

Head Covering and Uncovering (1 Corinthians 11:2-16)

Expository Lessons from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

I. My Approach in this Lesson

- a. This lesson will be on **1 Corinthians 11:2-6**, which is devoted to the topics of head covering (for women) and uncovering (for men).
- b. While many scholarly types have claimed that this is a difficult passage to understand, I will make the very opposite case, namely:
 - i. I believe this can be one of the *easier* passages in the Bible to understand.
 - ii. It gives rather clear instructions, telling us:
 1. *WHO* the instructions apply to,
 2. *WHAT* the people are supposed to do,
 3. *WHEN* they are supposed to do it, and
 4. *WHY* they are to do these things.
 - iii. For over 95% of Christian history, virtually everyone had a clear understanding of the instructions in this passage.
 1. For 19½ centuries, Christians around the world (including in India, China, Africa and Europe) did what it says here.
 2. It has only been since the mid-20th century, especially over the past 50-70 years (since about the 1950s to 1970s), that there has been confusion over how this passage should be understood and applied.
 - a. I have seen this shift occur within my own lifetime. As a child attending the Catholic Church, I remember a time when all the women would cover their heads (with a hat or scarf) at church. The same was the case in many Protestant churches in the U.S.
 3. A missionary friend in rural Africa said that all the Christians there follow what it says; it is *only the missionaries from the U.S. who don't!*

- iv. Furthermore, unlike some other counter-cultural teachings (like divorce/remarriage), there is only one passage (this one) that speaks on this topic. So, there is no issue with harmonizing different passages.
 - v. Unfortunately, here in the U.S., we are now in a culture where perhaps 95% of professing Christians no longer hold to the historical understanding of this passage, particularly regarding the call for women to cover their heads (with a cloth veil, scarf, hat or something similar) when they pray or prophesy.
- c. I happen to be preaching today to a rare group where practically everyone present is, along with me, in the minority that still holds to the historical understanding of this passage.
- i. Some come from backgrounds (conservative Anabaptist) where they were taught this from infancy.
 - ii. However, most of us were taught otherwise and came to be persuaded in the course of exploring the historic faith. Many were introduced to this directly or indirectly through the teaching ministry of David Bercot and Scroll Publishing.
- d. **Question:** Since members of our local congregation already have convictions about this, why should we study a something that *we already believe in*?
- i. **Answer No. 1:** We are teaching through the book of **1 Corinthians**. This is the passage we have come to, and we need to address it!
 - ii. **Answer No. 2:** We need to be *prepared to give an answer* to other believers who ask questions or challenge us on this subject.
 - 1. Peter challenged his readers:
 - a. "...always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear...." (**1 Peter 3:15**, NKJV)
 - b. While Peter was speaking about the gospel, I believe the same principle applies to various controversial Biblical teachings.
 - iii. **Question/Challenge:** *Could you*, using reason and the evidence of the Scriptures:
 - 1. Persuade an agnostic, atheist, Muslim or Jew of the truth of the gospel (that Jesus is the Son of God, having been crucified and raised on the third day in fulfillment of the prophecies)?

2. Prove to a Jehovah's Witness or Muslim the divinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all three persons being divine, yet there being *only one God*?
 3. Prove to your Christian friend that women still need to cover their heads with some type of cloth covering when they pray or prophesy, and men should uncover their heads at those times?
- iv. I was stunned that the two conservative Anabaptist churches in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania both asked me to speak on this topic! (Lancaster County is famous for its large Amish and conservative Anabaptist population, famous for the women wearing head coverings and having extremely modest, old-fashioned clothing styles.)
1. **Question:** Why on earth would they ask me to teach on this topic, *when everyone in their churches was already following this practice*?
 2. **Answer:** When their younger members visited other Protestant churches in the area, when challenged on this and other counter-cultural beliefs, *they could not defend what they practiced*. They followed the practice by habit, conforming to the church culture they were raised in.
 3. Because I was not from a church environment where this conviction was taught, I was forced to work through and overcome the arguments used against women needing to cover their heads.
 - a. The church leaders who invited me to teach on this therefore felt that having someone like me teach on this could be very helpful for their younger members.
- v. **My Goal in This Message:** To better equip you to explain this teaching to others, to advance to our friends one more aspect of the historic faith, "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (**Jude v.3**).
- e. Outline for this lesson.
- i. Let's start with the text itself, from which we can learn a great deal.
 1. First, look at the instructions given to men;
 2. Then, proceed to consider what Paul says to the women.
 - ii. Consider the popular modern objections that have been advanced, especially over the past 50-70 years.
 - iii. Take a look at the evidence (or lack thereof) that this command referred to some ancient pagan custom observed in Corinth.

- iv. Close with a dose of humility and perspective regarding this teaching,
- v. Finally, I will provide useful resources, via the notes that will be posted online with the audio lesson, for those who want to study this further on their own.

