

HOW WORDS LONG AGO BECOME GOD'S WORD TODAY

Scriptures: I Corinthians 11:2-16; I Corinthians 10:23-32

During the summer in our church services Pastor Betsey and I are responding to questions of faith that you in the church submitted to us back in May. One person wrote, "God spoke to us so eloquently through the Bible. How do we recognize God speaking to us today?" Another asked, "How can we take words and directions that were written in such a different time and apply them to guide our lives today?" Both of these questions have a common theme: How does God use the Bible to speak to us today? How do we read words written long ago in a very different time and hear in those words God's word to us today?

To answer that question, I want to use a case study. Turn with me to I Corinthians 11:2-16 (NT, p. 173). In this scripture passage the apostle Paul talks about how to dress in church. I want to use this scripture passage as a case study in how to interpret the Bible—how to hear God's word today in words that were written long ago in a very different time.

(Read I Corinthians 11:2-16)

I once read a story about a Kansas farmer who went to court seeking damages for injuries he sustained in a car accident. During the trial the lawyer for the opposing insurance company asked him, "Shortly after the accident, didn't you tell an officer on the scene, 'I think I'm feeling better now'?"

"Well," said the farmer, "it's like this. Me and my cow Bessie, we were going down the road..."

"Stop," said the lawyer. "You're not answering the question. Did you not say right after the accident, 'I think I'm feeling better now'?"

"Well," said the farmer, "me and my cow Bessie, we were going down the road when all of a sudden this truck crossed the center line..."

"Objection!" shouted the lawyer. "The witness is evading the question."

"Just let him finish his story," the judge said. So the farmer began again: "Me and my cow Bessie, we were going down the road when all of a sudden this truck crossed the center line and hit us head-on. Well I went flying this way, and Bessie went flying that way, and when I came to, a police officer was standing over Bessie shaking his head. He said, 'She's badly hurt. I don't think she's going to make it.' And he pulled out a gun and shot her. Then he said to me, 'How are you feeling?'"

Believe it or not there is a point to this story. The point is that to understand what someone says, you must understand the context. The statement: "I think I'm feeling better now" takes on new meaning when you understand the situation in which it is spoken.

The same is true of God's word in the Bible. To hear what God is saying to us today we must hear in context what God said in the Bible long ago.

To illustrate, let's go back to I Corinthians 11. In verse 5 Paul says, "But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled [the old King James Version says, "with her head uncovered"] disgraces her head." There was a time I when I was young that this verse still ruled women's fashion. When I was young my mother and most other women wore hats to church. You still see traces of that tradition on Easter when little girls wear Easter bonnets.

Now let's be honest. When Paul wrote these words he did not have in mind Easter bonnets. Or even the dainty little hats my grandmother wore with a little trim of netting that came down over her forehead, as if that constituted a veil. In reality we don't know for sure what kind of head covering or veil the apostle Paul had in mind, because we don't know for sure what kind of head covering or veil women wore back then. But we do know this: apparently the issue was creating some kind of controversy or scandal in the Corinthian church. In verse 16 Paul mentions people being contentious over this issue.

So what is going on? The truth is we don't know for sure. This may have been another source of conflict between Jews and Gentiles in the church. Jewish women, like most Middle Eastern women, generally wore veils in public, a practice that was not true of Greek women. So it could be that the Jewish Christians in Corinth were scandalized when the Greek women came to church without a veil. We don't know if that was the situation or not. But if we look at this scripture passage in the context of I Corinthians, we get a feel for Paul's real concern.

Now turn back to the previous chapter: our first scripture lesson from I Corinthians 10. In verse 23 Paul says, "'All things are lawful,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up." The Corinthians believed that Jesus had done away with distinctions between male and female. Did not the apostle Paul himself say, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In Jesus the old distinctions are broken down. Women and men are free to wear whatever they want. All things are lawful. That is what the Corinthians thought.

In one sense Paul agrees with them. Yes, Paul says, all things are lawful. But not all things are beneficial. Not all things build people up in faith.

