

A Custom, Not A Command

WILLIAM J. STEWART | FIRST ARTICLE

The apostle Paul's message in 1 Corinthians 11 concerning head coverings has been variably interpreted by our brethren. Folks differ on what the covering is, on when the covering is to be worn, and on whether it is binding today or not. Herein I affirm the wearing of an artificial head covering is a matter of custom, not a command.

Custom

We need to begin our discussion with the apostle's conclusion – “...*we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God*” (v 16). This word rendered “*custom*” (Greek συνήθεια) appears just twice in the New Testament, here in our text and also in John 18:39. In John 18, Pilate spoke of the common practice (not a binding law) for a prisoner to be released to the Jewish people at Passover. This is very different from the word εθος used in Acts 6:14 and elsewhere, “...*the customs which Moses delivered*...” The former is a habit or routine, the latter is a statute or commandment. Paul plainly identifies the wearing of head coverings as a custom. It is a cultural practice, not a divine commandment.

The apostle encouraged the Corinthian women to wear the head covering, of that there is no doubt. However, his candid affirmation that “...*we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God*” sets the rationale for his instruction in the realm of social etiquette rather than obedience to a divine decree. There may be reasons for a woman to wear a head covering in certain places and at certain times, but it remains a matter of custom, and a custom which does not belong to the church as a whole.

Setting the Context

We stress the importance of context, and rightly so. A text void of its context is easily misunderstood and misapplied. We must consider the greater context to which this instruction belongs. There is a principle woven through the middle portion 1 Corinthians dealing with the use of one's liberty. Just because we have the right to do something doesn't mean it is the right thing to do (6:12; 8:9; 10:23-24). Equally, though we receive sound and timely advice (perhaps even from an apostle), it is not sinful to do otherwise (7:25-28, 35-38). To demonstrate this principle about our freedoms and their willful restraint, Paul looks at various examples in the context: marriage (ch. 7), meats offered to idols (ch. 8, 10), the rights of an evangelist (ch. 9), and the wearing of head coverings (ch. 11); all demonstrating the saying, “...*I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some*” (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

Immediately preceding Paul's discourse about head coverings, we find this:

“Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved. Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ”
(1 Corinthians 10:32-11:1).

This willingness to set the concerns of others above our own freedoms is Paul's lead into the discussion of the head covering. There is no liberty with divine mandates, but there is a choice regarding the head covering, for it was an apostolic recommendation.

Judge Among Yourselves

In verses 13-15, Paul wrote:

"Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering."

Paul asked the Corinthians to employ their own ability to make a rational, common sense observation. The Greek word rendered "*judge*" in our text appears in Romans 14:5, "*One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike,*" and is elsewhere rendered determined, decided, etc.. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to decide among themselves what was proper, comely (**KJV**) or appropriate (**WEB**).

How were they to determine what was proper regarding head coverings and hair length? Paul counselled them to let nature be their teacher. We must be careful how we understand this term "*nature*." It does not refer to what is inherent or necessarily imposed by God. The same Greek word (φύσις) is used in Ephesians 2:3, which says we "...*were by nature children of wrath*..." Wickedness is not an innate attribute of humanity – God did not create vessels of wrath. Wickedness is an acquired trait, learned by exposure and experience, and then acted upon habitually, or as Thayer says "...*by long habit has become nature*."

What does nature teach us about hair length? He writes, "...*if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him ... but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her*..." (11:14-15). This was Paul's observation of what "*by long habit*" was the accepted normal, not a universal law. The Nazirite vow required adherents to not cut their hair for a time, and then at the end of the vow, to shave the head (Numbers 6:5, 18-19). The vow could be taken by either a man or a woman (v 2), which resulted in men having long hair and women being shorn. If either of these were inherently sinful, every Nazirite sinned, and did so at the Lord's command.

Acceptable hair length is a societal issue, not a Scriptural issue. Men with long hair and women with short hair is a matter of decorum, not sin. Christians should understand that to have a good influence in our communities (to "*be all things to all men*"), we should abide by societal customs which do not violate God's word.

A Symbol Of Authority

The woman's covering is identified as "*a symbol of authority*" (v 10). A woman's submission to her husband is a universal truth (v 3; cf. Genesis 3:16; Ephesians 5:23; 1 Peter 3:1, 5-6), but the covering is not a universal symbol of her submission. In other times and places the covering was a symbol of prostitution (Genesis 38:13-15, 19), of mourning and weeping (2 Samuel 15:30; 19:4; Esther 6:12) or of false prophecy and divination (Ezekiel 13:17-23). The

covering may have served as a symbol of a woman's submission to her husband in first century Greek or Roman culture, but the covering is not a universal sign synonymous with a woman's subjection to her husband. No such command existed in the age of the patriarchs, nor under the Mosaic Law, neither was it a subject of orthodoxy among the churches in Paul's day (v 16).

