

Truth for Today

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Some coverings of Scripture: The Covering of Heads

Our world is full of people who wear something on their heads and there are many types of headgear. There are also many reasons for having our heads covered. For example, my professional career was in the pharmaceutical industry. Whenever I entered a clean room where medicinal products were physically exposed to the environment, I was required to wear a hygienic head-cover just like those used in the food industry. On one occasion, my company received a complaint from a Japanese customer, who had found a ginger hair in a batch of product. We knew immediately which one of the operators had not followed the good manufacturing practice rule!

But today I'll talk about the subject of 'the coverings of heads' from a Biblical perspective only. The first thing to say is that the Scriptures do speak of peoples' heads in the literal sense and therefore the covering of the head requirements were, and in the New Testaments still are, commands from God. Sometimes the covering symbolised the person's position or status, for example a king's crown. At other times the human head is referred to in a symbolic way for leadership, control and ruling authority, as we shall see in 1 Corinthians 11. At other times the word 'head' is used to identify a person or a place in whom, or where, the authority is located. For example:

- "the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin", Isaiah 7:8 (English Standard Version).
- "[God] put all things under [Christ's] feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all", Ephesians 1:22-23.

Many types of head covering

Throughout Scripture, there are many occasions when people covered their heads. Genesis 24 is the lovely story of Rebekah being brought to Isaac to be his wife. As she sees him for the first time afar off in the fields, she properly veils herself to show that she had kept herself entirely for him in accordance with the marriage customs of her day. In Genesis 38, Tamar veiled herself and acted as a prostitute in order to seduce Judah, her father-in-law. Exodus 34:29-35 describes the peculiar way in which Moses had to veil himself after speaking with God on Mount Sinai so that the people wouldn't be afraid of him. In 2 Samuel 13, another Tamar, David's daughter, covered her head with ashes to publicise the abhorrence she felt after Amnon had raped her. In 2 Samuel 15, later on, her father, King David, covered his head as he escaped Jerusalem at Absalom's conspiracy. Hushai met David on the Mount of Olives with dust covering his head to empathise with the king. In great distress, King Hezekiah covered himself with sackcloth as he was confronted with threats of an Assyrian invasion of Judah, 2 Kings 19:1. Haman covered his head in shame after he had to publicly honour Mordecai, Esther 6:12. The Psalmist proclaimed: "O LORD, my Lord, the strength of my salvation, you have covered my head in the day of battle", Psalm 140:7. When Israel had turned away from Jehovah, Isaiah said, in Isaiah 29:10, the LORD had covered the seers' heads to prevent them from prophesying. At Judah's point-of-no-return under apostate King Zedekiah, the Lord GOD commanded: "Remove the turban and take off the crown ... and bring low that which is exalted", Ezekiel 21:26. Finally, Zechariah records that remarkable incident during Judah's post-captivity history, when Joshua the high priest was found clothed in filthy garments before the Angel of the LORD, who commanded that he be clothed with a clean turban and with pure garments, Zechariah 3:5.

Aaron's turban

A study of the Tabernacle system of worship that God set up through Moses for the Children of Israel is both fascinating and spiritually rewarding. Exodus 28 describes the high priest garments which Aaron wore - his official uniform as it were. After detailing his outer clothes - the ephod, the breastpiece and the robe - God instructed Moses: "You shall weave the coat in chequer work of fine linen, and you shall make a turban of fine linen, and you shall make a sash embroidered with needlework", Exodus 28:39. Linen outer and underclothes were worn by the whole priestly family: "For Aaron's sons you shall make coats and sashes and caps. You shall make them for glory and beauty. And you shall put them on Aaron your brother, and on his sons with him ... that they may serve me as priests. You shall make for them linen undergarments to cover their naked flesh", Exodus 28:40-42. The mention of nakedness reminds us that Adam and Eve discovered they were naked after they sinned in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-11). Therefore it was necessary for Aaron and the other priests to be suitably clothed when officiating in God's presence. Specifically, they wore linen turbans to cover their heads, showing that they understood that they were sinners who needed to be properly clothed. "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me

with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels", Isaiah 61:10.

