

Men And Women, Hats And Hair

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Numerous churches have a tradition specifying that women should wear a veil, a hat or some other kind of head covering when attending church services. Claiming that their teaching derives from the custom of the early New Testament church, these churches say that the apostle Paul specifies that women should wear a head covering. As proof, they point to I Corinthians 11:5, where God inspired Paul to write, "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."

Paul expands on this point in the next verse, becoming very emphatic: "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" (I Corinthians 11:6). On the surface, this seems to be a clear command by a leading, first-century apostle.

What is Paul saying here? Did he teach the early New Testament church of God that women must wear a hat or veil to church services? If this is not what he meant, how should we understand these verses? What kind of tradition was Paul teaching the church?

Head Coverings and Submission

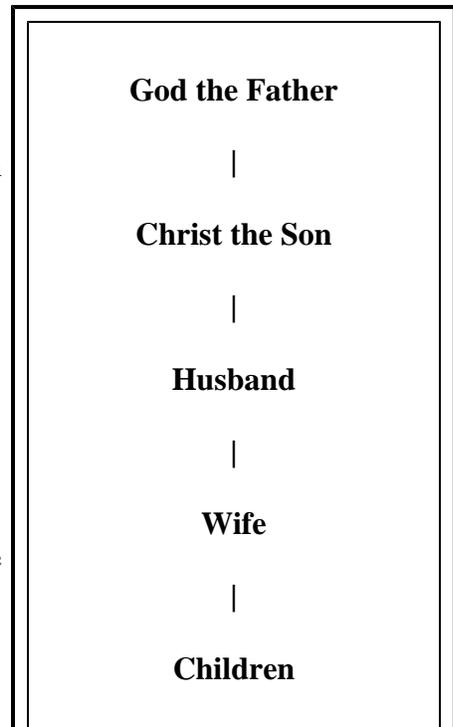
To obtain a clear picture of what the apostle meant by these statements, we must understand these verses in the context of his entire discussion of head coverings. This topic begins in I Corinthians 11:3, giving the underlying principle for his decision: "But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."

The real subject under discussion is subjection to authority! Paul shows that, under God's government, there is a chain of authority. A woman is subject to her husband, who is subject to Christ, who is subject to God the Father. He repeats this chain in the section on marriage in Ephesians 5:22-24.

In I Corinthians 11:4, Paul relates this matter of authority first to a man's head covering, "Every man praying or prophesying having his head covered, dishonors his head." Paul explains that a man should not have his head covered because a head covering symbolizes subjection. To wear a head covering would dishonor his God-given position as the head of his wife. The apostle explains this principle further in I Corinthians 11:7-10:

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.

For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was



man created for the woman, but woman for the man. For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

As God has appointed the roles of men and women, a man stands in a similar position toward his wife as Christ does to men. Thus, Paul says, a man who is a godly example of loving authority "is the image and glory of God." Likewise, a woman stands in a similar position as man does to God, in subjection. Therefore, Paul concludes, a woman must appear in her God-designed role as a submissive wife (Genesis 2:18; 3:16). Her submissive appearance renders glory to her head, her husband.

For further proof that this is what God intends, Paul recalls that God created a man first, then He formed a woman out of the man (I Corinthians 11:8). To him, the order of creation is significant, showing who was to be in authority. He then uses the fact that Eve was created as a helper and companion for Adam (I Corinthians 11:9), rather than vice versa, as a final proof for his conclusion that a man should not cover his head.

Paul immediately explains that the head covering a woman should wear symbolizes her submission to the man (I Corinthians 11:10). The covering on a woman's head is a sign of her willingness to be in subjection to a man. It also acknowledges that she has a special need for protection by angels that a man may not need.

In I Corinthians 11:11-12 the apostle cautions us not to go to extremes in these God-given roles:

Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as the woman was from the man, even so the man also is through the woman; but all things are from God.

Men and women need each other and can teach each other many things. In these verses, Paul seems to be recalling Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall be one flesh." If a husband and wife work together "in the Lord," they can produce the godly character that God desires in us. God has made us what we are, so we should, as "one flesh," strive to fulfill His purpose for us.

What Head Covering?

What is this covering that Paul is saying a man should not wear but a woman should? In answering this unspoken question, Paul asks, "Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?" (I Corinthians 11:13). He immediately answers his own question: "Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has *long hair*, it is a dishonor to him? But if a woman has *long hair*, it is a glory to her; **for her hair is given to her for a covering**" (I Corinthians 11:14-15).

All along, Paul has been writing, not about a hat or veil, but the length of one's hair! He is not saying a woman should wear something over her hair, but rather she should wear her hair long enough to be recognized as feminine. This wearing of her hair long shows her submission to the man.

Thus, in I Corinthians 11:5, Paul is saying that if a woman prays or prophesies while wearing her hair short like a man, she is dishonoring the man. She is not showing a willingness to wear the symbol of submission to the man's authority. Further, for a woman to wear her hair short like a man is just as

dishonorable as if she had her head shaved like a fallen woman! I Corinthians 11:6 means that if a woman has the wrong attitude about this matter, she might as well go all the way and have her head shaved!

The issue under discussion, far from being a matter of wearing a hat or veil, involves *the length of men's and women's hair*. Paul's head covering is the actual hair that grows on our heads, and his teaching is that a woman should wear long hair and a man should wear short hair.

The only place in the Bible where God instructs men to wear long hair is in Numbers 6:5 where He commands Nazirites to let their hair grow for the duration of their vow. A Nazirite vow was taken by those who were not Levites but wanted to serve in the Temple worship. In this case, the man was required to wear long hair as a sign of his submission to God. Ironically, the apostle Paul is thought to have taken such a vow not long before he wrote these instructions to the Corinthian church (Acts 18:18). He later paid the expenses of four men who had also taken a vow (Acts 21:18-24).

Principle and Balance

Because Paul specifies that a woman should wear long hair, some wonder, "How long is long?" Some have gone so far as to believe that a woman should never cut her hair. However, Scripture does not specify uncut hair, but long hair. Others have confused shorn hair with cut hair. Shorn hair is hair that has been closely clipped in a mannish hairdo.

Paul is making the point that a woman should wear her hair long enough so that she looks feminine and honorable. This is why he says in I Corinthians 11:15, "If a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her." A woman should pay particular attention to her hair and make certain that it is long enough and properly groomed and styled to enhance her appearance and femininity.

On the other hand, men must not follow modern fads and styles and wear their hair long like women. Long hair brings dishonor upon a man. God intends that we make a clear distinction between men and women in both grooming and dress (Deuteronomy 22:5). The length of one's hair is a most important line of distinction to God.

As supreme Creator, God has decreed that men should be in a position of leadership and loving authority over women. As such, they should be strong and masculine in both behavior and appearance. At the same time, He has decreed that women should accede to the role of submission. This should be reflected in a feminine appearance and demeanor.

We can learn an important lesson from these scriptures: Our appearance and grooming are important to God. We should not limit these instructions just to church services either. They apply at all times in all situations. In following the traditions that God gave to His church regarding hair length, grooming and dress, we are honoring God and the chain of authority that He has established.