

RCC in the Word
1 Corinthians 11:1-16
Week of July 15

Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

I don't have anything new to add to the discussion on head coverings for women in church. This is not a discussion to favor the matter in particular in either direction. But, it is an example close to home for Inna and I which opens up more questions and a broader discussion which will hopefully be interesting and relevant for each of us.

First a little background on the example subject matter. Paul commends the church for maintaining the traditions as he delivered to them, then reminds them that a wife should cover her head when praying or prophesying. He appeals to creation and the natural order of authority. God, Christ, husband, wife. The purpose of the head covering is to act as a symbol of the authority she is under in her husband. Most commonly this particular symbolism is seen as local custom, which can be substituted by whatever is suitable for a time and culture. That is, if wearing a veil is not the norm, it's ok for women to go without. However, the objective truth of the order of creation and what is symbolized by the veil still apply. Interestingly, RC Sproul had a different interpretation and saw this instruction by Paul as normative and applicable to the entire church everywhere today. Different commentators and pastors give different reasons and put emphasis on different words, sequence of points in Paul's argument, etc., all to validate the interpretation they have. One general point that RC Sproul made was that anytime you have an instruction, and you can't tell if it is a custom or a principle (that is, local and flexible vs doctrinal and to be adhered to) then you should treat it as a principle. That way, if it is only a custom and you have followed it unnecessarily then your error is only in being overly scrupulous. On the other hand, if you presume a principle of God to be merely a custom and ignore it, your error is sin against God.

This opens up two broader discussions in which I have more questions than answers but are good for us to think about. One is about navigating the “things we should and shouldn’t, can and can’t” thing. The other is about the danger of getting caught up in minutia and the evil of legalism.

When I was first responding to God’s calling, when I was first aware of the Holy Spirit working on me, Heaven and eternity were not important to me. What was alarming to me was the realization that creation has a Creator. The Creator is holy and perfect in righteousness and justice. I was a transgressor. I, a pretty decent guy by most people’s standards (I guess), was absolutely wrong, guilty, and corrupt. That was not ok, from the perspective of my responsibility to the holy, sovereign God of creation. I had lived in my own conglomeration of moralism and convenience, blissfully ignorant of my transgression. But thanks be to God, he sends the Holy Spirit to give us a new heart and make us born again. The gospel for me started with understanding the law via the Sermon on the Mount, and how I failed to live up to it. I wrestled for some time. I was reading the word, hearing it preached, knowing it was Truth. I liked being around God’s people who I didn’t even know. Things I used to like which didn’t seem all that bad or immoral became uninteresting or even disgusting to me. I felt myself changing fast without my consent, and as an analytical, science-minded person that bothered me. Eventually I acknowledged and submitted to our Lord Jesus’ authority. That was right around five years ago. Over time I’ve continued to learn more about myself, our Lord and God’s word. I started off my Christian life simply thankful for being saved. I then started appreciating the promise of a sinless eternity. The idea of rewards in Heaven seemed almost greedy. “Just being saved from the justice of my sin is enough” I thought. And it is enough. However, the Bible does refer to rewards *in* heaven.

So now I find myself in this place of being very concerned for what I think, say and do. I hate my sin. But I do the things I do not want to do. Romans chapter 7. More and more I want to do the things I ought. I want to understand clearly, *what are* the things I ought to think, say and do? Some are more obvious than others. Is a wife not wearing a head covering sinning against God, even if it is not done in conscious rebellion? I certainly hope not given the prevalence of uncovered heads in church. If it is sinful, thankfully Jesus’ propitiation is sufficient to cover that too. But, shall we go on sinning that grace may abound? By no means! Again, I’m not trying to say here that wives should all be wearing head coverings in church “just in case.” But we should prayerfully beg the Spirit to lead us into all wisdom and understanding. I’m sure there are a lot of things I think, say and do that are sinful before God. Some of them I am aware of, some of them I presume exist but I have not been convicted of yet. But what about all those “maybes” that we often put into the box of “let me find some human wisdom that matches the way I’m leaning (or want to....and is that in the Spirit or in the flesh?) or appeal to our Christian liberty?

We are saved by grace. Nothing will change that. We are now to strive for holiness (Hebrews 14:12), pursue righteousness (1 Timothy 6:11) and be holy, for God is holy (Leviticus 11:44, 1 Peter 1:16). Why are we to do this? Books have been written on that question alone, but in short because He told us to. In addition, He has given us motivating factors of gratitude for what He has done for us, and anticipation of future rewards He has promised.

I say all this to beseech you as Paul does in 2 Corinthians 13 to examine yourselves. Let us seek to please God, even in the small things. Let us have our eyes and ears wide open and our nerves sensitive to the Spirit’s work in us. Let us present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship. Let us not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the

renewing of our minds, that by testing we may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:1-2).

This first discussion turned out longer than I had planned. So I'll keep the second brief. The subject of head coverings is one which Inna grew up with and is still a consuming point of debate and contention in the Russian Baptist church. They have an Arminian perspective and put a greater emphasis on the things you are to do and not do with salvific implications. We visited some friends in Florida recently and heard a story of a church member scolding two young ladies who were visiting the church for the first time for their immodest dress. They left in tears. The gospel did not reach those two ladies in that situation. Fellowship is broken, churches argue and split over what is ultimately failure to submit to God's word. The whole counsel of God's word is lost in the human corruption that takes place when too much emphasis (pride) is put on tradition, custom, and cultural (church culture) norms. Clearly this is bad, bad, bad. Surely there are things we hold in high regard as individuals and as a church that may even be correct...or maybe not...but either way we must, must, must be careful not to let our presuppositions come before our love. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:38-40).

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