Covered Or Uncovered?

The instruction of 1 Corinthians 11:4-7 must be understood in light of these facts:

- The greater context deals with having consideration for others in our conduct.
- Hair length and coverings differ based on time and culture.
- Paul stated he is dealing with a custom, not a doctrine of the church.

Paul stated it is a dishonor for a man to pray or prophesy with his head covered (v 4, 7). This is a cultural observation, not a universal truth. Aaron and his sons wore turbans or hats when they served before the Lord (Exodus 28:3-4; 29:9), and it brought no dishonor to them or the Lord. In western culture, it is considered disrespectful for a man to wear a hat indoors (though such is changing). If a man wears a hat indoors, it may result in disapproval or rebuke. He brings dishonor to his head.

Paul continues, "...every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head..." (v 5). The application is the same. If cultural expectation is for a woman to be covered, then she should be covered (ie. Middle Eastern culture), lest she dishonor her head (herself and her husband's authority). Ignoring such a custom would bring disdain rather than an opportunity to influence others for good (to be all things to all men).

The "if" of verse 6 is important, "...if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered." Paul is not citing a divine law; the "if" appeals to cultural standards (v 13-15). This is not a universal statement of divine instruction, rather it calls upon brethren to fit in with local customs.

As much as we are able, we should minimize hindrances to our influence for the gospel's sake. That is Paul's focus in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 and in the greater context. As we are able, we should abide by the customs of the culture we are in. Seeking to make this text a universal law requiring women in all places and in all ages to have long hair with artificial coverings and men to have short uncovered hair stretches the text beyond the apostle's intent.

Thayer, Joseph, **Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament.**

Hats, Hair and Harridans

BRENT SHARP | FIRST ARTICLE

Suppose you showed up for worship services one morning and discovered that your preacher was going to deliver his sermon while wearing a ball cap with the logo for his favorite football team, or automobile company, or some such on his head. Would you care? Suppose another of your members, who happens to be from West Texas, was waiting on the Lord's table with a ten-gallon Stetson perched atop his head. What difference would that make? Suppose that the preacher put forward a man to be an elder, who seemed to be perfectly qualified from scripture... had long, flowing locks to his waist which the ladies of the congregation assured you were "beautiful". Would that be a problem?

Now suppose you entered a congregation for worship on Sunday morning and every woman and girl in attendance was bare-headed, many of the women had haircuts indistinguishable from men, and a sizeable minority had buzz cuts that would be acceptable for enlisted men in the army. Would this be a problem? Well, the fact of the matter is that you are highly unlikely to encounter the former ... but the latter is a fact of life for the overwhelming majority of professed churches of Christ throughout the United States. Why is this?

In the book of I Corinthians Paul addressed a number of disorders plaguing the church in Corinth. While this book was written to correct the excesses and contentions of Corinth, the letter itself is universally applicable to all local congregations, including the various local churches today. Paul's instructions to Corinth are still applicable in Amarillo, Lagos, Florence, or anywhere else a congregation of Christians assembles to work and worship together (I Corinthians 1:2). Included in these instructions were some specific matters as to the conduct of each sex within worship, with a strong emphasis on maintaining the proper role of each, not only to preserve decorum, but to properly reflect our relationship with Christ and His Father.

In the first half of I Corinthians 11 Paul admonished the Corinthians, and instructs us, in four specific things. These are that women should pray with covered heads and have long hair, whereas men should pray with their heads uncovered and keep their hair short. For the first eighteen centuries after Paul penned this letter few, if any, who claimed to be Christians disputed this matter. It was universally accepted by Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants that this was the correct way to do things. Suddenly, however, in the 19th century we somehow discovered this was incorrect.

Today most brethren will tell you that Paul was simply addressing a local custom of Corinth.... Yet Paul nowhere calls his instructions to the Corinthian church a matter of custom, nor did anyone believe so until modern times, nor do serious lexicographers believe so today. Most who oppose the head covering for women will point out that the word custom appears in verse 16 this passage, after which they will assert that this refers to Paul's instructions in the previous section, and then proclaim half the matter moot... that is, they will excuse women from their responsibilities in this passage while still binding Paul's instructions to men. A few will at least excuse men along with women from adhering to this, although they are a small minority.

