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HAIR

“Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering” (I Corinthians 11:14-15).

Biblical Foundation

I Corinthians 11:1-16 establishes that men should have short hair but that women should have long, uncut hair. We obey this teaching for the following reasons derived from that passage: (1) It demonstrates the wife's submission to the husband. (2) It demonstrates the church's submission to Christ. (3) It is a sign to angels of the Christian woman's obedience to God. (4) It is a shame for a man to pray with long hair or for a woman to pray with short hair. (5) Nature itself teaches these principles. (6) Long hair is a shame for a man but is a woman's glory. (7) This is one of God's methods for maintaining a clear distinction between male and female.

In the Old Testament, God used abundant hair to symbolize perfection, strength, glory, and separation for a holy purpose. Cutting the hair off symbolized disgrace, mourning, and glory departed. With this in mind, it is easy to see how long hair on a woman fulfills all the objectives described above.

In this chapter we address several important questions that have arisen with respect to hair.

I Corinthians 11: Long Hair as a Covering

Theologians have interpreted I Corinthians 11:1-16 in one of two ways. First, some have understood the entire passage to refer directly to hair. We basically presented this point of view in *In Search of Holiness*. So did Elizabeth Rice Handford in *Your Clothes Say It For You*, teaching that women should have long, uncut hair while men should have short hair. This is a respectable position as demonstrated by a footnote in the *New International Version* of the Bible, which offers the following alternative translation of verses 4-7:

“Every man who prays or prophesies with long hair dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with no covering of hair on her head dishonors her head—she is just like one of the ‘shorn women.’ If a woman has no covering, let her be for now with short hair, but since it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair shorn or shaved, she should grow it again. A man ought not to have long hair. . . .”

I Corinthians 11: A Literal Veil?

The majority of scholars hold that verses 4-7 refer to a literal veil or covering of cloth. In this section, let us assume they are correct. If so, Paul was teaching Corinthian women to wear veils in public assemblies because this was the proper dress for virtuous women in that culture. As one reference states, “The veil was the distinctive female wearing apparel. . . . Prostitutes went unveiled.”¹ Therefore, the Christian women of Corinth were not supposed to exercise their Christian liberty to flaunt local custom and dress like prostitutes, adulterers, or un-submissive women.

The wearing of literal veils does not apply to women today unless their culture demands it for the sake of propriety. However, Paul’s appeal in verses 13-16 to the universal, God-ordained principle of women having long hair still stands. Even nature teaches that women should wear a veil of long hair; therefore it was reasonable for Paul to insist upon a veil of cloth as well. In establishing the culturally relative rule regarding veils, he appealed to the universal truth that women should have long (uncut) hair.

Daniel Segraves takes this approach in *Women’s Hair—The Long and Short of It*. This view is also represented in *Good News for Modern Man (Today’s English Version)*, verses 5-6 and 13-16, given below:

“And any woman who prays or speaks God’s message in public worship with nothing on her head disgraces her husband; there is no difference between her and a woman whose head has been

shaved. If the woman does not cover her head, she might as well cut her hair. And since it is a shameful thing for a woman to shave her head or cut her hair, she should cover her head. . . . Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God in public worship with nothing on her head? Why, nature itself teaches you that long hair is a disgraceful thing for a man, but it is a woman's pride. Her long hair has been given her to serve as a covering. But if anyone wants to argue about it, all I have to say is that neither we nor the churches of God have any other custom in worship."

Some people insist that women of all cultures today must wear a veil of cloth. However, a literal translation of the Greek indicates that long hair alone is a sufficient covering as far as nature's teaching is concerned. *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* states, "The long hair instead of a veil has been given to her" (verse 15).

A Universal Teaching

Some teach that I Corinthians 11:1-16 relates only to Corinthian culture and has no application today. However, Paul based his teaching on nature itself (I Corinthians 11:14). All churches in Paul's day adhered to his teaching on hair, regardless of cultural background. Jewish, Greek, and Roman Christians all agreed on this issue. This was not merely a local custom, but a universal practice in all the churches. "If anyone wants to be

contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God" (I Corinthians 11:16, *NIV*). Even if we interpret verses 4-7 as a discussion of literal veils in Corinthian culture, we cannot relegate the teaching on hair in verses 13-16 merely to Corinthian culture.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states, "Some say that the custom was peculiar to Corinth, but Paul's words, *neither the churches of God*, argue against this view. Still others insist that the custom is not to be applied today It should be noted, however, that each of the reasons given for the wearing of a veil is taken from permanent facts, lasting as long as the present earthly economy A final word: In the final analysis, the . . . veil is not the important thing, but the subordination for which it stands. The presence of both is ideal."² To this analysis, we add that the woman's long hair is the covering or veil given by nature. Therefore, this passage teaches both that the woman should submit to her husband and to God and that she should have long hair as a symbol of that submission.

