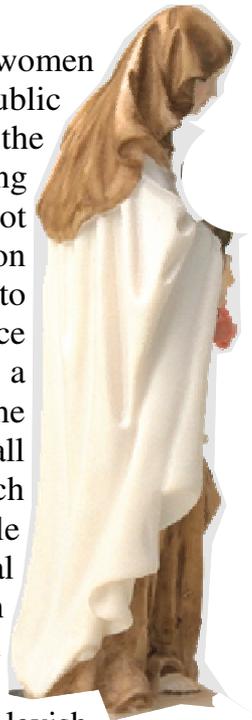


The Head Covering

by
Douglas L. Crook

The following notes are the personal conviction of the writer concerning the head covering of the woman as taught by the Apostle Paul in *I Corinthians 11:1 - 16*.

I believe that the custom of women wearing veils or head coverings in public church services should be viewed in the same way that the custom of foot washing is viewed by most Christians today. Foot washing was a necessary and common custom of the time and Jesus used it to teach an important lesson on love, service and humility. The custom belonged to a time and place but the teaching is for the whole Church Age and is universal for all believers. Well, we know that Church doctrine was entrusted to the Apostle Paul, so let's see if he used other local customs to teach universal Church doctrine. A lesser talked about custom and teaching is the custom of men greeting men with very long and lavish,



ceremonial greetings, that included exchanging kisses. Paul, four times in his writings, commands us to greet one another with a holy kiss. (*Rom. 16:16, I Cor. 16:20, II Cor .13:12, I Thes. 5:26*) The teaching is that we are to greet one another with a genuine love and concern and without any hidden malice in the heart. Our fellowship with one another is not to be ceremonial or superficial but genuine and in the love of God. The custom belongs to a region but the teaching is for all believers. Also, Paul uses what was a local problem at Corinth due to the customs of the day to teach some very important and ageless Christian principles. (*I Cor. 8 & 10*) The problem was meat that had first been sacrificed to idols before it was sold in the market. Should Christians eat it? Paul's answer; "Take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." The problem of meat sacrificed to idols does not even exist in our time and society, but the teaching that Paul gave in response to the problem still applies to our lives today.

Having found precedent in the Word of God for viewing such customs in this way, let's now look at the custom of women wearing the veil. Corinth was in Greece and therefore the customs that set the social atmosphere were Greek. The custom of that time and place that we are considering was the following: Women wore long, uncut hair as well as a veil or shawl that covered the entire head and shoulders. Not to be covered in this manner was a social sign of unfaithfulness to the husband and of harlotry. I once read that when Greek women were caught in adultery that their head was shaven as punishment. (*I Cor. 11:5*) Another custom that is mentioned in our text,

and I believe is important in understanding the veil, is that of the men having their heads uncovered at religious and sacred gatherings. Now, remember this is the Greek custom. Their hair was not to be shaven nor excessively long. If we are going to practice these customs today, they should be observed in this manner and not some modern day version of them.

As I stated earlier, I believe these to be local customs and not church doctrine. But that doesn't mean we just skip over this portion as if there is nothing here for us. There are some very important, ageless and universal truths taught in this passage. First, we have God's divine order for the family restated. Man is placed as the head of the woman, Christ is the Head of man and God is the Head of Christ. Headship denotes the authority of the head and the submission of those under him. The veil was a sign (*I Cor. 11:10*) of being under the power and authority of another. It was a sign of submission and faithfulness as well as protection and provision. When marriages were solemnized among the Jews, the man would throw the skirt of his robe over his wife and cover her head with it, thus declaring that she now fell under his protection. (*Ruth 3:9*) Wives should honor the authority of their husbands and husbands should care for their wives. In Corinth, the veil was an external sign of such mutual faithfulness. Paul uses this external custom to reemphasize spiritual truth. The relationship between a husband and his wife is a picture of the relationship of Jesus with faithful believers. (*Ephesians 5:22 - 25*) He is our Head and we are to be in submission to Him in all things. As our Head we fall under His protection and provision.

Christian marriages should be an example of such faithfulness as we are mutually faithful to one another.

Secondly, I believe that Paul was teaching the Corinthians the important heart attitudes that he also states in *Galatians 5:13 & 14*, *I Corinthians 8:13 and I Corinthians 9:19 - 23*. Even though the Christian men of Corinth may have had the liberty to cover their heads while praying or in a public assembly, which was the required custom among the Jews, such behavior would have caused the unsaved Greeks to look at them as if they were disrespectful and irreverent to God. For the believing women of Corinth to attend public assemblies and pray with their head uncovered would say to the unsaved that they were harlots who had no respect for their husbands or for God. Paul was telling them, "That's not the message we want to convey." Christians who want to teach and have a testimony of godliness and submission to Christ cannot do so if they blatantly break established social customs that already represent good social morals. To break them is to bring reproach to the Gospel even though the Gospel may give you liberty from such external bondages.

