

## Mistakes Some Make Regarding I Corinthians 11:1-16

- by Mark J. Ward -

### Diversity of Belief

Good brethren disagree over the proper understanding and application of I Corinthians 11:1-16. There are at least 5 positions (and varying views among the five main convictions) held by brethren today. God's Word is not ambiguous. The truth needs to be continually sought and then properly applied! Good brethren should be able to discuss differences on this subject, as well as any other Bible subject. It is sad that many brethren, when given the opportunity to discuss this subject (while they might preach or write on the subject) are not willing to have their views examined in honorable discussion (written or oral). Such an examination is good for people who are studying. Sometimes argumentation that "sounds good" at first blush is found lacking when opposed with scriptural refutation in the light of open discussion. In this article, let us look at a few of the mistakes some well-intentioned brethren make in their discernments on this important Bible text.

### "Praying AND Prophesying" versus "Praying OR Prophesying"

Some brethren teach that *prophesying* is exclusively the teaching done by one under inspiration of the Holy Spirit (except for false prophesying, they might say). Then, they proceed to associate the "praying" in I Corinthians 11 *exclusively* with prayer that was being done by one who was a recipient of one of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit listed in I Corinthians 12. They reason that since spiritual gifts have ceased, then there are no people today to whom this text would apply. This could be called the "spiritual gifts" position on I Corinthians 11.

There are several mistakes made in reaching this conclusion. Let us look at some of the problems with this reasoning.

1. **Prophesying is NOT exclusively inspired teaching.** Thayer's "d" definition of the word used for prophesying in I Cor. 11 is, "...to teach..." (pg. 553). Also, Titus 1:12 is an example of an **uninspired true prophet**. While the definition of "prophesying" would include *inspired teaching*, why would anyone want to exclude *uninspired teaching*?

2. **Praying is NOT a gift of the Spirit.** Furthermore, the reasoning is unsound that asserts that this "praying" is prayer *only* by those who had spiritual gifts (miraculous gifts). What in the text would teach that "every man praying or prophesying" and "every woman praying or prophesying" would be limited to those exercising spiritual gifts? Men and women still pray today. Consider: The passage does not suggest: "*Every man with a spiritual gift praying or prophesying with his head covered dishonoreth his head.*" Nor does the passage read, "*Every prophetess praying or prophesying....*" but reads "Every man..." and "Every woman...". Are we to believe that first century woman who either: did not have a spiritual gift (herself) or, was being led in prayer by a man who did NOT have a spiritual gift could pray *uncovered* in light of this theory? But, she would have to cover her head if the man leading the prayer HAD a gift of the Spirit? In other words, if the covering of the head for women was during the times of praying or prophesying exclusively during the exercising of spiritual gifts, then when uninspired teaching occurred OR whenever prayer was engaged in by those who did not have miraculous gifts, why would the passage apply then? Every man is to pray uncovered and every woman is to pray covered according to the message in the text.

3. **The two actions are not JOINED by the word "AND", but are SEPARATED by the word "OR".** I often see writings of brethren, capable men who are able teachers, making this mistake. The inspired pen of Paul does not conjoin the actions with the word "AND", but rather uses the word "OR". Every man (whether praying *or* prophesying should be uncovered and every woman (whether) praying *or* prophesying should be covered.

### **That LONG HAIR is the only covering**

Other brethren believe that the *only covering* in this text is long hair. Man is therefore uncovered by wearing short hair. Woman is covered by wearing her hair long. Those contending for this position (usually) believe that the passage is applicable today, but don't believe that the text would have the woman cover her head with an *artificial covering* at times of praying or prophesying.

Please note the following brief synopsis in showing the error in this position:

1. **The covering is something that is "done for an occasion".** Long hair is recognized in the text as the natural, permanent covering for the woman (see verse 15). This she wears, or is to wear, at all times. The covering alluded to earlier in the chapter (see verses 1-13), is something that is to be done at times of praying or prophesying. Thus, it is a **put-on-able** and **take-off-able** covering. This suggests a covering that is temporary in nature. The same is true of the man. Man is to be uncovered at times of praying or prophesying. Man, however, can be covered at other times than praying or prophesying. Women may be uncovered at times other than praying or prophesying. All this suggests an artificial covering in the text and not long hair (only).

2. **The wording in the text also teaches us clearly that the long hair cannot be the ONLY covering under consideration.** Notice verses 5 and 6, "*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. 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.*" The words "as if" in verse 5 and "let her also" in verse 6 teach that two coverings are under consideration in this context. Long hair is certainly required for women. But, if a woman prays uncovered (i.e. without an artificial covering), verse 6 makes it plain that for the shame involved in that she might **ALSO** wear her hair at an improper length (shorn or shaven). The word "also" suggests the idea of *in addition to*. If long hair were the only covering in the text, the uncovered woman in verse 6 would not might as well **ALSO** be shorn...she *would be* shorn.

NOTE: Long hair advocates explain this by saying that there are *four lengths of hair* in the passage, 1 = long (acceptable for the woman), 2 = shorter than that (unacceptable for the woman), 3 = shorn (even shorter than that), and 4 = shaven. Some would say that Paul is saying to the Corinthians that if you are going to cut your hair (go from #1 to #2), you might as well (let her *also*) go down to #3 or #4. Corinthians already recognized #3 and #4 as being shameful, but not #2. Paul is saying #2 is just as shameful as #3 and #4. So if you are going to do #2, then you might as well **ALSO** do #3 or #4.