II. Keeping the Traditions

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 11:2**.
 - i. “Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.” (**1 Corinthians 11:2**, NKJV)
- b. **Question:** Is it good or bad for a church or a Christian to keep a spiritual tradition?
 - i. **Answer:** It depends.
 - ii. In **Matthew 15** and **Mark 7**, Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for breaking the commands of God in order to follow man-made traditions handed down by their elders.
 - 1. The scribes and Pharisees challenged Jesus: “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” (**Matthew 15:2**, NKJV)
 - 2. Jesus challenged back: “...you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.” (**Matthew 15:6**, NKJV)
 - iii. **Question:** What is a “tradition”, in the sense that this term is used in the New Testament?
 - 1. **Answer:** It is something *handed down* from one person (or group) to another.
 - a. Jesus had said that the apostles would be led into “all truth” by the Holy Spirit, in **John 14 and 16**.
 - b. Something handed down by the apostles is a good thing that we need to follow.
 - i. “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” (**2 Thessalonians 2:15**, NKJV)
 - ii. “But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to

the tradition which he received from us.” (2 **Thessalonians 3:6**, NKJV)

- iii. “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.” (**Colossians 2:8**, NKJV)
- c. Something handed down by others may or may not be good to follow. However, if it *supplants* or *negates* the word of God, that is always a bad thing!
- d. Therefore, in **1 Corinthians 11:2**, it seems to me that Paul starts his discussion on head covering (and uncovering) by pointing back to *what he had handed down to them in the past*. He encourages them to hold on to that.
 - i. Recall that Paul had spent at least 18 months in Corinth (**Acts 18:11**).
 - ii. In **1 Corinthians 3**, Paul described himself as one who planted the church, a master builder who laid its foundation.
 - 1. “According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it....” (**1 Corinthians 3:10**, NKJV)

III. This is About Headship

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 11:3**.
 - i. **Question:** Does Paul base his argument on conforming to local customs at the time, or is this teaching rooted in something that is timeless and universal?
 - 1. **Obvious Answer:** It is rooted in reflecting the order of the universe. It is timeless.
 - ii. **Question:** What does this tell us about the relationship between Christ (the Son of God) and the Father?
 - 1. God the Father is the head of Christ (the Son).
 - 2. Most modern explanations of the trinity (unity and divinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) have erased this sense of order and headship.

- a. For example, I have seen the misleading example of an equilateral triangle used in a misguided attempt to express the relationship between the three divine persons.
 - b. The triangle (with each side and angle equal to the others) does not communicate any sense of order or headship among the three.
3. We know from the New Testament:
- a. The Father is *head over* the Son. (**1 Corinthians 11:3**)
 - b. Jesus prayed about doing the will of His Father, rather than His own will. (**Luke 22:42**)
 - c. The Father is greater than the Son.
 - i. Recall that Jesus said: “You have heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away and coming back to you.’ If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, ‘I am going to the Father,’ for My Father is *greater than I*.” (**John 14:28**, NKJV)
 - d. Jesus shared the same divine nature with His Father. Yet the Son came from the Father; the Father did not come from the Son. The Son did the Father’s will, was sent by the Father, and returned to the Father (not the other way around).
 - i. **Question:** Does this order in any way diminish the glory of Jesus, the Son of God?
 - ii. **Follow-up Question:** Should this statement in **1 Corinthians 11** in any way diminish the glory of women in relation to men?
 - iii. **Answer:** Certainly not!
- b. Here Paul is going back to a universal truth, the order of the universe, with:
- i. God the Father as the head of Christ;
 - ii. Christ is the head of all men; and
 - iii. Man is the head of woman.

IV. Men: Uncover Your Heads When You Pray or Prophecy

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 11:4**.

- i. "Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, *dishonors his head.*" (1 Corinthians 11:4, NKJV)
 1. Since Paul had previously established that the head of man is Christ, he is saying here that any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered is *dishonoring Christ!*
- ii. While most people focus on the direction given to women (that they need to cover their heads), Paul starts by addressing the men.
 1. **Question:** Is this "covering" referring to men having long hair, or to them covering their head with something like a hat, scarf, toga or veil? (Some have argued that the "covering" refers to a person's hair.)
 - a. How would the Christians in Corinth have understood the expression Paul uses here, which is translated "having his head covered"?
 - b. In the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek Old Testament used by the apostles and the early church, this same Greek expression is found in **Esther 6:12**, in the story where Haman is exposed for his wickedness. In Greek, the expression is: "*kata kephales / κατὰ κεφαλῆς*". In both **Esther 6** and **1 Corinthians 11**, the same expression, literally "down on/from his head", is used, corresponding to covering his head. We can tell from context what this expression means from the story of Haman. He put something over his head to cover it; he certainly did not suddenly grow long hair!
 - i. "Then Mordecai returned to the courtyard, but Haman turned back to his own home distressed, his head covered." (**Esther 6:12**, LES)
 - ii. "And Mardocheus returned to the palace: but (H)Aman went home mourning, and *having his head covered.*" (**Esther 6:12**, Brenton LXX En)
 - c. **Question:** Does it make any sense that a man would be asked to *have short hair* when he prays and prophesies?
 - i. Likewise, in the passage that follows, the "long hair is a women's covering" interpretation would mean that if a woman had short hair when she prayed, she should (as a consequence) *be shorn* (given a close-cropped haircut, as when shearing sheep).

