

Keep It Covered

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Series: Tough Texts of the Bible

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^{11:2}I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you. ³But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ. ⁴Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, ⁵but 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. ⁶For 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. ⁷For 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. ⁸Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. ¹⁰For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. ¹²For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God. ¹³Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? ¹⁴Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, ¹⁵but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

I've been doing this series on tough texts of the Bible. This week, I almost broke down and gave you a third week on the Good Samaritan. This is a tough text. It's the first of two from 1 Corinthians 11. If you don't like what I have to say, be sure to come back next week. (That's always a pretty good rule.) Today we need to talk about the importance of women covering their heads in worship.

Looking around the sanctuary, it doesn't look like anybody believes that verse anymore, even though some of my earliest memories of church had to do with those women who wore hats on Sundays. Most of them didn't wear a hat any other time of the week. But on Sunday morning, I can recall at least four or five women wearing hats to church.

And they weren't always the same hats. It seemed to be some kind of fashion contest. The men never wore hats inside the sanctuary, although the boys in our youth group had to wear yarmulkes at a Passover seder one time.

I have an old black and white picture of me and my younger sister Debbie. She was wearing an Easter bonnet, and I was wearing a little felt fedora and a clip-on tie. That seems like so long ago.

... That's about all that I can personally engage with this text. I'm starting to wonder: what's the big deal about hats? Why is a passage like this in the Bible?

Some would say it's here because Paul wants to remind all the women that they aren't as important as the men. And there's some evidence of that. Some think he is a woman-hater. "The husband is the head of his wife," he says. It's right there on this page, even though it's the only time in the New Testament that we can be sure that Paul himself is saying it.

There were a couple of letters that were written a lot later than this, and they seem to suggest that men are more important than women. The name of Paul is signed to those letters, even though there is good evidence that the letters were written after Paul was dead.

And do you remember that other text in First Corinthians where Paul says, “I’m not going to let women speak in any of my churches”¹? It turns out there many early manuscripts of the New Testament which don’t include those words. Apparently somebody added them later, and it probably wasn’t Paul. If you don’t believe me, just check the footnotes in chapter 14.

But alas, here is the one indisputable place where Paul implies that one gender is superior to the other. That’s what makes it a tough text. In fact, I was hoping that somebody else might handle this one while I was vacationing last week. No such luck.

So why is this text in the Bible? One first reaction is that Paul is he’s saying the same thing that roughly half of us used to say on the third grade playground – *that boys are better than girls*. Uh-uh. Girls are better, and taller, and smarter. *No, they’re not*. Yes, they are. The battle of the sexes continues. We yelled at one another, made fun of one another on the playground, and the old taunts linger in our minds for years and years.

I suppose we talk about these things because they’re so important. They cut pretty close to our sense of identity. In fact, our thoughts about “male” and “female” are so important that we will even joke about them. Some of my favorite jokes have to do with the uneven relationships between men and women.

- The woman says, “I always knew I'd marry Mr. Right. I just never knew his first name was Always.”
- The man says, “Women will never be equal to men, until they can walk down the street with a bald head and a beer gut and still think they are beautiful.”
- What do you call a man who has lost seventy-five percent of his intelligence? *Divorced*.
- Adam tells God that he's lonely. God says, “I will give you a companion. She will do everything for you. She will cook, wash, make you happy, and provide children. She will comfort you in times of sorrow, and compliment all your decisions. But it will cost you an arm and a leg.” Adam thinks for a while, and says, "What can I get for a rib?"²

So why does the apostle Paul even get into it? He says, “The husband is the head of the wife.” I haven’t found a wife who believes that. I’m not sure I believe it myself. And what did Paul know any way? Paul never got married, so we can’t expect him to understand how it works.

Most of us would rather hear Paul say those baptism words from his letter to the Galatians, namely, “In Christ, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”³ That’s a much better verse to hand onto, if only because it directly counters this verse.

Listen, I’m trying to raise two daughters and a new step-daughter to believe they are equal to men in the sight of God, even though they are in a society that persists in paying women less for the same work that a man does. Let’s admit it: a lot of injustice began with texts like this one.

But if you were paying attention to the text, that’s only a small part of what Paul had to say. Chapter 11 starts with a long and twisted argument. It sounds like it’s about men and woman, but the apostle takes a lot of detours to get to the greater point.

¹ 1 Corinthians 14:34-36

² These jokes, and more like them, are found at the website of the Prairie Home Companion. Log onto <http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/>

³ Galatians 3:28

When he says the man is the head, he means that the husband is the source. According to the book of Genesis, Eve came from Adam. That's how the story goes. Some people think that means Adam is more important than Eve. Other people think that Adam was merely the rough draft.

Either way, Eve came from Adam. Paul says as much, while standing on one foot. And then he stands on the other foot and says, "And every man comes from a woman." Then abruptly he puts both feet on the floor and confesses, "All things come from God."

But the heart of this whole section has to do with hair. In his study of Paul's moral teaching, Victor Paul Furnish says the issue is not hats or veils, but hairstyles. Paul spends fifteen verses to discuss women's hairstyles in worship.

Now, tell me: why is that in the Bible? Should her hair be short, or should her hair be long? Should her hair be cut, or should her hair be covered? That's what Paul is getting into. Some people may wonder if they would want a religion that tells them what to do with their hair.

