

A Brief Introduction To Headcoverings

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October 1, 2004

I have not found any divine of the First or Second Reformations (British or Continental) who teaches that the Pauline command given for men to be uncovered and for women to be covered in 1 Corinthians 11 is moral and universal in some absolute sense and to be practiced in every nation or church and in every cultural situation without exception. To the contrary, the Reformed Churches and divines of the First and Second Reformations make clear that the practice of men being uncovered and of women being covered was alterable and changeable from one historical and cultural context to another. In fact, the very meaning of the covered or uncovered head might be completely inverted so that in one culture the covered head might mean submission while in another culture the uncovered head might mean submission. This is the uniform testimony of the Reformation Churches as is demonstrated in the paper written by the RPNA.

However, even if historical testimony from the First and Second Reformations is as I have stated above, we must finally ground our view not upon man's testimony, but upon God's testimony. To that end, let me propose to you the way that I would approach the text in 1 Corinthians (which is the way I believe our Reformed forefathers also approached it in coming to their conclusions as well).

1. Whenever we find an outward practice commanded in Scripture we must seek to understand if that commanded practice is: (a) universal in all civil and ecclesiastical circumstances (for example, the command in 1 Timothy 2:9 to clothe our bodies modestly); (b) universal in all civil circumstances ALONE (for example, the command in 1 Corinthians 10:31 to eat and drink for physical sustenance to the glory of God); (c) universal in all ecclesiastical circumstances ALONE (for example, the command in Matthew 28:19 to baptize disciples in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; or (d) cultural as to its practice (for example, the command in 2 Corinthians 13:12 to greet one another with a holy kiss), even though the cultural practice may be based upon moral principles. This must be the way we approach all commanded practices in the Bible if we are to know our duty before God and man.
2. Thus, when we consider 1 Corinthians 11, into which one of the four categories above do we put Paul's command for men to be uncovered at the same time that women are to be covered? No one disputes that there is a command given to the Corinthians by the apostle Paul. No one disputes that the commanded practice is agreeable to moral principles as found in the light of nature. The only question is whether the command of Paul relates to a universal practice (whether #1 above i.e. in all civil AND ecclesiastical contexts, or #2 above i.e. in all civil contexts ALONE, or #3 above i.e. in all ecclesiastical contexts ALONE) or whether the command of Paul relates to a cultural practice (i.e. #4 above) that is agreeable to moral principles found in the light of nature.
3. The only way we may know into what category Paul's command for men to be uncovered and for women at the same time to be covered should be placed is to compare Scripture with Scripture (which is our infallible rule of interpretation). In other words, does the testimony of Scripture teach that Paul's command is universal (in any of the 3 universal categories listed above) or that it is cultural?
4. Let us briefly look at each of the categories listed above.
 - a. Is Paul's command for men to be uncovered and for women at the same time to be covered universal in all civil AND ecclesiastical circumstances (#1 above)? It is certainly not a creation ordinance. For Adam and Eve were created naked (Genesis 2:25) and lived and worshipped in their nakedness without any garment upon their body (which includes the head) there in the Garden of Eden. Neither is this commanded practice of Paul for men and women given to Adam and Eve after the fall. For God only made a "coat of skins" for Adam

and Eve after the fall (Genesis 3:21). The Hebrew word for "coat" means a "tunic" which was the ordinary garment for both men and women worn about the body. If the "coat" here refers to a veil for a woman, it is the only place in Scripture where that would be the case. Furthermore, what God made for Eve (a coat), He also made for Adam (a coat). Thus, if God clothed Eve with a coat (and if that means God also veiled her), then He also clothed Adam with a veil as well. For what God made for one, He made for the other. One cannot distinguish here a difference in the clothing which God prepared for Eve as opposed to the clothing which God prepared for Adam. Thus, the Scripture knows nothing of Paul's command for men to be uncovered and for women to be covered at the creation of man nor at the fall of man. There are also other places in Scripture which demonstrate that men and women in various civil and ecclesiastical circumstances did not follow this ALLEGED universal command of Paul in ALL civil and ecclesiastical circumstances. REBEKAH was uncovered in the presence of all the men who traveled with her until she saw Isaac. How does this practice comport with what Paul says? Are women only to veil themselves when they are in the presence of their husbands? Paul's command for women was not universal in a civil sense to Rebekah. THE PRIESTS OF GOD covered themselves with mitres as they served the Lord (Exodus 28:4,40) contrary to the command of Paul for men. DAVID covered himself as he mourned as did all those with him (2 Samuel 15:30) contrary to the command of Paul for men. SHADRACH, MESHACH, AND ABEDNEGO wore turbans in their civil life (Daniel 3:21) contrary to the command of Paul for men. LEPERS (presumably both men and women) were to be uncovered at all times (Leviticus 13:45) contrary to the command of Paul for women. THE BRIDEGROOM wore a head-dress of some kind at his wedding (Isaiah 61:10) contrary to the command of Paul for men. For the phrase "as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments" literally means "as a bridegroom adorns himself with a head-dress like a priest." The same word (translated "ornament" in Isaiah 61:10) is translated as "turban" in Ezekiel 24:17,23. Therefore, if Paul's command is universal (whether applied to all civil or ecclesiastical situations), then we would be forced to conclude that God contradicted Himself in the practice of the Old Testament saints (which we know cannot be the case).