1. Here also, such an understanding *makes no sense!*
- b. **Question:** Is it a serious problem or just a minor offense for a man to pray with his head covered?
 - i. Paul says that in doing so, he dishonors his head. Therefore, he is thereby *dishonoring Christ*, who died for him!
- c. **Questions:** Is Paul just calling the Corinthian men to follow some local custom?
 - i. **Answer:** No.
 1. How would Jesus be dishonored by Christian men in Corinth violating some local pagan custom when praying?
- d. **Question:** *What were* the local customs regarding men involved in worship?
 - i. Oddly, I read articles by two scholars from the Churches of Christ (Bruce Terry and Kevin Moore) making *opposite claims* on this question, *based on the same primary source material!* One of the few ancient contemporary sources that speaks about this is Plutarch, who spent time in Achaia and wrote about Roman customs. Since he lived c. 45-120 AD, his life overlapped that of the apostle Paul. Plutarch was Greek by birth and education, but a Roman citizen and civil servant. Corinth was part of the Roman Empire.
 1. Therefore, I had to go back to the primary source and read it myself. You can do likewise by reading Plutarch's *Moralia, Roman Questions No. 10-14*.
 - a. Plutarch said that the Roman custom was *for men to cover their heads* when they worshiped their 'gods',
 2. "[Roman] Question No. 10 : Why is it that when they [= the men] worship the gods, they cover their heads, but when they meet any of their fellow-men worthy of honor, if they happen to have the toga over the head, they uncover?" (Plutarch's discussion / explanation for that Roman custom follows the question, in his *Moralia*.)
 - a. In *Roman Questions Nos. 11-13*, Plutarch explains that the customs were different in worshiping the Roman god 'Saturn' and a god called 'Honor'. However, he is not sure why that is the case.
 - b. **Question:** Was the ancient Roman custom for men to cover or uncover their heads when they worshiped their gods?

- i. **Answer:** According to Plutarch, the Roman custom was for men to *cover their heads* when they worshiped their gods.
- c. **Question:** Was Paul calling the Corinthians to follow some ancient custom?
 - i. He was NOT calling the Christians to follow an ancient *pagan Roman custom*.
 - ii. On the contrary, Paul was calling the Christian men to follow a *Christian custom* that had been handed down to all the churches by the apostles!
 - iii. The Christian custom, in this case for men involved in worship, was *the very opposite* of the ancient Roman custom.

V. Women: Cover Your Heads When You Pray or Prophecy

- a. Now that we have understood the instructions to men, we are in a great position to tackle the instructions to Christian women. We have already established:
 - i. The covering Paul is discussing here refers to something you can put on or take off (as Haman did), not to long versus short hair (something that will come up later in the passage).
 - ii. Paul's command does not conform to ancient pagan Roman customs.
- b. Read **1 Corinthians 11:5-12**.
 - i. Paul tells women they need to cover their heads when they pray or prophesy.
 - 1. Prayer is when we speak *to God*; prophecy is when we speak *from God*. There were some in the church who had the miraculous gift of prophecy, as described in **1 Corinthians 12** and **14**.
 - ii. Paul gives several reasons why women need to do this.
 - 1. For a woman to pray or prophesy with her head uncovered is *dishonoring her head*.
 - a. In the case of a married woman, this would apply to her husband.
 - b. There is no separate Greek word for 'wife' vs. 'woman'; it has to be discerned based on context.

- i. The Greek word for women (or wife) is: “*gune / γυνή*”, which is the root for our English language word ‘gynecology’.
- c. As a result, there arose a dispute in the early church regarding whether Paul’s instructions applied to virgins (unmarried women in the church) or just to married women.
- d. Tertullian, in *On the Veiling of Virgins* (found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4), writing c. 207 AD, tackled this question.
 - i. Reading Tertullian’s argument, it is clear that both sides understood that the “covering” in this passage referred to a cloth covering over the head (rather than to long hair, which is mentioned later in Paul’s letter). Also, it is clear that they understood this to be a universal requirement applying to all Christians everywhere.
 - ii. Tertullian made a strong case that this applied to all women, whether married or not.
 - iii. Note also that even unmarried women generally have some male authority in their lives (such as a father).
- 2. Paul goes back to the Creation account in **Genesis 1:27** and **2:18-25**, where it says that man is made in the image of God, and woman comes from man. Also, the woman was created *for the man* (not vice versa).
 - a. At the same time, Paul clarifies that men are not independent of women (since every man comes from his mother).
 - b. “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.” (**1 Corinthians 11:11-12**, NKJV)
 - i. Because the above statement applies to all men (not just to married men), I tend to think that the instructions to women likewise apply to all women (not just to wives).

- c. Going back to **Genesis 1 and 2** and the creation of the first man and woman, it strikes me that Paul makes it clear that these instructions are *universal, and not culturally based*.
 - i. This goes all the way back to the account of the Creation, *long before* the Roman Empire and Roman customs!