There is a college in our town that has requirements about haircuts. It's right there in the student handbook: "Men will have short hair. Their hair shall not overlap the collar, the ear, or the eyebrows. They shall be clean-shaven at all times, and not have even a one-day 'scruff.'"⁴

I got a first-hand glimpse of this. Shortly after I moved to town, I thought I would go over there and check out the library. It was a hot summer day, maybe ninety-five degrees, and I was dressed appropriately for the weather. I thought an air-conditioned library might be a great place to spend an afternoon reading, certainly cooler than this building. So I drove over there, parked the car, and found the library. I was turned away at the front desk, because I wasn't dressed properly. A perspiring librarian in long pants pointed me toward a sign that said, "No shorts or sandals." Now, it was hot, but according to their judgment, my appearance did not reflect "biblical modesty."

Now, I'm not going to tell you which college it is. I don't want to make fun of them, or anything. But they do practice a form of religion that tells people what to do with their hair. And I will note, however, that the student handbook does not prescribe what women should do with their hair. In fact, it even says that "hats are inappropriate for chapel services."⁵ And here I thought those people were fundamentalists.

Paul says, "Women, cover your heads in worship. It's a disgrace to uncover your hair or shave your head." And that's not all that Paul says. Actually what he says is, "Women, when you prophesy in church – that is, when you proclaim the good news and exhort other believers in worship – you shall cover your heads." The New Testament view of "prophecy" was not fortune-telling, it was a form of preaching.

It's too bad that some of those churches that practice "biblical modesty" don't take the Bible more seriously. As I've been saying all summer, when you read the Bible, don't pick a few favorite verses and think you're done. Read more of the whole book. And pretty soon you might discover that those verses that you thought were condemning women as second-class believers are really giving some local advice on what women preachers should do with their hair.

Let me tell you a little bit about the context. This was Corinth. It was a city in Greece, which was an influential trade city of the Roman Empire. Sailors were passing through Corinth all the time. And if they passed by the right street corner at the right time, they might pass a prostitute who was – brace yourself – "letting down her hair." That was the sign that she was open for business.

⁴ Baptist Bible College, *2002-3 Student Handbook*, page 30-31.

⁵ *Ibid*, page 32

Now Paul writes to that church in Corinth because they had a lot of questions. The church was small, maybe fifty or sixty believers, but they were in the crossroads of the world. And there was an electrical pulse surging through that congregation. The Spirit was there. The people were full of joy and enthusiasm. Just when you thought things were quieting down on a Sunday morning, somebody would leap up and announce, “I have a word from the Lord.” And some of those somebodies were women.

They had heard the Gospel. They knew in their hearts that they were free from sin, free from the world’s condemnation, free to live in unity and equality with other brothers and sisters in Christ. And they rejoiced in that freedom. They were excited about it. So excited, that when the Spirit gave them a word to speak, they let down their hair.

Now, you know what the problem was. It wasn’t the women. It was the men. When the women dropped their hair in Christian freedom, most of the men started forgetting that they were in church. In fact, they started thinking they were sailors on some of those street corners.

About six years ago, when I was on the board of trustees with my seminary, we had a winter meeting in Fort Lauderdale. I know, it was a sacrifice, but none of you volunteered for it. To save some money on the airline ticket, I flew down on Saturday night and stayed over. The next morning, as is my habit, I went to church. As I walked into this church by the beach, I saw a discrete sign that said, “No swimsuits in church.” We wouldn’t normally see a sign like that in northeastern Pennsylvania. After the service, I chatted with one of the ushers. Pointing to the sign, I said, “Is this a problem?”

He replied, “It’s a new sign. Last month, somebody walked into worship in a thong bikini. She arrived about five minutes late, walked right in during the prayer of confession, and didn’t even notice that most of the people who were sitting around or behind her didn’t hear a word of the sermon.” I thought they probably didn’t do much confessing, either. Just a little too busy.

In those moments, I think we should speak a good word for “biblical modesty.” When people gather for worship, there are some things that should stay covered. Even though there isn’t much at all in the Bible about modesty, I think there are some basic cultural conventions that ease our ability to hear the Gospel. They may differ from cultural setting to cultural setting. Frankly I don’t care if our ushers wear sneakers or our organist shaves her head. But if every Sunday morning becomes a circus, if every Sunday morning becomes a competitive fashion show, cat fight, or some other display of worldly score-keeping, then we are *tempted to forget that the primary reason we are in church is to receive God’s word and respond to it.*

Like that Presbyterian Church in an unnamed town in California. They have a segregated parking lot. There’s a row for the Bentleys, a row for the Mercedes, a row for the Hummers, a row for the Beemers. Everybody is sized up by the car they drive. When that kind of thinking becomes an operating principle for your church, I can’t help but think that somewhere the Gospel itself has been silenced.

Elsewhere in his writing, Paul says, “I have a word from the Lord: in Christ, there is no longer slave or free, no longer Jew or Greek, no longer male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:27-29)

You know, that’s a powerful word from the Lord. It is a powerful word of true freedom. And as a result, I still am not sure why that whole bit about women covering their heads even belongs in the Bible.

Just because something is in the Bible doesn’t mean that it’s the Gospel...