

**PREFACE**

Just a short while ago we celebrated our Independence Day, the day we commemorate the signing of that foundational document, The Declaration of Independence, which declared our separation from Great Britain. Its second paragraph begins, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” That is, these truths are evident from nature itself; they were not invented by man, or by a committee, by a government, and most certainly not declared true by a king. They are *self-evident*; they require nothing else to substantiate them.

In the passage before us the apostle Paul employs the same argument, that nature itself teaches what he has been saying from v4 on—meaning it is obvious to all. And what is obvious is that, by design, God created two sexes, and they are to be distinctive in their appearance—especially when gathered to worship the Lord—because they were *made* distinctive.

After the parenthetical passage from our last session (vv11-12) in which Paul reminds the Corinthians of the balance of the sexes in God’s economy, he now returns to this original thread of thought to cap it with a final argument.

Two things to keep in mind as we examine this closing passage:

1. His discussion of hair in these verses does not mean that hair was the topic in vv3-10. It simply doesn’t work to use vv13-16 as proof that Paul has been talking about hair itself—rather than an external covering—all along, as some commentators try. Here he uses natural hair as an illustration, as an analogy to the earlier argument regarding “coverings” for the woman.
2. Contrary to his practice elsewhere, Paul does not close this topic with a direct command to the Corinthians. There is no, “Based on what I have just said, do this” in v16. For example, back up to Chapter Ten. After Paul’s lengthy dissertation on “things sacrificed to idols” (8-10) he closes with a summary commandment that he expects the Corinthians to follow.

**Read 1 Corinthians 10:27-28, 31.**

Paul does not do that here.

**Read 1 Corinthians 11:13-16.**

v13

*Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?*

To challenge the Corinthians to “judge for yourselves” is tantamount to declaring that it is “self-evident” that the proper way for a woman to pray to God is with her head covered. He puts the challenge in the negative, expecting a negative response. *No, it is not proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered.*

v14-15A

*Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her?*

Paul does not use the word “nature” (*physis*) as we might understand that word.

*Gordon Fee:* For him this is not an appeal to Nature, or to “natural law,” or to “natural endowment” (after all, what “nature teaches” comes about by an “unnatural” means—a haircut); nor is Nature to be understood as pedagogic (actually “teaching” these “laws.”) Rather, for Paul it is a question of propriety and of “custom” (vv13, 16), which carries with it [either] “disgrace” or “glory.” Hence this is an appeal to the “way things are.”

NIV: Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him...

In that Greco-Roman society of Corinth it was dishonorable for a man to have long or overly styled hair. This is not something to be determined by specified lengths, but whether or not there is a blurring of the sexes. The Lord God created only two sexes, and there is to be a visible difference between the two. In that first-century culture, men were to have short hair and women long. And, as Solomon wrote and I have repeated *ad nauseum*, there is nothing new under the sun.

Philo was a Jew living in Alexandria, Egypt, and a contemporary of Jesus and Paul in the first century. He offers us an account of a situation very familiar to those of us in the *twenty-first* century.

*Philo:* Moreover, another evil, much greater than that which we have already mentioned, has made its way among and been let loose upon cities, namely, the love of boys, which formerly was accounted a great infamy even to be spoken of, but which sin is a subject of boasting not only to those who practise it, but even to those who suffer it, and who, being accustomed to bearing the affliction of being treated like women, waste away as to both their souls and bodies, not bearing about them a single spark of a manly character to be kindled into a flame, but having even the hair of their heads conspicuously curled and adorned, and having their faces smeared with vermilion, and paint, and things of that kind, and having their eyes pencilled

beneath, and having their skins anointed with fragrant perfumes (for in such persons as these a sweet smell is a most seductive quality), and being well appointed in everything that tends to beauty or elegance, are not ashamed to devote their constant study and endeavours to the task of changing their manly character into an effeminate one... And some of these persons have even carried their admiration of these delicate pleasures of youth so far that they have desired wholly to change their condition for that of women, and have castrated themselves and have clothed themselves in purple robes, like those who, having been the cause of great blessings to their native land, walk about attended by body-guards, pushing down every one whom they meet.

God gave both men and women hair on their respective heads. Left alone, members of either sex would have long, unkempt locks. It is *society* that dictates the acceptable appearance of hair, and this, like dress, fluctuates wildly throughout history. But what has not fluctuated in all of Creation's millennia is the order God set forth: there are two sexes only—man and woman—and they are to be distinguishable from each other. In any society or culture, at any time in history, man is to be unmistakably male, and woman is to be unmistakably female.

