

Facts about covering of hair in worship

In appearing before God for devotion or worship, every woman is required by nature and by the law of God to cover her hair. This puts her in a solemn and becoming posture for study, meditation, prayer and singing of praises to God. However, it has now become the norm for women in most Churches in the world to go for devotion or attend services with their hair uncovered. This practice which has been gaining ground with the advance of secularism in the last 100 years is a clear violation of the law of God as stated in the Holy Bible.

Writing in such websites as www.btinternet.com, www.christianhospitality.org and www.pbc.org, a number of church leaders and commentators on the issue contend that “the hair is the God-given covering, the material covering is just a human fashion or custom” and that “women are not supposed to wear veils because God has given them long uncut hair instead”.

Among the arguments they use to buttress their stand are that:

1. By the law of Moses, women being tried for committing adultery are allowed to uncover their hair in the temple;
2. Mary, sister of Lazarus worshipped Christ without covering her head;
3. The Priests of old wore caps while a king of Israel was crowned in the temple

Let us now look at these arguments against the background of the Holy Scriptures.

In the case of women accused of adultery as stated in Numbers 5:11-31, the law provided that she should undergo a special rite to ascertain if she was actually guilty of the charge made against her. The law states among other things that “the priest shall set the woman before the LORD, and uncover the woman’s head”. (verse 18) Some hold to this as proof that women could uncover their hair in the temple. But it should be understood that women spoken of in the passage under reference were under trial and uncovering their hair signified the humiliating and shameful nature of the accusation against them. Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible in explaining verse 18 “uncover the woman’s head”, states as follows: “To take off a woman’s veil, and expose her to the sight of men, would be considered a very great degradation in the East.” It adds: “To this St. Paul appears to allude in 1 Corinthians 11:5,6,10”.

Since in the East it is considered highly disrespectful for women to appear before men without a covering in line with the law of God – it is therefore natural to expect them to show much greater reverence for God Almighty by covering their hair during devotion. What those who canvass this argument should also reflect on is that: if the Jewish women normally worshipped in the temple with uncovered heads, why then was it necessary for women caught in adultery to be specifically asked to uncover their hair? Certainly, it was not the practice in those days for women to go into the temple with uncovered hair. Also, it should be pointed out that the woman accused of adultery did not go to the temple at that particular time for worship but for judgment.

The Bible states that shamefacedness is a virtue in women. St. Paul in his letter to Timothy instructs thus: “In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works.” – 1 Timothy 2:9,10

Another instance adduced by those who believe and teach that a woman need not cover her hair in worship is that of Mary, the sister of Lazarus. On a certain occasion when the Lord Jesus Christ visited them, the Bible records her as “weeping at the feet of Christ and wiping his feet with her hair”. Here again we see that this was not a temple service but an unplanned, spur-of-the-moment action, in an informal setting – the family home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. The spontaneous outpouring of goodwill, and appreciation by Mary to God Almighty for His goodness on her, including the raising of Lazarus, her brother from the dead, cannot be used to justify leaving the woman’s hair bare during worship. -John 11:2; 12:2,3; compare Luke

7:37-50.

Some have argued that since the Bible says one should “pray without ceasing”, (1 Thessalonians 5:17), a woman should cover her hair all the time. This is not correct. As indicated earlier, the law on covering of hair by women has to do with worship situations. What St. Paul meant in his letter to the Thessalonians was that we should be regular in prayer; we should not be weary of asking for help from God. Prayer is a formal, solemn act of thanksgiving and of making requests from God by way of worship. This cannot be a 24-hour activity.

It is true that in the time of old, the priests wore headgears. The high priest wore a distinctive head gear called mitre (See Exodus 28:4,37,39; 39:28,30; Leviticus 8:9), while that worn by other priests was generally called bonnet. (Exodus 28:40; 29:9) The mitre is defined by the *Smith's Bible Dictionary* as “the turban or headdress of the high priest, made of fine linen cloth, eight yards long, folded around the head on the front of which was a gold plate with the inscription ‘Holiness to the Lord’”. We agree that under Mosaic law it was mandatory for priests to cover their heads but such law was not retained in the Christian era. See Colossians 2:14-17.

