

The
Significance of the
Christian
Woman's Veiling



The Significance of the Christian Woman's Veiling by Merle Ruth

This article revolves around an ordinance that many segments of the professing church have lost. This state of affairs has given to the practice, in the eyes of some, the appearance of a peculiar denominational tradition. That is a misconception that we unitedly ought to challenge and correct.

Most of you know that a keystone is the wedge-shaped stone that is put in the top center of the arch and thus gives strength and solidarity to the whole structure. The practice we are about to examine has about it something that makes it a keystone in the whole structure of Christian nonconformity. A study of the history of the church groups would reflect the fact that when once this practice falls by the way, it is only a matter of time until every other mark of Christian nonconformity becomes extinct. Let us therefore never become apologetic about teaching and practicing the Christian Woman's Head Veiling.

We ought to appreciate this title: "The Significance of the Christian Woman's Veiling." The significance of anything is its

meaning. God is concerned that we keep alive the meaning behind His ordinances. In connection with the first Passover, God said, "When your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? Then you shall explain what it means." When a Bible-taught practice is continued, after its meaning has been largely lost, it becomes subject to all kinds of abuse. At that point someone is likely to suggest it be discontinued—"Why continue a meaningless practice?" But that is walking right into the devil's trap. It is surely better to continue the practice and try in every way possible to revive its meaning so it becomes again the meaningful expression God meant it to be. That is reason number one for frequent teaching on this subject. We face the challenge of keeping alive, from generation to generation, not only the practice but also its meaning.

Another reason for teaching repeatedly on this subject lies in the circumstances alluded to at the beginning. This once widespread practice is, in many groups, now viewed as nonessential. Even among those who still retain the Mennonite label, there are many who have lost all appreciation for this practice. It has been said that the most important bolt on a train is

the one that is loose; for that reason it needs immediate attention. That has its parallel in the life of the church. The church at Sardis received from Heaven this mandate: "Strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die." That means that a practice, once it becomes neglected, ought to receive more attention than it otherwise would, and this is obviously a neglected practice.

In the nonprofessing world there are likewise circumstances that make this form of witness an urgently needed witness. There is wholesale disregard for God's headship arrangement. Sex distinction is becoming blurred, almost to the point of extinction. If we who claim to be the church do not give a clear witness concerning God's order, where else will this bewildered world find it!

To find the reasons for this practice, we do not go to some sourcebook on proper etiquette. Neither do we go to a denominational handbook. Rather, we go to man's highest court of appeal, that supremely authoritative Book of books, that Word by which all men shall be judged in the last day. We turn now, in that Book, to 1 Corinthians 11:1-16.

The first verse is in the form of a plea.

“Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.” Paul, the writer of this passage, was a divinely chosen vessel. He was on intimate terms with Christ. The instructions that come to us through him have their source in heaven. The Anointed of God, when He walked among men, had said, “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.” When He came back to earth on the Day of Pentecost in the Person of the Holy Spirit, He began to impart to men those things. Under His direction the New Testament came into being, and that is now our rule for faith and life. Thus it was that this man Paul could rightfully say in this same Corinthian letter, “The things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”

In the second verse Paul commends the Corinthians for the recognition and respect they have shown him and for their observance of the ordinances. “Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.”

I would now like to call attention to the beginning of the next verse, verse 3. It begins, as you see, with the word *but*, a word that usually serves to introduce a

contrasting condition. Evidently, on this one point Paul was led to depart from his commending them and seek instead to clarify and possibly correct. "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." This might be termed the theological premise underlying the practice that is to be outlined in the following verses. We are here being introduced to God's arrangement for working relations within the divine-human economy. This is otherwise known as God's order of headship. It is a God-designated line of responsibility. Furthermore, it is a permanently existing arrangement.

This verse names three relationships in which the principle of headship is in effect by divine decree: (1) the head of Christ is God, (2) the head of man is Christ, and (3) the head of woman is man. The meaning of headship for the man-woman relationship can be arrived at by examining the God-Christ relationship. Jesus once said: "I and my Father are one." That speaks of equality. On another occasion, He said this, at least in substance: "I am not alone in what I am doing." That speaks of cooperation. On a third occasion, Jesus said, "I do always those things that please him

[the Father].” That speaks of the Father’s leadership. By way of summary, one could then say that in the Father-Son relationship there is a blending of equality and cooperation along with a mutual awareness that ultimate authority resides with the Father. Or, stated otherwise, functional priority belongs to the Father. If then, in a relationship that is wholly divine, headship or leadership is needful and good, how much more so in the human, man-woman relationship. Both men and women need to recognize, therefore, that there is for each of them a God-appointed place and function and that they make their greatest contribution and reach their highest glory when cheerfully serving in that capacity.