However, the more important part of Aaron's head covering was the attachment to his turban: "You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, 'Holy to the LORD.' And you shall fasten it on the turban by a cord of blue. It shall be on the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD", Exodus 28:36-38. The gold plate, or crown, was to govern his thoughts as he went into God's presence - any sense he had of his own inadequacies were covered by the words 'Holy to the LORD'. About 80 years ago, a man who attended my church wrote a book about the spiritual meaning of the Tabernacle. (*The Tabernacle's Typical Teaching* by Algernon James Pollock. ISBN: 9780901860651) In it, he said pure gold symbolises deity whilst gold itself pictures divine righteousness. Therefore, when God saw the golden plate (or holy crown) in that prominent place on Aaron's forehead, He overlooked all imperfections of the worshipper and offerer; and accepted the offering according to His own standard of absolute holiness. For Christians, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is their great high priest. You'll remember that the book of Hebrews explains how He functions in God's presence in heaven for them in a similar way as Aaron did in the Tabernacle for the children of Israel. But there are no imperfections in Him! He is the heavenly man, as pictured in the blue cord-ties of the plate. Aaron's pure linen garments remind us that Christ is intrinsically holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners. But our acceptance before God is in the pure gold of his person; He is the Son of God. We may be conscious of our own imperfections and shortcomings as we come before God. We know that even our purest worship, our most devoted acts are tainted with self-pleasing, but He bears the iniquity of the holy things. Yes, everything is dealt with by the person and work of Christ. And, just as the pure gold plate was always on Aaron's brow, so the Lord Jesus Christ permanently holds his priesthood, "because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them...and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water", Hebrews 7:24-25 with 10:21-22.

Covering of head practices in Christianity

The fact that Christians can come directly into God's presence means that all true believers are priests, a fact which contrasts with the Old Testament system of worship. For the nation of Israel, only the specially-selected Aaronic family from the tribe of Levi was able to enter God's presence, either in the tabernacle or the later temple. Everything has changed now that Christ is the high priest of the true tabernacle which God Himself set up and which is not of man, that is, it's a spiritual system of worship. For Christians, there's no special dress-code except in regard to head covering.

But, before I say anything further on this subject, let's read from 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 in the New King James Version, where the apostle Paul explains what Christians must practise: "Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonours his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God. Judge among yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonour to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering. But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God."

We learn from this passage of Scripture that Christianity contrasts with Judaism in another way: Aaron's sons had to wear bonnets to function as priests but Christian men must uncover their heads whenever they pray or prophesy. On the other hand, the opposite is required of Christian women; they must cover, that is, veil their heads whenever they pray or prophesy. Why this change for men; and why these new requirements? There are at least two answers to the question. The first goes back to what I have already mentioned - that in Christianity it's the Lord Jesus Christ who represents believers in the true spiritual system of worship and service. Because the Old Testament sacrifices couldn't make the priests perfect, those priests had to wear linen coveralls to ensure that they weren't consumed by the holiness of God's presence. But Christ has made a full and complete sacrifice for sins thereby making believers holy: "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all", Hebrews 10:10. Consequently we know we are entirely covered by His blood, so that our natural sinfulness is never seen before God. Also, Christ, as our Great High Priest, is our representative of whom God was said: "sit at my right hand till I make your enemies

your footstool” to the “priest forever after the order of Melchisedec”. The second answer to our question is that, now that Christ has come, God has established His true order of headship, as stated in 1 Corinthians 11:3. That order of headship is: God is head over Christ; Christ is head over man; man is head over woman. God did this when: “he raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church”, Ephesians 1:20-22.

It seems from 1 Corinthians 11:2-3 that, although the believers at Corinth were readily following Paul’s oral apostolic instructions about practical Christianity, they were ignorant about this universal truth of headship. Therefore, before he explained how they should conduct various church services, which he did in 1 Corinthians 11:17-14:40, he had to correct this more fundamental issue.

Paul doesn’t elaborate on the fact that “the head of Christ is God” because all Christians acknowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ is God’s chosen, ideal, anointed Man, who carries out the divine will in perfect subjection. Note in this statement, too, that there can be no implication of inferiority, for there is equality within the Godhead. We are looking at their different roles allocated. Nor does Paul say that God is head of everything because believers already know Him as the true Deity. But he does explain in 1 Corinthians 11:4 that for a man to pray or prophesy with his head covered is for that man to shame his own head, that is, himself. By implication, he also would dishonour his immediate superior, Christ - the person who controls and directs him - and also God to whom Christ is always subject. 1 Corinthians 11:7 gives a further reason for Christian men to uncover their heads when it states that men are the image and glory of God. Paul is now reinforcing his teaching on headship with the original creatorial order of headship as stated in Genesis 1:26-27. There God created man (that is, Adam) in His own image and according to His own likeness. In this respect we must remember that Adam was to be head over the whole earthly creation and was commanded so to act in 1 Corinthians 11:28.

