

Philoneikos

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1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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A pastor was performing a wedding back in the hippy era of the late 1960s. At the conclusion of the wedding, he said in a somewhat confused tone of voice, "Will one of the two of you please kiss the bride?"

Nothing seems to be quite as contentious as length of hair. Even my own parents used to fuss about mine. I can understand why. Unfortunately, the Bible gives no instruction that says a man's hair must be kept ½ a thumbs length above the ear and a woman's hair must be at least a span below the ear. Oh sure there's a few instructions to the Jews. There's the Nazirite Vow, and we know that a Priest was to keep his hair trimmed. But we Christians are merely left with a few short verses that have caused many a quarrel. (**Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16**)

Why did these people need to hear this? It's because within this church Jews and Gentiles had both turned to Christ, but they both had very different backgrounds. The Jews knew the teachings of God, but the Gentile had grown up in one of the most wicked cities of the Roman Empire. And they would not know God's plan and pattern for humanity.

In a previous sermon ("Nouthesia" - May 16th, 2010) I mentioned the Greek god Aphrodite. She was the god of fertility, and sensuality. In her temple were a thousand priestesses who traditionally had their hair shaved short (almost bald), and were often seen with nothing on their head. Well, apparently the Corinthian believers were sharing the Gospel with some of these priestesses and were leading them to Christ. How do we know this? Paul's teaching about long hair and a covering makes no sense if it was simply addressed to those who already had long hair. Why tell a woman with long hair that she needs long hair? This passage only makes sense if there were women present in this church that did not have long hair, which could only be the former temple prostitutes.

So, what would happen if one of these former Priestesses walked into church the following Sunday? As she stood before God to pray, there was that uncovered head with very short hair. You can almost hear the criticism. "We don't accept your kind here" and she would have been escorted out of church. But rather than teach

these new believers about God's standards, some simply found this as a reason to quarrel. Big surprise there! Those who are fond of strife (*Philoneikos*) threw a fit and spent time pointing the finger. That's why Paul simply passes along some basic instruction on the role of men and women in God's Kingdom. A person (man or woman) needs to dress and act in ways that set them apart from the world.

In tenderness Paul instructs these people to put off the things that identify them with the world and put on the things that identify them as a child of God. And in that culture it was a covering (for the woman) and an absence of a covering (for the man). At one time they lived and dressed in a way contrary to God's design. But now that they have put on Christ, they needed to present themselves as someone new. Paul says, "*And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes.*"¹ (Galatians 3:27).

In this culture a woman who was pure and moral would wear something on her head to set her apart from those who embraced worldliness or those who sold themselves to others. Also in this culture a man who had a covering on his head was more than likely a slave. He belonged to someone else. Even a Jewish man always covered his head when he prayed; symbolizing that he was still bound by the Law. So as the Christian man or woman stood before God and prayed, or stood before others and talked about God (prophesying) they testified that they had rejected the world's standards and had submitted themselves instead to God's. The man stands before God submitting to the role He has asked the man to play. The woman stands before God submitting to the role He has asked her to play. The man accepts his responsibility to lead, and the woman accepts her responsibility to come along side offering guidance and support to her husband. And in this culture the woman wore a covering to symbolize this; to set her apart from the rest of the world.

So, what are we to make of this? What is Paul implying? Is this an instruction for us today as well? This is where people today still quarrel (*Philoneikos*). Some Christians insist that the instruction is clear. A woman must cover her head, and men must not have long hair. Others feel no such conviction. Who is right?

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

Some people have spent their whole life believing a woman must keep her head covered. It is an act of submission to her husband. Even today some congregations in the Church of the Brethren practice this while other congregations do not. But the issue here is not the covering. That's secondary. What was primary is that a person (man or woman) present themselves in a way that sets them apart from the world, and that they submit to the roles God had created in the first place. The whole reason Paul talks about the covering is to address the presence of these former priestesses who still looked like a woman of the world.

Paul uses the Greek word *Komao* in verse 15 which means "To have long hair" or "to fix the hair in a way that distinguishes a woman from a man". The implication is that a woman's hair ought to be longer than a man's, or fixed in some way to identify her as a woman. When God created woman He gave her long hair as a covering (or possibly translated "as a covering"). If a woman has sufficient hair to distinguish her from looking like a man, that is the same as if she wore a covering around her head.² The covering Paul mentions was to address the problem of short hair, or no hair, which made a woman look immoral. It was a temporary fix until this woman (the former priestess) had enough hair to fix it in a way that identified her as a woman.

Must a Christian woman wear a covering today? Of course not, as long as she has found some way to demonstrate her submissiveness to her husband, and identify herself as a woman of God. Even today a woman may wear a covering yet dishonor God by not submitting to her husband. Then is it okay if a woman chooses to wear a covering today? Of course it is. She has made that choice to use the covering as a way to identify her with Christ. For both a man and a woman, the question we should be asking ourselves is whether or not a person might look at us and identify us with Christ. That's the issue. Sure, it may be in the way we dress, or it can be in the language we use, the places we go, the way we handle our money, the way we care for others, the way we love, who we love, and what we love. No matter where a Christian may find themselves, they need to demonstrate in some way that they have discarded the ways of the world and put on the ways of Christ.

² Spiros Zodhiates – Hebrew/Greek Study Bible. AMG Publishers