

# *The Medical Meaning of the Head Covering*

**1 Corinthians 11:2-15**

**Sermon by Dan Schrock**

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*<sup>2</sup>I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you. <sup>3</sup>But I want you to understand that Christ is the head [kephalē, the word can also mean “source” or “origin”] of every man, and the husband is the head [kephalē] of his wife, and God is the head of Christ. <sup>4</sup>Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, <sup>5</sup>but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. <sup>6</sup>For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil. <sup>7</sup>For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. <sup>8</sup>Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. <sup>9</sup>Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. <sup>10</sup>For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of [“a symbol of” is not in the Greek] authority [exousion, meaning “inner power” or “inner capability”] on her head, because of the angels. <sup>11</sup>Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. <sup>12</sup>For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God. <sup>13</sup>Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? <sup>14</sup>Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, <sup>15</sup>but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering [peribolaion, also means “testicle”]. (NRSV)*

When I was a small boy, Mom sometimes dropped me off at my grandmother’s house near Wakarusa, Indiana. One of the best parts of staying with grandma was eating her food, especially her mashed potatoes and homemade egg noodles. When grandma and I sat down at her small kitchen table, she had a peculiar ritual that she always followed for prayer before the meal: she picked up the pleated white prayer covering that was laying on the side of the table, unfolded it carefully, pinned it to the top of her head, and when it was safely in place, began praying. After the prayer was over she reached up, unpinned her prayer covering, neatly folded it, stuck the pins through it for safekeeping, and laid it on the side of the table next to the wall, where it stayed until the next meal.

That was in the early 1960s, when most Mennonite women in northern Indiana and many other places too wore a prayer covering, maybe not always during the prayer before meals, but at least during church on Sundays. If you went to almost any Mennonite church service in this area in the first half of the twentieth century, you’d see an ocean of delicate white prayer coverings pinned on the heads of baptized women. Back then Mennonites interpreted 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 literally: Paul told women to cover their heads in worship, so Mennonite women did so.

But even in the early 1960s, feelings about the prayer covering were starting to change. In the same year that I watched my grandmother pinning and unpinning her white covering at the kitchen table, the women in a brand new Mennonite congregation in Columbus, Ohio—a congregation I would become the pastor of thirty years later—were mounting a rebellion against prayer coverings.

In 1962, women in their twenties and thirties at the Neil Avenue Mennonite Church in Columbus, Ohio quietly but firmly informed conference officials that they would not be wearing head coverings any more. That announcement set off a flurry of letters among male denominational leaders in both Ohio and Indiana. What are we going to do about those radical women in Columbus?, they asked. Finally, after months of theological argument and diplomacy, conference leaders agreed to let the women in Columbus go to church with their glorious hair uncovered. Only ten years after those delicate behind-the-scene negotiations, by the early 1970s, Mennonite women in most churches left their coverings in some forgotten drawer at home, or simply dropped them into a wastebasket. By now it's rare indeed to see any woman wear a covering in the Mennonite Church USA.<sup>1</sup>

Today you can still buy dozens of different models of prayer coverings at [www.prayercoverings.com](http://www.prayercoverings.com), but only conservative Christian women wear them. Most women in North America do not cover their heads in worship. This creates a problem. When we get to 1 Corinthians 11, how are we supposed to interpret Paul's admonition for women to cover their heads in worship? The problem is not simply that most women don't and won't wear veils. The deeper reality is that most people have basically given up trying to make sense out of Paul's logic because they think his argument is too convoluted.<sup>2</sup>

Until now. Just last year Troy Martin published an article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* that finally makes sense out of this odd passage in 1 Corinthians 11.<sup>3</sup> A member of the Church of the Nazarene, Martin has impressive academic credentials. Since other Pauline scholars are beginning to accept his interpretation of this text,<sup>4</sup> I want to share some of this new research with you, using the edited copy of the scripture passage printed at the beginning of this sermon.

We begin with a key translation issue at the very end of the passage. Look at the last word of verse 15, where Paul uses a peculiar Greek word, *peribolaion*, pronounced per-ib-ol'-ah-yon. You see the NRSV translates that word as "covering" in the sentence "For her hair is given to her for a covering." But when Troy Martin started reading Greek medical texts from the ancient world, as well as literature like Greek poetry and plays, he discovered that the word *peribolaion* can also mean "testicle."<sup>5</sup> Careful reading of ancient medical books shows that doctors of the time believed the hair on a woman's head was a testicle, a *peribolaion*, or in other words a sexual organ. So when Paul asks the Corinthian women to wear a veil on their heads, he's really asking them to cover one of their reproductive organs during public worship services.