Suppose a railroad locomotive could speak. It might say, “I’m tired of following the same old tracks and going through the same old towns.” And suppose the locomotive would then leave its tracks and start across the open fields. Would it improve its lot? Would it find greater liberty? Would it increase its usefulness? Of course not. In one way or another, it would eventually get stuck. The locomotive is most useful when it follows the tracks for which it was designed. In this day of supposed

liberation for women, that lesson is urgently needed. We make our greatest contribution when we function in our God-designated sphere.

God has chosen to employ visible means to preserve awareness of this divinely conceived arrangement whereby both the man and the woman have their own sphere of operation. It is this employment of a visible sign that puts the practice into the category of an ordinance. Both the Christian man and Christian woman are involved in giving this visible witness. And, it is a twofold witness from yet another standpoint, for it involves the giving of both a divinely supplied witness and a humanly supplied witness. The divinely supplied witness is the witness of nature. At a later point in this discussion, Paul indicates that the endowments and dictates of nature bear witness to a God-planned distinction between the sexes. Accordingly, woman's long hair is nature's covering, supplied by God. The humanly supplied witness is the one whereby the individual gives his or her personal endorsement of God's arrangement. God wants both Christian men and women to give visible evidence of their acceptance of His arrangement and their pledge to

harmonize their lives with that order. In verses 4 and 5, the God-prescribed form for this humanly supplied witness comes into view. "Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven."

It is obvious that these two verses take the negative approach; that is, they visualize a violation rather than a compliance. Nevertheless, what God expects is here clearly implied. The only possible correct deduction one can make is this: For men, the divinely prescribed headship sign is given by the man having his head uncovered; that is, free of any covering having a religious connotation, such as is worn by Jewish men and certain of the Catholic clergy. Our wearing of the hat is not a violation of this Scripture, for the hat is primarily a protectional covering. For women, the God-called-for witness is given by having the head covered. The word *cover*, as employed in verses 4-7, is derived from the Greek *Katakalypto* and means "veil." Consequently, some Bible versions properly use here the terms *veiled* and *unveiled*. The expression,

“Woman’s Veiling” is therefore altogether proper. The disregard of this practice is said to dishonor one’s head. Which head? The head here in view is most likely one’s spiritual head, which in the case of the man is Christ and in the case of the woman is man. The woman who refuses to wear the veil, by that act, projects herself into man’s position, usurping authority over him and, at the same time, repudiating that divine authority under which he stands. It would take a great deal of audacity to say, “God, don’t mind my disobedience; just answer my prayer.” But really, if you knowingly disregard this regulation, that is what your actions say.

In the remaining verses a number of related factors are brought forward to further substantiate both the principle of headship and the practice by which it is kept alive.

Let us look now at verse 6. “For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.” This further explains the concluding portion of verse 5. By going unveiled, a woman brings upon herself the same measure of shame that would accompany the shaving of her head. The divine

verdict is that if her head is uncovered, that is even all one as if she were shorn or shaven, and it is strongly implied that no one should challenge the fact that it is a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven. The grammatical construction in the Greek would permit this rendering: "Since it is a shame." Incidentally, in that time and place, for a woman to cut her hair was regarded as a shame. That can be said to their credit and to the discredit of today's society. Shorn hair, that is cut hair, obviously is longer than hair that has been shaven, but it is here represented as equally shameful. Notice the expression "shorn or shaven." Both are put into the same package; both are put into the category of the shameful. On top of that is this fact: The nonwearing of the covering is equally as shameful. Here is a divine verdict that no amount of human defiance can reverse.

Let us move now to verses 7 through 9. Here attention is called to the fact that this headship arrangement dates back all the way to the time of the Creation. "For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man" (verse 7). This seems to imply that

God created man to be His visible representative here on earth. Since there is no head above God, man, His representative, is to be uncovered in order to reflect God's supreme headship.

The next two verses focus on two more factors related to the Creation, which indicate that man's headship over woman was in the mind of God from the very beginning. Verse 8 speaks of man's priority in the process of creation. "For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man." That should be self-explanatory: Eve was created from Adam. Verse 9 speaks of God's purpose in creation. "Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man." Eve was meant to be Adam's helper. Thus the designs of the Creator have been shown to substantiate what has been said about the man-woman relationship.

