



Truth On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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What About the Head Covering?

I Corinthians 11:2-16

AS MENTIONED AT THE BEGINNING OF OUR STUDY of the principles for biblical interpretation, let us now use those principles to develop the Biblical teaching on a specific subject. Which subject? There are countless subjects we could choose, of course, and whichever we choose will not be of equal interest to everyone. A subject that recently caught my interest, however, was that of head coverings on women. What does Scripture really say about this? Should women today wear a head covering? Let us apply these principles (except the Paradox Principle, as it does not apply) to find out.

The Reverence, Diligence, and Illumination Principles

These three principles must always be the foundation of any study we do. We must not approach the Word of God flippantly or nonchalantly. Neither should we approach It with any preconceived ideas. Further, we must not approach It without a dependence upon the Holy Spirit's teaching. So, as we approach our main text, I Corinthians 11:2-16, let us do so with reverence, diligence, and dependence.

The Plain Principle

Applying this principle immediately reveals one important truth: *this passage does not command women to wear a covering*. There are those who use this text to teach that a woman must wear a hat, a scarf, or other article to cover the head, but the text clearly does not say that. In other words, this passage does not *mandate* a head covering.

It is also interesting that the covering Paul speaks of is a metaphor, or illustration, of submission. Unlike the allegorical approach to interpretation, which reads allegory into the text, Paul makes it clear that the covering is symbolic. When he says **the head of the woman is the man**, it's obvious that a man is not the literal head of a woman, rather he is the authority over her, as Christ is the authority over him.

Applying the Plain Principle here also destroys today's common teaching that women can preach, teach, and lead in church meetings. The teaching comes from the words **every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head** (v. 5). But if we take the Scripture plainly, this verse says nothing about church worship. We must not read anything into the text that is not there. As we'll point out later, Paul refers here to a woman praying or **prophesying** (that is, proclaiming the truth) in public places, not in congregational meetings.

The Grammatical Principle

The Greek word translated **uncovered** in verse 5 is the Greek *akatakalyptos*. The root *katakalyptos* means "to cover with a veil." This veil was not just a hat or other such article that covered the top of the head, rather it was the common eastern veil that covered the entire face except for the eyes. This word appears in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) in Exodus 26:34, where Moses hides the ark behind a curtain, and in Isaiah 6:2, where the seraphim cover their faces before the glory of God. So, the language clearly demonstrates that the **covering** was actually a veil. Those who teach that the covering is for today are

clearly not doing what the language teaches. Why do they not teach that the woman should be veiled? Because, as we'll see in a moment, Paul was dealing here with a local custom. How many Christian ladies today would be willing to go out of their houses with their faces totally veiled?

The word **covering** in verse 15 is a different Greek word, *peribolaion*, which refers to a cloak, wrap, cape, outer garment, or a mantle. It seems that Paul uses it here to reemphasize a covering for the head. In this case, as we'll see later, it is actually the woman's hair that can be her **covering**. The Greek behind **for** (*anti*) in verse 15 substantiates this fact, as it carries the normal meaning of "in place of" or "instead of." In Luke 11:11, for example, where Jesus asks, "If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he *for* [instead of] a fish give him a serpent?" James also uses this word. He points out that some people say, "To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain." He then adds, "*For* [instead] that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that" (Jas. 4:13, 15). So, Paul is saying that a woman's hair can be worn as a symbol of submission *instead* of a literal veil. (We will see another grammatical point in the next principle.)

The Historical Principle

This principle strongly substantiates the Grammatical Principle, for again, the so-called **covering** was actually a veil. As the classic work *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* points out:

The veil was the distinctive female wearing apparel. All females, with the exception of maidservants and women in a low condition of life, wore a veil. They would usually never lay it aside, except when they were in the presence of servants, or on rare occasions. This custom has prevailed among the Eastern women down to the modern era. When traveling, women may throw the veil over the back part of their head, but if they see a man approaching, they place it back in its original position. Thus Rebekah, when she saw Isaac approaching her camel caravan, covered her face with her veil (Gen. 24:64, 65). When women are at home they do not speak to a guest without being veiled and in the presence of maids. They do not enter the guest's chamber, but rather, standing at the door, they make it known to the servant what is wanted (See 2 Kings 4:12, 13). It is well to remember that prostitutes went unveiled. Today, as in olden times, virgins and married women may be seen wearing veils in Bible lands. The old customs are not being observed strictly by some Moslem Women, for they are now going unveiled.¹

Furthermore, the weight of historical evidence indicates that the wearing of a veil was a universal custom in the first century in both Jewish² and Greco-Roman³ culture. This historical fact has been understood for centuries. Puritan Matthew Henry (1662-1714), for example, taught, "To understand this, it must be observed that it was a signification either of shame or subjection for persons to be veiled, or covered, in the eastern countries, contrary to the custom of ours, where the being bare-headed betokens subjection, and being covered superiority and dominion."