VI. Because of the Angels?

- a. Paul also gives a *third reason* here for women to cover their heads when they pray: “because of the angels”.
- b. “For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, *because of the angels.*” (**1 Corinthians 11:10**, NKJV)
- c. This short phrase “because of the angels” has been a source of mystery/curiosity for many Christians over the years!
- d. **Question:** What in the world does that refer to?
 - i. This definitely introduces another element of spiritual significance in the unseen realm.
 - ii. However, *whatever* it refers to, clearly this has nothing to do with an ancient pagan custom!
 1. **Question:** Is it reasonable to assume that *the angels* would be upset that the Corinthian Christian women were not following some *pagan custom of the Roman Empire*?
 2. **Answer:** Of course not!
 - a. Logically, regardless of whether we know for sure exactly what Paul is referring to in this phrase, it does not have anything to do with some Roman custom.
 - b. It should be obvious that angels have nothing to do with local ancient pagan customs.
- e. I have run across two explanations that strike me as plausible regarding the meaning of “because of the angels”. (Actually, there is a third explanation that one early Christian writer held to, which I will mention as well.)
 - i. **Possible Explanation No. 1:** This is a reference to the wicked angels who rebelled right before the Flood of Noah, when it says, “the sons of God came into the daughters of men” and produced offspring, in **Genesis 6:1-4**.

1. Most early Christians understood “the sons of God” in **Genesis 6** as referring to angels who became wicked. This is consistent with the account in the *Book of Enoch*, which is quoted in **Jude v. 14-15**.
2. On the other hand, if this pertains to the wicked angels (who perhaps would be attracted to women and their beautiful hair), why is the requirement for women to cover their heads specified *only to times of prayer and prophecy* (as opposed to all the time)?
3. Tertullian, writing c. 198 AD, explained his understanding of Paul’s reference “because of the angels” as referring back to the wicked angels who rebelled in the time prior to the Flood:
 - a. “For indeed it is ‘on account of the angels’ that he says women must be veiled, because on account of ‘the daughters of men’ angels revolted from God.”
 - i. (Source: Tertullian, *On Prayer*, chapter 22; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 688)
 - b. For further treatment of Tertullian’s understanding of the “because of the angels” statement, see: Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, chapter 7; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, pp. 31-32.
 - i. [**Note:** One person who heard this lesson (David Sanabria) suggested that this reference to the *wicked* angels (Explanation No. 1) could be viewed as complimenting (rather than contradicting) the understanding that this is about the *holy* angels (Explanation No. 2 below), based on Tertullian’s explanation in *On the Veiling of Virgins*.]
- ii. **Possible Explanation No. 2:** This refers to the good angels who are assisting us, who are present, especially when we gather to pray and worship God. (This strikes me as the most likely explanation.)
 1. The **Hebrews** writer says of the angels: “Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?” (**Hebrews 1:14**, NKJV)
 2. Recall that Jesus was attended by angels during his time of fasting and temptation in the Wilderness and when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. (**Matthew 4:1-11**, **Luke 22:41-44**)
 3. In **Psalm 33/34:8** it speaks of the angel of the Lord being encamped around the righteous ones who fear God.

4. In **Daniel 9**, when Daniel is praying, the angel Gabriel intervenes and answers him.
5. Read **Tobit 12:12-15**.
 - a. The angel Raphael explains to Tobit and Tobias that when they and Sarah had prayed in the past, the angel was present with them and brought their prayers up before the Lord.
 - b. This suggests that men and women under the old covenant had angels mediate their prayers to God. However, note that in the New Testament it says that Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God, interceding for us. (**Hebrews 7:25-26, Romans 8:34, 1 Timothy 2:5**)
6. The presence of angels in our midst when we gather as a church may be foreshadowed in the tabernacle/temple service.
 - a. We know from **Hebrews 7-10** that those things foreshadowed what has now been revealed. The high priest, who alone entered the Most Holy Place (representing the presence of God) foreshadowed Christ. The New Testament refers to us as “priests” (**1 Peter 2:5 and 2:9, Revelation 5:10**).
 - b. Recall that the priests ministered in the Holy Place with the altar of incense (foreshadowing prayer, **Revelation 5:8**), the lampstand (perhaps foreshadowing the Word of God, **2 Peter 1:19, Psalm 119:105**) and the table of showbread (perhaps foreshadowing the Lord’s Supper).
 - c. Recall also that the Holy Place was enclosed by curtains and a *veil into which the images of cherubim, an order of angels, were woven* (**Exodus 26:1, 26:31**; see also **1 Kings 6-7**, designated **3 Kingdoms 6-7** in the LXX, regarding the temple of Solomon).
 - d. Therefore, the priests, as they were ministering, *were doing so in the presence of angels*, perhaps foreshadowing our own worship!
 - e. The **Hebrews** writer describes the church (assembly) to which Christians belong as being like Jerusalem or Mount Zion (in contrast with Mount Sinai). It seems to me that he is saying that when we are assembled together, we are *in the company of angels*.