Here are a few modern day applications of the truth that Paul is teaching in our text.

When my wife and I went to Paraguay, South America, I had heard that the people looked down on beards because they associated them with Fidel Castro and communism, both of which were sorely hated. I'm not sure exactly how true that was, but because I did not want to bring any reproach to the Gospel, I shaved off my beard before we arrived. My wife also conformed to several social customs for the sake of the

Gospel. For women to wear pants was considered disrespectful and not fitting for a Christian woman by many believers there. So she didn't wear pants. Another older custom was also closely observed by my wife. Red dresses were commonly considered the attire of prostitutes. Needless to say she never wore a red dress while in Paraguay. The observance of these external customs in and of themselves have no bearing on our fellowship with the Lord. God doesn't care if I have a beard or not, nor does He care if my wife wears pants or a red dress, but if these things bring reproach to the Gospel because of local social customs, then the higher law of love becomes the determining factor of what we do and do not do.

Paul says in *I Corinthians 11:16* that if anyone disagrees with what he has written, it doesn't matter, this was the only policy that the churches (local assemblies) should uphold. This does not change the fact that it is a local custom and not a Church ordinance. I believe that it would have been completely wrong for the Corinthian saints not to observe the wearing of the head covering, knowing the social havoc it would have caused and the reproach it would have brought on the Gospel. This is not a problem in our society today. We are bound by the spiritual truth of the teaching of the head covering but not by the observance of the custom of the head covering.

In the tenth verse of our text Paul uses the term "*because of the angels*", in emphasizing the importance of the Corinthian women wearing the sign of authority on their head. Some feel that this puts added significance on the need to observe the literal

wearing of the head covering. That fact presented by Paul in this verse is that the angels are the observers of the work of redemption. (*I Tim. 3:16, I Cor. 4:9, Eph. 3:10, Ecc. 5:6*) Angels witness our conduct here on earth as God's redeemed. The Bible tells us that all heaven rejoices at the salvation of even one soul. I am sure that there is rejoicing when we conduct ourselves in such a way as to bring glory to God and sadness when we walk disorderly and reproachfully. The fact that they witness our conduct is not reserved to the mere external observance of the ancient custom of the head covering, but to our heart attitude and daily manner of life.

Most Bible students agree that the passage indicates that the head covering was required only for public worship. To me this only emphasizes the fact that it cannot be a universal church practice. Angels can see us in private too. If, in the eyes of God, it is wrong for women to pray with their head uncovered in public, it would be wrong for them to pray that way in private. But if the public misconstrues our liberty as sin, then it's prudent that we obey local customs of good social morality.

To impose the use of long hair or the wearing of a veil as a mandatory Christian practice for women is to impose local and dated customs and that simply is not the purpose of the Pauline Gospel. Paul's Gospel sets forth universal and eternal truths about God and His Son that will never change with time or place.

One final thought. Remember that the customs mentioned in our text are Greek customs. The custom of the Jews has always been for the men to cover their

heads when they pray to God or assemble together. This is in direct opposition to the Greek custom. In *Acts 21* Paul entered the Jewish temple and took a vow and allowed a sacrifice to be offered in his behalf, all according to Jewish custom.

In *Acts 18* he shaved his head as part of a vow. We can assume that he also, according to Jewish custom, covered his head to pray when ever he was among the Jews. (*Acts 28:17*) Paul would not have done such a thing if it were contrary to universal church doctrine. Paul himself did not live according to the customs of *I Corinthians 11:1 - 16* but according to it's spiritual teaching.

I have no conflict with anyone who has a personal conviction to observe the custom of the wearing of the head covering, nor do I ridicule them for that conviction. If it is observed in a spirit of grace that produces obedience, then such observances can be a witness to others. If it is required in a spirit of legalism, it can only produce bondage and religiousness.

The issue is not covered or uncovered, long or short, but rather a question of the heart. The issue is our submission to Christ and a walk of love.



Douglas L. Crook, Pastor
Abundant Grace Fellowship
4535 Wadsworth Blvd.
Wheat Ridge, CO 80033
303-423-2625
dlcweston@juno.com