



Given Her for a Covering

An exposition of 1 Corinthians 11:15

By Mike Atnip

For 18 centuries, the title phrase never caught much attention from the people of God. Then came the 1800s, and new voices began to arise. New ways of looking at things. Questions of authority, questions of translation accuracy, questions about validity of long-established practices and teachings.

Yes, the question of covering the female head in public was one of those long-established practices that began to be questioned in the early 1800s. Was it mere coincidence that the question of covering the female head came right at the same time as the question of the woman teaching the man and taking leadership positions in the church? Both were long-settled practices. In the early church writings, both positions were clearly staked out: The woman was not to teach the man, and she was to cover her head in public as a sign of being under his authority. While occasionally a few small sects broke protocol and allowed women to preach to men, there seems to not have been a single group in the first 19 centuries of church history that questioned the use of a cloth-covered head for the woman. In fact, the practice and teaching was so well established, that, after the first couple of centuries, very few writers ever mentioned the issue, other than in passing.

Why so little in church history concerning the veil and long hair?

While thousands of volumes have been written about baptism, communion, and other topics, everything written during the first 19 centuries concerning the veil and long

hair could probably be fitted on a couple of sheets of paper. The *Ante-Nicene Fathers* contain several quotations in definite support of using a veil, but the only real tract on the subject comes from Tertullian, somewhere around the year 200 A.D. And even that tract did not argue the question of whether “the covering” was a veil or long hair, but whether unmarried girls should use veils, and the age at which they should start wearing them.

Why so little attention to the topic? Simple. People generally don’t spend much time writing about things that everyone agrees upon. Simply put, all Christians of every stripe and color agreed that 1 Corinthians 11 taught that women should cover their heads in public as a sign of submission to their husband or father. The practice and teaching was so universally agreed upon that no one wrote much about it for a millennium and a half.

Then came the 19th century. New winds were blowing in Protestant lands. The woman’s place in the church was being questioned. Was she really supposed to keep quiet in the church? Did that mean not teach and preach to men?

Women’s “liberation” and unveiling

While the themes of women keeping silence in the church and the covering of her head in public as a sign of submission to the man were rarely tied together in public debates, they are rather intrinsically united. After all, if a covered head is a sign of submission to the man, how could a woman be in a leadership position in a congregation, and at the same time wear a veil as a sign of being under authority to the man? Veiled heads and leadership simply just don’t mix!

Returning to the theme of church history, in the early 1800s more churches began to allow women to start preaching to men (the Quakers had allowed women to speak in the assembly before then). At the same time, questions arose about the use of a veil, and by the end of the century, a good number of the Protestant churches in the USA had dropped the head veil, claiming that long hair was the covering, not a cloth veil. Another



century passed, and by our time in 2010, the vast majority of churches worldwide have dropped the use of the veil ... and long hair as well. Even the Catholic Church succumbed to the tide, and by the end of the 1900s, only certain nuns and socially conservative areas were still wearing veils.

As mentioned above, the use of a veil was so commonly accepted that no one focused—that is, focused enough to specifically write a tract—on the topic for 1500 years. But when the Protestants in America began to drop the practice, other churches begin to see the need to defend it in writings and make statements in their Confessions of Faith in support of veiling the head. This explains why early Anabaptist Confessions of Faith, for example, do not mention the head covering. In earlier times, they had little reason to expound on an issue that everyone, and I mean everyone, agreed upon.

Examining the phrase

There are two basic reasons why most churches reject a veil today.

1. They say covering the head with a veil was indeed a cultural practice of Paul's day, but it is not intended for today. Most of those who think this way also accept women wearing short hair, since long hair and a veil are tied together.
2. They say that 1 Corinthians 11:15 teaches that long hair is the covering.

So let's take a look at what "for her hair is given her for a covering" means.

What is "a covering"?

A Greek *peribolaiou* was a veil, or in the case of Hebrews 1:12 (the only other place the word is used in the NT), a mantle or cape. The word is a compound of "*peri*" (meaning "around") and "*ballo*" (which means "to throw"). A head veil—as something that is "thrown around" the head—is clearly the intended meaning in 1 Corinthians 11:15. There is really no dispute about this word, and practically every English translation available translates it as "covering" or "veil."

What does "for" mean?