- i. “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, *to an innumerable company of angels*, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.” (**Hebrews 12:22-24**, NKJV)
- 7. From Origen, writing c. 234-240 AD, in his *23rd Homily on Luke* (surviving in Jerome’s later translation of the text):
 - a. “...our Savior, and the Holy Spirit who spoke in the prophets, teach not only men, but also angels and invisible powers. Why should I speak about the Savior? The prophets, too, and the apostles themselves proclaim everything that they reecho not only to men, but even to angels.
 - b. “You know that it is true, for Scripture says. ‘Listen, O heaven, and I shall speak,’ (**Deuteronomy 32:1**) and, ‘In the sight of the angels I shall sing to you,’ (**Psalms 137/138:1**, see LXX) and, ‘Praise the Lord you heavens of heavens; let the waters that are above the heavens praise the name of the Lord,’ and, ‘Let the angels praise Him,’ (**Psalms 148:2-5**) and, ‘Bless the Lord, my soul, in every place of His power.’ (**Psalms 102/103:20-22**)
 - c. “In many places, and especially in the psalms, you will find speech addressed to the angels. Power has been given to man – at least to him who has the Holy Spirit – to speak even to the angels. I shall give one example from these instances, so that we might realize that angels too can be taught by human voices. It has been written in the Apocalypse of John, ‘Write to the angel of the church of the Ephesians, “I have something against you.”’ (**Revelation 2:1,4**) And again, ‘Write to the angel of the church of Pergamum, “I have something against you.”’ (**Revelation 2:12,14**) Clearly it is a man who writes to angels and enjoins something.
 - d. “I do not doubt that angels are even present in our assembly – not only generally, to every church, but even singly. The Savior says of them, ‘Their angels always see the face of my Father, who is in heaven.’ (**Matthew 18:10**)

Here a double church is present, one of men, the other of angels. If we say anything in accord with reason and according to the intent of the Scriptures, the angels rejoice and pray with us. And angels are present in the church – at least that church that deserves them and belongs to Christ.

- e. “This is the reason why women are commanded to have ‘a veil on their heads’ when they pray, ‘because of the angels’. **(1 Corinthians 11:10)** Which angels? Clearly those who aid the holy ones and rejoice in the church.
 - f. “Our eyes are closed by the stains of sins, and we do not see them. But the apostles of Jesus see them. He says to them, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’ **(John 1:51)**
 - g. “If I had this grace, to see just as the apostles saw, and to behold, as Paul beheld, I would now see a multitude of angels. Elisha saw them. Gehazi, who stood with him, did not see them. Gehazi was fearful, lest he be captured by enemies. He saw only Elisha. But Elisha, as a prophet of the Lord, prays and says, ‘O Lord, open the eyes of this servant, and let him see that many more are with us than with them.’ **(2 Kings 6:16-17)** And, at the prayers of the holy man, Gehazi immediately perceived the angels that he had not seen before.
 - h. “... [*John the Baptist, the prophets and Jesus came and preached to men and angels*] ... ‘so that at the name of Jesus every knee would bend, of those in heaven, those on earth and those in the underworld; and every tongue confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of the Father,’ **(Philippians 2:10-11)** to whom is glory and power for ages of ages. Amen.”
 - i. (Source: Origen, *Homily on Luke No. 23*; taken from Joseph Leinhard (translator), *Origen Homilies on Luke Fragments on Luke*, The Fathers of the Church vol. 94, pp. 100-102, Catholic University Press, 1996.)
8. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407AD) said that when the church is gathered together, especially to celebrate the eucharist, there are angels present. In a discussion related to celebrating the Feast of the Ascension, which Chrysostom wanted to have celebrated at the Martyrium in Romanesia, he said:

- a. "The angels are present here..."
 - b. "For if the very air is filled with angels, how much more so the Church! And if the Church is filled with angels, how much more is that true today when their Lord has risen into heaven! The whole air about us is filled with angels. *Hear the apostle [Paul] teaching this, when he bids the women to cover their heads with a veil because of the presence of the angels.*"
 - c. (Source of quote: Jean Danielou, *Angels and Their Mission* [Kindle Locations 638-641]. Kindle Edition; primary source: John Chrysostom, *Sermon on the Ascension*)
- iii. **Possible Explanation No. 3:** The term translated "angel", which also can mean "messenger" refers to (human) leaders within the church.
1. [**Note:** In my study I also encountered this third early explanation of the passage. Although not discussed in the audio lesson, I have included it in these notes. This view, based on an unusual interpretation of the term "angel" used by Paul in this passage, strikes me as less plausible than the two alternatives previously discussed.]
 2. The Greek word for "angel" (ἄγγελος / angelos) simply means "messenger". This term is often used when referring to the heavenly non-human messengers (the angels).
 - a. However, it also can apply to human beings who are serving as messengers. An example of that is found in **Mark 1:2**, where **Isaiah 40:3** is quoted, and the term "messenger" applied to John the Baptist (obviously referring to a human being in that case).
 - b. Only from context can someone tell if this term applies to heavenly, angelic beings versus human messengers.
 3. Clement of Alexandria, writing c. 195 AD, interpreted the term "angels / messengers" in this statement by Paul as referring to *righteous men in the church*.
 - a. "'Because of the angels.' (**1 Corinthians 11:10**) By the angels he means righteous and virtuous men. Let her be veiled then, that she may not lead them to stumble into fornication. For the real angels in heaven see her though veiled."

