

## GENDER IDENTITY: WAS ST. PAUL RIGHT ALL ALONG?

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I must admit that in my formative years, the scripture of 1 Corinthians 11 which deals with a woman's long hair seemed antiquated and out of touch in the church. In the era when women were beginning to wear their hair short, this "ol' fashion" thinking didn't seem to fit very well with the developing and "maturing" mores of the church in general, including mine.

Women wearing short hair and men wearing long hair has been as normal in our culture and church community for almost 50 years (and probably longer). This length of hair has been present in the pews as well as the pulpits. It has been present in the average church member to the occupants in the highest offices of our denomination as well as many other evangelical, pentecostal groups. So to even consider writing an essay on the issue of long hair versus short hair might seem a bit out of touch isn't it?

Fast forward to 2015. As the new millennium continues to dawn, gender identity has become a hot topic both in culture and in church life. But before we go one, what is "gender identity"?

Here's a definition:

***Gender identity is a person's private sense and subjective experience of their own gender. This is generally described as one's private sense of being a man, a woman, or another gender, and it consists primarily of the acceptance (or non-acceptance) of membership into a category of people. All societies have a set of gender categories that serve as the basis of the formation of a social identity in relation to other members of society. In most societies, there is a basic division between gender attributes assigned to males and females. In all societies, however, some individuals do not identify with some (or all) of the aspects of gender that are assigned to their biological sex.***<sup>1</sup>

Basically, gender identity is how a person chooses to identify him or herself in public. It has nothing to do with their “assigned biological sex” but rather in how they see themselves. Why is this important? This notion is important because this sense of identity leads a person to see him or herself as a particular “gender” of his or her choosing. He or she will dress accordingly and in many cases wear their hair accordingly, so that, men could let their hair grow long in order to look more womanly and women can cut their hair short so that they can look more manly. This is no laughing matter. So much so, that cities, counties, states, and even our federal government is protecting individuals who choose this type of life-style. The city in which I serve, San Antonio, Texas, has passed a Non Discrimination Ordinance that includes these types of individuals and will fine anyone who “discriminates” against them. The discrimination is solely based on the person’s perception that he or she feel she’s being discriminated against by his or her appearance. So that if they came to church and a church greeter were to say “hello ma’am” and the man felt he was being discriminated against him because the greeter failed to see that he was a man even though he looked like a woman, the church could be fined for the perceived discrimination. This includes if one day, I were to preach on I Corinthians 11:2-16 and someone might feel they were being singled out where it states that,

*“2 I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you. 3 But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man,<sup>[a]</sup> and the head of Christ is God. 4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. 5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. 6 For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head. 7 A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; 9 neither was man created for woman,*

*but woman for man. 10 It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12 For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. 13 Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, 15 but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. 16 If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.*

Many writers have understood this passage to mean a custom that Paul was appealing to when he wrote this chapter. The debate rages over whether women should “cover” their heads (as some denominations practice). The point of this essay is neither to look at custom nor denominational practices, but rather “gender identity” in our current climate. How will we differentiate ourselves as men and women? And most importantly, how will the church respond to the increasing “tolerance” avalanche of pressure that has buried society as well as the church. Truthfully, today, there are times that we all have to take a second look to see if the person is male or female based solely on their appearance. A true challenge indeed. It is here that we can gain a glimpse of St. Paul’s wrestling with this issue in ancient Corinth where customs, traditions, and cultural mores were at play. Nonetheless, his appeal rested on a very important aspect. How does a Christian distinguish him or herself from others? Is it by the way he or she dresses? Or by the way he or she wears her hair? How will we as Christians model how a man and a woman ought to look like? Should we? Would this be asking too much?

The point here is to begin to consider how will we respond when women who’ve decided to define their gender as “male” and dress like men and wear short hair demand to be treated as Christians. Or vice-versa with a man. It seems ironic that

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 will once again become a topic of discussion as churches, pastors, and denominations try to address the very real situation of identity in their community. Seems that the apostle stood his ground in his own time and era. And, alas, St. Paul might be looking down at us and saying, *“would you be willing to challenge them to look like the men that God intended them to look like and the women that God intended them to look like?”* Or will we just succumb to the spirit of this new age and simply say that everyone is entitled to their own look?

Resources:

1. Source: Boundless. “Gender Identity Development.” Boundless Psychology. Boundless, 03 Jul. 2014. Retrieved 05 May. 2015 from <https://www.boundless.com/psychology/textbooks/boundless-psychology-textbook/gender-and-sexuality-15/introduction-to-gender-and-sexuality-75/gender-identity-development-297-12832/>

<http://www.bible-researcher.com/headcoverings.html>