Of course, we should emphasize the spiritual principles involved. It does little good for a woman to have uncut hair if she is rebellious, contentious, or brazen. The long hair itself will not make her holy in God's sight. She must have the proper attitude of which the long hair is a symbol. However, she need not choose between attitude and appearance. God desires for her to have holiness both inwardly and outwardly. She should have a submissive, modest spirit inwardly but also display it outwardly by her actions and by the God-ordained symbol of long hair.

The Teaching of Nature

Although Paul appealed to the Corinthians' judgment and by implication to their culture, he appealed to nature (and therefore to the God who established the natural state) in order to teach long hair on women. Exactly how does nature teach this?

Paul referred to the instinctive, universal knowledge of the natural, God-given order of things. Rousas Rushdoony quoted Charles Hodge with approval: "To a woman, however, in all ages and countries, long hair has been considered an ornament. It is given to her, Paul says, as a *covering* or as a natural veil; and it is a glory to her *because* it is a veil."³ The ancient society of Paul's world understood this principle of nature or else he would not have written what he did. *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* states that women throughout biblical times wore the hair long, basically uncut.⁴ According to *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, "In NT times the length of the hair was one mark of distinction between the sexes."⁵

Unfortunately, our society has so departed from godly principles that this natural, instinctive teaching is no longer part of our culture. Similarly, Paul appealed to nature to teach against homosexuality and lesbianism (Romans 1:26-31), but this teaching of nature is also rapidly vanishing from modern consciousness.

Even today, however, there is at least one specific way in which nature yet teaches us about hair. "Baldness. . . is apparently inherited and is, in a small way, a sign of masculinity, since the tendency does not manifest itself, even though inherited, unless there is more than a certain critical concentration of male sex hormone in

the blood. As a result, women rarely go bald, and men who are castrated before adolescence apparently never do."⁶ Thus, men who grow bald do so as a normal consequence of being male, while women usually do not grow bald except as the result of hormonal imbalance, illness, or disease. In this way nature teaches us that little or no hair on a man is an ordinary, normal occurrence, but that little or no hair on a woman is unnatural and shameful.

The Teaching of Other Scriptural Passages

Since this teaching of nature was very evident to God's people in both Old Testament and New Testament times, it is no surprise to find little direct teaching on the subject in Scripture. Even in I Corinthians 11 Paul assumed that everyone was aware of this basic teaching. Even so, other biblical passages allude to this truth.

In the Old Testament God pronounced judgment upon the haughty, bejeweled women of Judah. "Therefore the LORD will bring sores on the heads of the women of Zion; the LORD will make their scalps bald" (Isaiah 3:17, *NIV*). Instead of "well set hair" God would send them "baldness" (Isaiah 3:24). By taking away their long hair God intended to take away their womanly glory and to bring them shame.

In Jeremiah 7:29 God said, "Cut off thine hair, O Jerusalem, and cast it away, and take up a lamentation on high places; for the LORD hath rejected and forsaken the generation of his wrath." This entire passage depicts Jerusalem as a backslider (Jeremiah 8:5). Therefore, God metaphorically commanded her to cut off her hair as a

symbol of shame, disgrace, lamentation, and mourning. Cutting the hair did not represent a normal, godly action here, but a shameful act of a backslidden people that God had rejected and forsaken.

The New Testament shows that women of those days had long hair. An unnamed woman washed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair (Luke 7:37-38). On another occasion, Mary the sister of Lazarus anointed Christ's feet with costly ointment and wiped them with her hair (John 11:2; 12:3). Certainly these women had long hair to be able to do this. Peter and Paul both taught against elaborate hair arrangements with ornaments braided into the hair (I Timothy 2:9; I Peter 3:3). This could have been a problem only if women had long hair. Revelation 9:8 describes an army of demons that will have "hair as the hair of women." This description has meaning only when we understand that the New Testament expects women to have long hair and men to have short hair.

In addition to these specific references, other passages deal with the underlying principle of separation between the sexes. It is an abomination to God for a man to wear clothing that is distinctively feminine or for a woman to wear clothing that is distinctively masculine (Deuteronomy 22:5). No effeminate man will inherit the kingdom of God (I Corinthians 6:9-10). When I Corinthians 11 teaches that there should be a clear distinction between male and female with respect to hair, it does not establish a totally new doctrine but simply applies an important principle taught elsewhere in Scripture.