- i. (Source: Clement of Alexandria. *Fragments – From the Books of the Hypotyposes – Oecumenius from Book 3 on 1 Corinthians 11:10*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 578)¹

VII. An Argument Based on the Nature of Things

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 11:13-16**.
- b. Paul now adds a fourth reason (based on “nature”) to the three already presented (which were based on timeless theological principles), to make the case that women should cover their heads when they pray and prophesy.
 - i. In his teaching, Paul *often gives multiple reasons* to support something he teaches. Sometimes he draws both from theological arguments rooted in Scripture, as well as arguments rooted in the accepted nature of things that can be seen in the world around those Paul is writing to.
 - ii. For example, in **1 Corinthians 9** Paul gives several reasons why those who preach the gospel should be supported financially by the church.
 - 1. **Reason No. 1:** Soldiers are supported by others, and do not pay their own way. (**1 Corinthians 9:7** - argument based on the nature of things in the world around them)
 - 2. **Reason No. 2:** Farmers who tend their vineyards get to eat of the fruit. (**1 Corinthians 9:7** – argument based on the nature of things in the world around them)

¹ A few words of caution regarding the fragment above, which can be found in Ante-Nicene Fathers, volume 2. It is from one of Clement of Alexandria’s lost works, *The ‘Hypotyposes of Clement’*, also known as *‘The Outlines’*. The fragment survives in a catena (meaning ‘chain’, an early style of commentary) on **1 Corinthians** by Pseudo-Oecumenius.

‘The Outlines’ It still existed in the 9th century, when Photius of Constantinople read it, but probably perished with so much else in the sack of Constantinople by the renegade army originally hired for the Fourth Crusade.” (Pearse) This document may have been falsely attributed to Clement of Alexandria. See Photius’ summary of *The Outline* in the *Bibliotheca* (a/k/a *Myriobiblon*), codex 109, and contrast it with his summary of *Exhortation to the Greeks* and *The Instructor* in codex 110, and *Stromata* (The Miscellanies) in codex 111. An English trans. of the *Bibliotheca* is available at: https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/photius_03bibliotheca.htm#109.

Bottom Line Regarding this Third Alternative: Perhaps we should consider this potential early witness to an alternate view of “because of the angels” with an extra measure of skepticism.

3. **Reason No. 3:** Shepherds who tend their flocks get to drink of the milk from the flock (**1 Corinthians 9:7** – another argument from ‘nature’)
 4. **Reason No. 4:** In the Law of Moses it says, “do not muzzle the ox...” (**1 Corinthians 9:8-12** - argument based on theological principles, from the Old Testament)
 5. **Reason No. 5:** Law of Moses established that priests who served at the altar could eat from the offerings brought by the people (**1 Corinthians 9:13** – another argument based on theological principles from the Old Testament)
 6. **Reason No. 6:** Jesus had commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel (**1 Corinthians 9:14** - argument based on something Jesus Himself had said)
- iii. We can see that Paul takes a similar approach (providing multiple reasons, using Scripture as well as sometimes using examples from ‘nature’ or the world around them) to make his points. Consider how Paul supported his teaching on topics such as:
1. Unity in the church,
 2. The danger of sexual immorality,
 3. Putting those in serious sin out of the church,
 4. Idolatry, and
 5. Eating meat sacrificed to idols.
- c. In explaining why women should cover their heads when they pray, Paul now gives a fourth reason: appealing to “nature itself”.
- i. In almost all societies throughout history, men tend to have short hair, and women long hair.
 - ii. When men or women are deliberately trying to be ‘counter-cultural,’ they may buck this trend for a little while (like men growing their hair long in the 1960s and 1970s).
 1. However, the point remains that the dominant practice across the board and throughout history is for men to have relatively short hair and for women to have longer hair.
 - iii. Here, Paul makes the point that men and women are different in that women’s heads typically are covered with long hair, but men’s with short hair.

1. That was true in the ancient world, across a broad range of cultures, and has remained the case even to the present day.
- iv. Paul is adding that *even nature itself* points to the fact that women should cover their heads (with a cloth covering) and men should not when they pray and prophesy.
 1. Paul is *not* saying that women's long hair is the covering they are required to have when they pray.
 2. Instead, Paul is *reinforcing his previous directive on covering/uncovering* with this *fourth reason*.
 3. Note that Paul uses an entirely different Greek word here in **1 Corinthians 11:15** for "cover / covering" (peribolaion / περιβόλαιον) than the one he used previously in **1 Corinthians 11:6** and **11:7** (verb form: katakalupto / κατακαλύπτω; noun form: katakalupsis / κατακάλυψις or katakalumma / κατακάλυμμα).

