

Sermon notes

Rich Lusk

1 Cor. 11:2-16, 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:9-15; Gen. 2:18-25

“What Does Hair Length Have to Do with Angels?: Hard Questions and Loose Ends”

In the sermon, I made 5 observations on peculiar features of the text:

1. Paul’s reliance on the historical factuality of the creation account
2. Paul’s appeal to tradition
3. Paul’s teaching to men on head coverings and hair length
4. Paul’s teaching to women on head coverings and hair length
5. Paul’s reference to angels

These are not necessarily the most important aspects of the text for us, but for the sake of completeness (and curiosity), I felt the need to address them. These notes are a supplement to the sermon, hopefully clarifying a few things on the way, since I know that I did not say everything in the sermon as clearly as I would have liked.

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Virtually every time Paul deals with the roles of men and women, he appeals to the details of the Genesis creation account. That account can in no way be squared with an evolutionary account of the origins of humanity – which means, of course, we have to make a choice. Will we believe Genesis? Or Darwin? Even those who try to go the “theistic evolution” route generally do not take the details of the Genesis account seriously as history. But for Paul the historical details of the creation account are the material out of which he develops his whole theology of male/female roles. If those details are not accurate, then Paul is no longer a trustworthy or authoritative guide in these matters.

Christians are most certainly pro-science!! Indeed, the rise of modern science is due to the Christian worldview. But not everything that passes for “science” is really “science.” This is particularly true when it comes to origins. Natural processes as we know them today cannot account for the origin of the universe or the origin of life or the origin of humanity. That is to say, the beginnings of the universe lie outside the bounds of scientific inquiry; there was no scientist around to observe the creation, nor is there any experiment that can be run to duplicate it (cf. Job 38:4ff). The whole creation week is a series of unrepeatably miracles. The events of Genesis 1-2 are no more open to scientific explanation than the water Jesus turned into wine at the wedding in Cana (Jn. 2).

Christians should not give any ground to secular science on the creation issue unless we are also prepared to let science control our understanding of other miracles the Bible purports to have happened within the creation (e.g., the bodily resurrection of Christ). Indeed, once we let science have authority over the way we read the creation account, why do we stop there? Are we going to let science tell us how men and women should relate? When life in the womb begins? When life should end?

The modern day trend of letting scientists control the whole field of knowledge and ethics is not one that Christians should surrender to.

This is not a matter of denigrating science, which is a wonderful tool, enabling us to better understand and rule over the creation. Rather, it is a matter of keeping science in its proper bounds. So long as our culture makes a god out of science, and treats the scientist in a white lab coat as a priest, Christians must challenge the hubris of the modern, totalizing scientific establishment. We need Christians entering the field of science, but we need them to do so with a commitment to Christian presuppositions and biblical view of the world.

I do not think there is any good reason to abandon the church's traditional reading of Gen. 1-3 as history. Sure, the account is loaded with symbolism as well. But in the biblical worldview, history and symbolism go together. There is no hard-core scientific fact that would force us to change our reading of the creation narrative. The relation of scientific knowledge to the Bible is a difficult and complex one, and I cannot go any further into it here. But if you are looking for an excellent reading of Genesis 1, which at least shows some of the problems we run into if we cave into science, I recommend Jim Jordan's *Creation in 6 Days*.

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One of the great blessings of tradition is that it keeps us from having to reinvent the church in every generation. Sure, the church has to contextualize to her surrounding culture in various ways. But the areas in which we contextualize are not really areas in which we need to be concerned with upholding tradition.

Sadly, many American Christians take the same view of tradition as Sally Brown, of *Peanuts* comic strip fame: "When writing about church history, we have to go back to the very beginning. Our pastor was born in 1930." If we cannot trace our faith back through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, back through the Reformation, back through the apostles, all the way to the patriarchs, even to Adam, it isn't biblical faith.

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Paul forbids men to wear head-coverings while leading worship. This means the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox custom of mitres or other headgear for their bishops and other officers is a violation of biblical law. In other words, this kind of thing is dishonoring to Christ, per 1 Cor. 11:4:



See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitre>.

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To clarify something I failed to mention in the sermon: Women most certainly could have the gift of prophecy (when that gift was operative), e.g., Anna, Phillip's daughters, Acts 2:18, etc. But women exercised the gift outside the gathered assembly, consistent with the other biblical directives about the gathered liturgical service.

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Some have wondered if first century customs about headcoverings influenced what Paul says in 1 Cor. 11:2ff. If women wore headcoverings in the city of Corinth, is it possible that Paul is telling Christian women to preserve those customs?

The problem is that the evidence is very mixed. There does not seem to have been any standard practice. It seems that women did not wear veils or coverings in public; some private cults may have required them for worship. Jewish women did not wear veils in public or in synagogue, and there is no evidence that Christian women in the very early period of church history wore any kind of headgear as a standard practice.

The best discussion is found in Noel Week's treatment in his book *The Sufficiency of Scripture*. Admittedly, there are varying ways of interpreting the evidence, and the

data we do have is slender, but there is not any indication in the passage itself that Paul wants the Christian women in Corinth to defer to, or continue, a pagan practice.

