

27 September 2015

## Prescription or Description?

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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

This is one of those biblical passages that nobody really pays attention to these days. Well, nearly. Remember Bill Gothard from the 70s? He was a popular preacher who spoke to large crowds on the matter of appropriate roles for the sexes. Women were told, on biblical grounds, to be submissive, to wear no makeup or jewelry, to keep their hair long, and to cover their heads in church. Gothard women also never wore pants. They usually wore long denim skirts, as I recall. (The denim may not have been Gothard, though. This *was* the 70s, when the only material we had was denim and polyester.) So, yes, a few take this passage seriously, but only a very few. The rest of us – including most conservative evangelical biblical literalists – just sort of ignore it. But how can we do that? It says it in the Holy Bible.

Let me explain how, by showing one important distinction to make when reading the Bible: there is a difference between *description* and *prescription*. To *describe* is to present the way things are; to *prescribe* is to present the way things ought to be and demand that things change. Sometimes the Bible does prescribe. Sometimes it tells us not to accept the status quo and but rather change our behavior and our world. But other times the Bible simply describes the status quo, taking for granted the cultural context of the human writer. *And just because scripture describes a particular cultural behavior does not mean that behavior is how things ought to be for everyone, forever.*

For instance, the Old Testament assumes that when people worship God, they will worship in the same way that everyone else did in the 13<sup>th</sup> century before Christ: by sacrificing animals. Much of the Law of Moses is dedicated to instructions on which animals to sacrifice

when and how to do it right. But that does not mean animal sacrifice is an eternal law that we, too, should be practicing. Or again, the Old Testament assumes that it's normal for men to have multiple wives. The law even gives some rules for polygamous marriage. (Specifically, the law says to treat all wives and their children fairly and don't marry sisters. It doesn't work. I'll pause to let our married couples imagine that scenario for a moment.) But the fact that scripture has laws regulating polygamy doesn't mean it is demanded by God or that it's a good idea. Both Old and New Testaments take slavery for granted and instruct slave owners on how to treat their slaves. Slavery was part of ancient society, and the Bible reflects that. But that doesn't mean slavery is right. It isn't. And both Testaments treat women as being lesser than men, less intelligent, and most of all less capable of being leaders. These assumptions about women were shared by the Ancient Near Eastern culture of the Old Testament and the Roman culture of the New Testament. But that does not mean that they are right. It does not mean that they are God's plan forever.

The point is this: the Bible not only states principles that we should follow in all our lives, whatever our context, but also preserves some of the cultural assumptions of the human beings who wrote the text. The principles we need to seek and adhere to: the cultural assumptions we do not. We do not have to sacrifice bulls during Sunday morning worship. It is not all right for our men to have multiple wives. Even if a slave owner is fair, slavery is still wrong. And women, while different from men in many ways, may be just as smart (or more), just as courageous (or more), just as capable of leadership (or more).

Culture is not inspired by God. I have no doubt that in a generation or two, Christians will look back on us, at some of the cultural assumptions that we hold, and shake their heads at our backwardness. What matters is that no matter what context we are in, God is with us, speaking to us, guiding us, opening our eyes, showing us a better way.

With that, I turn the service over to a living example of this message: the United Methodist Women. Not only do they exemplify intelligence and capable leadership among women, but they intentionally seek to confront and change such remnants of primitive culture as slavery and the oppression of women and girls around the world.