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The Veil, Long Hair, and the Red Purse

by Bryan Hodge

Years ago, Roy Deaver wrote, “If the time ever comes when all impure women of Ft. Worth identify themselves by carrying a red purse on their right arm, I would argue strongly—in light of 1 Cor. 11:2-16—that it would be a sin for a Christian woman of the area to carry a red purse on her right arm” (Ascertaining Bible Authority, p. 83). I believe that he was correct. A Christian should want to dress and conduct himself as those “professing godliness” (1 Tim. 2:10). A Christian should cautiously guard his influence, and be careful to not send the wrong message. He should desire to be “providing honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men (2 Cor. 8:21).

The Veil

Some have suggested that the covering of 1 Cor. 11:4-5 is long hair (cf. 1 Cor. 11:14-15). This seems very unlikely. Consider: (a) The word in verses 4-5 is *katakalupto*, while the word in verses 14-15 is *prebolaiou*. Different original words are used. Why use different words, if the same covering is in view? (b) Being uncovered (*katakalupto*) is not the same as being “shorn” (*keiro* – meaning, “to cut short the hair”). Thus to paraphrase who can believe this says, “If she does not have long hair, let her also have her hair cut short”?

I believe that some type of artificial covering is in view. In context, the covering was a sign of subjection (1 Cor. 11:7-10).

The veil still serves as such a sign in some places. J.W. McGarvey remarked, “Thus Chardin, the traveler, says that the women of Persia wear a veil in sign that they are ‘under subjection,’ a fact which Paul also asserts in this chapter” (Thess., Cor., Gal., Rom., p. 110).

Some have wondered if the hat would serve the same purpose today. The word used for the covering literally means “down the head”. I have trouble seeing how this word can be fulfilled with a hat on top of the head. Moreover, I am not certain that the hat is a sign of subjection in our society. It seems more of a fashion item to me. However, to some, it is a conscientious choice (Rom. 14:22-23).

A point worth mentioning is that the veil significance has changed over time. Once it signified prostitution (Gen. 38:14-15). Later, it symbolized subjection. Moreover, this significance was not limited to Christians.

Another point is that it is well known that in Paul’s day Corinthian prostitutes did not veil the head, and they wore their hair shorn or shaven. “The unveiled face and shaven head was a badge of harlot” (B.B. James, 1st Annual Denton Lectures, p. 356). The I.S.B.E. reads, “In

N.T. times, ... among both Greeks and Romans, reputable women wore the veil in public and to appear without it was an act of bravado (or worse)" (Vol. 4, p. 3047).

I believe that there are reasons to conclude that the veil was a cultural issue. Christianity did not originate the veil, nor did the Bible. The meaning has changed over time. In Paul's day, it signified subjection.

What principles should we learn? (1) Women are to present themselves as being subject to their husbands. (2) They are to avoid dishonoring their husbands (1 Cor. 11:3, 5). (3) Men are to do nothing which dishonors Christ (1 Cor. 11:3, 4). Note: A man wearing a cap or hat today in worship is still viewed as being disrespectful. (4) We should not dress in such a way that identifies us with the rebellious or immoral. Such could harm our influence on others. Such could alienate and turn others off before they hear the message.

Long Hair

Hair is clearly under consideration later in this same chapter (1 Cor. 11:14-15). Long hair meant one thing for a woman, but something different for a man. The point being made is, "Just as you recognize that hair signifies something in society (cf. 1 Cor. 11:5-6), even so does the artificial covering."

"Nature" is referred to in these verses. This does not refer to biology. This is evident for both men and women are capable of growing long hair. The term "nature" can refer to "a mode of feeling and acting which by long habit has become natural" (Thayer).

Long hair on men has meant different things at different times, much like the veil. Many Old Testament characters had long hair (Judg. 13:3-5; 16:13-22 cf. Num. 6:1-21; 2 Sam. 14:25-26; Song of Sol. 5:2, 11; Ezek. 8:3). However, in the not too recent past long hair on a man sent a message that one was rebellious. Long hair in certain styles could also suggest effeminacy. Plutarch (c46 - 120 A.D.) wrote of Roman culture "it is usual that men should poll their heads, and women keep their hair long" (Kevin Moor, we have no such custom: A Critical Analysis of 1 Cor. 11:2-16, p. 12). We do read of women with long hair in the New Testament (Jn. 11:2 cf. Lk. 7:38; 1 Cor. 11:15). Men and women's hair were different (Rev. 9:8).

What principles should we learn? (1) McGarvey has written, "From this passage, it is plain that it was not intended that Christianity should needlessly vary from the national custom of the day" (Thess, Cor., Gal., Rom. p. 110). (2) We should ask—"What does our appearance say to the world?" (3) Perhaps, it suggests that there should be a clear recognizable distinction between men and women (cf. Deut. 22:5; 1 Cor. 11:4-5, 7, 14-15). I have met those who dress and style their hair and act in such a way that I am left confused as to call the person Mr. or Miss. Has this ever happened to you? Men should be men, and women should be women.