

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #17: WOMEN AND VEILS (A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11:3-16)

By John Temples

(Note: the following are my notes from a sermon preached on the subject "Must Women Wear Veils?")

MUST WOMEN WEAR VEILS IN WORSHIP?

1. A LADY RECENTLY ASKED ME THIS QUESTION.

- a. She said that a few weeks ago, she attended a church that issued coverings for women when they entered the auditorium.
- b. There are certainly denominational churches that do this.
- c. And no doubt there are congregations of the Lord's church that insist that women wear veils.
- d. So this is a Bible subject and an issue worthy of our study.

2. THE BIBLICAL PASSAGE THIS ISSUE IS BASED ON IS 1 COR 11:3-16:

"But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. 5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. 6 For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. 7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man is not from woman, but woman from man. 9 Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. 10 For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. 12 For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God. 13 Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? 15 But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her

for a covering. 16 But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.” (NKJV)

- a. Verse 3 is an important key to understanding this passage.
- b. It reads, “But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.”
- c. Verse 3 is about the structure and order of God’s creation.
- d. It is God’s “chain of command.”

3. EVERY ORGANIZATION OR ORGANISM HAS TO HAVE A HEAD.

- a. The head provides a central focus for decision and direction—a place for the buck to stop.
 - i. Every business has to have a CEO.
 - ii. Every team has to have a team leader.
 - iii. Every nation, every government, has to have a person in charge.
 - iv. The church has a head, Christ.
 - v. Even your physical body has a head that is (presumably) in charge.
- b. There is even a chain of command within the Godhead, according to this verse.
 - i. But please notice that this hierarchy, this chain of command, applies only to area of labor or function.
 - ii. The Bible clearly teaches that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are equal in essence, nature, power, and purpose.
 - iii. They differ only in—for lack of a better term—“job duties.”
- c. Here is the chain of command given by Paul:
 - i. God at the top;
 - ii. Then Christ;
 - iii. Then man (the male specifically—Greek term);
 - iv. Then woman.

4. IMMEDIATELY WE NOTICE THAT THE WOMAN IS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE LIST.

- a. This sets off fireworks from the feminists and skeptics who say the Bible labels women as inferior to men.
- b. The truth is, the Bible has done more to elevate the status of women than any other force in the world.
- c. The Bible does, however, place different ROLES on men and women.
- d. Here is an important principle: **your position of service within an organization says nothing about your worth or value as a person.**
- e. We are all equally precious in God's sight, but we have different tasks and positions.
- f. So as we study Paul's teaching on hair and coverings, remember two important principles:
 - i. Christians are equal in essence and value before God, but different in function.
 - ii. God has created men and women with differences, and He wants those differences preserved.

5. THERE ARE TWO OTHER FACTS WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS SITUATION:

- a. First, some women in the Corinthian church evidently felt that they had a right to disregard God's chain of command.
- b. Some of them were assuming a leadership (speaking) role in the worship assemblies (ch 14).
- c. Second, it seems they were also disregarding Greek and Roman customs in regard to symbols of subjection to their husbands.
- d. Now, let's study what Paul says beginning in v 4.

6. V 4: "EVERY MAN PRAYING OR PROPHECYING, HAVING HIS HEAD COVERED, DISHONORS HIS HEAD."

- a. "Every man"—every Christian man; the male as opposed to the female (Greek word).
- b. "praying or prophesying"—leading or speaking in the public worship assemblies.
- c. "having his head covered"—the Greek literally means "having something hanging down from his head."

- d. This covering could be a hat, a cap, a helmet, a veil--or long hair. (Note that God considers long hair as a “covering” (v 15).
- e. “dishonors his head”—not his physical head, but his spiritual head, Christ (v 3).
- f. Why? Because a covering (or something hanging down from the head) signifies submission or secondary status.

7. VERSES 5 & 6.

- a. “Every woman”—every Christian woman.
- b. “praying or prophesying”—has the same meaning as in v 3: taking a leading role in a public assembly.
 - i. Yes, women did pray and prophesy in the first century church.
 - ii. Remember, Joel’s prophecy (quoted on Pentecost) said “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy....” (i.e., speak by inspiration).
 - iii. Philip had four virgin daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:8, 9).
- c. But from other plain Scriptures we conclude that these women must have prophesied in assemblies of women, with no Christian men present. (Cf 1 Cor 14:34, 1 Tim 2:12).
- d. Continuing in vs 5/6: “with her head uncovered”—either having her hair shorn or cropped, or having removed a culturally-mandated covering such as a veil.
- e. “dishonors her head”—her husband, v 3; and indirectly, God (cf v 13).

8. V 7A IS FURTHER ELABORATION ON THE POINTS MADE IN VS 4-6.

- a. “For a man ought not to cover his head”—either by wearing long hair or an artificial covering (remember the Greek means “having something hanging down off the head”).
- b. “since he is the image and glory of God”—the man is the immediate representative of God and Christ in the world and in the church and was first in the creation.