To properly apply the passage we must know to what Paul makes reference when he uses the word “*custom*.” The fact of the matter is Paul was referring to the abhorrent Corinthian practices of having women appear uncovered when he uses this term, and was explaining that no other church anywhere in the world allowed their women to behave in such a fashion. Every church in the first century other than Corinth was requiring their women to wear a covering. Even studious opponents of the veil, such as Mike Willis, acknowledge that the wearing of the veil was the universal practice of all the churches when Paul penned this letter (Commentary on I Corinthians, page 308). If we look at this seriously, from a lexicographer’s view, what does the passage actually say?

We have no such custom - We the apostles in the churches which we have elsewhere founded; or we have no such custom in Judea. The sense is, that it is contrary to custom there for women to appear in public unveiled. This custom, the apostle argues, ought to be allowed to have some influence on the church of Corinth, even though they should not be convinced by his reasoning. (Albert Barnes)

“But if any man seem to be contentious - Εἰ δὲ τις δοκεῖ φιλονεικοῦν εἶναι· If any person sets himself up as a wrangler - puts himself forward as a defender of such points, that a woman may pray or teach with her head uncovered, and that a man may, without reproach, have long hair; let him know that we have no such custom as either, nor are they sanctioned by any of the Churches of God, whether among the Jews or the Gentiles. (Adam Clarke)

συνήθειαν. See note on 1 Corinthians 8:7. The word has been interpreted [1] as referring to contention, ‘it is not our custom to be contentious,’ or [2] to the practice of permitting women to appear unveiled at the services of the Church. The latter yields the best sense. This appeal to the Churches must not be understood to imply that all Churches ought in all respects to have the same customs. But in a matter such as this, involving the position of women in Christian society, and their reputation in the world at large—a matter of no small importance—it were far wiser for the Corinthian Church to follow the universal practice of Christendom.

Now if the false teacher resolves to be contentious, and maintains that it is allowable for women to pray and teach publicly in the church unveiled, we in Judea have no such custom, neither any of the churches of God.”
(James MacKnight on the Epistles)

See also Alford, Matthew Henry, Fausset (Pulpit Commentary), Lipscomb, McGarvey, etc. etc. etc.

At this point I should acknowledge that there has long been a minority opinion, championed by Chrysostom and Calvin, amongst others, that the custom of verse 16 is a practice of being contentious. While a minority of scholarly luminaries have taken this position, they likewise held that the veil was still universally binding and that the contentious person was still arguing about the head coverings and hair lengths despite Paul’s thorough teaching on the matter.

This is the crux of the problem for those who oppose the covering.... Their position is contrary to plain reading of the text, contrary to the Greek grammar (as seen above), and its existence is well nigh impossible to document prior to the latter half of the 19th century. Nowhere does Paul refer to the covering as a custom... this is a modern invention to excuse ignoring a direct command.

What we need to understand, and admit, is that at the turn of the twentieth century many preachers affiliated with the restoration, or Stone-Campbell movement, saw themselves as progressives and advocated positions that would shock most members of the church of Christ today. The most adamant opponents of the head covering, who by and large were successful in winning the majority over to their position, were men who embraced and espoused what would later become known as first-wave feminism.

These men advocated for deaconesses in the local church and women teaching Bible classes with men in attendance; some of them also advocated for women leading in various acts of worship such as prayer and song leading, and in a few cases even advocated for women preachers in the local churches. The ensuing split between the church of Christ and the Christian church has usually been framed as a matter of organization and to a lesser degree music, but the role of women played a sizable part as well. Even so, some of the feminist progressives continued with the church of Christ, for example Nichol, while others continued to be influential through their written works, such as McGarvey. The point to all this is that prior to the rise of first wave feminism in England and the United States no one questioned that women should wear a head covering in worship and keep their hair long. It was only after the rise of this movement, and the change of women's role in society at large, that many brethren "discovered" a new meaning of I Corinthians 11:16 which allowed them to utterly annul the teaching of the preceding fourteen verses; a view without historical precedent, grammatical structure or logical consistency. The fact of the matter is that the term custom in verse 16 means the opposite of what the progressives have told us, and that the entire passage is still binding in all places today.