He goes on in chapter 10 to describe grocery shopping. If you go to the market, you don't need to worry about buying meat that was sacrificed to an idol. After all, idols are not real; they have no meaning. You are free to eat whatever you want. But if you go to someone's house and they make a point of telling you that the meat they are serving was sacrificed to an idol, then you should not eat it, not because it might harm your relationship to God but because it might harm your host's relationship to God.

Sometimes as followers of Christ we have to pay attention to what we do, not because it will offend God but because it will unnecessarily offend someone else. In I Corinthians 14 Paul talks about speaking in tongues—praying or prophesying in a language that no one understands. Paul tells the Corinthians, "If you want to speak in tongues in church, that's fine, unless people

start to think you're nuts." I am paraphrasing here, but that is basically what Paul says. If you speak in tongues and drive people away because they think you're nuts, then stop it" Paul says. Stop it! Not because it is wrong to speak in tongues but because it is wrong to do things that will put up a barrier between other people and God.

That is the context in which Paul talks about head coverings here in chapter 11. A lot of details in this scripture passage are confusing. For example, Paul says, "Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head." What does Paul mean by that? To be honest, I don't know. I do find it interesting that Paul has no problem with the idea of women praying or prophesying in church. I think that has implications for women ministers, but that will have to be another sermon. In this scripture passage Paul has no problem with women speaking in church. He just wants them to do it with their head covered. But why do they need to cover their heads? I have not figured that out and neither have any of the commentaries I have read. It may be that we don't understand because we don't know all the details of the situation. We don't know the whole story about the farmer and his cow Bessie.

But if we look at the context, we can figure out Paul's basic concern. In verses 11-12 Paul says, "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." The point is not that men are over women or that women are over men. The point is that we are all dependent on each other.

Paul makes that point again in the next chapter: chapter 12. He says, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" The head is not over the feet in the sense of being a ruler over the feet. The head and feet are dependent on each other because they are both part of the same body.

Do you see the pattern? God does not really care what kind of meat you buy at the market place, but if the meat you buy will cause a problem for another believer because it was sacrificed to an idol, then don't buy it. And God does not really care whether you speak in tongues in church, but if speaking in tongues will drive away visitors from your church, then don't do it. And God does not really care whether women wear head coverings in church. After all, this is the only place in the entire Bible where this is mentioned. God does not really care about women's head coverings, but if the lack of a head covering will cause problems in the church for other believers, then for heaven's sake wear one. Why? Not because the head covering is important but because your relationship to your brothers and sisters in the church—the other members of Christ's body—are important.

Let me share one more story. I once read a book called *Hallelujah Chariot* about a Methodist minister and his family in the early 1900s. When the Rev. Andrew Hendricks and his wife Fawn were married, Fawn was given a pink velvet hat with white ostrich plumes imported from Paris. Apparently a pink velvet hat with white ostrich plumes was considered stunning in the early 1900s. Anyway, Fawn began wearing this hat to church at her husband's first pastorate, and immediately it created a stir. People of the church said it looked like too much money for a pastor's wife. One day Rev. Hendricks was called into the district president's office for a talk, and here is how the book describes it:

“Andrew,” the district president said, “you know how I feel about Fawn. She is especially comely in the pink, plumed hat.” He paused and studied his fingers for a moment, then cleared his throat. “But—well—women are born competitors, especially with respect to other women, not to mention a preacher’s wife. Fawn could make even burlap look stylish. Believe me, she’s going to have trouble enough without that pink hat. That hat could start a war.!”

Andrew was startled. “I’m sure she didn’t intend to offend anyone,” he hastily explained. “Why, don’t they all know I could never afford a hat like that? It was a wedding present. How could anyone be jealous of a gift?”

The district president smiled indulgently. “Try telling that to the women in your congregation.” Then he added, “Give Fawn my condolences concerning the hat, and my very warm greetings.”

You see, in a different context a woman might need to give up her head covering in order to serve Jesus. The point is not that all you woman in church need to go out and get a hat. Nor is it that all you men in church must go out and get your hair cut. The point is to serve Jesus and not let your hat or your hair or your clothes or anything else get in the way. That is how God’s word written long ago becomes God’s word to you today.

- Ken Onstot
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