Hays (p. 185) says, "It was not the normal custom for women in Greek and Roman cultures to be veiled; thus it is hard to see how their being unveiled in worship could be regarded as controversial or shameful."

I also think it stretches the language of the passage to make it about a particular hairstyle. This has been suggested by some who have thought that the passage deals with hair, but requires it to be bound in a certain way; perhaps, Corinthian Christian women were flaunting their freedom in Christ by letting their hair down, which could be taken in a sexually suggestive way. But the passage just does not say anything that suggests a particular hairstyle is the issue.

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Note that if a covering was required on top of the hair/head for women in 1 Cor. 11:2ff, it is ONLY required when the woman is leading in prayer or prophesy. That's the most that can be proved, or deduced, from the text. But that brings us back to the quote from Weeks that I read in the sermon: Paul seems to be saying that IF a women were to lead in prayer or prophesy, she would have to uncover her head; but to uncover her head (by cutting her hair, or by removing a head covering, if such was required) would be shameful (as everyone knows); therefore women ought not to pray or prophesy in church. What Paul argues in a roundabout way in 1 Cor. 11 becomes explicit in 1 Cor. 14.

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Not surprisingly, the commentators are all over the map when it comes to this passage. There are also numerous special studies, books, etc. But I have not found anything that I think gives an interpretation that is without any problems.

While I disagree with a bit of what he says, the most interesting commentary on 1 Cor. 11:2-16 is in Richard Hays' commentary. I especially enjoyed Hay's mock letter from the Corinthians to Paul on p. 182f.

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On first century "feminism," see *Rocking the Roles* by Hendricks and Lewis.

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While I tend to think "angels" in 1 Cor. 11:10 has to do with heavenly beings (cherubim, seraphim, etc.), it should not be taken to mean that we are somehow "under" the angels. After all, Paul has already said that in Christ, the church will judge angels at the last day (1 Cor. 6:3). In Christ, we have already been promoted

above angels so that they serve us (Heb. 1-2). They do not oversee us or tutor us in the new covenant. But in the church's covenant renewal gathering, we enter the heavenlies and join our worship to that of the angels. The angels were there in the beginning when God made man male and female, so they know the proper order between the sexes. If we violate that order by putting women in a position of leadership, the angels are offended, especially since the original fall in Gen. 3 occurred when a fallen angel led the man and woman into a kind of role reversal!

In Eph. 3:10, Paul says the angelic beings marvel at the manifold wisdom of God displayed in the creation of the church. When we depart from the biblical wisdom on the matter of gender relations, the church becomes an affront to the angels.

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Doug Wilson:

It is very easy for objectors to say that the reason Christian women were not allowed to become religious ministers back in the 'olden time' was because the position of women in society back then would have made the Christian faith disreputable to outsiders if women were allowed to function in this way . . . The problem with this argument is that it is actually the reverse of the truth. The Christian church did not have to exclude women in order to fit right in. Excluding women from the ministry was the odd thing to do. The ancient world was crawling with priestesses, and if Christians had admitted women into their ministry, no one would have raised an eyebrow. The church took the counter-cultural route and did something that made her stand out -- which is, incidentally, what we are being called to do.

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Doug Wilson on Deuteronomy 22:5:

The law in verse 5 is pointed, very clear, and largely ignored in our day. Two things are prohibited. One is the sin of transvestitism, where a man dresses effeminately in the clothing of a woman. Garments are specifically mentioned. But this is a law which does not have a reciprocal prohibition between the sexes. Women are prohibited from wearing, not the clothes of a man, but the "things pertaining to a man." The phrase *keli geber* refers to weapons, tools, and other things peculiarly masculine. The phrase encompasses football cleats, boxing gloves, a telephone lineman's tool belt, and a policeman's sidearm. The application to women in combat is pointed and clear. And Christian parents must note that one place where this particular abomination is currently being pushed is in the realm of women's athletics. We need to remember to have regard for seemliness according to nature ([1 Cor. 11: 13-14](#)). Never forget that how we dress matters to God ([Ps. 132: 9, 16](#); [Rev. 3:18](#)).

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Frederica Mathews-Green on the church:

A little church on Sunday morning is a negligible thing. It may be the meekest, and least conspicuous, thing in America. Someone zipping between Baltimore's airport and beltway might pass this one, a little stone church drowsing like a hen at the corner of Maple and Camp Meade Road. At dawn all is silent, except for the click every thirty seconds as the oblivious traffic light rotates through its cycle. The building's bell tower out of proportion, too large and squat and short to match. Other than that, there's nothing much to catch the eye. In a few hours heaven will strike earth like lightning on this spot. The worshipers in this little building will be swept into a divine worship that proceeds eternally, grand with seraphim and incense and God enthroned, "high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple" (Isaiah 6:1). The foundations of that temple shake with the voice of angels calling "Holy" to each other, and we will be there, lifting fallible voices in the refrain, an outpost of eternity.

If this is true, it is the most astonishing thing that will happen in our city today.