Even the briefest historical look at the city of Corinth reveals what the situation was. Corinth was an extremely pagan and immoral city. Women of loose morals, especially the prostitute priestesses in the Temple of Aphrodite, didn't wear veils and kept their hair short to differentiate them from other women. There was also a strong spirit of feminism (women's liberation). Women didn't want children because it ruined their bodies and restricted their freedom, they demanded the same jobs as men, they dressed and acted like men, and they cast off all signs of femininity. History records, for example, that women of that time did such masculine things as wrestling, sword throwing, and running bare-breasted while hunting wild boars. One of the first symbols of this liberation was that they took off their veils. So, the feminists took off their veils as a protest and the prostitutes took them off to advertise.

Apparently, Christian women were lured into this practice, as they have been in our day in different expressions. It's quite possible that the principle of Christian liberty ("all things are lawful") had been turned into license. As a result, the women threw off their veils and their place of submission. Again, just like today. Paul, therefore, reminds them that the veil was a symbol of their submission to their husbands.

Another extremely important historical and grammatical point in the passage is the Greek word behind **such** (*toioutos*) in verse 16, which means "such as this, of this kind, or sort." What is particularly interesting is that most of the popular English translations wrongly translate the word as "other" (NIV, NASB, NLT, NCV, RSV), despite the clear fact that it means **such**, *never* "other." The implication then is, "There is no need to argue with anyone on these issues because we have no *other* custom." But that is an *interpretation*, not a translation and is not what Paul is saying. To illustrate, as does one commentator, "If someone asks me, does your family always eat turkey on Thanksgiving?—and I answer, we have no *other* custom, it means that we eat turkey. However, if I reply, "We have no *such* custom, it means that we do not eat turkey."⁴ So, if we follow the modern translations, Paul is saying that we do, indeed, follow the customs mentioned earlier, *but that is the exact opposite of what*

he is saying. He is saying, in fact, we have **no such custom** (as the KJV, NKJV, Young's Literal, ASV, and ESV rightly say), which underscores again that such practices are cultural. In other words, there is no reason to be **contentious** because the covering issue is a cultural one.

This leads us right to the Contextual Principle.

The Contextual Principle

The point of this entire passage is *submission*, not the wearing of clothing. Just as there was nothing right or wrong in the eating or not eating of meat that had been sacrificed to idols, which Paul just dealt with in 10:23-33 (see also Rom. 14:1-15:6), there was nothing intrinsically right or wrong in wearing or not wearing a veil. As long as clothing is modest, it meets the Scriptural demand (I Tim 2:9).

The purpose of the veil, then, was to be a public testimony of a woman's submission to her husband. The word **head** is the key here. A man is responsible directly to Christ as his head and doesn't wear a veil because he is the image of God as a ruler. A woman, however, is directly responsible to her husband as her head. This is dramatically illustrated in verse 7. Here we see that the man is **both the image and glory of God**, while the woman is only the **image of God**, but the **glory of man**. While the *man* was made to demonstrate *God's* authority, will, and glory, the *woman* was made to demonstrate the *man's* authority, will, and glory. Further, the man illustrates the magnificent creature God created from Himself, while the woman illustrates the magnificent creature God made from a man. Many people today don't like this principle, and neither did most Corinthians like it, but it's still true.

In light of the throwing off of this principle in Corinth, it was absolutely necessary for Paul to restate it, just as God stated it when Adam sinned. Genesis 3:16 plainly declares, "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." The Hebrew for "rule" (*masal*) means "to install in an office, to elevate to official position." Man and woman were once "co-rulers," as the word "them" in Genesis 1:27-28 clearly demonstrates, but the husband was now installed as the ruler.

Even more dramatic, however, is the phrase "your desire shall be for your husband." This phrase does not mean what we might first think; it doesn't mean "a desire to please." In fact, it means quite the opposite! "Desire" comes from an Arabic word which means "to compel, to urge, or to seek control." It appears in only one other place, where we find it in the same construction as here. In Genesis 4:7 we read of Cain's anger and God's encouragement that he could still bring the correct offering. The latter part of the verse reads, "If

thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him." The same meaning is here in 3:16. Literally, it says, "Your desire will be to control your husband, but he will rule over you." We therefore see that *this is the curse!* It is from here that the "battle of the sexes" came. "Women's Liberation" is nothing but women trying to rule, and "Male Chauvinism" is nothing but men trying to squelch the rebellion.

If I may interject, the home life of many Christians today is in shambles because the wife "rules the roost." Neither does this mean that the husband should act like Napoleon. It means that he is to lead his home in accordance with God's Word. And may we add, every man will stand before God and give an account for how he lead his family.

So again, the veil was a symbol of a wife's submission to her husband. It was a public testimony of a wife's recognition of her husband as being her head, a testimony that was in direct contrast to the spirit of rebellion that prevailed in Corinth.

