

Summary of the Head Coverings Sermon

When Wendell asked me, some five or six weeks ago, if he could go ahead and announce the topic for today, I said, “As long as you’re sensitive enough to not call it Burkah Sunday.”

Some of you may wonder why we are taking time to address such an issue on Sunday morning. Some years back when we did the discussion on the Women in Ministry paper, the question of head coverings came up several times. At that time we did say that we would address it at a later date. In addition there are several groups in our area such as the Apostolic Church and some Pentecostals, who take a very firm stand on this issue. If neither of these reasons are of interest to you, then you could just look at this as an exercise in hermeneutics.

As we approach the only Biblical passage on this issue, I Corinthians 11: 3-16, we need to make several observations about the text in general. First, I Corinthians is what is known as an “occasional” text. This means it was written to a specific group, in a particular setting, in response to a problem they were facing. We do not always know what the particular problem or local practice was. Sometimes we can deduce it from the solution given in the text. An example here would be the communion passage at the end of chapter 11. We know from Paul’s solution that the problem involved not waiting for each other and preferential treatment within the body. In many passages of this nature, your understanding of the problem being addressed, and the way you frame the question Paul is addressing, will affect the interpretation.

The second general observation on this text is that it is a very difficult passage to interpret, both in English translation, and in the Greek text. One scholar has documented 22 different interpretations of this passage among scholars. There are legitimate questions about almost every major word and important phrase in the passage. The text at times seems to be arguing one direction and then takes a surprising turn and says something that doesn’t seem to follow.

Now most texts have different proposed interpretations attached to them, and it is the exegete’s job to decide among them. Some texts, however, are notoriously difficult to interpret, because not enough information is given to decide among the options. An example would be Paul’s reference to

“baptism for the dead.” We know enough about the early church’s view about baptism to know what this passage isn’t saying, but what the specific practice Paul refers to, is up for debate

The same is true of this text. There have been all sorts of interpretations on whether Paul was talking about shawls, veils, burkah like total coverings, long hair, or bound up hair. Good cases can be made for all of them. Yet despite disagreement on this and almost every major element in this text, almost all New Testament scholars today agree that head coverings are not required in today’s church. How can this be?

Often times there are commands in scripture in which we see a universal principle expressed in a cultural way. Foot washing for example is commanded to the disciples. In an arid society in which walking is the main transportation and sandals the main footwear, the need for foot washing in a hospitable household, is clear. It is not so clear in ours. Yet the command is there. Most commentators point to the willingness to serve each other as the point Jesus is making and the foot washing as an appropriate cultural expression of this for New Testament times.

How does one decide on what is universal and what is cultural? There are several factors. First universals are usual expressed as rooted in Creation principles, moral commands reflecting the nature and character of God, or ceremonies that remember a specific historical event.

At first glance it may seem that in fact we have a command rooted in the creation narrative in verses 7-10. But is there anything in the creation account that signifies there should be a wearing of a “covering” by the woman and not the man? No. There is nothing in the creation narratives that says to us, “it is thus universally clear that women should be covered in worship and men should be uncovered.”

Perhaps there is a universal that women be covered in worship and men uncovered, but it wasn’t clear until Paul revealed it here. Is it true that universally in scripture that a man’s head must be uncovered in worship? No in the Old Testament, God commands the priest serving in the temple (or tabernacle) to wear a turban. Now if Paul is referring to a universal principle (for all times and places) that a man who covers his head in worship, “dishonors” his head how is it that God commands a violation of this principle in His own instructions?

Perhaps, as some have suggested the covering here is long hair. Is it universally true that men must wear short hair in order to not “dishonor” his head? Again there is at least one example in scripture of men who wear long hair for a period of sanctification for a vow; the Nazarites. Paul seems to have taken such a vow himself in Acts 18:18.

Likewise, does a woman wearing a head-covering take on a particular significance for worship anywhere in the Old Testament? No. Nor is there a command anywhere in the Old Testament that women should be veiled in worship. In fact in at least one case, a woman veils herself to disguise herself as a prostitute.

What then is the universal in the creation narrative Paul refers to here? In the Genesis account referenced, man is created first and woman is created out of him to be his compliment. It would seem that the passage Paul alludes to points to a differentiation between male and female and the headship of the male in the family. These are the universals and the head covering is the cultural manifestation of those universals.

How does this fit with what we know of the setting in the Corinthian church? Many commentators believe that one of the problems facing the church at Corinth was the belief that we are already living the resurrected life. People in the church were abstaining from marital relations and even seeking divorce, perhaps thinking of Jesus’ words that in the afterlife, we are to be like the angels. In such a setting it is certainly conceivable that Paul wants to remind them of the importance of keeping a distinction between man and woman, as reflected in that historical setting.

For us today, the lesson is to maintain clear distinction between the genders and to remember the headship of family and church rests with the male. The specific practice will change from culture to culture.

One or two further points need to be addressed in respect to arguments made by groups that do advocate ‘head coverings’ for women. In one denominational apology for head coverings, a listing is given of Old Testament passages where women are cited as wearing head coverings. It is important to note that such a listing is irrelevant to the discussion at hand. All this tells us is that ancient Middle Eastern women wore coverings. It in no way supports an understanding that God required this. In fact one passage

in this list is the one where a woman is disguising herself as a street prostitute when she dons a veil.

The same denomination also quotes the church fathers Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian in support of their position on head coverings. It is true that both fathers support covering, but it is important to note that the covering they insist upon is not the same covering the modern denomination allows. Look at some examples:

Such a covering should be worn as is necessary for covering the eyes of women

-Clement of Alexander

It has also been commanded that the head should be veiled and the face covered. For it is a wicked thing for beauty to be a snare to men.

-Clement of Alexandria

For some, with their turbans and woolen bands, do not veil their heads, but bind them up. They are protected, indeed, in front. However they are bare where the head properly lies. Others are to a certain extent covered over the region of the brain with linen doilies of small dimensions...which do not quite reach the ears...Let them know that the whole head constitutes the woman Its limits and boundaries reach as far as the place where the robe begins. The region of the veil is co-extensive with the space covered by the hair when unbound...Arabia's pagan females will be your judges. For they cover not only the head, but the face also.

-Tertullian

Even when about to spend time in prayer itself, with the utmost readiness they place a fringe, tuft, or any thread whatever on the crown of their head and suppose themselves to be covered!

-Tertullian

It is somewhat disingenuous to quote these fathers as supporting head coverings without mentioning the only biblically acceptable covering to them, was a full head veiling. In addition, the fathers quoted are removed from the setting of Corinthians by a hundred years and diverse geographical settings. The ultimate question is, "What does Scripture say?"

It is of course a good thing to remember that when we are dealing with the issue of head coverings, we are not dealing with center circle issues. No one should feel it is their mission to convince other believers of their own position on such an issue. It is, as always, important to be gracious with others of other persuasions and to not be divisive among believers while still not compromising our own understanding of truth. We don't seek out controversy on second and third level issues, but when they come up we should speak frankly and persuasively, but always seasoned with grace.