



The  
Significance  
of the  
Christian  
Woman's  
Veiling



# The Significance of the Christian Woman's Veiling

————— by Merle Ruth —————

*Most Christian churches no longer teach that Christian women should cover their heads, although it was once the universal practice among Christian women. This article explores the New Testament teaching of the veiled head for women.*

## ***The Scriptural Basis for the Christian Woman's Veiling***

Why should Christian women cover their heads? To find the reasons for this practice, we cannot turn to books on etiquette, history, or culture or to a denominational handbook. Rather, we go to that supremely authoritative Book of books, that Word by which all men

shall be judged in the last day, the Bible. The Bible speaks to the practice of women veiling their heads in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16.

**Verse 1.** The first verse is a plea. “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.” Paul, the writer of this passage, was on intimate terms with Christ. The instructions that come to us through him come from Heaven. When Jesus walked among men, He 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 men wrote the New Testament, which is now our rule for faith and life. That is how Paul could rightfully say in this Corinthian letter, “The things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord” (14:37).

**Verse 2.** In the second verse, Paul commends the Corinthians for the recognition and respect they have shown him and for the way they have obeyed him in practicing the things he taught them. “Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.”

**Verse 3.** Now notice verse 3. It begins with the word *but*, which usually introduces a contrasting condition. Evidently, on this point Paul was led to stop commending them and seek 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 outlined in the verses that follow. God here introduces to us His design for working relations within divine-human relationships. We sometimes call this design “God’s order of headship.” It is a God-designated line of responsibility. Furthermore, it is a permanent arrangement.

This verse names three relationships to which the principle of headship applies 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

in essence said, "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.

In summary, we could 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. If headship or leadership is needful and good in a divine relationship, 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 role and that they make their greatest contribution and reach their highest glory when cheerfully serving in that capacity.

Suppose a railroad locomotive could speak, and it said, "I'm tired of following the same old tracks and going through the same old towns." And suppose the locomotive would then leave the railroad 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 soon get stuck. A 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 something visible to help us remember His plan whereby both the man and the woman have their own sphere of operation. Both the Christian man and Christian woman are involved in giving this visible witness.

It is a twofold witness from yet another standpoint, for it involves both a divinely supplied witness and a humanly supplied witness. The divinely supplied witness is the witness of nature. Later in this passage Paul indicates that even nature bears witness of a God-planned distinction between the sexes. Woman's long hair is nature's covering, supplied by God. The humanly supplied witness appears when an individual personally chooses to accept and endorse God's arrangement. God wants both Christian men and women to give visible evidence of their acceptance of His arrangement

and to pledge to harmonize their lives with that order.

**Verses 4, 5.** Verses 4 and 5 tell about the God-prescribed form for this humanly supplied witness: “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.”

These two verses take a negative approach; that is, they portray a violation rather than compliance. Nevertheless, what God expects is clear: (1) A man shows the divinely prescribed headship sign by 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. (2) A woman shows the God-ordained witness by having her head covered.

The word *cover*, as used in verses 4 through 7, is derived from the Greek *katakalypto* and means “to veil” or “to cover.” Consequently, some Bible versions correctly use here the terms *veiled* and *unveiled*. Therefore the terms *veiling* and *covering* are both proper.



Disregarding this practice is said to dishonor one's head. Which head? The head in view here 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 knowingly refuses to wear the veil projects herself into man's position, essentially usurping authority over him. In essence, she is rejecting the divine authority under which he stands. No Christian woman would say, "God, don't mind my disobedience; just answer my prayer." But when a woman who understands it is God's will for her to be covered refuses to do so, that is what she does when she prays.

In the remaining verses the apostle presents a number of factors that substantiate both the principle of headship and the ordinance that illustrates and keeps it alive.

**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 last part 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

grammatical construction in the Greek would permit this rendering: “Since it is a shame for a woman to be . . .” In that time and place, for a woman to cut her hair was still regarded as a shame. Thus this verse deals with more than just the veiled head; it speaks to cutting the hair. Undoubtedly, shorn or cut hair is longer than hair that has been shaven, but it is here represented as equally shameful. Notice the expression “shorn or shaven.” Both are categorized as shameful. On top of that, not wearing the covering is equally shameful. Here is a divine verdict that human defiance or reasoning cannot reverse.

**Verse 7.** Verses 7 through 9 state that this headship arrangement dates all the way back to 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 implies that God created man to be His visible representative on earth. Since there is no head above God, man, His representative, is to be uncovered in order to reflect God’s supreme headship.

**Verses 8, 9.** The next two verses focus on two more factors related to Creation, indicating that

man's headship over woman was God's design 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 Creator's design substantiates what has been said about the man-woman relationship.

In the ancient world the status of women was very low, even in Jewish circles. It is claimed that in Christ's time, Jewish men in their morning prayers thanked God for not making them "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 misinterpreted so seriously as to upend the headship order. Paul's emphasis in this passage seems to be 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.

**Verse 10.** This verse introduces another support for wearing the veiling: “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 why the woman should want to submit 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. Other explanations have been offered for the meaning of this verse, but this much is clear: it makes a difference to the angels whether or not a Christian woman’s head is veiled.

**Verses 11, 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 men and women have for each other and of their mutual dependence on the Lord. Very likely, this note was included to keep the man from becoming a proud, arrogant head. Headship is not something of which to be proud, but worthy.

**Verse 13.** Now an appeal is made to human judgment. “Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?” Evidently, the prevailing opinion about this matter was then still in alignment with God’s will. Society in general still saw the uncovered head as inappropriate. The very fact that this appeal would meet with a weak response in many circles today should open our eyes to the decline in moral judgment since then.

