

A Change of Conviction:

a brief study and exchange concerning

1 Corinthians 11:1-16

by Frank Jamerson

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Section 1

A Brief Study of the Veil

The church at Corinth wrote Paul asking about some problems that existed among them, 1 Corinthians 7:1. Although we do not know all the questions asked, we do know that he discussed:

- Whether believers could remain married to unbelievers, chapter 7.
- What Christians should do about meats that had been offered to idols, chapters 8, 10.
- Proper conduct in the use of spiritual gifts, chapters 12-14.
- Proper conduct of men and women while praying or prophesying, chapter 11: 2-16.

It is my conviction that the context clearly shows that Paul is dealing with the custom in Corinth and that any other conduct would have been a shameful display. If we keep in mind that the historical setting of this chapter is the first century, while women, as well as men, had spiritual gifts and keep in mind that the text is basically dealing with the proper relationship of men and women, we can better understand the point the apostle is making.

The question concerning women's subjection to men would have arisen because of the spiritual equality of women with men. If the women had simply been listening to men, there would have been no problem with subjection, but when they could pray and prophesy as the men did, there would arise a question about relationship. The passage is teaching that subordination to men is not inconsistent with spiritual equality. Read the passage carefully and see if the apostle is not assuming that any conduct other than what he sets forth would have been considered shameful in Corinth. He was not teaching women to dress peculiarly to their society, but the opposite.

The Principle of Authority, v. 3.

This verse sets forth the chain of authority, or headship: God over

Christ, Christ over man, and man over woman. This is the theme of the passage and the dress and conduct is discussed in recognition of this relationship.

Statement of Fact, vs. 4,5.

The statement that man dishonors his head by praying or prophesying veiled and the woman dishonors her head by doing the same unveiled, would have been true whether the veil were a new divine revelation or a local custom. These verses do not state why these facts were true. That must be learned by other verses in the context.

What was Prophesying?

Prophesy was a miraculous gift (12:10), and is defined by the Holy Spirit in 2 Peter 1: 20,21. Prophesying ceased after the perfect law was given, 1 Corinthians 13:9,10; James 1:25. Listening to a prophet was not prophesying (1 Corinthians 14:29-33), and repeating what the prophets said did not make one a prophet, just as repeating what an apostle said would not make one an apostle. When women prophesied, they did the same thing men did when they prophesied.

If the women had simply been listening to prophets, there would not have been any problem with subjection. Some who believe that women must wear a veil today have said that the veil “would silence them”. The fact is that women could not prophesy and remain silent.

What Kind of Praying was Involved?

Some in the church at Corinth had miraculous assistance in praying, as well as prophesying. (“With the Spirit” in 14:14-19, refers to miraculous gifts of the Spirit. We may not understand how they did this, but it is a fact.) Again if the women had simply been listening to men pray, no problem would have arisen over subjection to men. Whatever “praying and prophesying” meant for men, it meant for women. They would not necessarily have had to exercise these things in the same place, but we will discuss this later.

Some say, “it is assumption to say that praying was with the Spirit.” Then, they assume either:

1. It is talking about prayer in the assembly (this they conclude

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- because the Lord's supper is discussed next, though they usually bind it in all assemblies.)
2. It is all prayer - both public and private.
 3. It is prayer when others are present (and therefore would see their sign of subjection). Now, which assumption best fits the context? (This is not a crucial point to the conclusion we reach, but we all make assumptions on what kind of praying was involved.) We do know that some in Corinth had miraculous assistance in prayer, and we can easily see that if women had the same gifts as men, there could well have arisen a problem with the proper relationship of men and women.

Why Was The Veil A Sign of Subjection?

There is disagreement among secular writers concerning the customs of that day, so we cannot settle it by an appeal to secular sources. (See the **Truth Commentary** on First Corinthians by Mike Willis for evidence that the custom of Jewish men wearing a tallith arose in the fourth century, not the first.) Probably, customs varied in different places and times in that day, just as they do today. Many of us remember when women would not attend a public event (wedding, funeral, church services, etc.) without a hat. They wore dresses to the ankles, and would not have been seen in public wearing slacks or pants (and some still have strong opinions about that), but customs change. There are places today where the veil has significance, but it does not in this country.

