

Those Little Doilies & Scarves

In the days of Josiah, king of Judah, the book of the Law was discovered in the house of the Lord. Josiah had set his heart to seek the Lord and obey His commandments. When the book was found, the king commanded it to be read, and finding that the people of Judah had far forsaken the Law of God, he set about reforming the ways of the people to conform to the ways of the Lord as recorded in His word.

Aside from the Great Reformation of the 16th century, God has been pleased to set certain groups of people at sundry times to seek His truth in reformation and to seek His faith in revival. We are encouraged to note some of these little “mini-reformations” occurring in small groups all across the country today. As it always is in such cases, these people give themselves to searching the scriptures and, to the best of their understanding and ability, bring their lives and actions in line with the revealed will of God.

One now begins to notice in some of these groups little spottings of devout women with little napkins, doilies, hats, scarves and hoods over their heads as they sit in attendance at gatherings of worship. This is not new. It has occurred from time; and some small denominations have always held that women ought to wear a head covering to church. But for many who have never been exposed to its practice, and who also want to scrupulously serve the Lord, it presents a problem.

And problem it is. The apostle Peter observed that some of Paul’s writings were hard to be understood. This one certainly fits that category. The passage of scripture that gives rise to the head covering practice is found in I Corinthians 11:1-16. While I do not hope to settle everyone’s mind on this question perhaps by reflecting on some background of the Hebrews and their religious customs and the customs of the primitive Church together with the Corinthian passage, we can be better prepared to settle the matter as far as our own conscience is concerned.

One might now say, why question it at all? If the Bible says do it, then it ought to be done. To that we readily assent, the only question remaining, does the Bible really say that we ought to do it? Is the Apostle giving this instruction to the women of the Corinthian church or is he giving it to all Christian women of all time? Does it have to do with a local setting at Corinth, a custom of the Jews, a custom of the pagans from which the Corinthians were converted, or is it a tradition that was practiced by all the early Christian churches? Or is it a permanent command to the community of believers for all time, regardless of the changes in custom? These are the questions for which we will seek light.

One reason for the obscurity and uncertainty of the passage is its singular place in the Bible. One of the basic principles in identifying sound Bible doctrine is interbiblical support. No sound doctrine occurs only once in the Bible. It will be found in many places, and its principles will be interwoven all through the scriptures. This is the means by which the books of the Bible were canonized. They were found to be all teaching the same things. Allegedly inspired writings that taught contrary things or new things were in like manner rejected. Although this passage is included in the canonical writings of Paul, it does not seem to have precedent or succession anywhere else in the scriptures as a permanent command to the people of God. Otherwise, all genuine Bible-believing people would be practicing it, or at least ought to be.

It is generally agreed (whether correct or not, it seems quite reasonable and the only sensible explanation set forward) that the power or *exousia* (authority) in verse 10 is the symbol of (the man’s) authority. It was not uncommon for Hebrews to identify the sign and the thing signified by a single word. Thus circumcision, the sign of the covenant, was sometimes called the covenant, and the sin offering or sacrifice for sin became the sin and the sinner itself. “Christ, who knew no sin became sin for us.” Note also the allegory of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:22-26. Hagar *is* the covenant which is mount Sinai which is old Jerusalem.

What the Covering Is

Some understand no literal head covering to be implied at all: that all the apostle has in view as a covering is the woman’s hair and her husband’s authority. This view is defective because it overlooks two facts. The covering is spoken of apart from and in addition to the hair. “If the woman be not covered let her *also* be shorn” (vs. 6). Also, the covering cannot be authority *only*, because the man is told to be uncovered. No one would suggest that he throw off the authority of God as his covering when he prays. The woman is to be covered because of her authority, and the man uncovered because of his authority. Therefore, there must be a literal head covering in view other than the hair and the authority of which both hair and covering are symbolic.

The word in view here, covered, is translated from the Greek *kataklypto*, the prefix *kata* indicating down, *kalupto* meaning to wholly cover, hide or conceal. In the word’s noun form, covering it is a *kaluma*. The *kaluma* was a covering or veil that was draped over the head, hiding all the face except the eyes and falling all the way down to the shoulders. Thus we see that it was not something that covered the top of the head or the hair only, but the whole head and the face in particular.

Therefore, this covering, this veil which covered the woman’s whole head was a sign of her subjection to the man. I do not think it is necessarily a sign of her subjection to her husband, although that would certainly be included. But if it were limited to that only, then unmarried women and widows would be exempted. It more likely refers to something more basic than simply the government of the home, a universal order of the sexes as is indicated in the creation and the fall, wherein woman was placed under subjection to the man. This would also explain why the man was not to be covered, even though he is also under subjection to God. He is God’s image and glory, God’s vicar and representative, and to be put on display, not hidden. The woman, on the other hand, being the glory and image of the man, *who has fallen*, is to be covered because fallen man has no glory.

In accordance with this, the head covering, when worn, was used not only during prayer and prophesying, but at all times the woman was exposed to public. Otherwise, the uncovered woman would need to cut off her hair every time she prayed or prophesied. The shorn or shaven order speaks of a continual state, not just one for occasional religious exercises. Paul gives no specific command for a woman to cover her head and the man to uncover his head when praying. Rather, he says they ought to *be* that way when they pray. Verses 6 and 7 simply state that the man should *be* uncovered and the woman covered. The glory spoken of in verse 7 is to be displayed at all times as well as the authority is to be in continual effect, not just during religious functions.