**Verses 14, 15.** Next, we are called to notice 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.” God built into

the human makeup a sense of propriety that opposes long hair for men and endorses long hair for women. That many women today cut their hair betrays the character of our time. We must conclude they are doing so contrary to nature as God made it. It is a perversion similar to other perversions of 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.

These verses tell us the woman's hair is 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 the hair is the only covering in view in this passage ignore that the word *covering* here comes from a different Greek word. The word translated *covering* in verse 15 is not *katakalupto*, as in the earlier verses, but *peribolaion*. If God considered the hair to be the veiling, we could rightfully expect this statement to read thus: "Her hair is given her for a *katakalupto*" (veil). That it does not

say this is consistent with everything else in the passage.

Likewise, a careful reading of verse 6 confirms that two coverings are in view. We find there this statement: “If the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn.” The one who maintains that the hair is the covering 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 the second mark of disgrace.

Here is still another consideration: If the hair is the only covering, the Christian man would need to remove his hair in order to comply with God’s stated will.

**Verse 16.** There remains yet one verse: “But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.” In effect, Paul is saying, “It would be strange indeed for anyone to challenge a practice that

is being observed universally.” That this practice is not mentioned in letters to other churches is very understandable in the light of this verse. Apparently, all the other churches were faithfully observing it. The exception was Corinth, where possibly there was the threat of a departure. Whatever the situation, it called for this teaching.

It is significant that this passage addresses both men and women; this is not just a woman’s ordinance. Men are responsible to be the spiritual leaders in the home and in the church. Thus the preservation or loss of this practice hinges largely upon the brethren. Our Christian sisters need the support that comes from brothers of conviction. Daughters who have covering problems or hair problems need fathers and church leaders who gracefully insist on obeying the Bible.

### *Some Considerations Relating to the Covering*

**Size and Pattern.** No precise specifications are given for the veiling, so some allowance can be made about how it is made, but there are



sensible and proper limits. Obviously, it must convey a religious connotation; that means it must be distinguishable from any form of protective headgear. In view of the comparison drawn in this passage between the hair and the veil, we conclude 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.

A thoughtful person will recognize the advantages of a covering pattern agreed upon by the church rather than leaving it to individual judgment. The latter results in such a variation of practice that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the sign covering and any other type of headgear.

A woman's wearing of a hat does not fulfill the requirements of this passage, for that is worn primarily for protection, and has no religious connotation. Similarly, the man's wearing a hat is not a violation of verse 4, for the hat is for protection and not for religious reasons.

**Hair Arrangement.** This passage does not state precisely how the hair is to be arranged under the covering. But, obviously, the Lord's covering is incompatible with a worldly hairdo. Any "fixing" of the hair that is born of pride militates against the meaning of the veil. Arranging the hair modestly within the natural hairline would seem a reasonable guideline.

**When It Should Be Worn.** When or how much shall the covering be worn? Some wear it only for worship services and attempt to show that this passage applies only to public worship. But a look at the rest of the chapter makes this seem highly unlikely. In verse 17, Paul begins addressing another problem at Corinth—one that he specifically states occurs when the brotherhood is gathered. If, in the first sixteen verses, Paul had been addressing a problem occurring only in the worship services, would he not likewise have said so? Along with that, the fact that he identifies the narrow context of the worship service for verses 17-34 suggests that prior to this he had a broader context in mind.

To speak of the covering as a “prayer veiling” is incorrect. Even the term “devotional covering” can undermine God’s intent by restricting the wearing of it to one activity, 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 should wear the veiling primarily because she is a woman, not because she periodically prays or teaches. It is true that verses 4 and 5 speak of the practice in relation to times of praying and prophesying. But very likely it was for such occasions that the Corinthians had begun to feel they might omit the practice in the name of Christian liberty. The correction would naturally be applied first to the point of violation. Greek scholars have pointed out that the clause “Let her be covered” is the present, active, imperative form, which gives the meaning, “Let her continue to be veiled.”

**Is It for Today?** We have often heard that the value of Bible study lies in making present-day applications, and that is true. Sadly, many Bible teachers feel differently when they come to this passage, saying it does not apply today. But in the latter part of this chapter Paul addresses abuses relating to another ordinance—Communion. These same teachers would not argue that Communion was meant to be observed only by the Corinthian Christians of long ago. How can one generalize the latter part of the chapter, applying it universally for all churches of all times, and then limit the first part to a particular church for a particular period? It cannot be done honestly. 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” (1:2).

Those who 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 ancient Corinth the sign of a harlot was the uncovered head, Paul asked 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 misrepresents 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 an underlying reason for the practice.

**The Need for Teaching.** The significance of anything is its meaning. God is concerned that we live the meaning behind His ordinances. For example, about the 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 abuse. At that point someone may suggest it be discontinued—"Why continue a meaningless practice?" That is walking right into the devil's trap. It is surely better to continue the practice and revive its meaning so that 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 this subject repeatedly is that, in many groups, this once widespread practice is now viewed as non-essential. 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 a church or an individual. The church at Sardis received from Heaven this mandate: "Strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die." That means a practice, once it becomes neglected, ought to receive more attention than it otherwise would, and this is clearly a neglected practice.

**The Need for Faithfulness.** 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 a covering signifies

that you have accepted your God-designated role. It declares that here is one who has pledged to live her life under the lordship of the King of kings.

The world urgently needs the witness of men and women who hold to this Biblical principle and practice. Society today largely disregards God's headship arrangement. Distinction between the sexes is becoming increasingly blurred, almost to the point of extinction. If we who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ do not give a clear witness concerning God's order, where else will this bewildered world find it?

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