In the ancient world the status of womanhood was very low. This had its reflections even in Jewish circles. It is claimed that by the time of Christ, in the Jewish morning prayer, a man thanked God for not making him "a Gentile, a slave, or a woman." Christianity, more than anything else, has corrected that view. Paul taught that in Christ a woman

has spiritual privileges equal to a man. It may be that at Corinth this newfound liberty was on the verge of being interpreted so broadly as to cancel the headship order. It seems as though the emphasis given here was aimed at correcting that kind of false conclusion. These verses reaffirm that the creation order remains intact. In the reckoning of God, man continues to be the administrative head.

Another support for this practice is brought forward in verse 10. "For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels." The good angels are always represented as being in full subjection to God. In Isaiah 6:2, the seraphim are said to cover their faces in the presence of God. In numerous other places in the Scriptures, angels are represented as constant observers of the human scene and as helpers of the saints. This verse seems to imply that the presence of these unseen heavenly observers constitutes another reason that the woman wants to manifest submission to spiritual leadership. Her covered head is a sign even to the angels that she is qualified to pray and eligible for their ministry and protection.

Let us move now to verses 11 and 12.

“Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.” These verses speak of the need that men and women have for each other and of their mutual dependence on the Lord. Very likely, this note was injected to keep the man from becoming a proud, arrogant head. Headship ought to be viewed not as something to be proud of but worthy of.

Now an appeal is made to human judgment. “Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?” (verse 13). Evidently, the predominating opinion with regard to this matter was then still in alignment with God’s will. The very fact that today this appeal might meet with a weak response in many circles should open our eyes to the decline in moral judgment that has occurred since that day.

Next, attention is focused on the fact that God teaches through nature the same truth He here teaches by revelation. “Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her

for a covering” (verses 14 and 15). God put into the human makeup a built-in sense of propriety that opposes long hair for men and endorses long hair for women. The fact that today many women cut their hair betrays the character of our time. We must conclude that they are doing it contrary to nature as God made it. It is a perversion similar to perversions that characterize our time. When obedient to the dictates of nature, the man with his short hair appears uncovered; the woman with her long hair appears covered. By this arrangement, God has shown what He expects. He expects the man to be unveiled, the woman veiled. Please note that her hair is said to be given her for a covering. But while it is a covering, it is not the covering called for in the preceding verses. Those who claim that the hair is the only covering in view ignore the fact that in this instance the word *covering* comes from a different Greek word. The word translated *covering* in verse 15 is not *Katakalypto*, as in the earlier verses, but *Peribolaion*. If in God’s reckoning the hair is the veiling, we could rightfully expect this statement to read thus: “Her hair is given her for a *Katakalypto*” (veil). That it does not say

this is consistent with everything else in the passage. Likewise, a careful reading of verse 6 will confirm the fact that two coverings are in view. We find there this statement: "If the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn." If one maintains the hair is the covering, then he is faced with an impossibility, namely, two successive removals of the hair. If the hair is the covering and she is uncovered, then the hair has already been removed. Why then add, "Let her also be shorn"? What would be left to cut off? What the statement really means is this: A woman ought to wear both (the hair covering and the sign covering) or none. If she refuses to be veiled, she deserves a second mark of disgrace. Here is a still further consideration: If the only covering in view is the hair, the Christian man would need to remove his hair in order to comply with God's stated will.

There remains yet one verse, "But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God" (verse 16). In effect, Paul is saying, "It would be strange indeed for anyone to challenge a practice that is being observed universally." The fact that this practice is not mentioned in letters to other churches is very understandable in the light of this

verse. Apparently, it was faithfully being observed as verse 16 would suggest. The exception was here at Corinth, where possibly there was the threat of a departure. Whatever the situation, it called forth this teaching.

Is it not significant that Paul says, "If any man . . . be contentious?" And did you notice in verse 2 the "brethren" are specifically named. The preservation or loss of this practice hinges largely upon the brethren. Our sisters need the support that comes from fathers and brothers who likewise readily show their colors. Daughters who have covering problems and hair problems need fathers and church leaders who are gracefully insistent.

