

Response To "The Covering of I Corinthians 11"

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This article is written in response to Jere E. Frost's article entitled "The Covering of I Corinthians 11" which appeared in the September 1997 issue of "Gospel Truths." The conclusion demonstrated by my response is that the veil enjoined by I Corinthians 11:2-26 was required, not by custom, but by divine revelation, therefore it is still binding today.

Cover When?

Let me begin by agreeing with Mr. Frost that the "when" or "where" of the covering was "anywhere." The covering was not just required in the church's assembly, it was required anywhere that the woman prayed or prophesied. It cannot be that the covering requirement was limited to the assembly, because the woman was required to be covered when she prophesied, and she was not to prophesy in the assembly (I Corinthians 14:34-35). The text actually tells us in verse 5 exactly when the covering is required, and it does not say in the assembly; instead it says when the woman "prayeth or prophesieth."

Cover How Much?

I agree with Mr. Frost's point that the covering was "... to cover fully..." (Young), that is, to "completely" cover the head. But that does not mean that the covering has to cover the face also. The New Testament makes a distinction in the head and the face (just as we do today) in passages like Matthew 6:17 ("... when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face").

How "Nature" Teaches

Mr. Frost has a section entitled "How 'Nature' Teaches," obviously drawing from the word "nature" found in verse 14. He thinks one definition for the meaning of this word somehow helps his case for the covering only being a custom of the day and place, but his single faceted definition is shown to prove absolutely nothing by the following other definitions for "nature" (Strong's #5449):

- + Thayer - nature, i.e. natural sense, native conviction or knowledge, as opposed to what is learned by instruction and accomplished by training or prescribed by law ... the native sense of propriety ... I Co. xi. 14 ... guided by their natural sense of what is right and proper, Ro. ii. 14
- + Arndt and Gingrich - may mean instinctively
- + Vine - the regular law and order of nature

Regardless of which definition you choose, just because "nature" teaches something, that doesn't mean it is not binding. The same Greek word is also found in Romans 1:26 to refer to the fact that homosexuality is against "nature." Wouldn't Mr. Frost's reasoning mean that Romans 1:24-27 is not binding? As a matter of fact, one of the points I made in a recent public debate against a homosexual was that "even nature itself" teaches against homosexuality ("because the body parts don't fit"). I did not mean by the argument that revelation did not teach it. I meant that both revelation and nature teach it. Just because nature teaches something, that does not mean that revelation does not teach it. Nature teaches that God exists (Psalms 19:1, Romans 1:20), but revelation also teaches it, and it is not optional whether or not we believe it. The truth is that Paul has already established the artificial covering based upon a number of unchanging reasons (listed later in the article); in verses 14-15, he establishes the covering for women by pointing out something the Corinthians already agreed with: the fact that women are the ones that have the "natural" covering (long hair) ought to tell us that women are the ones that should have the artificial

covering. This is precisely "how" nature teaches us that the artificial covering is required for women. The bottom line is that verse 14 says nothing to make the veil non-binding today.

Footwashing And The Holy Kiss

Mr. Frost puts the covering requirement in the same category as footwashing and the holy kiss. But he presents no evidence that they are in the category, he just asserts it. To the contrary, it can be shown from the scriptures themselves that both footwashing (Genesis 18:4, Genesis 19:2, Genesis 24:32, Judges 19:21, I Samuel 25:41, II Samuel 11:8, Luke 7:36-44) and greeting with a kiss (Genesis 27:26-27, Genesis 33:4, Genesis 45:15, Exodus 4:27, Exodus 18:7, II Samuel 14:33, 20:9, Luke 7:45, 15:20) had been a practice for centuries before the New Testament was written, and the New Testament just regulates these already existing practices. But no man can show from the scriptures that covering the head during prayer or prophecy was a common practice before I Corinthians 11. As a matter of fact, passages like II Samuel 15:30-31 show just the opposite. There the record shows that David prayed with a head covering on. In view of all these facts, the veil requirement is not like footwashing and the holy kiss.