9. VS 7B-10 ARE PAUL'S EXPLANATION OF WHY WOMEN WERE SUBJECTED TO THESE RESTRICTIONS.

- a. "But the woman is the glory of man"—she brings honor to him—she makes him look good.
- b. "For man is not from woman, but woman from man."
 - i. "From" is the Greek word *ek*, meaning "out from" or "out of."
 - ii. This is a reference to the creation of Eve from the side of Adam.
- c. "Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man."
 - i. Guys, this simply means that God knew we men would need help!
 - ii. The woman was made as a companion or helper for the man—for his advancement, comfort, and happiness.

10. V 10—"SO THE WOMAN OUGHT TO HAVE A SYMBOL OF AUTHORITY [I.E., A COVERING] ON HER HEAD."

- a. Because of the divine order, the woman's head ought to be covered as a token of submission to her husband and to God.
- b. Now before you get all bent out of shape, here's a preview: v 15 says **God accepts her long hair as a covering.**
- c. Local custom may dictate an additional covering as a sign of honor to her husband (veil, hat, etc.).

11. "BECAUSE OF THE ANGELS."

- a. This may mean that the angels observe our worship and are offended when they see women not observing the proper order, worshipping or approaching God uncovered.
- b. Isa 6:2 says angels cover their faces in the presence of God.

- c. Now men, the opposite must be true—the angels are offended when they see men approach God with their heads **covered**.
- d. Is this why we ask men to take off their hats or caps in worship? Yes.

12. VS 11 & 12 ARE A WARNING TO MEN NOT TO ABUSE THEIR HEADSHIP STATUS OR TO BECOME TYRANTS.

- a. Headship is not dictatorship!

13. NOW TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER: VS 13-15.

- a. In the case of women (vs 13, 15):

- i. “Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?”
- ii. The question as posed assumes a “NO” answer.
- iii. But what is that covering to be?
 1. V 15 makes it clear that **as far as God is concerned, her long hair is an acceptable covering** (in fact, God gave it to her for such).
 2. But human cultural custom may dictate an additional, artificial covering as a sign of subjection to her husband.
 3. If so, then the woman should wear whatever local custom dictates.

- b. In the case of men (v 14):

- i. Whereas a woman’s head should be covered in God’s presence in worship, a man’s head should NOT be covered, either with a hat or long hair.
- ii. Paul says “nature” teaches that long hair on a man is a shame to him.

1. "Nature" is not primarily a reference to the natural world.
2. Rather, it is a reference to "usual and customary practice or perception."
3. It's just immediately obvious to the most casual observer that men's hair by nature is shorter than women's hair.
4. It can be as long as women's hair, but it takes work.

14. A COUPLE OF QUESTIONS IN THIS REGARD:

- a. Does that mean that a man can never wear a hat or head covering under any circumstances?
 - i. No, remember, this is about approaching God in a worship situation.
 - ii. Common sense tells us that men need head protection in some situations (work, riding a motorcycle, putting up Christmas decorations, etc.)
- b. How long is "long" with respect to a man's hair (ah, yes, the eternal question).
 - i. Very simple answer that doesn't require a ruler: From the context, "long hair" on a man is **hair that is long enough or styled in such a way as to cause him to be mistaken for a woman.**
 - ii. Remember the meaning of the word "covered" in this text: "having something hanging down from the head."
 - iii. If it hangs down off the head (or sticks up above the head in a feminine style), it's too long.

15. FINALLY, V 16: “IF ANYONE SEEMS TO BE CONTENTIOUS, WE HAVE NO SUCH CUSTOM, NOR DO THE CHURCHES OF GOD.”

- a. “Custom” here is the Greek word *sunetheia*, meaning “habit, custom, or conventional practice; which suggests that Paul is speaking of a local or cultural issue, not a point of church doctrine.
- b. If local custom dictates that a woman should wear a veil, then Christian women would wear veils.
- c. But the matter of women being required to wear veils or any other artificial covering is not a church ordinance or matter of apostolic decree.
- d. A covering for a woman’s head in the presence of God IS required, but God gives her a covering, her long hair.
- e. So, the bottom line: do Christian women have to wear veils in worship?
 - i. No, unless they live in a culture where not wearing a veil disgraces their husbands.
 - ii. What about women who have lost their hair due to some physical condition such as chemotherapy?
 - iii. In such a condition, they would probably want to wear a veil, wig, or other artificial covering.
 - iv. The Bible just says a “covering.”

16. CLOSING THOUGHTS:

- a. *Distinctions are important.*
 - i. God made us male and female, with obvious physical differences and with different roles in society and in the church.
 - ii. He wants those differences to be honored and maintained.
- b. *Differences in function do not imply differences in worth of individuals.*
- c. *It is right and good to honor local customs, if those customs do not violate a Biblical principle.*

d. *Dress, appearance, and hairstyle matter!* We should not send a “wrong message” to others by our dress or appearance. --John Temples

SEE ATTACHMENT: Chart on head coverings