Returning to 1 Corinthians 11:5, Paul continues to show that unless a woman covers her head when she prays or prophesies, she dishonours herself, men, Christ and God. 1 Corinthians 11:5-6 extend the argument by saying a woman’s uncovered head is equal to the shame she would experience if she had her hair shorn or shaved. These two verses teach that she’s to recognise her subjective position relative to man, by veiling her hair, so that her natural glory isn’t seen. 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 also apply the creatorial order of headship to this issue of a woman’s subjection, by mentioning that Eve was made for Adam. However, 1 Corinthians 11:10 gives an additional reason why a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, a covering or veil - it’s because angels are looking upon all church activities. Angels are God’s highest order of created beings. According to Ephesians 3:10, they’re privileged to see how God’s wisdom works within the church. But I’ve already said that Paul was explaining a universal order of headship, which extends to all creation; and it is obvious that the practices of praying and prophesying are not restricted to church meetings. To pray is to speak to God. To prophesy is to speak from, or on behalf of God. As such, they’re practised by believers at any time in any place, as well as describing in generic terms what happens “in church”.

Headship, although a universal truth, is essentially a personal matter, although it does primarily apply within church, as I have just said. Therefore, with respect to Paul’s teaching here, I can only speak for myself, and for my wife and family. I make sure that I subject myself to the control that God has authorised in His word. I ensure that my head is uncovered whenever or wherever I pray, either privately or publicly, and also whenever or wherever I’m preaching or teaching the word of God. By contrast, my wife covers or veils her head whenever or wherever she’s engaged in these activities. Our practice is no different at home, within our family. And, although not mentioned in this section of God’s word, we also follow the headship instructions given by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:8-15, which state that it’s the men who lead and speak in any mixed gathering of Christian men and women for prayer or teaching. Together we recognise these different roles in life, whilst maintaining the truth that men and women are equal in the Lord, as 1 Corinthians 11:11 highlights.

Paul was sensitive to the prevailing carnal attitudes within the Corinthian church. Therefore he wanted them to appreciate that he wasn’t selecting them out for special prohibitions. Rather, they were to understand that neither the apostles, nor any other Christian church, did otherwise: “But if anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no [other] practice, nor do the churches of God”, 1 Corinthians 11:16. Paul also wrote as the apostle to the Gentiles, and he consistently and authoritatively applied his teachings to every church of God, wherever it was located. In 1 Corinthians 14:37, he appeals to the spiritual believers in the Corinthian church to acknowledge that he was writing a command of the Lord. But he also asks all of them to discern the sense of what he is saying: that it is godly order for a woman to veil her head when praying because her hair is her natural glory; and that short hair is in keeping with the natural glory of man, 1 Corinthians 11:14-15.

But I finish my talk on the coverings of the head by referring to the metaphorical head covering, the helmet of salvation of the armour of God in Ephesians 6:17. The overall idea is to equip believers for the on-going spiritual battles encountered throughout Christian life. We must protect our minds by putting on the helmet of salvation. We have been

saved from our sins, but the helmet of salvation provides on-going safety from the many and varied spiritual attacks upon our minds, which raise doubts and fears. I wore a safety helmet when I worked in chemical manufacturing, where the plants are constructed out of unprotected steel girders, and there are miles of steel pipes and much equipment. You only have to bang your head once on a girder or pipe to realise the sense of this safety requirement! Similarly, we should always wear the helmet of salvation because of the prevailing spiritual darkness during the night of the Lord's absence from earth.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:8, Paul calls this helmet 'the hope of salvation' because, when the Lord comes again for us, He will deliver us completely from all dangers of life upon earth and securely place us into His heavenly kingdom. To paraphrase 2 Corinthians 1:9-10: we know that, as to the past, God has delivered and kept us safe; that presently, He does deliver and save us; and we trust that, as to the future, He will deliver us from all evil and keep us safe until the Lord comes for us!

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