Perhaps the pivotal verses concerning this issue are verses 14-15, **Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.** These verses should clear up any question about the veil being a mandate for today. As mentioned earlier, the word **for** is the Greek *anti*, which carries the normal meaning of "in place of" or "instead of." Why is long hair a shame for man? Because it's a covering, and a man is not to be covered (v. 7). How ridiculous a man would look in a veil! But a woman has long hair simply because she needs "a veil." Her hair is a glory to her as she is a glory to her husband, and it serves as a veil, a symbol of her submission. When you compare the first part of the passage with the last part, it becomes clear that regarding the head covering Paul first talks about *custom* but then talks about *nature*, that is, what God designed. If custom does not require a veil to symbolize submission, as it did because of the situation in Corinth, then a woman's hair is enough to symbolize that submission.

The Comparison Principle

As we saw in the Plain Principle, this passage does not mandate or command the wearing of a veil. When we now apply the Comparison Principle, we discover that no such command appears anywhere in Scripture. We must not mandate that which God does not mandate, for when we do, we degenerate into legalism.

As also pointed out in the Plain Principle, some teachers use this passage to teach that women can preach, teach, and lead in church meetings, but plainly the text does not say that. Other Scriptures clearly forbid women from teaching in church meetings (I Cor. 14:34) or usurping authority over a man (I Tim. 2:12). This

praying and **prophesying** (that is, proclaiming the truth) must refer to a women's public witnessing. This, too, coincides with other Scripture. A woman can teach children and other women (Tit. 2:3-4), and nowhere does the Scripture prohibit a woman from witnessing even to a man, but she is never permitted a leadership role over men.

The Outline Principle

As one reads this passage, Paul's progression of thought emerges. As we've seen, the point of this passage is submission, not the wearing of clothing. With that in mind, then, we see at least three points. First, we see The Statement of the Principle (v. 3), which is that of headship. Second, we see The Development of the Principle (vs. 4-12), which is that a man does not veil himself because he is the image of God as a ruler, but a woman is to veil herself because she is to demonstrate the man's authority, will, and glory. Third, we see The Application of the Principle (vs. 13-16), which is that to demonstrate her submission, the woman is to be veiled. The method of the veiling might demand a literal veil, as was the case in Corinth, or her veil can be her hair if no other symbol is needed.

The Progressive Principle

This passage provides us with another example of the Progressive Principle, that God reveals His truth in steps. As mentioned earlier, the custom of wearing a veil goes back millennia, but Paul now reveals the next step in the progression. He emphasizes that it is not the *symbol* of submission that is the most important, rather the *reality* of submission that's crucial. If custom permits, a woman's hair can just as effectively demonstrate her submission to her husband as can a literal veil. Why? Because submission is a matter of attitude. After all, is it possible for a woman who wears a covering to still be

unsubmissive? Of course. So, as always, Paul takes us past forms and symbols to emphasize reality and truth.

The Practical Principle

As always, we do not apply this principle until last. Oh, how much damage is done by quick application! We must first see what God says by painstaking study before we can apply it. And again, the interpretation process uncovers the application. We don't have to *look* for the application, for it becomes self-evident. At least three applications flow from the study of this issue. First, every man should be reminded of his submission to God. Second, every woman should be reminded of her submission to her husband. Third, every Christian should be reminded not to add artificial symbols to Christian living.

As we close this issue, let us notice that we did not come to our position quickly. Indeed, we have taken several pages to examine this subject. This should again emphasize that Biblical interpretation demands diligence. This should encourage us to practice such diligence always in our study of the Word of God.

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NOTES

- ¹ Fred Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands*, CD-ROM computer version; electronic text (c) 1995 Epiphany Software.
- ² As in the apocryphal book 3 Maccabees 4:6; the Mishna, *Ketuboth* 7.6; and the Babylonian Talmud, *Ketuboth* 72a-b. Cited by David K. Lowery in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor, 1983), p. 529.
- ³ As in Plutarch, *Moralia* 3.232c; 4.267b; and Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 11.10. Cited by David K. Lowery in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 529.
- ⁴ Gordon H. Clark, *1 Corinthians* (Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1975), p. 177.

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

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All that Protestants insist upon is, that the Bible contains all the extant revelation of God, which He designed to be the rule of faith and practice for His Church; so that nothing can rightfully be imposed on the conscience of men as truth of duty which is not taught directly or by necessary implication in the Holy Scriptures.

This excludes all unwritten traditions, not only; but also all decrees of the visible Church; all resolutions of conventions, or other public bodies, declaring this or that to be right or wrong, true or false. The people of God are bound by nothing but the Word of God.

It is well, however, to bear in mind the importance of this doctrine. It is not by Romanists only that it is denied, practically at least, if not theoretically. Nothing is more common among Protestants, especially in our day, than the attempt to coerce the conscience of men by public opinion; to make the opinions of men on questions of morals a rule of duty for the people, and even for the Church. If we would stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, we must adhere to the principle that in matters of religion and morals the Scriptures alone have authority to bind the conscience.

Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, pp. 182-183.