

Author finds out just how much is expected of 'biblical' women

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

December 1, 2011

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(RNS) Living like a biblical woman, as Christian author Rachel Held Evans discovered, can be a real pain in thy rump.

That's especially the case during a woman's "unclean" time of the month, when sitting on any surface renders it unclean, and why Evans carried around a stadium seat cushion on those days as she attempted to live out a year as a true "biblical" woman.

Yet Evans' experiment -- which she intends to chronicle in a forthcoming book tentatively titled "A Year of Biblical Womanhood" -- also changed her relationship to the Bible and deepened her faith.

"I feel less like I have to make the Bible into what I want it to be, which is how I spent a lot of my evangelical life, trying to force the Bible into a mold," said Evans, who lives in Dayton, Tenn., the home of the 1925 Scopes "monkey trial" that challenged evolution.

The Bible is not "simple, easy to understand, or easy to apply. It's just not," she continued. "Learning to love it for what it is and not for what I want it to be, that has been sort of the take-away from the year."

Numerous Bible passages encourage women to excel at homemaking, child rearing and submitting to their husbands -- a challenge for a not-so-domestic young woman in an egalitarian marriage in which children are not yet in the picture.

Evans, 30, picked a different womanly biblical virtue each month -- beauty, purity, submission, valor, domesticity, etc. -- and tried to live them out as best she could: -- Proverbs 31:22 "She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple." Evans now has a grape-colored dress, which she admits was mostly made

by her mother and two other women who can actually sew.

-- Colossians 3:18 "Wives, submit to your husbands ..." was translated to letting her husband Dan pick the movie they would watch, no matter her preference.

-- Proverbs 31:23 "Her husband is respected at the city gates ..." prompted her to stand by the roadside, next to the "Welcome to Dayton" sign, holding up a homemade poster that said "Dan Is Awesome."

-- Leviticus 15 and 18, the laws on "family purity," led to the stadium cushion, avoiding any physical contact with her husband during her menstrual period and a week after, and sleeping in a tent outside their home.

Evans isn't the first to undertake such a project, but her status as a woman living in the buckle of the Bible Belt made her experiment unique -- and perhaps more challenging.

Ed Dobson, an architect of the modern religious right and now a retired Michigan pastor struggling with a terminal illness, decided to live like Jesus for a year, observing all the Jewish holidays and refusing to shave.

He got the idea after reading the 2007 best-seller, "The Year of Living Biblically," by A.J. Jacobs, a secular Jew who kept kosher and, following the rules laid out in Deuteronomy 22:23-24, once threw a pebble at a confessed adulterer.

"Well, as the Bible says, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," Jacobs said of Evans' project. "Actually, the Bible doesn't say that. But it definitely sounds biblical. It's probably in the Talmud somewhere."

"I hope her journey was as fascinating and life-changing as mine was," added Jacobs, who joined a synagogue and continued to practice some Jewish rituals after writing the book.

Evans' book, like Jacobs,' is a serious undertaking that appreciates the comedy inherent in living like an ancient in modern times. The two also discovered the burden of the Bible's clear preference for lots of hair.

Jacobs felt as if he was wearing a "hedgehog" on his face and his wife refused to kiss him for the last two months of his experiment. Evans said her hair by year's end was "eating her head."

Not touching her husband is probably the part she will miss least. "That was surprisingly isolating for me. I never realized how I relied on a pat on the back or a

kiss. They connected me to Dan," she said. "I would not recommend it."

Her husband of eight years, who owns a video production company and is partner in a Web startup, fully endorsed the project before his wife committed to it. It wouldn't work without him playing the part of the biblical husband.

They didn't have any "safe word" they could use to take a break, even when it got distasteful, he said.

That happened whenever his wife had to submit to him, including the time she really wanted to throw a Christmas party and he decided it would be too stressful.

"It kind of made me feel like a jerk," he said, "It was almost as if her ideas were inherently less worthy than mine."

But the year also brought gifts.

From 1 Peter 3:4, she tried to nurture a "gentle and quiet spirit." Evans described her own spirit as restless, often having trouble with spontaneous prayer and wondering if she was just talking to herself.

But after a year of reciting the prayers of St. Teresa of Avila and meditating on Psalms 23 and 131, she found herself slower to anger.

"Be passionate, but learn how to control those passions," she said. "This project helped me learn how to do that."