Response to A Custom, Not A Command

BRENT SHARP | SECOND ARTICLE

To begin with, let's fix the opening line: The apostle Paul's message in 1 Corinthians 11 concerning head coverings has been variably interpreted by our brethren since the turn of the 20th century. Prior to the turn of the 20th century brethren were united on Paul's admonitions for women to have long hair and coverings in worship, and men to have short hair and bare heads in worship. In fact, nowhere in what we might broadly call "Christendom" was there any variable interpretation as to whether women should have their heads covered in the assembly for almost two thousand years.

Brethren who oppose Paul's teaching on women's headdress in I Corinthians 11 make much hay of the word "*custom*" appearing in verse 16. As we previously saw, the custom Paul is referring to is allowing women with short hair and no covering (and men with long hair and a covering), and that Paul's plain, divinely inspired statement was that no church, anywhere in the entire universe, allowed that to go on in the assembly. The Corinthian custom of feminine rebellion through bear headedness is what the Holy Spirit is referring to by use of the word "*custom*".

As for the context: Paul presents multiple arguments for the commands he relays from God in verses 2-16. First, he states that the command on a hierarchy of the Father to Christ to man to woman (verse 3). This is a universal truth, it is in no way consistent with the context to make this a local custom. In verse 7 Paul tells us another reason for these rules; the man is the image and glory of God; the woman is the image and glory of man. This is a universal truth, it is in no way consistent with the context to make this a local custom. In verse 10 Paul stresses that a woman should have a symbol of being in submission on her head "*because of the angels*." I am uncertain as to the exact meaning of this verse; nevertheless there is no indication that it is in any way limited to Corinth; this too is a universal principle. In verse 14 Paul states that "*nature*" teaches us the difference between male and female hair length. This is a universal truth, it is in no way consistent with the context to make this a local custom.

As to women wearing the head covering as etiquette, we have now reduced Paul to Ms. Manners. This is, frankly, absurd. This is also a purely modern invention. The covering was, and is, a divinely commanded article of clothing demonstrating feminine submission (see Adam Clarke; Albert Barnes; Jameson, Faucet and Brown; Dummelow; Matthew Henry; Johann Peter Lange; Matthew Poole; **Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges**; Lipscomb, etc.). Paul did not tell the Corinthians to make sure they used proper etiquette because the woman was created for the man. Such a line of argumentation reduces the entire passage to nonsense.

Next we apparently have to deal with the idea of "*apostolic recommendations*." Paul's appeal to the Corinthians to be able to understand his command by using their own judgement does not reduce four direct commands to take 'em or leave 'em "*recommendations*." The idea that Paul makes arguments based on the order of creation, on the inherent nature of the sexes, that he says to disobey the commands he is giving is "*shameful*" and that a woman who

disobeys should have her head shaved.... The statement that this is just a “*recommendation*” displays a disturbingly flippant attitude towards divine authority. Paul is an apostle of Christ, he gives four direct commands, he explains multiple reasons for those commands, he is speaking by direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and we are supposed to believe it’s just a “*recommendation*” and we don’t have to do it if we don’t want to. That is not exegesis, it is high-handed rebellion.

Please note as well, when Paul gives instructions which are not binding insofar as sin is concerned (marriage in I Corinthians 7) he specifically states that is what he is doing, and further clarifies the matter by saying he is speaking on his own account and not according to divine inspiration in that matter. In the passage we are studying, however, Paul is speaking by direct inspiration and is giving specific commands as ordered by the Holy Spirit.

The word “*nature*” in this passage is the same word, used in the same way, as his condemnation of homosexuality in Romans 1 (see Vine’s Dictionary of New Testament Words, in addition to the various scholars listed above). When Paul said the homosexuals were doing that which was against “*nature*” in Romans 1 he meant that their actions were a violation of God’s created order. The same is true of short haired women and long haired men in I Corinthians 11. As to the Nazirite, the long hair of a Nazirite man was a symbol of humility before God, and was an exception to how other men were wearing their hair (See Albert Barnes, Numbers and I Corinthians commentaries; Adam Clarke commentary I Cor. 11:10). This does raise the question as well, would it be acceptable for a man to have hair to his waist, wear a ten gallon cowboy hat, and wait on the Lord’s Table? Remember, don’t bind your customs and recommendations on others! Or are we just concerned about the “*etiquette*” involved?