Let us turn now to some remaining loose ends. No precise specifications are given for the veiling. Some allowance can therefore be made relative to the details of its construction. But there are limits beyond which variation cannot properly go. Obviously, it must be of such a nature that it conveys a religious connotation; that means it must be distinguishable from any form of protecting headgear. In view of the comparison drawn in this passage between the hair and the veil, it seems obvious that the veil ought to cover

the larger part of the head. The God-required sign is not the veil alone, but the veil-covered head. Consequently, when the veil becomes too small, the practice loses its significance.

Again, this passage does not state precisely how the hair is to be arranged under the covering. But, *obviously, the Lord's covering will not fit properly on the devil's hairdo.* Any "fixing" of the hair that is born of pride militates against the meaning of the veil. Some sisters wear their hair too far down on the neck; consequently, only the back of the head is covered by the veil. Others wear their hair too far down on the forehead. *Why not keep the hair within the natural hairline?*

A thoughtful person will recognize that the policy of having the church recommend a uniform-type covering has definite advantages over the policy of leaving the matter to the judgment of the individual. The latter policy results in such a variation of practice that soon there is little resemblance of unity in this area of witness and great difficulty in distinguishing between the headgear that was intended to serve as a sign covering and headgear that was not so intended.

When, or how constantly shall the

covering be worn? *In some circles, the covering has become, by default, merely a worship veil.* The attempt is then made to show that this passage has in view only times of public worship. That is a very poorly substantiated conclusion. Please note that in verse 18, where Paul is entering into another matter, he indicates that now he has in view an abuse that manifested itself when they came together in the church. Would this not suggest that he had in view a broader context prior to that point?

To speak of the covering as a “prayer veiling” is incorrect. Even the term “devotional covering” has likely militated against God’s intention by restricting the wearing of it to one phase of life’s activities, whereas God’s plan for the man-woman relationship is as broad as life itself. The veiled head does not necessarily signify that here is a soul at prayer. Rather, it signifies that here is a woman who seeks to honor God in all of life. So it is not really a prayer veiling but a woman’s veiling worn to show that the wearer is in God’s order. A sister ought to know she wears the veiling primarily because she is a woman, not simply because she periodically prays and

teaches. It is true that verses 4 and 5 speak of the practice in relation to times of praying and prophesying. But it is highly probable that those were the occasions when possibly the Corinthians had begun to feel this practice might be omitted in the name of Christian liberty. It is only natural that the correction would first be applied to the point of violation. *Students of the Greek language have pointed out that the clause, "Let her be covered," is the present, active, imperative form, so that by its grammatical structure it means, "Let her continue to be veiled."*

Again and again we have been told that the value of Bible study lies in making present-day applications, and that is right. But many, who supposedly are Biblical experts, change their tune when they come to this passage. This supposedly does not apply today. But as many of you know, the latter part of this chapter has Paul correcting abuses relating to another ordinance—Communion. When these supposed experts move from the first part of the chapter to the latter part, they betray their inconsistency. They would not think of arguing that Communion was meant to be observed only by the Corinthian Christians of that day. But

how can one generalize the latter part of the chapter, giving it universal application for all churches of all times and then limit the first part to a particular church for a particular period? It simply cannot honestly be done. This epistle is not addressed to the Corinthians exclusively. *The salutation indicates that this letter is meant for "all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord."*

Those who want to belittle this practice have given it derogatory labels such as "a purely cultural practice," and "an ancient oriental custom." An oft-heard argument runs like this: Since in Corinth the local sign of a harlot was the uncovered head, Paul is asking the Corinthian women to avoid all appearance of evil by covering their heads; and since a woman's uncovered head no longer necessarily signifies what it once did, the practice is no longer relevant. But that is misrepresenting the thrust of this passage. Nowhere in this chapter are women told to wear the veiling in order to distinguish themselves from harlots. True, it does that, but that is a result of the practice and not the basic reason underlying the practice.

Again, in review, let us recognize that this practice is rooted deeply in God's

unchanging headship order. *Sister, your veiled head is the sign of a spiritual relationship that remains totally unaffected by the changing customs of society.* This is God's way of preserving awareness of a permanently existing arrangement. Your wearing of your covering ought to be a token of the fact that you have accepted your God-designated sphere. It declares that here is one who has pledged to live her life under the lordship of the King of kings.

Can God use us to keep alive this neglected, belittled, yet vitally important practice? That is the challenge we face. That also may be a part of the unique mission of the truly Mennonite brotherhood.

—Annville, Pa.

Copies available from:

Christian Light Publications

P.O. Box 1212

Harrisonburg, Virginia 22803-1212

Phone (540) 434-0768