The passage we are studying clearly indicates that it was a custom in Corinth for women to wear veils, which symbolized subjection. Any other conduct would have been a shameful display. Following are some verses that indicate this:

1. Verses 5,6: If a woman was not veiled, she "should be shorn. But if it is a shame to a women to be shorn or shaven, let her be veiled." There is no divine revelation that says that shearing or shaving the hair is a shame, but they knew it. The same shame was associated with removing the veil. Paul was not instituting some new and strange attire, but telling them not to exhibit shameful conduct. They obviously knew that it was

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- wrong to remove their hair and they should have known the same about removing the veil. The same shame attended both.
2. Verse 13: “Judge in yourselves: is it seemly that a woman pray unto God unveiled?” In view of God’s law of headship, and the veil’s significance among them, they were admonished to draw their own conclusions. If this had been a new divine revelation of peculiar dress, how could they judge within themselves the fittingness of it? Albert Barnes commented: “He now appeals to their natural sense of what was decent and right, according to the established and acknowledged customs and habits.” (J.W. McGarvey, Adam Clarke and others make the same observation.) The clear import of the verse is that they should know within themselves what was seemly, or fitting. This is an appeal to their custom.
 3. Verse 14: “Doth not even nature itself teach you...?” If nature referred to inborn nature, everyone would have it, and from the beginning. We know that this is not true. It has not always been true that long hair was a shame for man, 2 Samuel 14:25,26; Numbers 6:1-5, 18. Neither has it always been true in this country. Nature means “natural sense, native conviction or knowledge, as opposed to what is learned by instruction and accomplished by training or prescribed by law, 1 Corinthians 11:14...natural sense of what is right and proper, Romans 1:14,” Thayer, p. 660.

The verse does not say, “nature gives a man short hair.” It says, “nature teaches you...”

Nature does not mean God or the word of God. It means nature - “a native sense of propriety...as opposed to what is learned by instruction.” That is custom.

4. Verse 16: “We have no such custom...” the word custom comes from the Greek word *sunetheia*, which means “a custom, customary usage; John 18:39; 1 Corinthians 11:16” (W.E. Vine). Another word, *ethos*, would have been used if he had been referring to a “custom, usage, prescribed by law;

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Acts 6:14; 15:1; 25:16...,” W.E. Vine. This word may also be used of habit, John 19:40; Luke 22:39; Hebrews 10:25, but *sunetheia* is never used to refer to “usage prescribed by law.”

Some interpret this to mean, “we have no other custom.” This would still admit that it is called a custom, but the word other is not in the text. Paul did not say that, rather he said “no such custom.” The custom he is talking about in verse 16 is the one he has been discussing throughout the context - women wearing a veil and men not wearing one.

The only interpretation that avoids the veil being called a custom is to contend that the custom is contention. This seems to be completely out of harmony with the context and contrary to other teachings of Paul. Contention is a violation of God’s law (Romans 1:29; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Galatians 5:20), not something that is just contrary to their “natural sense...as opposed to what is learned by instruction.”

What does it mean? It seems to me that Paul is saying: “if any man” (a reference to himself and others who taught the same things), “seems to be contentious” (appears to you to be contentious because we are binding this on you, when we do not bind it on others), the reason is that “we (the apostles?) have no such custom, nor the church of God” (in other places). The point? You do have such a custom and you must conform to the custom because of its meaning. The same principle applies today in whatever society we live. Christians are to conform to seemly conduct of the society, so long as those customs are not sinful.

We could grant that it means “there is no other custom,” and it would not change the fact that Paul called it a custom. It would then be a universal custom of that day which had a meaning to them. This would not prove that veils should be bound on societies that “have no such custom.”

Some Questions & Answers

1. Since it is still true that the “woman is the glory of the man” and “was made for the man” (vs. 7,8), should not the woman continue to wear the veil?

Answer:

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