The Spiritual Gifts Argument

Mr. Frost labors to prove that "prophesieth" in I Corinthians 11:5 is a miraculous gift, and therefore the covering does not apply today, since miraculous gifts have ceased. But anybody who knows what the word "or" means understands that this position is completely without merit. Verse 5 requires a woman to be covered when she "prayeth OR prophesieth" (in addition, verse 13 mentions that a woman should be covered when she prays, and it doesn't mention prophecy at all). Granted, prophecy has ceased (I Corinthians 13:8-10), but prayer certainly has not. Notice the following parallel sentence: Every person driving or riding (in the front seat of) a car with belt unbuckled breaketh the law. What does the sentence mean? If you do either, you break the law. The same is true with the covering; if a woman either prays uncovered or prophesies uncovered, she breaks God's law. I am confident that Mr. Frost's wife prays today. Therefore according to God's word, she breaks God's law if she does so unveiled.

Some say that prayer in I Corinthians 11:5 is miraculous prayer since it is mentioned in close proximity to the miraculous gift of prophecy. But this type of false reasoning would make the gifts of "giving, ruling, exhorting, and ministry" miraculous, since they are mentioned in close proximity to prophecy in Romans 12:6-8. Again, this type of false reasoning would make eating bread miraculous, since it is mentioned in the same verse with prophecy in Amos 7:12. You say ridiculous? Then you've got the point. This type of reasoning would mean that Acts 20:7 is not binding today, since the preaching there was undoubtedly inspired. As a matter of fact, practically the whole New Testament would be rendered useless since every book is riddled with the mention of spiritual gifts. What proves too much, proves nothing.

The Scholars Say Custom?

Mr. Frost's primary argument for his custom view was as usual, not the scriptures, but scholars stating that the covering was just a custom. He quotes a few scholars stating such, but predictably leaves off all of the multitudes of scholars that report just the opposite. Notice what the following scholars have to say:

- + Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges - In the remarkable fact that the practice here enjoined is neither Jewish, which required men to be veiled in prayer, nor Greek, which required both men and women to be unveiled, but particularly to Christians.

- + Expositor's Greek Testament - Paul's instructions do not agree precisely with current practice. Jewish men covered their heads; amongst the Greeks both sexes worshipped with uncovered heads.
- + W.E. Vine - Among the Jews the heads of the men were covered in the synagogue. Among the Greeks both men and women were uncovered. + Morris in Tyndale Series - Jewish men always prayed with heads covered (as they still do). Greek women, as well as menfolk, prayed with head uncovered.
- + Vincent's Word Studies - The Romans (the men), like the Jews, prayed with the head veiled.
- + Pulpit Commentary - Having his head covered ... The Jewish worshipper in praying always covers his head with his Tallith.
- + Moffat Series - Men and Women worshipped bareheaded in Greek rites.
- + Robertson in Word Pictures - The Greeks (both men and women) remained bareheaded in public prayer.

What can we learn from the fact that scholars are disagreed on this matter (and just about every issue)? What we should have known all along, that we are just going to have to accept God's revelation on the matter! The scriptures only (and not commentaries) are inspired, and therefore reliable for doctrine (II Timothy 3:16-17).

This brings us to what should be the main point for all brethren. What does God's word reveal as to the reason a woman should be covered when she prays? The text actually gives us seven (as I count) reasons, and not one of them has to do with custom. These reasons follow:

Headship

I Corinthians 11:3-5a teaches that a woman ought to be covered when she prays or prophesies because of the order of headship. I ask the reader, is man still the head of woman? (note: many of our more liberal brethren say no, so they allow women preachers, elders, etc.). If man is still the head of woman, then the Bible still says that if a woman prays to God uncovered, she dishonors her head (man). You can't have one (headship) without the other (the covering)!

