

THE NECESSARY MODESTY

1 Corinthians 11: 2-16

I praise you because you remember me in all things and because you hold fast to the traditions as I handed them down to you. But I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, and that the man is the head of the woman, and that God is the head of Christ. Every man who prays or preaches with his head *covered* shames his head. Every woman who prays or preaches with her head *uncovered* shames her head, for she is in exactly the same case as a woman whose head has been shaved; for, if a woman does not cover her head, let her have her hair cut also. If it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut or to be shaved, let her have her head covered. A man ought not to cover his head because he is the image and the glory of God; but woman is the glory of man; for the man did not come from the woman but the woman from the man; for the man was not created for the sake of the woman but woman for the sake of man. For this reason a woman ought to retain upon her head the sign that she is under someone else's authority, for the sake of the angels. All the same it is true that, in the Lord, woman is nothing without man nor man without woman; for just as woman came from man, so man is born through woman, and all things are from God. Use your own judgment on this. Is it fitting for a woman to pray to God *uncovered*? Does not the very nature of things teach us that it is a dishonour to a man if he lets his hair grow long? But if a woman lets her hair grow long it is her glory, because her hair was given to her for a covering. All the same, if anyone wishes to go on arguing for the sake of arguing, it is sufficient to say that we have no such custom, nor have the Churches of God.

THIS is one of these passages which have a purely local and temporary significance; they look at first sight as if they had only an antiquarian interest because they deal with a situation which has long since ceased to have any relevance for us; and yet such passages have a very great interest because they shed a flood of light on the domestic affairs and problems of the early Church; and, for him who has eyes to see, they have a very great importance, because Paul solves the problems by principles which are eternal.

The problem was whether or not in the Christian Church a woman had the right to take part in the service unveiled. Paul's answer was bluntly this—the veil is always a sign of subjection, worn by an inferior in the presence of a superior; now woman is inferior to man, in the sense that man is head of the household; therefore it is wrong for a man to appear at public worship veiled and equally wrong for a woman to appear unveiled. It is very improbable that in the twentieth century we are likely to accept this view of the inferiority and subordination of women. But we must read this chapter in the light not of the twentieth century but of the first, and as we read it we must remember three things.

(i) We must remember the place of the veil in the East. To this day eastern women wear the *yashmak*: which is a long veil leaving the forehead and the eyes uncovered but reaching down almost to the feet. In Paul's time the eastern veil was even more concealing. It came right over the head with only an opening for the eyes and reached right down to the feet. A respectable eastern woman would never have dreamed of appearing without it. Writing in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, T. W. Davies says, "No respectable woman in an eastern village or city goes out without it, and, if she does, she is in danger of being misjudged. Indeed English and American missionaries in Egypt told the present writer that their own wives and daughters when going about find it often best to wear the veil."

The veil was two things. (a) It was a sign of inferiority. (b) But it was also a great protection. Verse 10 is very

difficult to translate. We have translated it: "For this reason a woman ought to retain upon her head the sign that she is under someone else's authority," but the Greek literally means that a woman ought to retain "her authority upon her head." Sir William Ramsay explains it this way—"In Oriental lands the veil is the power and honour and dignity of the woman. With the veil on her head she can go anywhere in security and profound respect. She is not seen; it is a mark of thoroughly bad manners to observe a veiled woman in the street. She is alone. The rest of the people around are non-existent to her, as she is to them. She is supreme in the crowd. . . . But without the veil the woman is a thing of nought, whom anyone may insult. . . . A woman's authority and dignity vanish along with the all-covering veil that she discards."

In the East, then, the veil is all-important. It does not only mark the inferior status of a woman; it is the inviolable protection of her modesty and chastity.

(ii) We must remember the status of women in Jewish eyes. Under Jewish law woman was vastly inferior to man. She had been created out of Adam's rib (*Genesis* 2: 22, 23) and she had been created to be the helpmeet of man (*Genesis* 2: 18). There was a Rabbinic piece of fanciful exegesis which said, "God did not form woman out of the head lest she should become proud; nor out of the eye lest she should lust; nor out of the ear lest she should be curious; nor out of the mouth lest she should be talkative; nor out of the heart lest she should be jealous; nor out of the hand lest she should be covetous; nor out of the foot lest she should be a wandering busybody; but out of a rib which was always covered; therefore modesty should be her primary quality."

It is the unfortunate truth that in Jewish law a woman was a thing and was part of the property of her husband over which he had complete rights of disposal. It was true that in the synagogue, for instance, women had no share whatever in the worship but were segregated completely from the men in a shut-off gallery or other part of the building.

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In Jewish law and custom it was unthinkable that women should claim any kind of equality with men.

In verse 10 there is the curious phrase that women should be veiled "for the sake of the angels." It is not certain what this means, but probably it goes back to the strange old story in *Genesis* 6: 1 and 2 which tells how the angels fell a prey to the charms of mortal women and so sinned; it may well be that the idea is that the unveiled woman is a temptation even to the angels, for an old Rabbinic tradition said that it was the beauty of women's long hair which tempted the angels.

(iii) It must always be remembered that this situation arose in *Corinth*, probably the most licentious city in the world. Paul's point of view was that in such a situation it was far better to err on the side of being too modest and too strict rather than to do anything which might either give the heathen a chance to criticize the Christians as being too lax or be a cause of temptation to the Christians themselves.

It would be quite wrong to make this passage of universal application; it was intensely relevant to the Church of Corinth but it has nothing to do with whether or not women should wear hats in church at the present day. But for all its local significance it has three great permanent truths in it.

(i) It is always better to err on the side of being too strict than on the side of being too lax. It is far better to abandon rights which may be a stumbling-block to some than to insist on them. It is the fashion to decry convention; but a man should always think twice before he defies it and shocks others. True, he must never be the slave of convention, but conventions do not usually come into being for nothing.

(ii) Even after he has stressed the subordination of women, Paul goes on to stress even more directly the essential partnership of man and woman. Neither can live without the other. If there be subordination, it is in order that the partnership may be more fruitful and more lovely for both.

(iii) Paul finishes the passage with a rebuke to the man who argues for the sake of argument. Whatever the differences

that may arise between men, there is no place in the Church for the deliberately contentious man or woman. There is a time to stand on principle; but there is never a time to be contentiously argumentative. There is no reason why people should not differ and yet remain at peace.