

Head Coverings for Christian Women ?

1 Corinthians 11:3-16 is a controversial passage. When reading the verses 3-10, one might conclude that a Christian woman must wear a head covering when she prays or prophesies. However, when reading the verses 11-16, starting with "nevertheless", Paul is arguing the opposite.

It is impossible to make sense of verses 3-10 unless we know that the Jewish women at the time had to cover their heads with a physical veil. The Orthodox Jewish women still follow this custom today. Covering a woman's head was and still is a Jewish custom. Jewish women had to veil their head at all times when outside the house.

It is important to understand that covering a woman's head was not a command of God. There is no such command found in the Old Testament. It was a custom invented by the Jewish rabbis and passed on as part of the oral law of the Jews. This oral law was supposedly an interpretation of the Torah (the law, meaning the five books given to Moses that constitute the beginning of the Old Testament of our Bibles today), but in fact comprised a multitude of human laws that had no origin in God whatsoever.

1 Corinthians 11:3-16 in the New Testament is the only passage in the entire Bible that deals with this subject. It is falsely interpreted by some to mean that a woman must cover her head when she prays or prophesies.

It was this very oral law that the Pharisees were following when Jesus was on earth. Our Lord criticized them sharply for "observing the traditions of the elders" (Mark 7:3). He told them that they were invalidating the word of God by the traditions which they had handed down (Mark 7:13).

Head coverings were part of this very Jewish tradition. That is why Paul refers to head coverings as a Jewish custom in his closing statement in verse sixteen: "But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such **custom**, neither the churches of God".

Verses 3 - 10 discuss Jewish head covering customs. There were people who were wanting to put this Jewish practice on the Messianic / Christian women. Paul comes against this custom and refutes the men who were being contentious about this by stating: "... **we have no such custom, neither the churches of God**".

Paul does not command that Christian women must wear head coverings. He

says to the Corinthians: "**Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray uncovered unto God?**" (1 Corinthians 11:13) Why did Paul say that? Because he knew the Jewish traditions very well. He knew that in a traditional Jewish environment a wife might actually dishonor her head (her husband) if she does not cover her head.

Again, Paul does not say that a woman should cover her head. He actually says the opposite, namely that "**her hair is given her for a covering**" (1 Corinthians 11:15). He is allowing for an exception, which means that she does cover her head, simply because of human traditions. This decision should be taken by the married couple in view of the effect that a wife uncovering her head might have in the midst of a traditional Jewish community.

Let us summarize: Covering the head with a physical veil was and still is a Jewish custom. A woman was not to be seen without a head covering in public. Paul does not support this custom. He states that a woman's hair is given her as a covering. His final words are that he does not have the custom of head coverings, neither do the churches of God. He does allow a woman to wear a head covering if her not doing so would shame her husband. The judgment whether or not a woman should wear a head covering must be made individually. Paul does not take this decision, nor does he give an order to be applied in all cases. The dividing line is whether the behavior of the wife would shame her head (her husband).

It is wrong to transfer a Jewish custom to the Christian Church and then call it "Christian". There is no scriptural basis for this. It is even worse to make it a new "Christian" law and demand that women falsely submit to this man-made law. God has never commanded that any woman, whether Jewish or Christian, should veil her head.

In our Western society today, a woman does not shame her husband if she does not wear a head covering. In the Christian church it is not a disgrace either if a Christian woman does not wear a head covering.

Rather than clinging to a false interpretation of the letter in 1 Corinthians 11:3 - 10 we should cling to the spirit behind this passage. What is the core of what Paul is saying?

There are two underlying lessons to learn from 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. The first is to refute and refuse Jewish (unBiblical) man-made traditions as rules for the Christian Church. The second is that a wife should avoid anything, be it in her

behavior or her apparel, that shames her husband.

The prayer and prophecy mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11 apply to women praying and prophesying aloud in a church gathering: "But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but **one who prophesies edifies the church**" (1 Corinthians 14:3). Prophecy is for the church. And prophecy is a form of teaching: "**For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn** and all may be exhorted" (1 Corinthians 14:31).

The religions of Islam and Hinduism enforce head coverings on women. This fact alone should lead us to question the practice and ponder its spiritual origin. The account of Scripture and the study of Jewish traditions speak one language:

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Dr. Annette Brians,
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