From the phrase "prayeth or prophesieth," another significant flaw in Mr. Frost's custom argument becomes apparent. Mr. Frost uses his own scholars to say that the custom was for the women to wear the veil "in public" (similar to women in Arab countries today). But the text says nothing of the phrase "in public." Verses 4, 5, and 13 mention that the application was to be made during times of prayer or prophecy. This is not the same as "in public," because a woman prays in private also (like at the dinner table at home). So if we compare the text to even Mr. Frost's own scholars, we see the practice enjoined by Paul was different than the prevailing custom of the day. To complicate matters further, we have Mr. Frost trying to tell us that it was the custom of the Corinthian people for their women (a bunch of heathens) to veil their heads when they prayed or prophesied. Since when do the heathen pray or prophesy? Moreover, does Mr. Frost really expect us to believe that Paul is telling the Christian ladies that they ought to be veiled when they prayed because the heathen ladies were veiled when they prayed? Conclusion: the phrase "prayeth or prophesieth" shows that the practice was peculiar to Christians (since they were the only ones that actually prayed or prophesied), and therefore proves that Paul is not just regulating a local custom.

Shame Like Shorn Or Shaven

I Corinthians 11:5b-6 teaches that a woman ought to wear the covering because to be uncovered is shameful like being shorn or shaven. Is it still a shame for a woman to be shaven? Then the Bible still teaches that it is likewise a shame for a woman to be uncovered when she prays or prophesies. Actually the verse uses "if" in the sense of "since." Since it is a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. It is not left up to us. A woman should be covered even today.

Image And Glory

I Corinthians 11:7 teaches that a man should not wear the covering because he is the "image and glory" of God, while the woman is the glory of the man. I would ask, has anything changed about this reason for the covering? Does God still recognize this fact of creation when assigning man and woman their roles? Then the covering still applies today.

Because Of The Angels

I Corinthians 11:10 teaches that a woman ought to be covered "because of the angels." Again I ask, has anything changed about this reason for the covering? Nobody even knows for sure exactly what this reason fully entails, so how could anybody know that the reason doesn't apply anymore? The covering still applies today, because of the angels.

Artificial Covering Needed By Same Gender As Natural Covering

I Corinthians 11:13-15 teaches that a woman ought to wear the artificial covering because she is the one given the natural covering of long hair. Paul's argument is essentially this: "Look, God has given women (not men) the long hair as a natural/permanent covering; that ought to tell you that when it comes to the artificial/temporary covering, God wants the woman covered, not the man." Ask yourself, are women still supposed to have longer hair than men today? Then the veil is still required today.

No Such Custom

Mr. Frost says at one point, "Paul plainly said the church had 'no such custom.' Think about that. Repeat it five times. My hat brethren do not read it that way." Mr. Frost should know that we read it exactly that way (the way verse 16 reads), but we are careful to notice exactly what custom Paul is referring to that the churches do not have. It is not the covering requirement that Paul has been earnestly contending for in the preceding 14 verses that the churches do not have. Rather it is the practice of the man contending against Paul. Read verse 16 again - "But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom" What does "such" refer to? It points back to the contentious man and what he is contending for, not to Paul and what he has been teaching.

Instead of hurting the "hat brethren's" case, I suggest that I Corinthians 11:16 actually contains one of the more powerful arguments in favor of the covering being binding today. When you read the verse carefully, you see that Paul is saying that the covering was being practiced by all the Christians at that time everywhere (that is, "we" and "the churches of God"). It was a universal practice at that time, and therefore should be likewise now. Verse 16 teaches like:

+ I Corinthians 4:17 - as I teach "every where in every church"

+ I Corinthians 7:17 - And so ordain I in "all churches"

+ I Corinthians 14:33 - For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in "all churches" of the saints

that the practice of wearing the covering was uniform throughout all the churches everywhere, and was not just a local custom. It is saying that if a man would contend against the covering, the universal practice of the churches would contradict the practice that man is contending for. So the practice of wearing the veil was a general practice, not just a local practice.

Notice that Mr. Frost is contending in his article for the same practice that the contentious man of verse 16 was contending for. Paul rebukes the man of verse 16. What do you think then that Paul (God) would say about people today who do the same by contending against the covering requirement?