Where in the text do we get the information that the Corinthians believed that #2 was acceptable? This is assumed without proof. Where in the text do we get four lengths of hair? This is also asserted without proof. Actually, the meaning of the word "shorn" includes the idea of putting shears to the hair, to cut the hair. Furthermore, the covering (of verses 4-13) was to be done at times of praying or prophesying, whereas long hair (on women) should be something worn **ALL THE TIME** (not just at times of praying or prophesying).

### **That the covering of the woman during prayer is FIGURATIVE**

Other good brethren contend that the covering, while applicable today, is something that is purely mental, done in the minds of men and women while praying or prophesying. This could be termed the *figurative position*.

Note the following thoughts on the mistakes of reasoning that the covering is purely figurative.

1. **The text teaches that the covering is something that one can see, thus it is outward, not inward.** How do we know if a man has long hair or short hair? By observation. How do we know if a woman has long or short hair? By observation. Who would know if a woman was covering her head at times of praying or prophesying if such was figurative action? This suggests the idea of something outward, as opposed to something done only in one's mind.

2. **The figurative view has the covering on the man and not on the woman at times of praying or prophesying.** When a woman prays (who believes the figurative position) she mentally covers the MAN (who is her head). But the text tells us that it is the WOMAN who is to be covered in verse 6, "...let HER be covered."

### **That the covering was a first century (or local Corinthian) CUSTOM**

One of the most popular views against the covering being applicable today in the form of women wearing artificial headcoverings while praying or prophesying is the contention that the things Paul taught were either (a) the local custom in the city of Corinth, or (b) a local first century custom. Thus, unless someone is living in a place like Nigeria today, for example, these brethren contend that such a covering is unnecessary for the woman at times of prayer.

While we do appreciate the fact that these good brethren would teach women to cover their heads today in local settings wherein the custom would be such, the greater question remains. *"Where does the BIBLE teach that the covering is a custom (local OR first century only)?"*

1. **IF this was either a local custom, or a first century custom...what inspired passage so teaches?** Since we have all things that pertain unto life and godliness in the New Testament, what **passage** would teach the custom view? Normally, brethren dig into commentaries, Bible encyclopedias and other uninspired works in an attempt to shore up the custom view. Only verse 16 uses the word "custom", and the natural question should be, After Paul taught women to be covered and men uncovered while praying or prophesying for the reasons of headship, creation, the angels, and nature, did he simply mean to teach in verse 16 that if they were disagreeable about it, they didn't have to do it since it was just a custom?

Carefully consider, dear reader...Paul taught, "But if any man seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God." No such custom as **what**? What Paul just contended for? Certainly not! No such custom as being contentious? NO! No such custom as what a contentious man would contend for? Yes, that's the answer. The **contentious man would be teaching contrary to what Paul just taught** and Paul said *we have no such custom*, neither do the churches of God!

2. **Since there were both Jews and Greeks at Corinth, it would be good to note that there can be all types of quoting from scholars on the matter of what was custom at that time.** The Jewish men and women were covered all of the time and the Greek men and women were sometimes known to be uncovered. In this sense, Paul was teaching God's instruction for every man and every woman at the times of praying or prophesying...contrary to both the Jewish custom (for the men would need to uncover) and contrary to the

Greek custom of the day (for the ladies would need to cover). Uninspired commentators will not settle the matter of what was and what was not the local custom at either Corinth or during the first century. In fact, Paul was NOT regulating what was going on at times OTHER THAN praying or prophesying (like going to the market or talking about the weather). Paul was teaching us what "every man" and "every woman" should do while praying or prophesying. It matters little what the custom concerning wearing a headdress was for those involved in secular activities.

### **That the covering is a SPECIFIC TYPE OF HEADDRESS**

Some brethren reason (???) that women today are not covered because they are not wearing a veil (headdress) exactly like the ones worn in the first century. But, I have yet to have any brother tell me the specific shape, size, type of material, etc. the covering has to be today from a passage in God's Book. Furthermore, I don't see such specifics required by the text, do you? Yet, many brethren write a lot about the women of today not being covered because they are not wearing a specific headdress. Since God did not reveal the specifics and since the *action required* is to cover (artificially), let us leave it at that.

### **That the covering applies to the ASSEMBLY ONLY**

Paul said, "...we have no such custom, neither the churches of God." I believe that praying occurs IN and OUT OF the assembly today. Prophesying occurs IN and OUT OF the assembly, as well. If a man is leading the congregation in prayer in the assembly, for example, aren't the other men and women in that assembly praying, too? Aren't they engaging in "praying"? Paul's instruction is not limited TO the assembly only, or to OUTSIDE the assembly only, but rather it applies *everywhere* that men and women might be praying or prophesying.

I encourage men today to wear their hair short (I Cor. 11:14). I also encourage men today to always take their hats off when they pray (I Cor. 11:4). I encourage women today to wear long hair (I Cor. 11:15). I also encourage women today to cover their heads (artificially) whenever they pray (I Cor. 11:5-13).

Thanks for reading. - Mark J. Ward

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