It is also true that King Joash was crowned in the temple as recorded in 2 Kings 11:11,12,14. But this was an abnormal situation. Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel (2 Kings 11:1) had usurped the throne after the premature death of her husband Jehoram and her son Ahaziah. She sought to secure herself on the throne by the murder of all the seed royal. Only Joash her grandson, then an infant, was saved by his aunt Jehosheba. The child was concealed in the temple for six years and brought up under the care of the priest, Jehoiada. During this period Athaliah reigned over Judah. At the age of seven Jehoash was brought from his place of refuge and crowned under the supervision of Jehoiada the high priest. The people's zeal for God and their loyalty to the house of David ensured that they quickly stood up to Athaliah's subsequent challenge and put her to death. – 2 Kings 11:1-21; 2 Chronicles 23:1-21.

What happened was that God allowed the Priest Jehoiada to install Jehoash as king in order to continue the royal lineage of king David in keeping with His oath to him. (Psalm 132:11,12; 2 Samuel 7:12; 2 Chronicles 6:16) The devil, knowing the purpose of God that all kings of Israel would come through the line of king David, had planned to frustrate that purpose by using Athaliah to kill all the heirs to the throne. But no one can interfere or change the will of God. The crowning of Jehoash in the temple is an exceptional case which cannot be cited as a precedent for all time. God also makes allowance for unusual circumstances and these could warrant exemptions from the general rule. The circumstances of those days warranted the action of the Priest Jehoiada as the temple was the only secure place the priest could get to hurriedly crown the king. In any case, this was not a normal coronation ceremony as Jehoash was only seven years old. There is no other example in the Holy Bible where a king of Israel was crowned in the temple. In summary, we must reiterate that the case of king Joash being crowned in the temple was an example in time of old, which does not apply in the Christian era.

Some scholars have argued that though Joash was crowned in the temple, the venue could not have been the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies where the priest enters once a year. According to the American Tract Society Dictionary, “The temple itself, strictly so called, which comprised the Porch, the Sanctuary, and the Holy of Holies, formed only a small part of the sacred precincts, being surrounded by spacious courts, chambers, and other apartments, which were much more extensive than the temple itself. It should be observed that the word temple does not always denote the central edifice itself, but in many passages some of the outer courts are intended.” – Emphasis ours.

Change of Priesthood

The Bible shows that Jesus Christ came to “magnify the law and make it honourable”. (Isaiah 42:21) It was the will of God that in due course the work of the Ministry should be raised to new heights through Jesus Christ. In the words of Apostle Paul “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.” (Romans 10: 4) The Priesthood changed with the

coming of Christ, the Melchizedek, as a result of which the laws, which were only a shadow of things to come, were done away with. St. Paul said: "For the Priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law." (Hebrews 7:12) For the fact that Jesus Christ did not come from the priestly line of Levi indicates that the law as to the priesthood had changed. (Hebrews 7:11-15) And in Galatians 3:24,25 St. Paul added: "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a school master." After Christ, the perfect teacher, had come, nobody should take the people of God back to the schoolmaster.

We implore our readers to take particular note of the fact that Apostle John records a vision in the book of Revelations where the 24 elders who sat about the throne of God "cast their crowns before the throne" in reverence to God Almighty. (Revelation 4:10,11) This is a clear demonstration of the fact that men, no matter how highly placed ought not to cover their heads during worship and is in line with the words of St. Paul that men should not cover their heads while worshipping God.

Jesus Christ and his apostles wore no head covering or any distinctive garments as the priests of old did while ministering in the temple. That was why Judas had to use a kiss to identify Jesus Christ. (Matthew 26:48). The example and precept of Christ and his apostles supersede the laws of the old testaments regarding the dressing of priests and ministers of God. (John 13:15) St. Paul in his letter to the Christians at Colossae stated: "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ." - Colossians 2:14-17.

St. Paul

To better understand the Bible position on the covering of hair by women, let us dissect St. Paul's letter to the Christians at Corinth in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 in which he dwelt extensively on the issue. In verse 1 he enjoins the Corinthian Christians to follow his example just as he was also following the commands of Christ. In verse 2 he reminded them of the need to keep the ordinances he delivered to them. He went on to state the basis of the ruling he was to give, saying in the next verse, "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God." For this reason therefore: "Every man praying or prophesying, (preaching the word of God) having his head covered, dishonoureth his head: (Jesus Christ) But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head (the man) for that is even all one as if she were shaven". (verses 3-5) Then he added in verse 6, "For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered". The statement is clear enough.

