

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

15 Women At Prayer

Scripture Reading

1 Timothy 2:8 – 15

So Far

Last week we considered the part that may be played by women when God's people assemble. In particular we thought about their participation in public prophecy in the light of 1 Corinthians 14:34 – 35 and looked at the various possible interpretations of that passage. We made passing reference to 1 Timothy 2:8 – 15 which also addresses the role of women and said we would return to look at it in more detail this week with particular emphasis on the question, is it permissible for women to pray in our church gatherings.

It's Clear and Consistent

Timothy had been left in Ephesus to continue the work there, and Paul wrote this letter to remind him how people ought to conduct themselves in the house of God (1 Timothy 3:15). The reminder was needed for false doctrine and wrong practices had crept into the church (1 Timothy 1:3). What the doctrines and practices were we are not sure but from what is written in the letter it seems that there are many similarities between what was happening in Ephesus and what went on in Corinth some years earlier.

For the most part the teaching of the passage we are looking at is clear and is consistent with the principle we discerned underlying both 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Corinthians 14. There is a social order, ordained by God which must not only be maintained but also be seen to be maintained among God's people. It is therefore not appropriate for women to do anything which would cause it to appear that they are assuming authority over men.

Here, in 1 Timothy, Paul asserts that women should dress modestly and that they should learn in such a way as demonstrates acceptance of their place in the social order. They should not teach or exercise authority over the men present in any way. Paul gives a reason for this and with it, once again, he sets the foundation of his teaching right back in the book of Genesis. This teaching has nothing to do with local customs or changing times.

Paul's reference to the woman being deceived should not be taken to infer that women are more gullible and therefore not to be trusted. That is not his point. He is simply reminding us of the fact that Eve was deceived and Adam, who having been created first and had the role of head and leader, followed her into transgression. We still live with the consequences of that. It is an example of what can happen when roles are reversed and a reason to ensure that they are not.

Note too that the word which Paul uses here for silence does not necessarily mean refraining from all speech. It is often translated "quietness." The meaning of verses 11 and 12 is akin to the meaning behind, "Children should eat their dinner quietly and do what they are told. I do not allow them to fight or quarrel. They must be quiet." So for women to do what these verses say, it is not required that they play no part in public worship at all. All that is demanded is that any appearance that they are usurping authority should be avoided.

But What About Praying?

The part of this passage which causes difficulty for some is the reference to prayer in verses 8 and 9. Does this mean that only the men are to pray and that the women must not? The fact that it is followed so closely by the direction in verses 11 and 12 for women to be silent does seem to suggest that. However, if Paul does not mean that women should remain in absolute silence then the possibility of them praying in church gatherings is opened up.

Verse 8 instructs the men to pray "lifting up holy hands." "Men," says Paul, "I want you all to pray but I want you to come before God as men who are living holy lives, not given to anger and strong in your faith."

Verses 9 and 10 are about how the women should present themselves: they should dress modestly and appropriately, in a way that is consistent with godliness. But how does this fit in the flow of Paul's thoughts?

I think the key comes in the words "In like manner." Modest and appropriate dress is one mark of a godly woman — Paul says so in verse 10 — and the absence of anger and doubting is a mark of a godly man. The

men are to pray as men who are visibly godly men and “in like manner” the women are to pray as women who are visibly godly. If this is correct then, far from being a prohibition on women praying, this is a direction that they should.

If the fact that Paul makes a distinction between the men and the women is an indication that women are not expected to pray then we must find another reason for the inclusion of the words “in like manner.” The only possibility is that they refer only to Paul’s wanting. He wants the men to behave in a godly manner and in the same way he wants the women to behave in a godly manner but he is saying nothing about the women praying. However, that still leaves the matter far from clear and if we conclude that women should not pray because it is not specifically said that they should we are deriving a command from Paul’s silence then we might just as well come to the conclusion that the men should not dress modestly because it is not said that they should do that.

It seems to me that if women are to be banned from praying in our church gatherings we need a better reason than these verses. I can think of two possible reasons.

- If you take the view that to lead in prayer is to take authority over others then it is not appropriate for women to pray when men are present.
- If you have come to the conclusion that 1 Corinthians 14:34 and verses 11 and 12 of the passage we are now looking at command that the women sit in total silence then prayer would be included, as would the singing of hymns and any spoken response.

But The Principle Stands

Whatever conclusion you come to on this and the other issues we have discussed over the past few weeks the principle that there is an order which must be seen to be maintained must stand, for it is clear. If we keep it before us most of the practical decisions we will have to take on how things should be done in the church will not be difficult. Some, not many, of those practical decisions will depend on the interpretation of difficult passages. But even then, if our first question is, “What will best reflect God’s proper order?” rather than, “What can we get away with?” our practices will be God honouring.