



151st Church of Christ
Small Group Study Guide – 1 CORINTHIANS
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AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
TEACHER – 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?

- 1) They hadn't forgotten Paul, and most likely, maintained some good feelings toward him.
 - 2) They kept the "traditions" (teachings) as presented by Paul.
- The relationship of these traditions to what follows is difficult to determine since Paul doesn't identify what they were.

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?

Commentators frequently assume that these were unrelated matters, and that Paul mentions them for the sole purpose of finding something positive to say about the Corinthians before resuming his rebukes and corrections. This conclusion doesn't satisfy. It is more natural to think that verse 2 isn't an isolated topic squeezed in between the topics of chapter 10 and the first part of chapter 11. It is more profitable for study purposes to consider seriously an understanding of the "traditions" that leads into the discussion of head coverings.

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

This verse presents the basic theological point that introduces and guides the entire discussion. Paul will discuss an area of Christian life and relationships that, somehow, affirms the God-ordained hierarchy in which God is over Christ, Christ over man, and man over woman.

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.”**

Some commentators give little attention to what the “traditions” might have been, and then conclude that the difference of tone was simply that Paul felt compelled, for some reason that isn’t explicitly stated, to write about head coverings, but he took a mild approach because he didn’t attach great importance to the head covering issue.

It seems more likely and consistent to suspect that the “traditions” which they were obeying were traditions related to head coverings (see question # 2). If Paul had taught on the topic and the Corinthians were obeying his teachings, that would explain his praise of their behavior.

The rest of the passage is less of an exhortation or command about what they should do, and more of an explanation of why he had previously told them to do it. This would fit the less severe tone (it was not a rebuke or correction), and the impersonal third person form of address. He doesn’t say, “Why do *you* do this, or why do *you* not do that?” but “men and women, in general, should do this or that.” They hadn’t asked him what to do (i.e., wear head coverings or not), but had asked why he had instructed them to adopt this set of behaviors. Paul answers their question by explaining the reasoning behind the custom.

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

The head. This is not about veils over the face or the lower part of the face.

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 11:4-5 _____
- When praying or prophesying if men were present _____
- When praying or prophesying “in church” _____

This is one of the clearer points that Paul makes, but one which is almost always overlooked. Of all the options presented above, the only one that is explicitly stated by Paul

is, “When praying or prophesying” (Verses 4-5). All the other options are guesses or assumptions for which there is no clear support in any verse of the passage.

Many scholars and non-scholars barely address this question and then proceed on the assumption that it involves the entire worship assembly. The NIV labels the paragraph as “Propriety in Worship.” I have also known of women who covered their heads only during the Lord’s Supper. Some commentators propose that the problem stemmed from the “fact” that prostitutes were known to go out in public without veils and for this reason Christian women should cover their heads. If the women were to cover their heads whenever in public, that would mean that men should *never* cover their heads in public.

Paul does not say that the setting was only if men (or husbands) were present. That could be the case, but it is not specified as such. As to the question of whether this was only “in church” or included other settings, see the next question.

- 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?**

He says nothing that would clearly situate the head covering issue in the worship assembly. We tend to read, “when praying or prophesying,” and quickly assume that it must be in the assembly.

The common Bible word for “church” is *ekklesia*. It can mean the world-wide church, a local congregation, or the assembly of the congregation for worship and edification, as in several passages suggested above. It is used only once in this passage (v. 16) and means congregations in various places. It is used twice later in the chapter in the discussion of the Lord’s Supper, and nine times in chapter 14 where the context is clearly the worship assembly of a congregation. There is no direct reference to the worship assembly in this passage (2-16), in contrast to his introduction of the Lord’s Supper discussion in verse 17 when he specifies, “when you come together as a church.” The context here could be the assembly, but it should not be assumed, and there are solid reasons to consider other possibilities.

Anna (Luke 2) was a Jewish prophetess, but under the Law of Moses, David’s temple reforms, or 1st century Jewish customs, there is no likelihood that she prophesied in either Jewish temple or synagogue services of the 1st century. She was in the area around the temple, but this was not during a temple service. Other New Testament examples of women prophesying do not identify the settings in which they prophesied (e.g., Acts 21:9). That it was during the church assemblies is an assumption.

We must consider the possibility that early Christian women prayed and prophesied at times other than the assemblies of the church. Admittedly, we have little information about those settings, but that doesn't mean they didn't exist. Certainly, modern Christian women pray and teach in other settings, including settings where no men are present.

- 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?

The NIV and KJV use “woman” all 16 times that it is found in this passage. The ESV has “woman” 10 times and “wife” 6 times. “Man” (Greek, *aner*) is used 14 times.

This is a major point of debate. If Paul is concerned only with a wife covering her head to show respect (submission) to her husband, then nothing said would apply to an unmarried woman in the church. If, however, his concern is with honoring God’s general order of Christ-man-woman, then things change.

In this discussion, in most translations, “man” or “husband” is never linked with the possessive pronoun “her.” (An exception is found in v. 3 in the ESV, which has “the head of the wife is her husband.” The literal Greek says, “and the man is the head of the woman,” with no possessive pronoun used). In the discussion of marriage in chapter 7, “her husband” is used several times in most English translations. In chap. 11, “her” is linked several times with “head,” but never with “man.”

It seems that the generic nature of Paul’s statements about “the man” suggests that this is less about the husband-wife relationship (though it would be involved), and more about all male-female relationships in the church. Also, it sounds more like a general description of male-female relationships than a direct rebuke to the men and women of Corinth.

- 9. It is sometimes suggested that Paul is not concerned with a head covering as a piece of clothing, but is only discussing 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”?**

The idea that this is all about hair length probably wouldn't come up without verses 14-15, which raise the possibility. But the “covering” of verses 5-6 is explicitly distinguished from

the hair that is shaved off. The hair of verses 14-15 is mentioned only as a precedent supporting the idea that women should be covered and men not.

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.)

- a. It is shameful or dishonoring for women to be uncovered or men covered.
- b. Man is the image and glory of God; woman is the glory of man.
- c. Because of the angels
- d. Woman (Eve) was created for man (Adam)
- e. Woman is from man (i.e., Adam and Eve), but man is through woman (biological birth)
- f. What is “proper”
- g. Lessons from nature and common hair length

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?

Verse 11 affirms mutual dependence. In this passage, this one statement doesn't erase the idea of male leadership and a God-given structure to the male-female relationship. If it did erase it, the rest of the passage wouldn't have been written. It simply affirms value while admitting differences of roles involving men and women. In Ephesians 5, a wife is to submit to her husband, but all Christians are to submit to each other and the husband is to care for his wife as he does himself.

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?

We must not resort lightly to the position that the Bible was written in a certain culture and that the customs today are different, and for this reason we don't have to follow them. At the same time, cultural messages and expectations today are not the same as then.

Clearly, women in the church should never behave in a way that shows disrespect to men or that disregards Bible teachings about male leadership. (Men should not show disrespect to

each other, either.) However, it seems reasonable to question how pulling a shawl over one's head would be understood as expressing that respect in today's world. A sister in Christ whose conscience is better served by covering her head in certain settings should not be marginalized in any way, but the sister who finds head coverings to be meaningless in 21st century America should not necessarily be classified as a rebellious woman.