In spite of the clarity of St. Paul's statement, many professed Christians still do not understand what St. Paul meant in verses 5 (already quoted) and 15 of 1 Corinthians 11. Verse 15 says: "But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering." A number of professed Christians wrongly explain this text to mean that because the woman already has hair on her head she does not need any scarf or any other covering anymore!

There should be no room for confusion in understanding of 1 Corinthians 11 verses 5 and 15, if we are sincere to ourselves. What St. Paul is saying is that if the woman prays without using a scarf or other material to cover her hair, she by so doing dishonours her head, that is the man. The material over her head is a sign of her subjection to the man and her readiness to subject herself to the divine order. The only condition in which she could pray without covering her hair is to shave it all. The covering in verse 5 refers to a material covering or vesture, etc. There is no

way the expression “having her head uncovered” could mean “having no hair on her head”. The “long hair” in verse 15 means the woman’s natural hair. This gives her glory and she could use it to cover her face if struck by shyness: “for her hair is given her for a covering”.

St. Paul’s words are rendered more clearly by the *Living Bible*. We may as well quote verses 2-76, which reads as follows: “But there is one matter I want to remind you about: that a wife is responsible to her husband, her husband is responsible to Christ, and Christ is responsible to God. That is why, if a man refuses to remove his hat while praying or preaching, he dishonors Christ. And that is why a woman who publicly prays or prophesies without a covering on her head dishonors her husband [for her covering is a sign of her subjection to him]. Yes, if she refuses to wear a head covering then she should cut off all her hair. And if it is shameful for a woman to have her head shaved, then she should wear a covering. But a man should not wear anything on his head [when worshipping, for his hat is a sign of subjection to men]”. St. Paul adds in verses 13-15: “What do you yourselves really think about this? Is it right for a woman to pray in public without covering her head? Doesn’t even instinct itself teach us that women’s heads should be covered? For women are proud of their long hair, while a man with long hair tends to be ashamed.”

The Churches who allow women to uncover their hair in worship are motivated by the quest for large membership and money, for which reason they are prepared to compromise Christian standards than practise righteousness. Such will definitely give account of their stewardship to God. (Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10) Even the wives of some of the Church leaders cover their heads during worship whereas most members of their congregation don’t. This is hypocrisy.

Like the unfaithful priests of old, some of the Church leaders of today are committing a grievous blunder by not clearly setting out the right standards, as commanded by God for people to follow. In Ezekiel 22:26 God declared: “Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean, ... and I am profaned among them.” See also Ezekiel 44:23; Leviticus 10:10.

Personal Righteousness

The truth is that several Churches have gone with the prevailing fashion of the secular world such that the covering of hair “has slowly but surely slipped out of sight” in many congregations.

Those women who prefer to do their own will by not covering their heads argue that God does not look at the outward appearance or dressing but the heart. This is a grossly misleading argument which has nurtured several licentious practices. The outward appearance or conduct is and should be a reflection of what is in the heart. And Christ said so in Matthew 15:18-20 thus: “But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man...” By refusing to obey the command of God, those women who fail to cover their hair in worship and the priests who cover their heads are showing that their hearts are far from God. (Matthew 15:7-9; Isaiah 29:13,14) Indeed, those who follow the opinions and traditions of men and serve God loosely are indulging in vain worship.

It is in view of this that we go all out to draw people’s attention to the truth as stated in the Holy Bible, not for the love of controversy as some say, or with the view of embarrassing anybody, but in the interest of the sheep of God who want to practise His righteousness so as to be saved.

Regrettably, many professed Christians today are behaving like the natural Jews who, instead of adhering to the standards God has laid down for His worshippers, are following the

dictates of their hearts thereby falling short of the righteousness of God. St. Paul stated: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." – Romans 10:1-3

Warning those who refuse to abide by this instruction on covering of hair, St. Paul declared "But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God." He also stated: "If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant." -1Corinthians 14:37,38. See also 1 Corinthians 11:16; 7:40; Matthew 7:21.