argues this point in the very next phrase: "For, long hair is given to her as a covering." The word "as" here is *anti*, and means literally "instead of." The word for covering in this verse is not the same as has been used by Paul up to this point. Everywhere else in this passage Paul has used *kataluptos*, which is a very generic term for "covering." Here Paul uses the word *peribolaios*, which means literally "that which is wrapped around [the head]."

In other words, Paul is saying that, yes, women do need coverings (*kataluptos*) on their heads when praying or prophesying. But, "in the Lord" that covering is not a *peribolaios* (cloth wrapped around the head) but rather the woman's own long hair. In fact, "in the Lord" (i.e., in the church), long hair is given to a woman "instead of" (not "as") "that which is wrapped around the head." Women in the church have a ready-made covering and are therefore not necessarily in violation of the principles expressed in vv 3-10. Overall then, 1 Co 11:2-16 is a very liberating passage. In it, women are freed from the bondage of wearing religious head garb.

On which side of this issue do I then fall? In practice I do not at all differ from those who see this passage as culturally relative and who therefore do not practice garment head coverings for women. Hermeneutically, I am more closely allied with those who see no cultural relativity in this passage and who believe Paul is here laying down a custom for the church of all ages and cultures. Although I disagree with it regarding the exegesis of this passage, this view is far more faithful to Paul's intent than is the former view. Still, neither view seems to grapple with the literary structure of this passage (the point/counterpoint dialogue that pivots around v 11) or the points of grammar brought up in this article (the use of *anti* ["instead of"] in v 15, and the use of *toioutos* ["such"] in v 16). My reconstruction, though admittedly not without its own inherent weaknesses, goes much farther in unraveling a difficult passage about which there is much dispute. I hope that it will be of help to those who seek to follow apostolic tradition.

- E.S.

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