

NO SUCH *CUSTOM*

Recently a book came to my attention, seemingly written by an ex-conservative Mennonite, and published by a liberal Mennonite publishing house. The title promises “a unique perspective” on I Corinthians 11. Upon reading the book, this “unique perspective” turns out to be little more than a “unique spin” on the headcovering-denial fashionable in our feministic age.

The author’s strongest argument is that I Corinthians 11:16, “But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God” means that the churches of God have no custom of the headcovering.

While such an interpretation is a possible explanation of Paul’s words in verse 16, it is neither the best nor the most likely explanation.

Why would Paul spend 15 verses explaining and defending a practice, only in the end to say that neither he and his companions nor the other churches actually required or practiced it? Does this make any sense at all?

Would Paul argue at length that a woman praying to God uncovered disgraces or shames the men in her life (her head), only then to say that to do so is permissible because all the other churches do not practice a covering?

Would Paul argue at length that for a man to pray to God with his head covered dishonors Christ, only then to say that it is permissible to do so because the churches have no united practice or custom with regard to headgear? When is it permissible to dishonor Christ?

In answer to anti-headcovering arguments drawn from verse 16, some have responded that the churches had no custom of being contentious. This seems a rather weak response, since it should be obvious that the church has no custom of being contentious. Others have suggested that the verse should be translated “we have no other custom.” While this seems to be striking closer to Paul’s thought, the Greek word translated *such* in this verse means “such” or “this kind” everywhere else it is used in the New Testament.

The interpretation which seems to make the most sense is that Paul, having established and argued at length for a practice of headcovering for the previous fifteen verses, now addresses potential (or real?) “contentious” detractors in Corinth. The church, Paul tells

them, has no such custom as what they want to introduce – no custom different from what Paul here explains. To paraphrase the verse, But if any man seem to be contentious about this, wanting to introduce a different understanding or custom, we have no such custom as he wishes to introduce, neither the churches of God.

It is a historical fact that the churches of the second and third centuries did have a united custom for the woman's headcovering. In fact, the Corinthians themselves understood Paul to be referring to the wearing of a physical veil and practiced the headcovering for women both married and unmarried. Tertullian writes, quoting our verse, "If any," he says, "is contentious, we have not such a custom, nor (has) the Church of God." He shows that there had been some contention about this point...So, too, did the Corinthians themselves understand him. In fact, at this day the Corinthians do veil their virgins. What the apostles taught, their disciples approve."²

Another passage from Tertullian shows that a variety of coverings were used in the early church. Tertullian argued for a larger covering than many used. What is notable here is that those who wished to be uncovered or minimally covered did not argue that Paul's instructions did not mean that a physical veil should be worn; they simply wore small coverings, or (as stated in another place by Tertullian)³ quickly placed a small item on their heads before prayer or the reading of Scripture (neglecting to wear it at other times).

But we admonish you...not to outgrow so far the discipline of the veil, not even in a moment of an hour, as, because you cannot refuse it, to take some other means to nullify it, by going neither covered nor bare. For some, with their turbans and woollen bands, do not veil their head, but bind it up; protected, indeed, in front, but, where the head properly lies, bare. Others are to a certain extent covered over the region of the brain with linen coifs of small dimensions—I suppose for fear of pressing the head—and not reaching quite to the ears. If they are so weak in their hearing as not to be able to hear through a covering, I pity them. Let them know that the whole head constitutes "the woman." Its limits and boundaries reach as far as the place where the robe begins.⁴

So the churches of God did, immediately after the time of Paul, have a "custom" of the headcovering. If this was not established by the apostles, why did the "correct" custom completely disappear, without an argument about it?

Why is it that it is only now, in the past eighty or so years, that so many Biblical scholars have all of a sudden discovered the new "truth" that Paul did not instruct women to pray and prophesy covered? Why is it only now, in this age encompassing feminism, the sexual revolution, and general rebellion, that the church has come to the "light" that God does not require women to cover their heads before Him, at the exact same time that the world discarded the practice? Today's teachers agree with each other and with the world in impressive unanimity that women do not need to cover their heads, yet their confusing and contradictory new rationales combine into a Babel-like, self-refuting cacophony.

All that really matters, the author of the "unique perspective" book informs us, is being "in Christ." Yet the Scriptures inform us what it means to be in Christ. It means to not walk after the flesh, but after the Spirit (Rom 8:1). It involves our ways, our manner of living (1Co 4:17). Being created in Christ means to be created unto good works (Ephesians 2:10). Our lifestyle in Christ is a good or virtuous lifestyle (1Pe 3:16). The Apostle John tells us: *But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: **hereby know***

we that we are in him. *He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked* (1Jo 2:5-6).

The author of the “unique perspective” tells us, “All these concerns [about the headcovering], along with many other religious distractions, tend to rob our attention and devotion from the spiritual aspects of being in Jesus.)⁵

Perhaps, instead, this “unique perspective” is a distraction from faithful living in Jesus.

-Andrew V Ste Marie

Footnotes:

1. Ben Weaver, *Bible Study on 1st Corinthians 11: A Unique Perspective*, Masthof Press, 2012.

2. Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 8; translation from Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2012 (reprint), Hendrickson Publishers [hereafter ANF], volume 4, pp. 32-33.

3. *Ibid.*, 17, p. 37.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Ben Weaver, *Bible Study on 1st Corinthians 11: A Unique Perspective*, Masthof Press, 2012, p. 20.