Next Brother Stewart argues that since different people have used head coverings for different reasons in different times and places we may dispense with it if we see fit. Perhaps we could apply this to the Lord’s Supper as well? After all, people have eaten unleavened bread for many different reasons in different times and places, and the Lord’s Supper is in this immediate context as well, so maybe that’s just a matter of etiquette, and as long as we “*remember the principle*” we can dispense with actual unleavened bread if we see fit? And certainly men have drunk the fruit of the vine for many different reasons in many different locations in many different times, so as long as we “*observe the principle*” certainly we can dispense with the necessity of actually using the fruit of the vine? After all, that admonition is right here in the same context where some would have us believe Paul is just making recommendations. Now we are certain Brother Stewart doesn’t actually believe such, but unfortunately he’s left himself without a leg to stand on against such nonsense by his argumentation on the immediately preceding passage.

Brother Stewart’s entire argument depends on the fallacious assertion that the word “*custom*” in verse 16 refers to women wearing a head covering; as we have seen that is the opposite of the truth. When Paul said “*we have no such custom*” he was referring to the fact that the universal practice of every church in the world at that time, other than Corinth, was that women were to be covered, and no church other than Corinth practiced the degraded custom of

allowing their women to be uncovered (Mike Willis, commentary I Corinthians). God, through Paul, commands the covering and gives multiple reason for its necessity; unfortunately most of the church has departed from this command and now makes the command of God of no effect by their custom.

It would also be well to note that this is a very new doctrine. Prior to the 20th century the universal practice of all who claimed Christianity was to have women covered in worship, and all referred to Paul's teaching in I Corinthians as the authority for this doctrine (Chrysostom, Calvin, etc.) Perhaps we should note that one of the main arguments brethren have held against instrumental music over the years is that it is an innovation which did not appear in worship services until the 7th century. Now I hold that this is, in fact, a legitimate and sound argument against instrumental music; I fail to see, however, how it can be made in good faith by men who defend an innovation in worship that "did not appear until the late 19th century, and was not widely accepted until the middle of the 20th century. I do not ask that brethren abandon the aforementioned argument against instrumental music; rather I find I must insist that we apply the same standard to our own practices concerning God's commands in I Corinthians 11.

"Men with long hair and women with short hair is a matter of decorum, not sin" is the modernistic teaching of men; *"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"* is the direct command of God given through his apostle. I know which I choose.

Response to Hats, Hair and Harridans

WILLIAM J. STEWART | SECOND ARTICLE

When brethren come together, we see a variety of greetings. Many offer a good strong handshake; some might exchange a delightful and cheery “Hello;” others may even share a warm hug. But where is the “*holy kiss*”? The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, “*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*” In fact, we find the same thing in 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; and 1 Thessalonians 5:26. Why have we exchanged holy kisses for holy hugs, handshakes and hellos?

On the same night Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper with His apostles He also washed their feet. After He finished, He said,

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you (John 13:12-15).

When was the last time you washed a brother’s feet or vice versa? Why are we not washing one another’s feet? Jesus commanded it!

I trust our brethren in Amarillo, Lagos, Florence, and elsewhere demonstrate love for one another both in their greetings and through acts of service. That said, I doubt they are doing so with holy kisses and foot washings. The universal applicability of the Corinthian letter which our esteemed brother mentioned in his article (which is true of the New Testament as a whole) does not enjoin adherents to maintain societal practices or arrangements. We understand the principle behind the “*holy kiss*” – the warmth and comradery of brotherhood. We grasp the reason behind the foot washing – service to one another. However, in neither case is it necessary to enforce for ritual sake practices which are rooted in Jewish culture and an age of dirt roads and open sandals.

I share my esteemed brother’s concern about men wearing ball caps (with or without logos) or ten-gallon Stetson hats while serving in the assembly, though not for the same reason. He condemns such as a violation of God’s law, transgressions of 1 Corinthians 11. Conversely, I believe it to be in poor taste, flying in the face of acceptable cultural expectations for such an assembly. The same is true for the eligible elder candidate with long hair and the bare-headed or short-haired ladies mentioned. These are all cultural or personal sensitivities, not Divinely legislated clothing and grooming practices.

The text certainly has “*a strong emphasis on maintaining the proper role*” of men and women. In fact, this is the principle established in the text. The covering or uncovering of the head is an application of the principle (like the foot washing and holy kiss mentioned above). Several other texts speak about the role of men and women (1 Corinthians 14, Ephesians 5, 1 Timothy 2, Titus 2, and 1 Peter 3) but none of them mention the need for women to cover their heads to properly reflect their relationship to men or to the Lord. That is not conclusive evidence of this

being a custom rather than a command, but it is curious that 1 Corinthians 11 is the only time the covering is mentioned despite the roles of men and women being discussed multiple times.

