

Biblical Teaching on Hair

By E. W. Wheeler

I Cor. 11:1-16

The context for this passage can be seen in the whole of chapters ten and eleven, in which Paul addresses idolatry, using Israel as an example. This subject of idolatry occurs between the author's addressing his own liberty in chapter nine, and spiritual gifts in chapter twelve. The question of hair should be considered within this context.

For a springboard to address idolatry in these two chapters, the writer used Israel for an example, both in their relationship with God and their struggles with idolatry, leaving one to wonder if Jews may have also been caught up in elements of paganism. Knowing their history, makes this quite plausible.

Neither be ye idolaters, as ~~were~~ some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. (1 Corinthians 10:7)

Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry. (1 Corinthians 10:14)

The remainder of these two chapters are about idolatry. Two verses later, he addresses the "cup," which was more than just a utensil for drinking, but a metaphor for a pagan ceremony.

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 10:16)

Stressing the "cup," two more times in chapter ten, and five more times in the following chapter indicates that pagan rituals were the problem. The topic of communion services is introduced here, and the next chapter ends with the same. All intervening subject matter should be considered in this light.

When ye come together therefore into one place, ~~this~~ is not to eat the Lord's supper. (1 Corinthians 11:20)

This is a strong statement. While it is easy to understand problems of overeating, drunkenness and sectarianism, the recurring emphasis on the "cup" itself was the greater concern, being given so much attention in the passage in question and the very strong language associated therewith. Since everything else about the communion service was wrong, it would be difficult to draw any conclusions about what we should use in a communion service from the misbehavior of this church.

In the eighth chapter of this letter Paul, taught that meat offered to idols is not inherently wrong, and reiterated that point again in 10:19 and 10:25, but used much stronger language about the “cup,” so that we understand that the problem was not that of substance, but ceremony. These people brought pagan ceremonies into the church, incurring judgments of sickness and death.

The teaching on hair in this context helps understand that paganism was at the root of the hair problem, and may not have been limited to newly converted pagans. While there were problems with women cutting their hair, and possibly men growing long hair in this church, it was, and is, inherently wrong for men to fail to keep their hair cut, and for women to trim theirs.

The phrasing in the verses relating to the hair question indicate that Paul was primarily addressing a problem with women in particular. It appears that women had gained an inordinate amount of influence in the Corinthian congregations, and were causing other problems, including general confusion in church gatherings.

*Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but **they are** commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. (1 Corinthians 14:34)*

*4 Every man praying or prophesying, having **his** head covered, dishonoreth his head.*

“Covered” is from the Greek term “kata,” (Strong’s 2596), which has a wide range of meanings, depending on usage, but here is used metaphorically to refer to something draped down, probably referring to some customs in which men used a shawl over the head in worship.

*5 But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with **her** head uncovered dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.*

“Uncovered” is from “akatakáluptos,” (Strong’s 0177) the same root term used for men’s covering in the preceding verse, with the “a” prefix (alpha negative meaning “not”), and a suffix, occurring in Scriptures only here and verse thirteen, and is therefore antithetical to a man’s veil or shawl in the previous verse.

It would be interesting to know just which pagan practices Paul was confronting, but difficult to be sure. Studies of the culture of the time are quite interesting, but should be read bearing in mind human nature. Using Christianity as an example, with its countless groups, subgroups and divisions, claiming authority from the two sources of Spirit and Truth, one should bear in mind that paganism is not universally cohesive, often lacking their own “bible,” resulting in so many groups and subgroups, many of which may have escaped the writer’s pen.

Common customs in Corinth of that time, dictated that some women wear veils, and that the heads of slave women be shaved, but the practices were not universal in that society. Not all women were expected to have a head-covering.

In this verse, the alpha negative is employed to mean without a garment. A woman who worships without a garment on her head is as offensive to God as if she had shaved her head like a slave.

These practices are joined so that to violate one principle also violates the other. This becomes clearer later.

The concept of women wearing some sort of garment on their heads was quite common in history, and many reasons can be offered for the practice, which seems to be part of the problem Paul was addressing. In pagan cultures, most anything can be used as a talisman or amulet if it has been blessed by someone considered to have special powers, such as a witch or medicine man. In the Far East, I have known of seemingly innocuous items of clothing such as belts and tee shirts being used for this purpose, as well a vast array of other common items which give no hint of their spiritual significance.

13 Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?

“Uncovered” is from “akatakáluptos” as in verse five.

14 Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?

15 But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.

In verse fourteen, Paul employed a figure of speech, known as anacoenosis, meaning, of “common cause” which is an appeal to others as having interests in common (*Figures of Speech used in the Bible* by John Bullinger). Therefore, the argument is that nature teaches that a man keep his hair trimmed and that a woman keep her hair untrimmed.

There were two principles addresses in verse five - the symbolic and natural purposes of a woman's hair. A woman must have a garment on her head, and she must not cut her hair. These two practices are inseparable. A woman's hair is given to her as a garment, and she must not cut it, for in doing so, she violates both the natural and symbolic principles for head-covering.

The term "covering" in this instance is from peribolaion (NT:4018). Strong's defines this term as "something thrown around one, i.e. a mantle, veil:" This word is a conjunction of two Greek terms, "Peri" which means "around," (as in perimeter), and "ballo" which means to "to fall." This term is loosely translated "wrap" as in a garment that "wraps" around. Childhood teachers often referred to our coats as "wraps." This term is used one other time in Scriptures where it is translated "vesture."

And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail. (Hebrews 1:12)

A woman's hair serves two purposes – natural and symbolic. Verses 13-14 teach that her hair serves a natural purpose.

Verse 15 teaches that her hair also serves a symbolic purpose. If a woman trims her hair, she violates both the natural purpose of her hair and the symbolic purpose it represents. Any woman with un-trimmed hair also has a veil, or any other sort of symbolic garment on her head. She can pray anytime, anywhere.

16 But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.

The apostolic churches had no other policy than that women have long, uncut hair, and that men keep their hair trimmed. Since nature teaches a man to cut his hair, some of us have asked barbers for a "natural haircut." Each time, it is trimmed within the hairline.

Contextually, we know Paul's teaching on hair was dealing with idolatry in the Corinthian church, but gives universal truths, valid for all times.