

“Hot Potato Texts: Barefoot, Pregnant and Silent”

1 Timothy 2: 1-15
Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism (excerpt)
By John Shelby Spong

Rev. Brian Heron
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
March 7, 2010

I am going to start off with some “hot potato jokes” first. This is a hot potato joke for the men.

In the beginning, God created the earth and rested.

Then God created man and rested.

Then God created woman.

Since then, neither God nor man has rested.

And now a hot potato joke for the women.

Months pass after God created Eve for Adam.

During one of his morning strolls, God joins him.

God asks Adam, "How is your woman?"

Adam replies back, "God, she's wonderful....except..."

God looks puzzled and replies, "Except what?"

Adam says, "Why did you make her so stupid and ignorant?"

God replies back to Adam, "So she would love you, dummy."

We might say those are hot potato jokes. They are hot potatoes because they make us squirm in our seats a little bit. We can laugh at them because we know they are just fun ways to tease and rib each other a little. But, what do we do when we have “Hot Potato Texts”? What do we do when scripture is so offensive that we would rather just skip right over it? In fact, if we weren't afraid of being struck down by lightning we might even be tempted to tear these pages right out of the Bible when no one else is looking.

Today's scripture in 1 Timothy has to be considered a “hot potato text.” What's a woman's place according to this scripture? Keep her barefoot, pregnant and silent! I wished I could say that I was exaggerating, but you heard the texts yourself earlier. When it comes to **worship “women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes.”** That's the tamest part of this. It goes on to say that a **“woman learn in silence with full submission.”** Paul goes on to say, **“I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.”** Oh, but it gets even juicier. Paul gives this rationale for why a woman should remain submissive to men. **“For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived.”** In other words, when God came into the garden and saw that Adam was eating the apple the first thing Adam said was, *“It wasn't my fault. That woman gave it to me!”* Things haven't changed much, have they? The good news according to Paul is this however. While it is true that the woman was deceived first she is saved as long as she bears children. **“Barefoot, pregnant, and silent!”** It's right there in the scriptures.

I am doing this series because I have an axe to grind. John Shelby Spong in his book *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism* nails it on the head. He says that we are just one generation from away from losing a Biblical worldview to an increasingly secular society. His frustration is shared as he describes our current environment as one where our choices are between the Biblical ignorance of mainline Christians and the absurdity of the literalism of fundamentalist Christians. I am preaching this series because it is time that we learn to take the

Bible seriously without taking it literally. Today's text is a great example. We say that we believe the Bible, but will any of the women in our congregation go home today and apologize that they may have spoken out of place by speaking at all? Will any of the women suddenly show up next week without their jewelry and in clothes that draw no attention whatsoever? Will any of the men dare to go back to their homes this week and say, "*You know, honey, I was reading the Bible today and I realized it was time I wore the pants in the family again!*" And will any of us feel good if next week I made sure that either Flo, Lucile, Joy, or Chris never again speak from the pulpit. Because if we say we believe in the Bible and take it literally we are compelled, we are obligated, we have a responsibility to live as closely to the Biblical blueprint as possible.

On the other hand, if these texts make us uncomfortable do we find ourselves just skipping over them? Do we play cut and paste with the Bible and decide what parts are inspired by God and what parts seem inspired by too many nips at the bottle? Because that is how mainline Christians often approach it. We go to the Bible as if we were walking through the lines at Home Town Buffet. I'll have a little of this and a little of that. Load up on the dessert and leave the vegetables for another day.

But, that isn't how the Bible was put together. It was put together more like a long, winding historical novel. The Bible is one long story of the people of Israel and the emergence of this tradition called Christianity. It isn't meant to be read like a "how to book" where you go to the index, thumbing through the letters until you hit "W." "Ah, here it is—Women and their role—see 1 Timothy 2." And you turn to 1 Timothy 2 and clearly says, "Women should remain barefoot, pregnant and silent." God said it. I believe it. Case closed!

No, the Bible is more like telling your own family story except it is the story of a whole tradition over a 2000 year period. The story evolves and changes. The story includes a whole long history of the ways those early Christians tried to live faithfully to their God.

Once again, as I said in the sermon on Leviticus the more important matter are the questions being asked rather than the particular answers being given. Over and over again we see the Israelites asking the question, "What does it mean to love the Lord your God with **“all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and all your mind.”** In this particular text today the lesson starts out with "how do you lead a life worthy of God?" "How do you show proper reverence and restraint in worship in a way that honors God?" You see, those are good questions. The answers they came up with are maybe a little suspect 2000 years later, but the questions are important.

And here is the trick in reading the Bible. If we read the Bible as if it's an unfolding story we will be able to parse out the major themes. We will be able to discover the deep important questions of what it means to be faithful. And we will be able to discover our own answers for our own time and our own place. If we do not do this we are left with one of two very unsatisfying alternatives. We either take the Bible literally and we bar women from speaking in our church. Or we ignore the parts of the Bible we just don't like and go through it and play cut and paste depending on how we feel that day. That is not the Presbyterian approach to the Bible, however. We read the whole Bible. But, what separates us from others is that we take it seriously, but not literally.

I will end with this quote. I was riding into work this week and I saw this bumper sticker that tackled this same issue of the role of women. It said, "*A woman's place is in the house and the senate!*" You may agree or disagree, but I can tell you in my world I would rather say that than that she must be "barefoot, pregnant, and silent." That is, if you know what's good for you!