Our brother would have us believe the instruction of 1 Corinthians 11 requires women to wear a covering in our worship assemblies. Please note verses 5, “...every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...” Paul is not talking about women listening to men pray or prophesy – the woman in question is praying or prophesying. However, in 1 Corinthians 14:34, the same apostle wrote to the same Corinthian church, “Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says.” Women are not permitted to pray or prophesy in the assembly. This text is not about women covering their heads in an assembly of the church.

We’re told for eighteen centuries basically no one “...who claimed to be Christians disputed this matter.” That is an exceptionally broad statement. Does our brother have access to written records from every quarter of the world in every century between then and now to support his claim? Even if all Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants imposed the head covering on women in worship assemblies for eighteen centuries, they have failed in their application of the text. Again, it is not about the assembly.

Our brother aptly pointed out the inconsistency of those who excuse women from wearing the covering, reasoning it is a custom, but still bind short hair and no covering on men. He’s right, it is inconsistent. I am one of the few my esteemed opponent says will “...at least excuse men along with women from adhering to this...” I do not expect my brethren to wash feet, but I do expect them to serve one another. I do not expect my brethren to wear coverings or have a certain length of hair, but I do expect them to adhere to distinct roles which God has given to men and women.

What custom did the apostles and the churches of God not have (verse 16)? Our brother says it is “...the abhorrent Corinthian practice of having women appear uncovered...” and that Paul was “...explaining that no other church anywhere in the world allowed their women to behave in such a fashion.” He affirms the instruction for women to be covered was spoken universally by the apostles and given to all the churches of God, and cites Mike Willis (Commentary on 1 Corinthians, p. 308) as a hostile witness to that end. But where is the biblical evidence showing such a command was given universally and proclaimed by all the apostles? There is no instruction about the covering in the New Testament except what Paul wrote to Corinth.

If the “no such custom” of verse 16 is women not having their heads covered, it essentially makes Paul’s statement a double negative – “we do not not do this.” Neither Paul nor the Spirit are so convoluted in the presentation of truth. And yet an impressive list of commentators are cited in support of this muddled explanation. Many commentators agreeing on a position does not make it biblically correct. Nineteenth century commentator B.W. Johnson observed of verse 16, the “...no such custom... refers to covering the head, etc. The lesson of this whole passage is that we must not defy existing social usages in such a way as to bring reproach on the church” (**People’s New Testament Commentary**). Our brother warned us about the “first-wave feminism” of Johnson and others like him, for not only did he identify the head covering

as a custom, but he also advocated for deaconesses in the local church. That said, if our brother can unapologetically support his claims with denominational preachers who were either unable or unwilling to teach truth about salvation, then I will also freely quote a man who admittedly went beyond the scope of Scripture about deaconesses, but who obviously had a better handle on truth than his denominational counterparts. The pursuit of the perfect commentator will always leave us disappointed.

Sadly, our brother had little to say about the text itself or the greater context in which it is found. Instead he hung his hat on a perceived feminist agenda as the reason for brethren permitting women to worship God with uncovered heads. A plain reading of the text reveals the principle of headship (verse 3) with a contextual application (verses 4-5) which has unfortunately been misconstrued as Divine legislation about coverings within the assembly. Did Paul command in verse 5 (women praying and prophesying in the assembly with covered heads) what he would later forbid in 1 Corinthians 14:34? There are several statements in the text ("*if*" clauses, "*judge among yourselves*," and the appeal to nature) which indicate this is not a Divine command but a matter of reason and judgment.

The custom of the covering is not the discovery of a new meaning of 1 Corinthians 11:16, it is the result of sound and careful Bible study. It does not undo fourteen verses of teaching – it accounts for the content of the text and the greater context which focuses on the compromise between Christian liberties and the need to not cause offenses (6:12; 8:1, 9; 9:19-22; 10:23-24; 10:32-11:1). The principle of headship is still binding, just as principles of brotherhood and Christian service are binding today, but the cultural applications of these principles (the washing of feet, holy kisses, hair length and head coverings) were never introduced as the Divinely decreed method (and only way) to fulfill these principles. The Scriptures do not bind head coverings on women.

