



Is a Woman's Hair Her Only Covering?

Joseph Herrin (8-24-2001)

[A sister wrote to ask a sincere question about Paul's comment that a woman's hair is given to her for a covering. Is this the only covering a woman needs on her head? This article addresses this question.]

Dear Sister,

You have asked what constitutes covering the head?

This can be a troubling issue, and all the more since few people even concern themselves with this matter today. You mentioned that I Corinthians 11:15b states, "for her hair is given her for (or instead of) a covering." This would seem to be implying that a woman's hair is all the covering that is being spoken of by the apostle, and if a woman has hair, particularly long hair, then she is properly covered and is giving a testimony to the angels.

This raises a couple of problems, however. If this covering is a sign to the angels, as verse 10 of this same passage states, then would it not be true that all women with long hair, whether pagan or saint, are giving a testimony to the angels? But how can a pagan give a testimony to the angels when they do not even understand the witness they are giving, and knowing nothing about the government of the kingdom of God it is highly improbable that they are practicing submission to that governmental order. This sign that Paul speaks of would seem to be more deliberate than this. It is something done with conscious thought and as an intentional declaration that the angels understand.

But let me share something with you that the Spirit revealed to me that I think will be most helpful to you. Paul's discourse on headship and headcovering conforms to a pattern that he uses in other places as he speaks of different topics. The pattern that Paul demonstrates is to declare the issue that he is discussing, and then use examples from scripture as well as from nature to illustrate and add emphasis to his teachings.

Let us look at an example of this from this same letter to the Corinthian church. Note that Paul declares his topic at the very beginning and then he uses various examples to back up his declaration.

I Corinthians 9:3-14

- 3 My defense to those who examine me is this:
4 Do we not have a right to eat and drink?
5 Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?
6 Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working?
7 Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard, and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock?
8 I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the Law also say these things?
9 For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing." God is not concerned about oxen, is He?
10 Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crops.
11 If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we should reap material things from you?
12 If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things, that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.
13 Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share with the altar?
14 So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.
(NAS)

In verses 3 - 6 Paul declares his topic. He is speaking of the right of a minister to receive physical things from the church in return for spiritual labor so that the minister might be able to refrain from working. It is clear that this is his topic, and we see that he concludes this passage by restating his topic, "So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel."

In the verses between Paul uses both scriptural arguments and natural ones to support what he has spoken. When he speaks of a soldier not serving at his own expense, or a farmer eating of the fruit he has planted, he is giving a natural illustration. When he speaks of not muzzling an oxen, and later when he speaks of Levites eating that which is brought to the temple, he is giving scriptural arguments. So we see that Paul follows this pattern: declare his topic; support it with scriptural and natural examples; declare his topic again.

Now let us compare this to the passage in I Corinthians 11 regarding headcovering.

I Corinthians 11:2-16

2 Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

3 But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

4 Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying, disgraces his head.

5 But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head; for she is one and the same with her whose head is shaved.

6 For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head.

7 For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.

8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man;

9 for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.

10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

11 However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.

12 For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.

13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with 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 one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

(NAS)

Again we see that Paul begins by declaring his topic. In verses 2 - 6 he states that he is speaking of holding firmly to the traditions he has delivered to them, and the particular tradition he addresses is regarding headship and the practice for women to have their heads covered while praying or prophesying and men to have their heads uncovered.

Again, just as in the prior passage he concludes by summarizing his topic, “But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.” Paul begins and ends by saying that he is speaking of the traditions or practices of the churches of God.

In between the introduction and conclusion of this topic we can see that Paul has followed the same pattern as the previous passage. He gives weight to his exhortation by giving examples from scripture and from nature. Paul states that man should not cover his head because he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the image and glory of man. He further states that man does not originate from woman, but woman from man and that woman was created for man, not man for woman. All these are scriptural examples given to support the tradition he delivered to the Corinthians that women were to have their heads covered while men remained uncovered.

In verse 13 Paul switches to giving natural examples to support the practice he is proclaiming. He identifies the next examples with the phrase “does not even nature itself teach...” Compare this to the previous passage on ministerial support, “I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the Law also say these things?” Whenever Paul gives natural examples, he does not stop there lest some should accuse him of speaking things according to human judgment. He also uses the Law, or the scriptures.

What is the natural example he gives regarding the practice of headcovering?” He gives the example of women having long hair and it being a glory to them, but men having long hair being a shame to them. As we look at this passage, however, it is clear that hair is not Paul’s topic. Hair is simply a natural example he uses to give credence to the tradition of the church for women to cover their heads while praying or prophesying.

We are not to confuse Paul’s natural illustrations with the actual subject of his discourse. In the passage from I Corinthians 9 we would be mistaken if we said Paul was really talking about oxen, farmers, or soldiers. In I Corinthians 11 we would be mistaken if we were to say Paul was talking about hair. This is merely a natural example to support his teaching that women should have a sign of authority on their heads to testify that they are content with Yahweh’s governmental order.

Again, as we look at the pattern Paul uses, his main topic is proclaimed in the opening verses. In chapter 9 he discloses that he is talking about a minister’s right to obtain a living from the gospel. In chapter 11 he clearly is speaking of headship and the practice of covering the head. Note that in verses 2 - 6 of I Corinthians 11 the word hair is never mentioned, for hair is not the topic. In every occurrence the word Paul uses for head is

Strong's 2776 *kephale* which is properly interpreted as *head*. In fact this word is used all the way down to verse 14 where we finally have a mention of hair which is the Greek word *komao*, Strong's 2863 which is defined as *tresses of hair*.

If Paul had meant to declare that the tradition of the churches of God was that women wear long hair, he would have declared this in his topic statement. However, this word is nowhere used until he gets to the portion of his discourse where he is using natural examples to support his topic that women should have a covering on their heads. So we see that hair is not Paul's subject at all. Wearing a covering on the head as a symbol of recognition and submission to Yahweh's governmental order is his topic.

It is not hair that Paul is declaring as the sign to the angels, it is the wearing of a covering on the head that is deliberately placed there to make a statement of agreement with Yahweh's governmental order.

How easy it would have been for Paul to begin by saying "Every man who has long hair while praying or prophesying, disgraces his head. But every woman who has short hair while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head." If the tradition or practice of the church Paul was speaking of was for women to have long hair and men short hair, he could easily have said so. But he does not say this. He does not even mention hair until he gets to the end of his discussion and he chooses to give a natural illustration to support the practice of the church.

To discern Paul's topic we must limit ourselves to that which he states when he introduces his topic: "Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying, disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head."

So we are able to answer the question, "Is a woman's hair the only covering she needs?" The answer is clearly "No." Paul only mentions hair in this passage to add weight to the practice he has delivered to the church that women should have a covering upon their heads while praying or prophesying. I trust that this explanation will bear witness with your spirit.

Your servant,

Joseph Herrin