VIII. A Universal Practice in All the Churches

- a. This is the way it is in all the churches.
- b. "But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God." (**1 Corinthians 11:16**, NKJV)
 - i. Keep in mind that Paul had spent time in Jerusalem, Arabia and Syria, and he knew the other apostles. Antioch, his 'base camp' from which he launched missionary journeys, was the gateway to the east via the Silk Road network of inland routes to Iraq, Parthia/Persia, Bactria, India and beyond.
 - ii. **Question:** How long did it take for the gospel to spread beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire?
 1. **Answer:** It took no time at all! On the first day of Pentecost, when the church was founded, the gospel spread *immediately* beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire.
 2. Those listening to Peter at the very beginning included Parthians, Medes, and Elamites (from the Parthian / Persian Empire to the east) as well as people from Mesopotamia, Arabs, etc. (**Acts 2:8-11**)
 3. When Paul says that *this is the way it is in all the churches*, he is not referring to some custom for those who lived in the Roman Empire. This was a universal practice in the church, worldwide.

IX. Common Objections to the Historic Understanding on Covering/Uncovering

- a. **Common Objection No. 1:** “But (practically) no one else I know is doing this (perhaps including hundreds or thousands of people in large churches and leaders within their churches).”
 - i. Don’t forget. Those who hold to this teaching are not alone, and we are not few in number when one considers the history of Christianity over the past twenty centuries.
 - ii. If one were to ‘invite’ one representative from each century of the church’s existence and ask them all what was taught during their time, 19 of the 20 would agree with the principles presented in this lesson. They would affirm that the church of their age expected women to cover their heads with some type of cloth when they prayed or prophesied, while men should not.
 1. The only ‘outlier’ would be the one who represented the 20th century. That one would be confused or perhaps schizophrenic when asked about this, since this teaching was widely accepted during the first half of the century, but then widely rejected during the second half of that century!
 - iii. For more on the historical continuity of the practice of head covering over the centuries, see the book *Headcovering Throughout Christian History*, with reference provided at the end of these notes.
- b. **Common Objection No. 2:** “But very highly respected Bible authority ‘X’ told me that we no longer need to do this.”
 - i. Unfortunately, the prevailing culture has influenced many highly respected Bible authorities when counter-cultural New Testament teachings are “out of season”.
 1. In many places has happened with teachings on non-resistance, modesty, materialism, homosexuality, and the role of women in the church.
 - ii. There are also “highly respected Bible authorities” who continue to affirm what Paul said, namely that women need to cover and men to uncover when they pray and prophesy!
 1. Let us follow the example of the noble-hearted Bereans. They did not automatically accept what Paul said, but went back and examined the Scriptures to verify for themselves that what he said was indeed true. (**Acts 17:11**)

2. For more information on the head covering and uncovering provided in this lesson, see resources at the end of these notes, such as *'No Such Custom'* by Bruce Terry, and teaching by David Bercot on the early church understanding of the text in question.
- c. **Common Objection No. 3:** "But the 'head covering' that women need to have when they pray or prophesy is their long hair."
- i. As noted previously, the church historically, from the beginning, has understood that the "covering" Paul requires for women (and forbids for men) while praying and prophesying in the first part of this passage is a cloth covering (such as a veil) that goes over the head, not hair.
 - ii. Also, as noted previously, the passage makes no logical sense if you interpret the "head covering" in the first part of the passage as referring to hair.
 1. **Question:** Are men being directed to take their hair off (cut off their hair) when they pray and prophesy? Are they to put it back on (grow it out) at other times? Does that make any sense?
 2. **Question:** Are women being told to cover their heads with hair (grow their hair long) when they pray and prophesy? Are they to then cut it off or cut it short at other times? Does that make sense?
 - iii. The confusion as to hair being the covering has been magnified by some rather inaccurate Bible translations and footnotes, with the NIV being one of the worst offenders.
 1. Bruce Terry discussed the NIV translation of this passage in *No Such Custom*, where he wrote:
 - a. "It is regrettable that this incorrect interpretation has found its way into the footnotes of the New International Version with this reading:
 - i. 'Every man who prays or prophesies with long hair dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with no covering [of hair] on her head dishonors her head—she is just like one of the "shorn women." If a woman has no covering, let her be for now with short hair, but since it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair shorn or shaved, she should grow it again. A man ought not to have long hair....'
 - b. "This is poor exegesis, and even worse translation...."

2. For those in churches that use the NIV, I encourage you to utilize more literal Bible translations when studying this topic.
 - a. Also, take the time to explore how early Christian writers (such as Tertullian in *On the Veiling of Virgins*) understood the meaning and application of Paul's directives on this matter.
 - b. As native Greek speakers who lived much closer to the times of the apostles, early Christian writers are in a better position than we are to understand the meaning of Paul's instructions!
- d. **Common Objection No. 4:** "Paul is appealing to an ancient Corinthian custom (or perhaps to an old Roman custom), and since this symbol does not have the same meaning in our day, we no longer need to practice this."
 - i. As discussed above, Paul's reasons for covering/uncovering are universal in nature, applying to all men and women for all time (related to headship, order of the universe, the creation of the first man and woman, and "because of the angels", etc.). Those reasons are independent of culture.
 - ii. Primary sources refute the idea that there was an ancient pagan custom that corresponded to what Paul was telling the Corinthians to do. As Plutarch explained, the ancient Roman custom was for men to cover their heads when they worshipped (the opposite of the Christian custom Paul was calling the Corinthians to follow).
- e. **Common Objection No. 5:** "Perhaps women are supposed to do this, but this is a relatively minor command, and certainly not a '*salvation issue*'."