Order Of Creation

I Corinthians 11:8-9 teaches that a woman ought to wear the covering because of the "order of creation." Likewise, I Timothy 2:11-13 ("Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve.") teaches (among other things) that a woman should not be a preacher because of the "order of creation." Since it is the same argument for both practices, if one practice does not apply anymore, neither does the other. Let me repeat by pointing out that the covering requirement of I Corinthians 11:2-16 and the prohibition against women preachers in I Timothy 2:11-12 stand or fall together, since Paul uses the same argument to make his case for both conclusions. Both passages argue their respective cases from the fact that man, Adam, was created first, and then the first woman, Eve. This argument is not based upon culture, but is based upon the "order of creation." Since it is the same argument for both practices, if one practice does not apply anymore, then neither does the other. The reader must either accept the covering requirement as applicable and binding today, or if he rejects it, claiming it was just cultural, then to be consistent he must reject the prohibition against women preachers upon the same basis, that is, he must teach that the prohibition against women preachers was also just cultural.

The fact that these two teachings stand or fall together was decisively pointed out in the 1990 Freed-Hardeman Forum. The issue in this forum was whether or not women should be given a greater role in the church, including should they be allowed to preach in the church assemblies. In arguing against women preachers, Ralph Gilmore said on page 57 of the book (transcript), "These scriptures are not tied to culture. They are tied to creation ... I do not know how they can say that this is a cultural matter when at least these two instances, and probably three instances [i.e., I Cor 11, I Tim 2, and I Cor 14], it's tied to creation, it's tied to creation, it's tied to creation." On page 72, Mr. Gilmore further argued, "I Timothy 2:12-15 is not cultural because it says the woman came from the man, and woman was deceived in the transgression." Now notice Lynn Mitchell's correct response on page 133 while arguing in favor of women preachers: "In I Cor 11, Paul bases his discussion on whether women should wear veils on the doctrine of creation and the order that exists between God and woman." Mr. Mitchell was correctly pointing out that the covering requirement and the prohibition against women preachers stand or fall together since the same argument is made for both. Mr. Mitchell's contention was that they both fall. The truth is that they both stand.

Some have made the argument that in I Corinthians 11, Paul makes the "order of creation" (and other arguments) in favor of man being the head of woman, and that the covering is just a cultural application of that headship principle. Mr. Frost tries to make this same argument when he applies the statement "Principles do not change. Customs do" to the covering issue. But this same basic argument could be made against I Timothy 2 and its prohibition against women preachers. Many (including Lynn Mitchell) indeed make this argument by saying that the "order of creation" argument is made in I Timothy 2:13 in favor of man's headship over women, and that the rule about women not teaching over the man is just a cultural application of that headship principle.

Some might respond that not teaching over another is inherent in the idea of headship. But that is not so. Who among us thinks it is wrong for a professional at his job to lead a meeting where such meeting includes his own boss? Again, the elders have authority (headship) over the local congregation, but that does not mean that it is wrong for one of the other men of the congregation to lead a class that includes one or more of the elders as students.

The truth is that the covering requirement and the prohibition against women preachers are both divine applications of the divine headship principle. The Bible argues for both teachings using the same argument. God requires that the woman place herself under the headship of man, and God says that applications of that headship are that the woman (and not the man) should be covered when she

prays, and that the woman should not teach over the man. "For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man" (I Corinthians 11:8-9). "For Adam was first formed, then Eve" (I Timothy 2:13). If the covering requirement is only cultural, then so is the women preacher prohibition. To be consistent, Mr. Frost and those who take his position would have to accept women preachers today. The truth is that both (the covering and the prohibition against women preachers) are still binding.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me say that to prove his position, Mr. Frost would need to prove that all of these seven inspired reasons for the covering are temporary in nature. But instead, none of these reasons are temporary or based upon local custom. All of the reasons are permanent, and still apply today. Therefore, the covering likewise applies. I urge you to just accept what the Bible clearly says on this matter!