

The Covering of I Corinthians 11

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It has been my lot for more than forty years to be involved in much study and many discussions on what is commonly called "The Covering Question." It is my observation that most of the confusion exists because of unwarranted assumptions. But the pertinent facts on this matter can be easily researched and understood, and many of the common assumptions can thereby be clearly refuted and dismissed. Since simplification is said to be the first step to understanding any subject, my approach will be simple, and we will break the subject into definable parts, as follows:

1. The Custom: There was a custom in Corinth of the woman, when in public, being covered.
2. The Covering: The custom's covering was a katakalupto that completely covered the head.
3. The Prophesying: This was a spiritual gift.
4. "Nature" Teaching: "Nature" is social propriety, the ways of a society.
5. Women Prophesying: They did prophesy, but this did not exempt the prophetess from moral implications associated with the customs.
6. Today: We have neither the custom nor prophesying.

1. Corinth Had a Custom of Women Wearing a Covering

The evidence of a custom in Corinth concerning women being covered is irrefutable. It bothers me when this fact is denied by those who insist that women are to wear a hat in worship services today. Every man has a right to his own opinion, but no man has a right to be wrong in his facts. That such a custom indeed prevailed, history and scholarship leave no doubt:

"In Greek, as well as in Eastern cities, it was customary for women, except those of bad character, to cover their heads in public." (The One Volume Bible Commentary, J.R. Dummelow, on I Cor. 11)

"No respectable woman in an eastern village or city goes out without it, and, if she does, she is in danger of being misjudged." (Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible)

"In NT times, however, among both Greeks and Romans, reputable women wore a veil in public (Plutarch Quaest. Rom. xiv) and to appear without it was an act of bravado (or worse); Tarsus, St. Paul's home city, was especially noted for strictness in this regard ... Hence .. Paul's indignant directions I Cor. 11:2-16 ... have their basis in the social proprieties of the time. The bearing of these directions, however, on the compulsory use of the hat by modern women in public worship would appear to be very remote." (ISBE, vol. 5, p. 3047)

"A Corinthian woman's veil would be the peplum, worn over the shoulders in the house, drawn over the face in public. [At Corinth a ēshorn' woman would be a harlot]." (The Preacher's Homiletic Commentary, I Cor.11)

"I Corinthians 11:10. Respectable women went out with their heads covered and wore veils. Only prostitutes displayed their faces and showed off their hair in order to attract men.... Even when Christians have liberty in the practice of their faith they are not to shock propriety." (Manners and Customs of Bible Times, Ralph Gower, p. 20)

"We must remember the place of the veil in the East. To this day the Eastern women wear the yashmak which is a long veil leaving the forehead and the eyes open but reaching down almost to the feet. In Paul's time the Eastern veil was even more concealing. It came right over the head with only an opening for the eyes and reached right down to the feet. A respectable eastern woman would never have dreamed of appearing without it." (Wm. Barclay, Daily Study Bible, commentary of I Cor. 11:2-16)

The reader can see the plain and simple evidence -- Corinth had a custom of women wearing a covering in public.

2. The Custom's Covering, a Katakalupto, Completely Covered the Head.

The word for the woman's covering in I Corinthians 11 is the Greek word katakalupto (kata, down, and kalupto, cover). It bothers me that some who advocate that a woman must wear a hat, or just something on her head, acknowledge the literal meaning of this word to completely cover and hang down, then shift its meaning to an "adequate" covering, and after some incredible reasoning and mixing of terms conclude that it means "anything" on the head. Unbelievable! It is like a Methodist who goes from baptism literally meaning immersion, rationalizing it to mean an "adequate" amount of water, and concluding that it means "any" water at all. The facts belie the labored efforts of hat-advocates and Methodists to change words' meanings. The character of the covering is noted in the last three quotes above (kindly reread) and in the following:

"Outside the NT the word means "to veil (oneself)." In the LXX Moses hides the ark behind a curtain (Exod. 26:34), the Seraphim cover their faces (Isa. 6:2) ..." (Theological Dict. of the NT, Kittel and Friedrich)

"To cover up (kata, intensive), in the Middle Voice, to cover oneself, is used in I Cor. 11:6,7 .." (Vine's Expository Dictionary)

".. to cover up ... to veil or cover one's self: I Co. xi.6." (Thayer, p. 331)

".. to cover fully ..." (Young)

"In Greek, as well as in Eastern cities, it was customary for women, except those of bad character, to cover their heads in public." (Commentary, J.R. Dummelow, on I Cor. 11)

3. Prophesying Was a Spiritual Gift

Advocates of the covering as a binding requirement today characteristically distort the meaning of every key fact and word. What they do with the Corinthian custom and katakalupto, they do with prophesying -- they change its meaning. Some say prophesying merely means teaching, and others say that it is a synecdoche for the worship of the church. But such is fanciful speculation and imagining that arbitrarily assigns the meaning that is wanted so as to reach the conclusion desired. That prophesying was a spiritual gift, we call the reader's attention to (1) several passages of Scripture that so identify it, and to (2) lexicons' and scholarly commentators' observations about it.

"Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy ..." (Romans 12:6)

"For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom ... to another prophecy .. But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit." (I Cor. 12:8-11)

"And God hath set some in the church, first, apostles; secondarily, prophets ... Are all apostles, are all prophets? ..." (I Cor. 12:28,29)

"And though I have the gift of prophecy .." (I Cor. 13:2)

"... whether there be prophecies, they shall fail ..." (I Cor. 13:8)

"Follow after love, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy. For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue ..." (I Cor. 14:1,2)

"Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues." (I Cor. 14:39)

"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some ... teachers .." (Ephesians 4:11)

All these Scriptures declare and clarify the role of the prophet as an inspired spokesman. Though he taught, he is distinguished from the mere teacher just as the apostles, who taught, are more than mere teachers. The apostles and prophets were inspired. Peter declared that when the prophets spoke, the Spirit "which was in them" was signifying, or testifying (I Peter 1:11). The Scriptures call prophesying a spiritual gift, and scholars concur.

"Secondarily, prophets ... a person who, under Divine inspiration, predicts future events ..." (Adam Clarke on I Cor. 12:28)

It may be noted that Clarke wobbles on the point in his discussions, much as Methodist theologians do on baptism. But Clarke can tell you the meaning of the word baptize, and the meaning of the expression, "for the remission of sins," but he abandons scholarship and the meaning of words when he proceeds with Methodist doctrine, sprinkling etc. This is exactly what he does on "prophet" -- but he also gave, as you just read, its actual meaning without his personal theology and beliefs added. Other scholars (such as Vincent), do not back away from their scholarship. They declare prophets inspired and distinguish them from teachers.

"Prophets. Preachers and expounders under the immediate influence of the Spirit, and thus distinguished from teachers. I Cor. 12:10."

On Hebrews 1:1: "By the prophets ... does not mean in the ... writings .., but rather in the prophets themselves as the vessels of divine inspiration. God speak in them and from them." (Vincent's Word Studies)

"..[T]he prophets made new revelations, and spoke all their prophesying under the Spirit's influence." (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown on I Cor. 12:28)

"There were the prophets. The word prophet does not so much mean a fore-teller as a forth-teller... Their message was held to be not the result of thought and study, but the direct result of the Holy Spirit." (Wm. Barclay, Daily Study Bible, Eph. 4:11)

"prophecy ... prophecy, i.e. discourse emanating from divine inspiration .." Prophet: "... one who speaks forth by divine inspiration ... II. In the N.T. 1. one who, moved by the Spirit of God and hence his organ and spokesman, solemnly declares to men what he has received by inspiration ..." (Thayer, p. 552)

4. How "Nature" Teaches

"Nature," in the sense of the purely physical universe, teaches nothing as to appropriate hair. Hair lengths and styles are not the result of women's hair naturally growing long and men's hair naturally being unable to grow long, for that simply is not the case. Samson had long hair, and a manlier man never lived. Absalom had long hair, and he was apparently the handsomest man in the kingdom, being without blemish from the crown of his head to the sole of his feet. Nature in the passage is obviously "the way of propriety," society" or "custom," as scholars of the Greek language and customs attest:

Nature: "... a natural feeling of decorum ... in respect to national customs in which one is born and brought up ... It was the national custom among both the Hebrews and Greeks, for men to wear the hair short, and women to wear it long." (A Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament by Edward Robinson, p. 771)

"The word nature denotes evidently that sense of propriety which all men have, and which is expressed in any prevailing .. custom.... It is doing that which almost universal custom has said appropriately belongs to the female sex." (Barnes Notes on I Cor. 11:14)

5. The Fact of Prophesying Did Not Change the Implications of Customs

We have established two salient facts that should be kept in mind as to what apparently produced the need for this portion of Scripture. First, there was the custom of women in public wearing a katakalupto in Corinth. Second, there were women who prophesied, women who were thus moved by the Holy Spirit to speak. It does not matter whether this was in an assembly or not. Philip had four daughters who not only could but who did prophesy (Acts 21:8). Custom dictated the same decorum and manner from them as from other women, and called for it on the street corner, in the marketplace, or in the assembly -- any and every public place. Arguments about the place are irrelevant to the issue of the covering, for the custom applied in all public places. The point is that not even spiritual activity, which would otherwise favorably reflect to the woman's credit and

reputation, would justify ignoring the social mores and customs that were so closely identified with morality and character. As Barnes said:

"There can be little doubt that they had consulted him in their letter (chap. vii. 1) about the proper manner in which a woman ought to demean herself if she was called upon, under the influence of divine inspiration, to utter any thing in public. The question seems to have been, whether, since she was inspired, it was proper for her to retain the marks of her inferiority of rank, and remain covered; or whether the fact of her inspiration did not release her from that obligation ..." (Albert Barnes, Barnes' Notes on I Cor. 11:2)