Response to Brent Sharp's Second Article

WILLIAM STEWART | THIRD ARTICLE

Our brother is adamant that prior to the 20th century, nowhere in all of “Christendom” (in fact, he said “in the entire universe”) was there any interpretation on Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 11 except that women should have long hair and be covered in worship and men should have short hair and bare heads in worship. I commend his zeal, but his claim is indefensible. He cites several 17th through 19th century commentators who agree with his position, but that is hardly proof that no one in almost two thousand years has believed something different on the topic. His claim and his evidence are disproportionate.

Understanding Paul’s “*no such custom*” statement in verse 16 is important. Brother Sharp’s explanation is the church does not have a custom of women not having their heads covered in the assembly. If the universal practice of the church is that women must wear head coverings in the assembly, would it not have been more prudent for the apostle to state such rather than use a messy double negative? We have no such custom of people not doing this. The apostle said the church does not have a custom (Greek, συνηθεια, a habit or routine) of women wearing head coverings – it was not a universal command. In fact, despite our brother’s claims, there is no commandment anywhere in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 11 included) for women to wear a head covering in the assembly. The multiple arguments Brent refers to in our text are support of the universal truth which the text is truly about – the distinct roles of men and women. 1 Corinthians 11 no more commands head coverings than 1 Corinthians 16 commands us to kiss one another, or John 13 commands us to engage in foot washings.

Brother Sharp stresses that when Paul gives instructions which are not binding, he will specifically state so, and furthermore, will distinguish his words from those given by inspiration. If our brother’s observation is true, then the command to greet one another with a holy kiss is binding today (1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; Romans 16:16). In no “holy kiss” text does Paul identify the practice as his unbinding uninspired instruction. Using our brother’s reasoning, he must conclude that the holy kiss was not a societal custom but a universal divine commandment. Does our brother impose the holy kiss on brethren? If not, why not?

Based on Paul’s condemnation of homosexuality in Romans 1, our brother says the word “*nature*” refers to “*God’s created order*,” and thus surmises that it is inherently wrong for men to have long hair. I am curious, did the Gentiles by “*God’s created order*” do the things in the Law (Romans 2:27)? Did God not spare the Jews because of their innate essence (Romans 11:21) or was it against “*God’s created order*” to receive the Gentiles (Romans 11:24)? Are we inherently children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3)? Each of these texts uses the same Greek word for “*nature*.” The issue is not as easy as saying the word nature refers to “*God’s created order*.” We have noted the Nazirite vow which required a man to have long hair (Numbers 6:1-5). Our brother calls this an exception. Did God violate His own “*created order*,” commanding men to do what He had already deemed sinful? In Romans 1, the word nature certainly refers to

inherent design, but such is not the case in the other texts mentioned above, nor in 1 Corinthians 11:14. Commenting on the word nature in Ephesians 2:3, C.G. Caldwell stated:

“...the word nature (φύσις) refers to one’s acquired nature through habitual regular practice. For example, Paul said, ‘Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?’ (1 Cor. 11:14). Such instruction is not the result of genetics but of social acceptance and practice.”

In 1 Corinthians 11:14, Paul urged the Corinthians to consider what was the accepted practice in their culture. It was socially acceptable for women to have long hair and men to have short hair. Why? Because God had inherently and universally made it so? No, because that was their common practice. Now, does that mean any social custom is OK? No, if it violates God’s law, then it is wrong, regardless how widespread a practice might be. But there is no commandment of God condemning long hair on men or short hair on women.

Our brother dismissed evidence that there is no universal or inherent link between head coverings and submission, and then mockingly asked if we could ditch the use of unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine in the Lord’s Supper for the same reason. The difference is this: God commanded the use of unleavened bread and fruit of the vine for the Lord’s Supper, He has not commanded women to wear head coverings in the assembly of the saints. He ignored evidence presented of men serving before the Lord with their heads covered (Exodus 28:3-4; 29:9), which he says is inherently sinful. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul acknowledged a custom and urged the Corinthians to recognize that violating the custom would bring dishonour to them. However, he made it clear regarding the covering and uncovering of heads and the length of hair, the Lord’s church has *“no such custom.”*

Allow me to close with this observation: even if 1 Corinthians 11 were a command for women to wear head coverings, it would not be fulfilled in the assembly of the saints. The women in the context are praying and prophesying (verse 5). In 1 Corinthians 14:34, the apostle said women were to keep silent in the churches, that is, they were not permitted to pray or prophecy in the assembly. Logic dictates Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 cannot be about the assembly of the saints.

Cited

Caldwell, C.G. “Colly,” **Ephesians, Truth Commentary Series**, p. 73.