First of all, *who are we* to divide the commands of Jesus and the apostles into 'salvation issues' versus 'non-salvation issues' (which presumably one could willfully disregard without losing one's salvation)?

- i. Second, Jesus said that the greatest command is to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength (**Matthew 22:36-38**). If we love God, we will strive to obey all of His commands. They are all for our own good, whether we realize it or not.
 1. "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome." (**1 John 5:3**, NKJV)
- ii. Paul says that any man who prays with his head covered is dishonoring his head (which is Christ). For a Christian to *dishonor Christ* does not strike me as a small matter!

- iii. Finally, let us recall that Jesus said we need to focus on the greater commandments of God, *yet not neglect the lesser ones*. (**Matthew 23:23**)
- f. **Common Objection No. 6:** “This is about *outward* signs and symbols. God is interested in the inner things of the heart; therefore, outward signs *don’t really matter*.”
 - i. Oh, really? What about things like:
 1. Placing the blood of the sacrificed lamb on the door posts at the time of the Passover (**Exodus 12**)?
 2. Getting rid of all the yeast (or being expelled from the community) during the Feast of Unleavened Bread immediately after Passover (**Exodus 12-13**)?
 3. The bronze serpent that the Lord told Moses to make in the Wilderness and to lift it up on a pole (**Numbers 21**)?
 4. Bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper?
 5. The water in Christian baptism?
 - ii. Clearly, the Lord uses physical things to represent and connect with spiritual realities, and He considers those to be very important.
 - iii. Again, recall that Paul said that for a man to pray with his head covered is *dishonoring Christ!*

X. In Closing: Admonitions for Those of Us Who Hold to the Historic Teaching

- a. Don’t go beyond what is written. Not to the left nor to the right.
 - i. “I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us *not to go beyond what is written....*” (**1 Corinthians 4:6**, ESV)
 - ii. “*Do not add to the word that I am commanding you and do not subtract from it. Keep the commands of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today.*” (**Deuteronomy 4:2**, LXX, LES)
 - iii. [the king was to read the Scriptures all the days of his life] “...so that he may *not deviate from the commands to the right or to the left*, that he will be long-lived on his rule, he and his sons with the children of Israel.” (**Deuteronomy 17:20**, LXX, LES)
- b. Don’t make the common mistake of elevating a Scriptural command(s) that you and your group happen to be following (but many other believers are not) to the status of “greatest commandment”.

- i. Let Jesus define for us what the greatest commandments are!
- c. Following Paul's teaching on headship by the outward manifestations of uncovering or covering our heads is important. However, having a submissive character (being submissive to Christ and wives being submissive to their husbands) is *even more* important.
 - i. That is the internal principle we strive to manifest with these outward signs.
- d. Show humility and respect toward others who have not yet embraced these teachings. Many good-hearted, sincere Christians have been mis-taught. Don't be arrogant or a stumbling block to others. Let us strive to help them!
- e. Regarding how to handle those in the church who are not practicing these things, each church leadership will need to sort that out as they see best. Recognize that different church leaders may handle this differently, particularly related to communion.

XI. Addendum: Recommended Resources for Further Study

- a. Exposition of the Biblical text.
 - i. *No Such Custom: An Exposition of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16*, Bruce Terry
 - 1. <https://bterry.com/articles/headcovr.htm>
 - 2. [I have found this to be the single best article I have read on this topic – CP]
 - ii. *Head Coverings: What the Bible Teaches about Head Coverings for Women*, K.P. Yohannan, Believers Church Publications
 - 1. <https://www.headcoveringmovement.com/head-coverings-by-kp-yohannan.pdf>
- b. Insights from the early Church regarding how this passage was understood.
 - i. Teaching audio: *What the Early Christians Believed about the Head Covering*, David Bercot
 - 1. Audio lesson available from Scroll Publishing. <https://scrollpublishing.com/head-covering>
 - 2. Also available for listening via the Scroll Publishing YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oflUWLFXyfl>
 - ii. *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, edited by David Bercot, article on 'Veil'

- iii. Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, found in Ante-Nicene Fathers, volume 4
- c. Overview of the historical practice of the Christian churches over the ages:
 - i. *Head Covering Throughout Christian History*, David Phillips, 2011-2014
- d. Cultural Customs in Ancient Corinth:
 - i. *An Analysis of Certain Features of Discourse in the New Testament Book of First Corinthians*, Ralph Bruce Terry, University of Texas, 1993 (doctoral dissertation), chapter 2.4: 'Aspects of Culture at Corinth'.
 - 1. https://bterry.com/dissertation/2_4-aspects.htm