Jewish Customs. The Bible and secular history are less than clear on this score concerning the strict adherence of women wearing the head covering. It does seem that this was a custom or practice, even though there is no such commandment in the law as such. That women often, if not always, wore the *kaluma* as a sign of subjection and modesty is strongly implied in Numbers 5:18. The woman suspected of adultery has her covering removed by the priest. Elsewhere, however, we have abounding testimony that the custom was loosely adhered to:

I Samuel 1:12,13. Hannah prayed without a head covering, or Eli would have been unable to see her lips move. Rebekah did not wear a veil when she met Abraham's servant (Genesis 24:65); otherwise, he could not have known that she was fair. Genesis 12:14. Had Sarah worn a *kaluma*, she would not have been recognized as fair.

In the matter of men praying with their heads uncovered, it seems that the Jewish custom was contrary to this. Leviticus 8:9,13; 10:6. Aaron and his sons wore a prescribed priest's covering on their heads as they ministered. Ezekiel 24:15-21. The prophet tired his head as he prepared to prophesy. II Samuel 15:30-32. David and his men prayed with their heads covered. Modern Jews cover their heads with a shawl or a skull cap when they pray.

Since we have no direct commandment in any of the Old Testament directing to pray or prophesy bare headed, and for women to do so with heads covered, we can safely conclude that this was not a strict Jewish custom. Since we have nothing in the teachings of Christ that taught such a thing and no hint of it elsewhere in the New Testament, it seems doubtful that this was a Christian custom. We do know that the women of the New Testament did not generally wear a *kaluma*, and there is no indication that they put one on in worship services. Why would Paul give instructions about the adornment of the hair, etc., if the woman's head and face is to be covered most of the time?

Observations

In the light of the above, I think we can safely make the following observations:

1. The head covering, the *kaluma*, was a hood or shawl that covered the entire head except the eyes. Those who feel that the custom ought to be yet observed will have to use more than a doily, handkerchief, scarf or hat. If it is to be objected that these scantier items are only convenient symbols of the real thing, then let us be reminded that the real thing is only a symbol itself. You have reduced the custom to a symbol of a symbol.
2. The head covering was symbolic of subjection, humiliation, mourning, shame, or contrition. The woman wore it for these reasons. But not only the women: Men did so on some occasions. Elijah "wrapped his face in his mantle" (I Kings 19:13). David and his men covered their heads as they fled from Absalom (II Samuel 15:30-32). The modern Jew prays under the shawl or the skullcap for the same reason.
3. Since the Old Testament gives no specific command for the covering of the woman's head or the uncovering of the man's head, it is likely a tradition the Hebrews brought with them from their pagan background. This would account for its loose observance. We do know that this is and was a Moslem custom. It therefore seems highly likely and reasonable that some early Christians, converts from Judaism and paganism, brought the custom with them. Christians of certain cultures today still do the same thing, bringing some of their inherited tradition (which has no scriptural basis) with them into Christianity.
4. Men are now forbidden to pray or prophesy with their heads covered as they did under the old economy because of Christ's victory. He has redeemed us from the curse, and we stand with Him on the resurrection side of Calvary. To go back to the custom of the Old Testament is to deny our redemption from the curse, which was an occasion for the mourning humiliation. When Paul forbade men to pray covered, he threw out the custom that the Orthodox Jew in his darkness yet practices. We now come boldly to the throne of grace. We all with open face behold the glory of the Lord (II Corinthians 3:18).
5. Corinth was an exceptionally sensual city. It seems that the Corinthian church, because of the special need for a display of modesty and sobriety, along with the influence of the Greek and Roman tradition from which they were converted, adopted the custom of women wearing the *kaluma* when praying or prophesying. Paul encouraged this. It was certainly his manner to accommodate local customs when it did no violence to vital scriptural principles: Acts 16:3, the circumcising of Timothy; Acts 21:25, his entering into the Nazarite vow according to the Law. He became all things to all men. He also taught that a weak brother's conscience ought to be respected and guarded (I Corinthians 8, Romans 14). It is noteworthy that in teaching the head covering for the woman, he appeals, not to scripture, but first the symbolism of her subjection, and then to "what is comely." We all know that "what is comely" varies greatly from one locality and one time to another.
6. Verse 15, "But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God" must, I think, be taken on face value. It means exactly what it says. The Christian churches did not generally practice the rule of women wearing the head covering during prayer or prophesy. What else could the verse mean? It would be most awkward and superfluous for him to be saying, "We have no custom of doing anything contrary to this teaching." It would be absurd for him to say, "We have no custom of being contentious." In none of his writings does Paul conclude a positive command on a conciliatory or passive note such as this. He is always dogmatic and insistent upon strict adherence. This conclusion can only mean that the instructions he has given are to be confined to the Corinthian church alone and is not a command or general custom for all Christians.

Now, where does this leave us? Some of you may have found that you feel more comfortable yet using the little hats or symbols of coverings in worship services. I would not attempt to dissuade you from doing so. I would suggest, however, that you give prayerful consideration as to *why* you feel better doing it. Hopefully, it is not for the same reason some feel safer with a rabbit's foot or a four-leaf clover. I know that these have no Biblical basis at all, and that yours was prompted by a study of God's word and a desire to please Him, but make sure that your faith is in the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ, and not in any exercise or practice or object applied in order to win you favor and protection. These can become as much a hateful substitute for God as any heathen idol or superstitious charm.

We ought to beware of anything we do or wear, practice, eat or drink that seems to protect us from evil spirits. The word of God allows only faith. To this end, we pray, trust and obey Him. Yet even then we should be careful that our faith is not in our prayers, Bible reading or even our obedience, but in Him alone. Anything more is a heathen fetish.

- C. M.