Response to William Stewart's Second Article

BRENT SHARP | THIRD ARTICLE

In his second article Brother Stewart spends his first three paragraphs discussing the holy kiss and foot washing, emphasizes that both those were customs of a certain time and place, and apparently draws the conclusion this proves Paul's instructions in I Corinthians 11:2-16 are likewise only local customs limited to Corinth in the first century. Our brother's logic is, however, quite unsound in this matter.

First of all, Paul is speaking by inspiration, with apostolic authority, giving a series of direct commands as to the conduct of the members of the church. It is not my responsibility to prove that these commands are not just a local custom; if a brother is going to reject these commands for such a reason it is his responsibility to prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that such is the case. Would Brother Stewart apply the same reasoning to Paul's commands concerning the Lord's Supper and social meals immediately following? If someone else did so, how could he object? Would Brother Stewart apply the same reasoning to Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to sing? How can he object to those who introduce instruments using the same line of reasoning? Would Brother Stewart apply the same reasoning to Paul's prohibition of women teachers? Already many, including brethren, assert this, too, is just a "*local custom*" of time and place Paul is referring to in I Corinthians 14. How can Brother Stewart correct them?

Brother Stewart is likewise concerned about my "*broad statement*" concerning the wearing of the head covering by women for 18 centuries. I would like to remind Brother Stewart that sources such as Studylight.org and e-sword are readily available. Early church historians, including Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus of Rome, Origen of Alexander and John Chrysostom, among myriad others, spoke definitively on the issue. I listed numerous historians and word scholars previously on the matter; I could continue on more or less indefinitely were we not constrained by the number of words to be published in these articles. Once again, prior to the 19th century there was no disagreement, and not until the 20th did the practice of ignoring Paul's instructions in this passage gain a majority practice in the West.

I did indeed refer to Brother Willis' commentary on this passage, and especially for the reason that although he shares Brother Stewart's position, he concedes in his writings on this passage that it was indeed the universal practice of the first century church for women to be covered and men uncovered. Brother Stewart also seems quite concerned that this is the only instance we have recorded in the New Testament of this command, which I concede. And what of it? God gave a direct command through His apostle and had it recorded for us in this book. How many times must He do so before the command is valid? I maintain that number is one. If God's giving the command one time is not enough for Brother Stewart than perhaps he could enlighten us as to how many times a command must be given to be valid, and by what hermeneutic he has arrived at such a conclusion. I suppose that could prove an interesting topic for a follow on debate.

Now Brother Stewart is grammatically perplexed by his misperceived double negative. "*We have no such custom*" means we (the apostles and all other congregations) have no (do not

have what you do) such custom (a custom of allowing bareheaded women or covered men in the church). If our brother is still concerned about a possible “*double negative*” I encourage him to familiarize himself with the wonderful “*neither-nor*” construction; as in we neither teach that women may be uncovered nor do we allow men to wear hats.

Now Brother Stewart is disappointed in my time spent on verses 2-15. This is easy to explain; those verses are clear instructions and should be followed in all times and places throughout the world. I'm sure Brother Stewart understands that this passage requires men to abstain from wearing a head covering in church and to have short hair, and for women to do the opposite. If we agree on that then there is no reason to spend time on it other than to evade the true point of disagreement, which is whether this is just a matter of local custom. It is not.

Brother Stewart also dismisses the idea that the abolition of the women's head covering in the West, specifically the United States, was in any way connected to the rise of feminism. On this he should have done more reading before speaking on the matter. The Brother Johnson he quotes did indeed say that this was a matter of custom, but then went on to say women in the U.S. ought to wear a covering because that was still the custom; Brother Johnson wrote this in the latter half of the 19th century. The next great opponent of the head covering, McGarvey, conceded that it was indeed a universal command, but that we have now outgrown it; a position which he also applied to Paul's teaching on women in I Corinthians 14, in which he argued women of exceptional ability should now be able to take leading teaching roles in the church. Additionally, C.R. Nichol, in his book “*God's Woman*” openly rejected the Biblical pattern for male headship in the home as well as the church, and in so doing went out of his way to attack the head covering as sinful in and of itself.

Brother Stewart has spoken much of the principal of headship in I Corinthians 11, but the fact of the matter is that in most Western countries, including the U.S., that principal has been abandoned, including in most public worship. At the same time this abandonment took place, so to, for the first time in history, was Paul's instruction from this passage abandoned. Judge for yourselves indeed.