

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

We're in for a challenge—we've come to one of the more challenging passages in First Corinthians. When Paul turns to the topic of "head coverings," readers of Scripture have wrestled for decades about not only what Paul means by what he says but what the implications are for us. Some dismiss the passage as entirely anachronistic without any real value for us; others insist that every woman should be wearing a veil when out in public. We believe that the "take away" truth of this passage lies somewhere in between. It has to do with living out our freedom in Christ in an appropriate way in relationship with one another.

WALKING THROUGH THE DISCUSSION

Maybe it's a special activity, perhaps a phrase or saying, it could even be some kind of gesture or hand sign. Often families develop ways of communicating that just don't make much sense to those outside the family circle. As you open your discussion, that is the starting point. We want to help your people think about what their "traditions" communicate . . . to those "in the know."

When we get into the text, we can leverage that idea. Although we might not be able to explain (or even fully understand!) all that Paul refers to in this section, one thing is clear: there were "traditions" in Corinth that communicated to them and to others. Specifically, the wearing of "head coverings" or "veils" had a particular significance.

There are four common approaches taken to this passage:

1. Paul is writing about what was going on in Corinth, a practice shaped by their culture, and what he writes has no real value for us today. But this approach dismisses the text.
2. Paul is writing about what was going on in Corinth, a practice shaped by their culture, but the focus is on the woman's hair and not an actual head covering. But this approach misreads the text.
3. Paul is really referring to a literal head covering, a practice influenced by their culture, and he is insisting that this must be implemented in the same way in churches at all times and in all places. But this seems to misapply the text.
4. Paul is referring to a literal head covering, a practice shaped by their culture, and he must be understood *conceptually* for us to appropriate what Paul is saying. And this is the view we adopt.

Apparently, the Corinthians *have* sought to hold on to what Paul taught (11:2; his reference to the "traditions" is a reference to the teachings he passed on to them). However, there was also apparently some misunderstanding—and that's what he addresses beginning in 11:3.

What was misunderstood? What was misappropriated? It is hard to be dogmatic, seeing as Paul does not directly say; but what he does write in 11:3 is quite suggestive. It has to do with how some were living out their freedom and life in Christ *in relationship with others*. What Paul highlights in 11:3 is that there is a pattern of relationships that undergird and shape the Christian's life and experience; it's even something seen in the relationship between the Father and the Son. And Paul wanted the Corinthians (and us) to see this.

When he speaks of God being the "head" of Christ, we should not think of "guy in charge"; that is not the relationship that Jesus has with the Father. In speaking of Christ being the head of man and man being the head of woman, Paul does not primarily have in mind the idea of "the one who tells others what to do!" Seeing as "headship" is seen even in the relationship between the Father and the Son, that also means headship is not a matter of one being "better" or "superior" to the other. This is about pattern of relating.

Although we might not fully understand in what way a man "dishonors his head" by praying or prophesying with his head (literally) covered nor fully understand in what way a woman "dishonors her head" by praying or prophesying with her head uncovered, what seems to be in view is that *the way the man and the woman are both to carry out ministry and life is in a way that reflects their awareness of the relationships they live in*.

Apparently some in Corinth had slipped into thinking that their common access to God in Christ and through the Spirit should result in the erasing of all relationship distinctions. But the equality of the Father and the Son does not erase relationship distinctions there.

The frequent challenge presented by this text is "to wear or not to wear;" that is: Does this passage mandate women to wear something on their heads for all peoples, at all times, in all cultures? And, we would suggest that it does not. There are clues within the text that suggest that the issue of wearing a veil is not a "rule" to follow but an expression of something understood in the culture.

For example, Paul mentions that if a woman was to cut her hair short (11:5-6) that it is "shameful." But that is not a universal truth. For example, in some sub-Saharan African cultures short hair in a woman is considered both beautiful and appropriate. Some African traditions include a woman cutting her hair short when she marries.

Paul mentions a man having long hair (11:14) is disgraceful. But that is not a universal truth. In the Old Testament, Samson was known for his long hair (Judges 14-16), Hannah vowed to God to not cut her son's hair if He would give her a child (1 Samuel 1), and a man could take a vow before God to not cut his hair (Numbers 6). Even in Scripture, long hair on a man is not always a disgrace—but in Corinth it was.

Where does this leave us? Apparently some in Corinth failed to consider the cultural expressions appropriate for human relationships, assuming that their relationship with Jesus freed them from that and opting for expressing their freedom in the way(s) they thought best. Some women abandoned the practice of wearing a veil, thus inappropriately sending a message that they were no longer recognizing their husband's role in the lives and wrongly communicating that they were unwilling to recognize appropriate social norms. The heart of the issue for us is not whether we should insist that women wear veils or not, but whether or not we recognize and embrace the truth that our lives with Jesus influence all our relationships and that affirming and "living in" those relationships in culturally appropriate ways is neither legalism, worldliness, nor unimportant. No doubt this still leaves lots of questions . . . but thinking along these lines gets us moving in the right direction.

INITIAL THOUGHTS

Every family has a few—no doubt there are some in your family. What do we all have? Family “customs” that might seem really strange to someone not “in the know.” Can you think of a family tradition or custom that might just not be understood by someone not “in on it”?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

We come to one of the most challenging portions of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. As we read and discuss, we may not be able to work out all the details, but we should be able to lay hold of the basic ideas.

How would you explain the situation we are brought face to face with in this section? What’s going on in Corinth?

Although the presenting problem is “to wear or not to wear” a head covering, what appears to be the issue behind that problem?

Some have concluded from how they have read these words that Paul either doesn’t like women or that he wants to “put women in their place.” What indications are there in the text that such views *are not* what Paul is intending?

In what ways does Paul anchor all that he is explaining in God, what He is up to, and what He is like?

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

Like we did in discussing food sacrificed to idols, take a step back from the specific issue that is in view. Try and think about what is shaping Paul’s thinking in addressing this issue of women wearing head coverings. What do you think Paul wants us to understand about . . .

How life in Jesus impacts roles and relationships?

How expressing appropriate honor to God and one another should shape how we “do church”?

We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
11:2-16



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