The whole interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:15 hinges on a single little word: *for*. And what a varied little word it can be! My *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* gives no less than 27 meanings under "for." The following are the dictionary entries that could make sense with the context of our verse:

1. In the place of; instead of; as a substitute or equivalent
2. As representative of, on behalf of
3. With reference or in regard to

4. Because of; on account of, by reason of
5. With a view to the use and benefit of

Essentially, we can narrow the definitions to two options: either the hair was given to replace the veil, or it was given as a response to a veil. The English word "for" can be used in both ways.



And the Greek?

In cases of ambiguity like this one, the original language can sometimes shed some light. Turning to the Greek text, we find that "for" is a translation of the Greek word *anti*. Literally translated, we see that "her hair is given her *anti* a covering."

Immediately our English minds think, "Ah! *Anti* means opposed to. That means that her long hair is opposed to a veil!"

And that *could* be the case. But ...

Anti is like our English word "for," having more than one meaning. Let's take a look ...

For my own personal research, I looked at around ten different Greek-English lexicons. They were all agreed, although various shades of meaning came out. Some of these lexicons dealt only with biblical Greek, others dealt with the whole range of early Greek writings.

Anti means, literally, "in front of."² In very colloquial English, it means "standing right smack in front of something." While there are many slightly varying uses of the word in ancient Greek literature, they can all be boiled down to basically two reasons why something is "right in front of" something else:

1. Two things/people are *opposing* each other, or one is *replacing* the other.
2. Two things/people are *responding* to each other because one has provoked the other (positively or negatively).

So we have *anti* meaning either *replacement* or *response*. This is exactly what we concluded above, concerning the English word "for." For that reason, "for" is a good English translation, even though it is ambiguous in its meaning.

Interestingly, both forms of *anti* have come down to us in transliterated forms in our English



1 *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 714-715.

2 For those familiar with the Spanish tongue, *ante* in Spanish corresponds very closely to the *response* aspect of the Greek *anti*. So that we can say, "Ante un velo, le fue dado a la mujer el cabello." Unfortunately, the Spanish versions tend toward the weaker expression, "en lugar de," which creates the same ambiguity as the English "for" does.

language. We are more familiar with the *opposition* use: antislavery, antiestablishment, antiabortion, etc. and etc.

On the *responsive* end, we have words like antiphonal (where two people/groups sing in response to each other), and antitype. An antitype is that which corresponds to a type. For example, we say that the brass snake hung on the pole was a *type* of Christ. We also say that Christ was the *antitype* of the brass serpent on the pole. Christ and the brass serpent are “right in front of each other,” corresponding to each other.

Since the opposing aspect of *anti* is the most common form for us in English, it is only natural to immediately think in that aspect when we see *anti* in 1 Corinthians 11:15.

To get us used to the idea that *anti* also means “corresponding to,” we will look at a few New Testament verses where it is used that way.

- Matthew 5:38 “eye *anti* eye, and tooth *anti* tooth.” This is a very classical use of *anti* in the sense of “corresponding to” or “as a response to.” Other similar phrases found in the New Testament are “evil *anti* evil,” “grace *anti* grace,” and “railing *anti* railing.” In all these cases, the first is a response to the second.
- Luke 1:20 “And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, *anti* thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.” Here we see that the first part of the sentence was a result of the second part. Here, *anti* is used in the response sense. The response to Zacharias’ unbelief was dumbness.
- Luke 19:44 “And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; *anti* thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.” Again, we see that the destruction of Jerusalem was a response to their rejection of the Messiah. *This* happened because of *that*.
- Ephesians 5:31 “*Anti* this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.” This is another case of response. The response to God making male and female was that the male will leave the security and love of his father’s home, to begin his own.
- Hebrews 12:2 “Looking unto Jesus the author

and finisher of our faith; who *anti* the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” In this case, our King James Version uses the word “for” in the responsive sense. As a response to the joy set before Him, Jesus endured the cross.

- James 4:15 “*Anti* that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.” Once again we see *anti* translated to “for,” in the responsive sense. As a response to the uncertainties of life, we should say, “If the Lord wills ...”

Can we really write off 1800 years of unified practice and teaching on a subject? Yes, we could. But we are not very wise to scorn one of the few teachings that was not questioned by any notable Christian for 18 centuries.

So ...

Should “her long hair is given to her *anti* a covering” mean that the long hair *replaces* the covering, or is it a *response* to the covering (and all that the covering represents)?

If this sentence were all by itself, we would never be able to know. It could accurately be translated either way:

1. “her long hair is given her to replace a covering.”
2. “her long hair is given her in response to a covering.”