- b. Is Paul's command for men to be uncovered and for women to be covered universal in all civil circumstances ALONE (#2 above)? Using only the Scripture to answer this question, it is clear that women in various civil situations did not cover their heads: REBEKAH (Genesis 24:65); the LEPERS (Leviticus 13:45); RUTH (Ruth 3:15); and possibly Mary (John 12:3) where she wipes the feet of Jesus (presumably) with her uncovered hair. Since there is no other command in Scripture for women to be covered universally in all civil circumstances and since there are occasions noted in Scripture in which women clearly did not do so, how can we interpret Paul's command in 1 Corinthians 11 to be applied universally in all civil situations? Likewise, since there is no other place in Scripture where men were to be uncovered universally in all civil circumstances and since there are occasions noted in Scripture in which men clearly did cover themselves in civil circumstances (DAVID, SHADRACH, MESHACH, AND ABED-NEGO, THE LEPERS, AND THE BRIDEGROOM), how can we interpret Paul's command in 1 Corinthians 11 to be applied universally in all civil circumstances?
- c. Is Paul's command for men to be uncovered and for women to be covered universal in all ecclesiastical circumstances ALONE? Going to our only infallible rule of interpretation (God's holy Word), we see that men did cover themselves in worship: THE PRIESTS OF GOD (Exodus 28:4,40). Likewise, women were uncovered in worship and in the very presence of God: EVE (Genesis 2:25; Genesis 3:21); THE WOMAN SUSPECTED OF UNFAITHFULNESS (Numbers 5:18). If one might seek to argue that this command of Paul to men and to women was newly implemented at that time to be used in worship (as a part of the Regulative Principle of Worship), how then was the Church of the Old Testament not commanded to do that in worship which was an ALLEGED creation ordinance based upon such universal principles of headship, submission, proper order, decorum, and distinction between men and women? If Paul's command is a part of regulated worship, it should have bound not only the New Testament saints, but Old Testament saints as well. But such is not apparently the case. Since there is no other command found in Scripture which requires men to be universally uncovered in worship and for women to be universally covered in worship, and since there are places in Scripture where men and women did not keep this command in worship, how

can we interpret Paul's command in 1 Corinthians 11 to be applied universally in all ecclesiastical circumstances ALONE?

- d. Is Paul's command for men to be uncovered and for women to be covered cultural as to its practice even though the cultural practice may be based upon moral principles found in the light of nature? Having eliminated the previous three possibilities (unless of course one of those three possibilities can be proven from Scripture to be correct), we are cast upon Paul's command as being cultural. In what sense is it cultural? Paul's command for men to be uncovered and for women at the same time to be covered is agreeable to moral principles found in the light of nature as he demonstrates (1 Corinthians 11:3,7-9,10,14-15). The moral principles which agree with the cultural practice of the Corinthians are these: the headship of men vs. the submission of women (1 Corinthians 11:3), the headship of men and submission of women in the very order of creation (1 Corinthians 11:7-9); the orderliness and proper decorum in the roles of men and women that should be present in all circumstances and especially in worship before the very angels of God (1 Corinthians 11:10); and the proper distinctions that should be made in the appearance of men and women which is agreeable to the very light of nature in all men and women (1 Corinthians 11:14,15). Just as the command to greet one another with a "holy kiss" (2 Corinthians 13:12) was a cultural practice and yet agreeable to the moral principle of brotherly love, and just as the command to wear sackcloth and shave one's head (Isaiah 22:12; Ezekiel 27:31; Micah 1:16) was a cultural practice and yet agreeable to the moral principle of mourning, and just as the command to wash the feet of the disciples (John 13:14,15; 1 Timothy 5:10) was a cultural practice and yet agreeable to the moral principle of serving one another, so likewise the command for men to uncover themselves and for women at the same time to cover themselves (1 Corinthians 11:4,5) in both civil and ecclesiastical circumstances in Corinth was a cultural command and yet agreeable to the moral principles of headship, submission, orderliness, and distinguishing men from women. However, in a culture where a kiss to greet friends, shaving the head and wearing sackcloth at times of grief, washing the feet of those who visit you, and wearing headcoverings to distinguish men from women is not practiced by the society in general (as in the United States), Christians should not use such outward cultural customs. For they do not convey the same meaning to our culture as they once did in the culture in which they were practiced. I dare say that if in Corinth some Christians refused to give the "holy kiss" to fellow brethren (as some men were wearing headcoverings and some women not wearing headcoverings), there would have been a chapter in 1 Corinthians on the "holy kiss" and the necessity to practice that as well. For not to do so would have been scandalous, disorderly, and divisive to the churches.