We should note that the Bible nowhere commands a certain hairstyle, such as having hair worn up, although

many women throughout history have worn long hair up as a matter of neatness and convenience.

Men's Hair and the Nazarite Vow

The Nazarite vow prohibited the cutting of hair. Why did God establish this vow for men since long hair is a shame for them? Numbers 6:18 shows that the typical male vow was temporary in nature. After the time of his vow was completed, he shaved his head and offered the hair as a peace offering.

The Bible records only two men who definitely had life-long vows not to cut their hair—Samson and Samuel (Judges 13:5; I Samuel 1:11). In addition, John the Baptist was probably a Nazarite (Luke 1:15). In each of these cases, the Nazarite did not choose this status for himself, but God and his parents determined it before his birth. The long hair was a sign that set him apart from the normal male in his society, and it probably served as a badge of shame that he bore for God's sake. Everyone in Israel knew about the Nazarite vow, so his unique long hair was not a sign of effeminacy as it would have been otherwise.

In view of the exceptional nature of these cases, we cannot use them to justify a violation of I Corinthians 11:14, just as we cannot use Isaiah's temporary nakedness (whether it was partial or total) or Christ's shame on the cross to justify immodesty of dress (Isaiah 20; Hebrews 12:2).

Miscellaneous Objections

In an attempt to avoid the teaching of Scripture on

the subject of hair, several objections have been offered, which we state and answer below.⁷

* *“Absalom had long hair.”* Absalom is certainly a poor example to follow since he was very ungodly and died in rebellion against God’s anointed king, his own father David. In fact, his hair apparently caused him to be caught in the branches of a tree and thus captured and killed (II Samuel 18:9). Also, we find that he did cut his hair from time to time, at least once a year (II Samuel 14:26).

* *“If long hair on a woman means uncut hair, then a man’s hair is technically short if he cuts it just once in a great while.”* I Corinthians 11:5-6 indicates that if a woman cuts her hair then it is the same as if she shaves it totally. Since nature teaches that women should have long hair, we should let nature determine the length, by allowing the hair to grow freely. (This is what the Nazarite vow required.) Any other definition of long hair for a woman would be arbitrary, would not be of universal applicability, and would be subject to uncertainty and abuse. Any other definition could be altered inch by inch until it would have no meaning at all. So, long hair for a woman must mean uncut hair.

However, I Corinthians 11:14-15 indicates that a man should have hair short enough to distinguish him clearly from a woman. Therefore, it is not enough for a man to cut his hair a few times in his life; his hair must be observably short. The precise length may change somewhat from age to age and culture to culture. In ages past, when all women had uncut hair and when modern barbers’ equipment was not available, men could wear their hair somewhat longer and still not confuse the sexes. In our

day, however, most women wear shorter hair. Moreover, in our culture long hair on men has been used to symbolize rebellion against society and traditional morality. For these reasons, it behooves Christian men today to wear their hair noticeably and unquestionably short. The hairline is a good, natural guide to follow in deciding how short to cut a man’s hair.

* *“Some women cannot grow long hair.”* I Corinthians 11 does not specify any dimensions for hair length. The woman should let nature determine the length of the hair. If she lets her hair grow freely, as the Nazarites did, then God considers her hair to be long.

* *“A woman’s hair is not really a covering.”* This statement directly contradicts Paul’s statement that a woman’s hair is a covering or veil for her. He did not mean for us to count the square inches of skin covered. Instead, he meant that a woman’s long hair was a symbolic covering which represented her submission to God and to her husband. Obviously, long hair does not provide the type of covering that literal clothing does, nor does it replace the need for clothing. Rather it serves as a symbolic veil or article of apparel.

* *“The Israelites shaved the heads of captive women according to Deuteronomy 21:10-14.”* As in Jeremiah 7:29, this action does not characterize normal, godly women but ungodly women. The shaving of the head took away the heathen woman’s former glory, humbled and shamed her, and prepared her for a month of mourning. It symbolized total renunciation of her past identity so she could become an Israelite and be eligible to marry an Israelite. The implication is that after she became an Israelite, her hair would not be shaved again.

* "To shear means to cut the hair off totally." To the contrary, a study of standard dictionaries and lexicons will show that the English verb "to shear" and the corresponding Greek verb *keiro* simply mean "to cut or to cut off." I Corinthians 11:5-6 specifically distinguishes this word in meaning from the different word "to shave" (Greek *xurao*).