In Corinth, as already noted, the absence of a covering in public was generally viewed as insubordination or harlotry. Hat-advocates emphasize a place (a church assembly). The Scriptures do not. The custom was for all the women to be covered in all public places. Only the insubordinate and harlots did otherwise. Yet only the woman praying or prophesying is addressed. Why is that? Obviously, because the Christian women were not otherwise causing a reproach by being uncovered, the only exception being some who may have thought their inspiration and spiritual activity would release them from the need for the covering. Perhaps they thought a covering was demeaning and inappropriate for one who was prophesying. Whatever the reason, they and they alone were the objects of the admonition to be covered. Inquire as to the who, when, where and what of the passage. Hat-advocates do not (cannot) answer the who, when etc. in Bible terms. Their position requires and depends upon assumptions to the contrary. Consider:

WHO is the object of the admonition? The woman who prayed or prophesied. It is apparent that there was no problem with other women. No other woman than one praying or prophesying is mentioned.

WHEN was she admonished to wear it? When she prayed or prophesied, suggesting that at other times there was no problem even with these women.

WHERE was the covering needed in the text? Anywhere! All the women wore it in public. The prophetess was not exempted anywhere just because she prayed or prophesied. Covering-advocates sharply contradict themselves at this juncture. All of them that I have ever spoken with deny that a woman ever prayed or prophesied in a worship service. If they are correct, how then can they say this represents conduct in a worship service? They themselves deny it ever occurred in one! How can they make a behavior that never occurred in a worship service, in their own view and argument, a synecdoche for a worship service?

WHAT was the covering, and what was to be covered? The covering was a katakalupto -- a complete covering. The head, including the face (it being part of the head) was to be covered ala the custom in Corinth.

6. "We Have No Such Custom"

The Greeks, and Corinth (it being a Greek city), had this custom. The only custom in the entire context is a covering. "We have no such custom" therefore references the covering, not contentiousness, for being contentious is not a custom but is forbidden as a sin. He is therefore giving instructions as to how the believers, those women who prayed and prophesied, were to act in view of the customs where they lived. Paul said "we" have no such custom, and also that the "churches" had no such custom. So his admonition does not rest on some apostolic or church law. This is nothing strange, nor is it unusual or unique in Scripture. For example:

Footwashing was the customary manner of hospitality. One had to respect the custom to show proper hospitality. Footwashing was required! (John 13:14; I Tim. 5:10). The principle pertaining to graciousness, humility and hospitality still remains to this day, but the custom of footwashing is not part of our culture and the hat-binders do not try to bind that custom even though it is mentioned more often than the covering, and is commanded. Why do they pick the one and not the other? Can

you imagine the argument if I Timothy 5:10 had said, "if she have worn a hat in worship" instead of "if she have washed the saints feet"?

The holy kiss was commanded five times! (Rom. 16:16; I Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; I Thess. 5:26; I Peter 5:14) It is illogical to try to bind the covering custom and not bind the holy kiss custom. Principles do not change. Customs do. We need to give a proper, courteous greeting to one another. Women need to appear virtuous. But we shake hands for the former, and women do not need a covering for the latter, in our culture. No brother known to me tries to bind this custom as they do the covering of I Corinthians 11. But the one is as binding as the other!

Paul plainly said the church had "no such custom." Think about that. Repeat it five times. My hat brethren do not read it that way. They read it to say, "we have no other custom" than that, but that is not what it says! "We have no such custom"! It means exactly what it says -- this custom did not issue from the apostles or from the church. To emphasize the intrinsic meaning of the subject sentence, let us restate it but change the negatives. Reverse the point 180 degrees and you will notice that then, and only then, it reads the way hat-advocates believe it:

"But if any man seem to be contentious, we DO have such a custom, as ALSO DO the churches of God." (I Cor. 11:16, Hatters' Translation)

"Hat" brethren are contentious FOR the covering because they believe the apostles and churches DO have such a custom and requirement. But Paul says the exact opposite! This passage reproves whoever is contentious in the matter, and the reason is "for (because)" neither "we" nor "the churches of God" have such a custom. Corinth did! But the apostles did not! But he urged the Corinthians to respect propriety. We should do that equally with the covering, footwashing, holy kissing, and anointing with oil. If it is the custom, "nature" teaches you to conform and not to produce an unnecessary reproach.

Conclusion

If whosoever may chance to read this will respect the simple definition and Scriptural use of words, he will see that this was a matter relevant at a specific time and place. As William Barclay, England's celebrated scholar of the Greek language and customs said:

"It must always be remembered that this whole situation arose in Corinth.... It would be quite wrong to make this passage of universal application; it was intensely relevant to the Church of Corinth but it has nothing to do with whether or not women should wear hats in Church at the present day."

We have none of the essentials for making this passage a binding commandment today. It is as passe' as footwashing and holy kisses. We have no such customs. No one in our culture wears a katakalupto. We have no prophets. We have no prophetesses. We have no women praying and prophesying. But principles are ageless, and we should now, as they were urged then, respect the propriety of our social courtesies and customs, and not disregard them to the detriment of the gospel.