



AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
CLASS – Lesson 16

GENERAL OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 7:1-11:16, Questions asked about marriage, idols & head coverings

OUTLINE: Lesson 16

1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Head coverings

- 11:2 A moment of praise
- 11:3 God's order
- 11:4-6 The issue of head coverings
- 11:7-12 Lessons from creation
- 11:13-15 What is proper
- 11:16 Church custom

We could argue convincingly that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is one of the most difficult passages of the New Testament to understand. We face major hurdles in our understanding of what Paul meant and how we should apply his ideas today. We face these hurdles because much of the background to the passage and to individual statements is extremely obscure to modern readers.

We aren't sure of the exact situation that caused the Corinthian Christians to be confused about head coverings. The cultural background is also obscure, and has been made even more uncertain by statements that have no textual or historical support, but nevertheless have been made by reputable scholars. To the ambiguous context of the issue we must add the fact that some of Paul's statements simply are not clear to us. And finally, as much or more than most other passages, our reading of the text is colored by our preconceived ideas and expectations.

However, archaeology and other studies teach us a few things about the culture of the time and place that can be helpful. Customs about men's and women's head coverings in public and in religious settings varied in different parts of the Roman Empire. From Rome to Greece to Asia Minor to Palestine, culture varied greatly. In addition, Corinth was a Roman colony. The ancient city of Corinth had been destroyed in 146 B.C., and then was rebuilt in 44 B.C. As such, in many areas of life, it was as much or more Roman than Greek. Roman men and women were known to wear head coverings in religious services, whereas non-Romans generally did not. Both groups were represented in the Corinthian church. The Roman head coverings were usually created by pulling the hood of the toga up over the back of the head (like a hood).

In light of these challenges that have perplexed Bible students for ages, it is highly unlikely that in our brief study we will suddenly find the key that makes everything clear. For these reasons, we will make a special effort to look carefully at the text and distinguish what is said from what isn't said. We will, by necessity, leave some of our personal questions unanswered, but hopefully we'll uncover some fresh ideas that get us closer to where Paul wanted us to be.

There are also certain points that resurface in chapter 14. For the most part, we will wait until our study of that chapter to introduce them to our discussion. Suffice it for the moment to believe that Paul will not contradict himself. We should seek harmony of doctrine without distorting or disregarding any of his teachings.

DISCUSSION

- 1. Exceptionally, for 1 Corinthians, Paul was pleased with something the Corinthian Christians were doing. What was it that Paul praised and how does it relate to what follows?**

- 2. As we attempt to follow Paul's line of thought, is it likely that the traditions to which Paul alludes in verse 2 were about matters totally unrelated to his discussion of head coverings beginning in verse 3?**

- 3. In analyzing the structure of the passage, what role does verse 3 play in the discussion?**

- 4. The passage does indeed challenge our understanding on many points, but possibly the mere tone of Paul's words can give us some guidance. After a close reading, how does the *tone* of this passage differ from the tone of some other passages in the letter such as 5:1-8 (incest) or 11:17-22 (Lord's Supper)? Why might the tone have been different?**
 - In connection with this line of inquiry, what do you make of the fact that most of the passage is presented in a generic third person rather than a more direct second person? For example, he says that "a woman dishonors," and "a man dishonors," instead of saying "you dishonor."**

- 5. What part of the body, head or face, was to be covered?**

6. From the following list of options, indicate which ones are explicitly identified in this passage as moments or situations when women should have the head covered. Indicate the verses that support your choices. Look carefully at what Paul says and does not say.

- Whenever in public _____
- When men were present _____
- Throughout the church worship assembly _____
- During the communion (Lord's Supper) part of the service _____
- Whenever praying or prophesying _____
- When praying or prophesying if men were present _____
- When praying or prophesying "in church" _____

7. Praying and prophesying were a part of the Corinthian church's Sunday assembly, but they were not necessarily limited to the assembly time. Other than being a mere possibility, what does Paul say that would clearly identify the context of this passage as the worship assemblies of the church? Since he is introducing a new subject in chapter 11, what does Paul not say that would open the door to other possibilities (cp. 11:17-18; 14:23, 28; Luke 2:36-38)? We will study chapter 14 later, but what is clear about the setting in 1 Corinthians 14 that can only be assumed in chapter 11:1-17?

8. The Greek word for "woman" in this passage is "*gune*." It can also be translated "wife." Check your translation to see which way it translates, and if it does so consistently. Then compare this to other translations. How much do the translators' decisions influence your understanding of what Paul writes?

- Paul refers to "her head," which we struggle to determine if that is a reference to her literal head or to her husband as her metaphoric head. But he also refers to "man" several times. How many times does he say, "her man," or, "her husband"?
- Based on this bit of research, do you think Paul is discussing a wife honoring "her husband," or God's general order of Christ-man-woman?

9. It is sometimes suggested that Paul is not concerned with a head covering as a piece of clothing, but is discussing only the length of men's and women's hair. What statement in the passage might suggest that? What statement seems to rule out that understanding of "head covering"?

10. Paul gives several background reasons to support his teaching that women should cover their heads when praying and prophesying, and men should not. The number of reasons can vary depending on how one breaks them down. Whatever the number, what are the supporting principles that Paul gives? (Let us note that what some of these reasons mean is not clear to us.)

11. While Paul clearly adheres to the principle of male leadership, what statement does he include that to some degree balances that principle in a way reflective of statements in Ephesians 5?

12. It seems clear that in Corinth, Paul wanted Christian women to cover their heads when praying and prophesying and didn't want the men to do so. (The exact setting is less clear.) The great question for us concerns the application for today. To what extent would the presence or absence of "head coverings" convey the same message of submission today as it did then and there?