* "In I Corinthians 11:1-16 Paul simply quoted a letter from the Corinthians and did not himself teach this as doctrine." This objection twists the Scriptures to mean exactly the opposite of what they plainly say. No reputable translation of the Bible has followed this strange and dangerous method of interpretation. If this view is correct, Paul is guilty of writing a very confusing, incomprehensible passage and of failing to answer the Corinthians' question adequately. Furthermore, how would we explain all the other evidence from Scripture, nature, and culture that women were expected to have long hair and men short hair? How would we explain Paul's statement in verse 16 that the churches of God have no other custom than that which he has just described?

Teaching in Church History

With respect to men's hair in early church history, Rousas Rushdoony has stated, "Church councils very early censured long hair in men as a mark of effeminacy, as had the Romans before them. There is no evidence to support the usual portrayal of Christ and the apostles as long-haired men; the evidence of the age indicates very short hair."⁸ We only need look at the sculpture and coinage

of that age to verify this statement.

Clement of Alexandria had much to say about hair in *The Instructor*.⁹ He taught against elaborate braiding, curling and dressing of the hair, elaborate headdresses, dyeing the hair, and wearing false hair. He admonished women to bind their hair simply and not to cut it, stating, "God wishes women to . . . rejoice in their locks alone growing spontaneously." He told men not to adorn their hair like women or to let it hang in long, womanish ringlets. To avoid any womanly appearance, he recommended that men shave their heads or at least keep the hair very short. Because his culture considered a beardless man to be effeminate, he also counselled men to let their beards grow or to shave them only partially.

Tertullian wrote in his treatise *On the Apparel of Women* that women should not dye the hair, use wigs, or arrange the hair elaborately.¹⁰ Tertullian agreed with Scripture that it was a shame for a woman to have shaved or shorn hair. He remarked, "Let the world, the rival of God, see to it, if it asserts that close-cut hair is graceful to a virgin in like manner as that flowing hair is to a boy."¹¹

The *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* admonished men, "Do not thou permit the hair of thy head to grow too long, but rather cut it short. . . It is not lawful for thee, a believer and a man of God, to permit the hair of thy head to grow long, and to brush it up together, nor to suffer it to spread abroad, nor to puff it up, nor by nice combing and plating to make it curl and shine."¹²

John Chrysostom interpreted Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 11 to refer to long hair. In a sermon on that chapter, Chrysostom wrote that Paul "both affirms the

covering and the hair to be one, and also that she again who is shaven is the same with her whose head is bareHe signifies that not at the time of prayer only but also continually, she ought to be covered. . . .But with regard to the man. . .the wearing long hair he discourages at all times."¹³ In the same sermon, Chrysostom compared this teaching with Deuteronomy 22:5, noting that both passages teach a distinction between male and female in appearance.

Throughout the centuries, the question of women cutting the hair was not a major issue because women traditionally have always had long hair. As the above writings indicate, a greater historical problem has been men wearing and fixing hair in a womanly fashion. Only in the 20th century has society generally accepted the practice of women cutting their hair. Even so, our society still has some lingering distaste for a shaved or bald female head. After World War II, many European communities took the women who had collaborated and fraternized with the Nazis and shaved their heads as a mark of shame.

Standard encyclopedias record few instances of women cutting their hair in ages past. One exception is that in ancient Egypt many women shaved their heads and wore veils. In Judeo-Christian lands women wore long hair until the 20th century. As the *Encyclopedia Britannica* states, after World War I "hair was bobbed."¹⁴

As women began to cut their hair, some conservative Christian groups began to take a stand against it. Most of the Holiness groups opposed it, although they have largely relaxed their stand. Early Pentecostals generally opposed it, as demonstrated by the position of the Apostolic Faith and the United Pentecostal Church. Many

women in other Holiness or Pentecostal denominations today still refuse to cut their hair, such as in the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee). Many independent Baptists and other fundamentalists also oppose it today, as exemplified by Elizabeth Rice Handford.

We conclude that, regardless of the changing attitudes of modern society, God still desires for men to have short hair and women to have long, uncut hair.

FOOTNOTES

¹Wight, pp. 98-99.

²*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1248.

³Rushdoony, p. 348, quoting Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), p. 213.

⁴"Hair," *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1980), II, 600.

⁵"Hair," *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, p. 330.

⁶Isaac Asimov, *The Human Body* (New York: The New American Library, 1963), p. 273.

⁷For a presentation of these objections, see Woodrow, pp. 50-54.

⁸Rushdoony, p. 348.

⁹Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, 3.2-3 & 11, ANF, II, 272-75 & 290.

¹⁰Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, 2.6-7, ANF, IV, 21-22.

¹¹Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 7, ANF, IV, 31.

¹²*Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, 1.2, ANF, VII, 392.

¹³John Chrysostom, *Homilies on I Corinthians*, 26, NPNF, 1st ser., XII, 152.

¹⁴"Dress," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, V, 1033.