I know this sounds absolutely crazy, but bear with me while I try to explain what ancient doctors said about human anatomy and how they thought babies were created. Most of this medical theory is going to sound weird to you. But remember that ancient doctors did not know even 1% of what we now know about the human body. They did the best they could; but without microscopes and other medical tools that we have today, ancient doctors misunderstood how the body works and how children are created.

For instance, ancient doctors apparently knew nothing about the eggs stored inside a woman's body and the need to fertilize an egg in order to create an embryo. When it came to creating babies, all the ancients knew about was sperm. Where does sperm come from? Sperm comes from your head, according to the doctors, especially from the man's head. So if sperm is stored in a man's head, how does it get from there over into the woman to make a baby?

The answer is hair, said the doctors. Human hair helps sperm travel through channels or tubes in our bodies because hair is hollow and has suction power. If you want a modern analogy, think of a vacuum cleaner hose that's hollow and creates an air vacuum with suction power. That's just what the ancients thought hair does. The longer your hair is, the more suction power you have inside your body. If you have lots of long hair, you have the most vacuum power. If you have a little bit of short hair, or no hair at all, you don't have much vacuum power, and so the sperm won't move from one place to another in your body.

In order to get the sperm from a man's head down into his testicles, he needs short hair on his head and lots of hair further down on his body. A man doesn't want long hair on his head, because then the hair will keep sucking that sperm up and it will stay there in his brain. That's why a man who wants to have children should have a head of short hair. Then the hair on his chest and testicles and legs will suck the sperm from his head down through his body. Once the sperm arrives in his testicles, said the ancient doctors, the testicles froth the sperm before it leaves his body. This frothing determines the gender and personality of the new baby.

When the sperm leaves the man and enters the woman, it has to travel up into the woman's body into her womb. Once again, the suction power of hair does the trick. A woman should have as little pubic hair as possible, because you don't want the sperm to sit there and not go anywhere. This explains why so many women in the ancient Mediterranean world removed their pubic hair and why they let the hair on their heads grow as long as possible. The long hair on a woman's head vacuumed the sperm up into her womb, where it congealed and grew into a baby. The hair on a woman's head was therefore thought to be a vital part of her reproductive powers. Not only was her

long hair a sign of fertility, it was also a crucial part of her sexual organs, her testicles. So there we have it—the best ancient medical insight into human procreation!<sup>6</sup>

With these medical beliefs in mind, Paul’s logic in 1 Corinthians 11 makes more sense. Since female hair is a testicle, it’s disgraceful, says Paul, for any Christian woman to come to a worship service with her hair publicly exposed. In a little rhetorical hyperbole, Paul even declares that it would be better for such a woman to shave off the hair on her head and be bald—at least then she wouldn’t be displaying one of her sexual organs. But of course Paul doesn’t really want women to be bald. Instead he wants them to have the long, glorious hair that will help them and their husbands to conceive children.

This helps us understand the meaning of verse 10, where Paul says “For this reason a woman ought to have authority on her head.” You’ll see that the phrase “a symbol of” in the NRSV was added by the translators and is not in the Greek text. The Greek word for “authority” (*exousion*) really means inner “power” or “capability” or “ability.” So this sentence should read, “For this reason a woman ought to have inner power on her head.” In other words, long hair gives a woman the inner power and capability to draw the sperm up into her womb where it can congeal and grow into a child.

While we’re on verse 10, you’re probably wondering about that phrase, “because of the angels.” In those days Christians and Jews believed that angels were present whenever people gathered for worship.<sup>7</sup> Jewish rabbis also believed that angels were sticklers for moral behavior.<sup>8</sup> So it seems Paul is simply reminding the Corinthians that angels are watching while they worship and will be offended by immoral behavior such as displaying personal body parts.

Now since male hair is not a sexual organ, it’s perfectly fine in Paul’s view for Christian men to come to worship with uncovered heads. I suspect that if the Corinthian men had come to worship with their sexual organs publicly displayed, but the Corinthian women with all their sexual organs covered, Paul would have written this same passage, but against the men’s behavior rather than the women’s.

