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Women and Headcoverings

Paul and Head Coverings

1Co 11:1 Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

1Co 11:2 Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

1Co 11:3 But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

1Co 11:4 Every man who has *something* on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.

1Co 11:5 But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.

1Co 11:6 For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head.

1Co 11:7 For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.

1Co 11:8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man;

1Co 11:9 for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.

1Co 11:10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

Verse 10

As the target verse in this study, it is clear from my own study and commentaries I've read, that there is such wide digression of opinion on this teaching, that a universal understanding of its meaning is all but impossible. Two terms are especially problematic:

1. *Power*

The word translated as power or authority from the Greek (*exousia*) does mean exactly that, but the sense in which a woman puts "power" on her head is variously understood. Some have even taken it to mean that the power is actually the power to pray and prophesy in public, which was denied in Jewish culture, but now available in Christian practice. Most, though, feel it is an extension of the authority of a woman's husband (or male leadership in general, if unmarried) granted to her in order to take part in public worship.

Further, as translated above, most interpreters see the power as a symbol of that authority, that is, the veil, kerchief, or head covering mentioned at length in verses 4 through 16. So the head covering is the symbol of power or authority, either the woman's own, or most likely of the male authority figures in her life.

2. *Angels*

To give as a reason for the woman to be covered because of the angels is an especially difficult verse. Again, some commentators, such as Barnes, simply admit they don't know what it means, but other views fall into several groups.

- a. Angels mean either good angels, who in Jewish tradition were thought to be present at human worship and watchers over human affairs. By following proper submission and symbols of submission, these angels would not be offended.
- b. Bad angels/demons who would be incited to lust or would incite male human church members to lust over women who were not so covered during worship.

- c. Angels as generic human messengers (The word from the Greek, *aggelos*, means a messenger, envoy, or one who is sent, and does not necessarily mean a messenger from God) or even spies who are reporting to other churches or extra-church assemblies of practices within the church. Not to follow appropriate practice would be demeaning to the church.
- d. Some arcane and esoteric point of angelology that we have lost, but Paul expected his readers to understand without explanation as a justification.

Mutual Submission

Whatever is understood of the terms in verse 10 above, the concept of mutual submission is front and center again here as it is in Eph 5:22-33 in a similar context. Paul details how everyone is in submission: the wife to the husband, the husband to Christ, Christ to the Father. (There is also the implication elsewhere that the Spirit is also in submission to Christ, so even the members of the Trinity are in submission to each other.) Further, in verses 11 and 12, he states that neither man nor woman is independent of each other. Though woman was made from man (the Adam's rib creation story), so man is born of woman—interdependent.

After laying out the details of mutual submission, Paul states that a man shows his submission by uncovering his head during prayer, while a woman shows hers by covering her head. The idea seems to be that the head (un)covering is the symbol for all parties working within the bounds of their mutual submission.

The Head Covering

Though some Christians have interpreted the head covering to be a woman's hair itself, this seems not to fit the context. Paul seems to be talking about an actual head covering of some sort as the symbol of a woman's authority under man to perform worship activities publicly. So, the big question is whether this teaching still binds us today. There are three possibilities here:

1. *The head covering is to be taken descriptively. There is no relevance to today.*
Paul is documenting a descriptive practice that conformed to local practice and custom, but is not meant to bind women today to do the same. Though head coverings in the Greco-Roman cities of the eastern empire were quite common, it was not mandatory for women to wear them as it was in the near and middle eastern cultures. Women were already free to wear or not wear coverings. Further, Paul takes pains to frame his argument from creation and nature, as well as in saying that this practice is universal among the current churches (verse 16). It seems clear he's trying to establish a more prescriptive basis for his teaching that would then have some relevance for us today.
2. *The head covering is to be taken literally and prescriptively.*
Under this interpretation, women today are literally bound to wear head coverings, not all the time, but specifically during public prayer and prophetic utterance. Although this is the simplest reading of the text, it misses a key point. Paul states in verses 5 and 6, that a woman is disgracing herself to have her head uncovered just as if her head is shaved. In fact, if she doesn't cover her head, her head should be shaved, because it is the same in essence. This can be seen to be a culturally based image.

A woman with a head covering, though not mandatory, was certainly socially normative and common, and to be uncovered in the east was actually unacceptable and shameful. Today, a woman *with* a head covering would be the one seen as shamed, the equivalent of having her head shaved. It would be a symbol of humiliation, of not being equal with men. Paul is clear in stating that mutual submission does not mean that men and women are not equal—they are. But in *function*, there are roles and mutual submission that are ordained by God and have been in practice since the beginning. In short, the head covering demanded by Paul to show submission, but not to disgrace or humiliate in his time, would do the opposite in ours. Which brings us to the third possibility.

3. *The head covering is to be taken prescriptively, but symbolically.*

In other words unlike #1 above, the head covering is not irrelevant to us today, but is also not meant to be taken literally and enforced today as in #2 above. The prescriptive truth of Paul that there exists mutual submission in all creation that should/ought to be realized and practiced is still intact. What's at issue is how to practice/express that submission in a vastly different culture and time. The head covering was the perfect symbol of a woman's submission during worship in the first century. There needs to be found another symbol for the twenty first century that acknowledges the submission without bringing social humiliation or sense of inequality to women.

Conclusion

I believe, as in number 3 above, that Paul is trying to convey a timeless, prescriptive truth while using a symbol that is restricted in time and place. There is a fine line here, that in throwing out the symbol, we are functionally throwing out the principle as well. It is true that saying women no longer have to practice the wearing of head covering may be tantamount to saying women are no longer in any way in submission to men. But it's important for us to embrace the spirit of the text rather than just its letter in every passage of scripture or we all begin straining at gnats and swallowing camels, as Jesus said.

Just as in verse 17ff, Paul admonishes the church for not respecting the spirit of the common meal, the holy meal or eucharist. They are following the symbol, the letter, but not the spirit. Paul and Jesus are both clear that the ritual, the letter, the symbol, means nothing without the true spirit, motivation, or intent behind them. Paul expects his church to respect the submission that is inherent in creation. In verse 1 he says be imitators of me, as I am an imitator of Christ. This is much the same as Jesus saying that he and the Father are one. If we imitate this example, we can let go of the pride and individuality of purpose, the self-centeredness that divides us, and we can truly become one with each other. A woman's submission to her husband and a husband's submission to his wife are critical to learning how to relinquish our own rights in favor of our neighbor—any neighbor.

A woman needs to waive her rights to her husband in order to find true freedom in unity. A man must do the same. How that plays out in the public square of our worship is up to us to decide for today. To find the appropriate symbol or way of expressing that submission is important, but less important than the submission itself—the true desire and motivation to live in such a way as to be fully submitted to each other at all times.