Again, Paul is citing the difference in men's and women's hair simply to illustrate how they are to properly appear before the Lord in worship. So in contrast to the man, the woman of the first century in that culture was to have long hair. It was her "glory." And here is the distinction demonstrated: for man, long hair is dishonor; for woman, glory. Since it is used here as the opposite of dishonor, Paul probably means it as distinction, or honor. Her long hair does not give the woman her glory, but it functions as something that distinguishes the splendor of the woman (Fee).

### **Read Exodus 28:1-2.**

The NIV translates this "dignity and honor." These splendid ("holy") garments were to distinguish the priests, to set them apart from others. At the same time they gave them dignity and honor for the sacred task assigned to them (Fee).

We might still struggle with the meaning of the phrase "it is a glory to her"; just what does the hair atop a woman's head have to do with glory, with dignity and honor. But if we just accept the statement and imagery as it is, it lends a certain poignant majesty to a couple of scenes in Scripture. Take, for example, the dinner scene at the Pharisee's house, when an immoral woman was "standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume" (Luke 7:38).

Gary Crandall quotes H. A. Ironside: “It is precious to think of Mary of Bethany and of the poor woman in Luke 7 who washed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with their hair. They cast their glory at His feet.” Would that we all would so freely spend whatever small glory we have in such abject adoration of our Lord.

## 15B

*For her hair is given to her for a covering.*

This would seem to reinforce the position of some that Paul has been talking about the hair throughout—and that three-letter word “for” just before “a covering” would seem to nail that argument down.

**for** = *anti* (an-tee’) = a primary particle; opposite, i.e. **instead or because of** (rarely in addition to) :- for, in the room of. Often used in composition to denote contrast, requital, **substitution**, correspondence, etc.

It is true that the word “for” can mean replacement, “one thing instead of another” (this for that)—i.e., the woman has been given long hair as a *replacement* for an external covering. But *anti* can also mean “that one thing is equivalent to another” (either this or that)—i.e., the woman’s hair represents or illustrates the covering she needs. Thus the woman has been given long hair as a covering to point to their need to be covered when praying or prophesying (Fee). Substantiating this, the word translated “covering” is

**peribolaion** (per-ib-ol’-ah-yon) = neuter of a presumed derivative of <G4016> (periballo); **something thrown around one, i.e. a mantle, veil** :- covering, vesture.

One does not typically throw one’s hair around oneself.

## v16

*But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.*

**inclined**<sup>nasb, esv</sup>, **seems**<sup>kjvs</sup>, **wants**<sup>niv</sup> = *dokeo* = a prolonged form of a primary verb *doko*, *dok’-o* (used only as an alternate in certain tenses; compare the base of <G1166> (*deiknuo*)) of the same meaning; **to think**; by implication **to seem** (truthfully or uncertainly) :- be accounted, (of own) please (-ure), **be of reputation**, seem (good), suppose, think, trow.

**contentious** = *philoneikos* = from <G5384> (*philos*) and *neikos* (a quarrel; probably akin to <G3534> (*nikos*)); **fond of strife, i.e. disputatious** :- **contentious; quarrelsome.**

To our ears this sounds a bit cryptic; just what is Paul saying here? Well, something similar to what he has said before—just another topic.

**Read 1 Corinthians 3:18.**

**Read 1 Corinthians 8:2.**

**Read 1 Corinthians 14:37.**

Each of these three other verses refer to something certain individuals in the Corinth church were doing that required correction from the apostle. And the verse before us, worded the same, is meant to convey the same. Apparently there were some women in the church who were doing without covering for their hair—beyond that, Paul anticipates that they will try to argue the point with him (“inclined to be contentious”).

*we have no other practice,*

The word translated “practice” (*synethia*) was used in Chapter Eight in the discussion about things sacrificed to idols: “...but some, being accustomed to the idol until now...” The noun form in 11:16 means custom or habit.

*nor have the churches of God.*

That is, neither the apostles and teachers or the rest of the Christian churches have or observe a different way for women to present themselves in corporate worship. There is no alternative for the woman but to cover her head in public—and *I don't want to hear any arguing about this!*

## CONCLUSION

Though Paul has been emphatic and detailed on this topic, even this last passage makes it clear that his conclusion does not constitute a commandment; he is not here establishing canon law. Even more so than in the first century, the Christian church today encompasses a vast multitude of cultures spanning all continents on earth. Dictating a common dress for all men and all women is impossible—and unnecessary. The point is this: Based on the habits and customs of the local community, the attire for both men and women in corporate worship is to be conservative, modest, and not draw attention to the wearer. The sole object of attention, praise, and worship is to be our “head,” Christ Jesus and God the Father. Anything that distracts from that is improper.

Paul’s approach with this topic—appealing to shame, propriety, and custom—stands in contrast to his approach with the next: attack and imperative, and calls for immediate change without qualification. What the Corinthians were doing in regard to the Lord’s Supper “cuts at the heart of both the gospel and the church” (Fee).