If female hair was considered to be a sexual organ, we might wonder why the Corinthian women were coming to church with their hair uncovered. Scholars offer various answers for this, but the most sensible one is that Christians in Corinth misunderstood what it means to follow Christ. As we can see in the discussion about sexual behavior in 1 Corinthians 5, about food offered to idols in chapter 8, and about behavior during the Lord’s Supper later in chapter 11, the Corinthian church as a whole thought Christ gave them freedom to do whatever they wanted, to say and eat and

act as they pleased. No, says Paul, that's not true. We Christians don't have the freedom to do anything we please. God still wants us to pursue virtuous living.

There's one more important detail in verse 3. Paul says here that God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of every man, and every husband is the head of his wife. As you know, a lot of people have misinterpreted the headship language in this sentence to mean that husbands should dominate and have authority over their wives. But you'll see in the edited note at the beginning of the sermon that the word for head, *kephalē*, can also mean "source" or "origin." I think the medical theory we've talked about helps us understand that in this context Paul is really talking about the sequence or stages of biological creation. Since people in Paul's day believed that new human beings came from sperm, and that sperm was produced and stored inside a man's head, then the word "head" had to connote the starting point—the source or origin—for new life. At the dawn of creation, according to Paul, the life-giving essence flowed from God's head into Christ, who in Romans 8:29 and Colossians 1:15 is called the "firstborn of creation;" then from Christ's head into Adam, the first man; and then from Adam into Eve, the first woman. Ever since then, of course, it takes a man and woman working together in an interdependent relationship before God to create a new human being, which is just what Paul affirms in verse 12.

Thanks to medical advances, you and I have a far better understanding of the human body than the best ancient doctors and theologians did. We know sperm is not stored in the head, that hair is not hollow, that hair has nothing to do with human reproduction, and that women's hair is not a sexual organ. Paul's argument for head coverings was based on inaccurate medicine. So I see no reason, whether medical, theological, or biblical, for women to wear a veil in worship—unless they happen to want to for the sheer fun of it.

However, that does not mean this passage is irrelevant for us today. In at least two ways it continues to be relevant. First, I suspect all of us would agree with Paul about the main point he's trying to communicate to the Corinthians: good Christian people, both men and women, should arrive for public worship services with their sexual organs covered. The right clothing for worship is modest clothing.

The second value for us in this text is Paul's assumption, clearly articulated in verse 4, that women as well as men are to pray and prophesy in worship services.<sup>9</sup> Christ's church is more faithful when we hear the Holy Spirit speaking through both women and men.

## Notes

1. For more on the covering in Mennonite history, see “Prayer Veil,” *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Volume V, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck and Dennis D. Martin (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1990), 719-720.
2. Robin Scroggs’ views illustrate the long-running exasperation of scholars with this text: “This is hardly one of Paul’s happier compositions. The logic is obscure at best and contradictory at worst. The word choice is peculiar; the tone, peevish.” See “Paul and the Eschatological Woman” in *The Text and the Times: New Testament Essays for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 87.
3. Troy W. Martin, “Paul’s Argument from Nature for the Veil in 1 Corinthians 11:13-15: A Testicle Instead of A Head Covering,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123/1 (2004), 75-84.
4. See for example, Christopher Mount, “1 Corinthians 11:3-16: Spirit Possession and Authority in a Non-Pauline Interpolation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124/2 (2005), 333.
5. Martin, 77.
6. Martin, 77-81.
7. Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1999), 412.
8. Scroggs, 91.
9. Alert readers of 1 Corinthians may want to protest that 14:34b-35 explicitly forbids women to talk in church. Since the two passages contradict each other, something is obviously out of alignment here. As Jouette M. Bassler observes in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), “How can women exercise their acknowledged right to pray and prophesy . . . if they must keep absolute silence? How can women like Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2-3), Prisca (Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19), Mary (Rom 16:7), and Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Rom 16:12) function as co-workers in the churches if they cannot speak in those churches? How can Phoebe fulfill the role of deacon (Rom 16:1-2) if she cannot speak out in the assembly?” (327-328). While scholars have proposed a number of different solutions to this dilemma, the most sensible one—and the one favored by most people—is that 14:34b-35 was inserted later by some copyist and is not original to Paul. For discussions of the various solutions, see Bassler, 328; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 245-249; J. Paul Sampley, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 968-970, and Graydon F. Snyder, *First Corinthians: A Faith Community Commentary* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1992), 184-186.