



Conducted by
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“Should christian women wear a head covering during the worship of the Church?”

THIS question is no doubt asked because of the conflicting practices which are to be seen in different assemblies of christians regarding the covering of the head by women during worship services. Some assemblies favour all sisters to wear a covering, while others consider head covering unnecessary; some even allow individuals to make up their own minds on the subject. A subsidiary question to the one asked above would be, “Does the Lord approve of one practice more than another, or does His Word give clear teaching on the subject?”

It is in Paul’s first letter to the Church at Corinth, Chapter 11 verses 1-16, that we find the principal teaching on this subject and it is to that part of the Word that we shall now turn our attention.

Tradition

Before he begins to teach anything on the subject, Paul appeals to the christians at Corinth to “hold fast the traditions” (1 Cor. 11:2). The word ‘tradition’ as used here is an old word and denotes something handed on from one to another. Now things which are handed on to other people can be either bad and contrary to the will of God (Matt. 15:2f; and Mark 7:8), or wholly good and acceptable to God (as here). So what the apostle is here asking the Corinthian christians to do is to embrace the teaching which he is about to give (because he is an imitator of Christ, v1), and to understand that this teaching will be good for them and in accordance with God’s will; in other words he is saying that this is the orderly presentation of new truth based on, and in harmony with, those old truths which they had been taught and by which they were supposed to control their lives.

The Deuteronomists knew all about this emphasis on tradition long ago because they taught that God’s laws should be taught by parents to their children who in their turn could pass them on to their children and so on. In this way they would ensure the continuity of God’s

tradition throughout their time and their children's time as well. This is surely a salutary lesson for us today, and one that we would do well to copy.

Authority

I consider verse 3, together with verse 2, to be crucial to the understanding of the discourse on head covering which follows. It is not coincidental that Paul mentions ordinances, traditions, and authority before he gives his important teaching. Let us look at the authoritative hierarchy as Paul reveals it, "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" (v.3). It seems to me that there is a note of censure in what he says. To paraphrase it he would seem to be saying, "Now look here, I want you to know and understand this...etc". Perhaps the Corinthian christians had not appreciated this; perhaps we have not appreciated it. You christian women, know this; Christ is subject to God, and you are subject to man. If you keep this clearly before you, then you will not misunderstand the subsequent teaching. And you christian men: is it asking too much that you should fulfil the God-given requirement that you should be the head of the woman, or has the modern view of the emancipation of women torn a hole in your defences?

The Corinthian Scene

Paul deals first with the men, "Every man praying or prophesying having his head covered, dishonoureth his head" (v.4). 'Having his head covered' means literally, having a veil hanging down from the head. So what Paul is saying is that a man who prays and prophesies with a veil on his head (i.e. his head covered) dishonoureth his head, which is Christ. It was the custom among the Greeks, both men and women, to remain bareheaded during public prayer. This custom, says Paul, should be continued by the men, the reason being that thereby Christ would be honoured. Most christians will understand, of course, that there has never been any controversy about men wearing a head covering.

Regarding the women, the scripture reads, "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered (unveiled) dishonoureth her head" (v.5). Now we know that the head of the woman is the man, so what Paul is saying is that if a woman worships with her head unveiled she is dishonouring the man. He ends that verse by saying, "For that is even all one as if she were shaven".

What was the significance in the shaven female head? There were evidently two classes of women who wore shaven heads in Corinth, the slave-women, and the adulteresses. Therefore, says Paul, if the women will not cover their heads in public praying and prophesying, let them be shorn. 'And if the shorn head is a sign of dishonourable conduct, which it undoubtedly was, then it is also a sign of dishonourable conduct for women to refuse to cover their heads, because by so doing they are bringing dishonour upon their heads, which are the men. Clearly Paul uses language as strong as this because of the effect on a woman's reputation in Corinth if she was marked out by her conduct as a lewd woman. The teaching is clear and unambiguous.

So up to this point, Paul is making it perfectly clear that in public worship (a) the man's head should be uncovered, and (b) the woman's head should be covered.

The Hierarchy

Paul now clinches the argument by reference to the Creation. He emphasises that the man was created first, and that he (the man) was in the image and glory of God. We must understand, of course, that Paul is referring to moral likeness and not bodily resemblance. Man was the summit of God's creation and endowed with authority as well. But the woman is 'of the man', i.e. formed from the man, and because of this fact a certain superiority is given to the male. However, Paul infers that the woman was the crown and climax of the creation of God, and can in her own right add glory to the man. What a beautiful sight it is when we see christian men reflecting the glory of God, and that glory being enhanced rather than marred by the actions and words of their christian women. I tend to be a little impatient with women who constantly moan about their so-called 'inferior role'. God created woman for a very necessary and important role; to be a help suitable for the man. Not as a chattel; not as a clothes and dish-washing machine; nor as a sex symbol, but as a vital part of His scheme for the human race on earth. And if anyone has seen a good christian man, ably assisted by his christian wife; a

home well-organised along good christian principals by that woman; and children who are a credit to her industry and ingenuity, then one has seen what God intended when He created woman. On the other hand, one has seen women who, as they put it, have 'taken their 'rightful' place with men, and in the process have become separated from their husbands and strangers to their own children. I thank God because He is wiser than the emancipationists. However, I digress. Or do I?

Obligation

Paul now makes it clear that the woman is obligated to cover her head. As he puts it, "For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels" (v.10). This means that the veil worn by the woman is the sign of the authority of the man over the woman. But perhaps we should look at this in another way. Sometimes when people have authority over us we do things because of the authority and not because we want to. Therefore it would seem to me that if a woman covered her head it would be indicative that she was willing to show her subjection both to the man and also to God. I have a sneaking feeling sometimes that women do not conform because they want to be a wee bit rebellious to the men; but let us be careful that we do not find ourselves in rebellion before God, because it is He who arranged things as they should be.

Furthermore, what about the demonstration to the angels? Over in Isaiah 6 we read of the seraphins around the throne of God. Each one had six wings; two were used for utility, and four for humility. How would the angels, who were so humble before God, react to the display of women who were not willing to show their subjection by covering their heads, but were willing to show what was a sign of shame by coming before God with heads uncovered? Surely we can understand what Paul means when he says "neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord"? The woman is for the man. Man could not exist without the glory of motherhood. Let each fulfil his or her role before God in a way best pleasing to Him.

We could not close this study without some comment on verse 15. Some have thought that a woman's hair is the covering and that no other covering is necessary. The words 'for a covering' are ANTI PERIBOLAIUO and mean literally 'in the sense of' or like a veil, but not in place of a veil.

Conclusion

Well, there we have it. In public worship Paul is teaching that the women should have their heads covered. This is the way that God would approve of. Let each one of us seek to do His will.