Listed below are a few alternative ways to say *anti* (in the responsive sense) in 1 Corinthians 11:15, gathered from the information in various Greek-English lexicons:

- “her long hair is given her as a response to a covering.”
- “her long hair is given her because of a covering.”
- “her long hair is given her for the cause of a covering.”
- “her long hair is given her in light of a covering.”
- “her long hair is given her in consequence of a covering.”
- “her long hair is given her in consideration of a covering.”

In each of the above phrases, we see that the first part (her long hair) is a result of the second part (a covering). Taking the liberty to change the order of the sentence—and using colloquial English—we can correctly translate the phrase to, “in response to what a veil represents, long hair was given (by God) to the woman.”

Modern translations

The last couple of decades have produced a profusion of English translations of the Bible. This can be confusing,

and, personally, I think it is just another one of Satan's tactics to confuse God's people. Not that modern translations are always all wrong, but just the multiplicity of versions is enough to cause people to wonder, "Just what *does* the Bible say?"

Concerning 1 Corinthians 11:15, I have seen a number of the modern translations along the line of "given to her as a covering" or "given to her in place of a covering." The reason this happens is because the translators take the liberty to use the *opposition* definition of *anti*. The older versions like the KJV, the RSV, and the ASV all stayed with simply translating *anti* to "for," and allowed the reader to make the judgment as to what sense of "for" was meant. Students of the Bible need to be aware of this, both for 1 Corinthians 11:15 and for other scriptures.

The context

We have been given a couple of other witnesses to help us understand the meaning of this phrase: the context of the verse, and historical practice.

Concerning context, the *replacement* aspect of *anti* makes little sense in verse 15 when we look at 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." If her long hair is given to *replace* her covering, it makes absolutely no sense to say, "But if the woman doesn't have long hair, let her also be shorn or shaven."

On the other hand, to say that her long hair was given to her as a natural response to a covering, verse six makes perfect sense: If the woman takes off her veil, she should also respond by taking off her corresponding long hair. In other words, if the man's authority is taken off of her, so should her glory.

The whole point of the long hair being a *response* to a veil is actually quite simple. Because a man is not supposed to cover his head (since a covered head³ represents submission to man), neither should he let his hair grow. On the other hand, since a woman is supposed to cover her head,

³ This study is not about the size of the covering, but as a side note we need to come to terms with the fact that it is a "covered head" that signifies submission, not "a covering on the head." Many women have "a covering" on their head, but their head is not really covered. The Greek word for "cover" is rooted in the idea of "hidden." The covering is supposed to "hide" the head, which signifies that the head (authority) is covered over by a man's authority. In addition, we need to remember that to have the symbol (the hidden head) without the reality (submission to the man) is hypocrisy.

having long hair is not a problem ... the hair is in fact given to her by God because of the very fact that it is on the same part of her body that is to be covered. It was God's *response* to His own law. Underneath the covering of authority was another covering of glory! It is actually a very meaningful picture, *because* (for) in the kingdom of God, the lowest servant has the highest glory! Hidden underneath submission is great beauty. What a jewel in the kingdom of God. Amen!

Historical practice

While historical practice in and of itself does not automatically make something sound doctrine, one can hardly ignore 1800 years of unified teaching and practice. As mentioned already, every Early Church reference to 1 Corinthians 11:1-15 unanimously teaches the use of a cloth veil. Then for the next 1500 years, not a single voice opposed that teaching. It was only in the late 1700s or early 1800s that the practice began to be questioned, finally to be abandoned by the majority of the churches by the time the mid-1900s rolled around. Can we really write off 1800 years of unified practice and teaching on a subject? Yes, we could.

But we are not very wise to scorn one of the few teachings that was not questioned by any notable Christian⁴ for 18 centuries.

What shall we say?

We have seen that, textually, the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:15 hinges upon which definition of *anti* is used. Either a woman's long hair *opposes and replaces* a head veil, or it is a *response* to what a veil represents. Both definitions can be grammatically correct. So we have to look to the context for our answer. Contextually, it is clear that her long hair was God's response to her submission to the authority of the man. He glorified what was in submission. And, 19 centuries of church history back up that interpretation.

What can we say, except that the Christian woman should cover her head as a symbol of submission, and with long hair in a natural response to that? And if she does not wish to cover her head with authority, she should also be stripped of her glory. For her hair is given to her because of a veil. ~

⁴ I personally do not know of a single opposition, but I do not know everything. If anyone for the first 18 centuries of church history did oppose the use of a veil, he is certainly not well known.

