

WOMEN PRAYING IN THE ASSEMBLY

Introduction

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes, “I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God” (1 Tim. 2:8-10).

An inference drawn from this passage has often been used as the basis of a wide variety of restrictions on women praying out loud in mixed company. The range of application goes all the way from prohibiting women from praying out loud in formal Christian assemblies to forbidding that a Christian woman pray even at the dinner table in the presence of her husband or baptized teenage son.

The practice in the Connecticut Valley church has tended toward limitations in the formal assembly only, although a few members have applied the “silence” rule in other settings as well. About a year ago in a few Sunday morning assemblies, a handful of women briefly prayed out loud as a part of a group prayer. Almost no one made an issue of it, but the Servant Leaders felt this was a significant shift in our practice, so they asked that the practice stop until we could study the subject as a congregation. We were concerned about confusing our young people. We also felt that we should not adopt a practice that some felt to be wrong unless we had satisfied ourselves through Bible study that there was a scriptural basis for it.

The Sunday morning study of 1 Corinthians and 1 Tim. 2:8-10 dealt with the only relevant NT passages. What follows is a brief recap of the conclusions we reached in the course of our study of the three key texts.

1 Timothy 2:8-10

In discussing men in 2:8 and women in 2:9, Paul uses the gender-specific words for “man” (*aner*) and “woman” (*gune*). Although sometimes in the NT the gender-specific word for “man” refers to women as well (see Acts 1:16, 2:5, 14, 22; James 1:8, 12, 20, 23, 3:2), Paul makes it clear by the choice of these two words that he is addressing specifically men in 2:8 and women in 2:9-10.

In 2:8 Paul directs men to lift holy hands and explains what he means by saying that men who pray should not be characterized by anger and quarreling. This makes perfect sense in light of the setting in Ephesus, with its problem with false teaching.

The problem manifested itself differently with the women (2:9-10). Women who profess to be devout are to demonstrate it by their attire and deeds. Paul’s issue, then, for the men was anger and quarreling (2:8) and for the women was the way they dressed and otherwise conducted themselves (2:9-10).

“I also want women”

Some have inferred from the words “I also want women” in 2:9 that Paul wants men to do the praying (2:8) but that he has other instructions for women. Therefore, women are forbidden to pray in the assembly. Others go further and take the phrase “everywhere” (2:8) to refer to any setting, even outside of formal Christian assemblies. Some will not let their wives pray out loud in their presence, even at home.

The difficulty with this latter position is that there is nothing at all in the passage about women praying *in the presence of men*. That element has been inserted by those who take this view. Further, the logical conclusion of this line of reasoning, though it is not widely acknowledged, is that if only men are being authorized to pray and “everywhere” means every place a person could be, then women would never be allowed to pray at all, even in private when they are alone.

The words “I also want women. . . ,” however, can just as legitimately be taken “I also want women, when *they* pray. . . .” In this case 2:9-10 would be instructions for women who pray, just as 2:8 is instructions for men who pray. Note that in 2:1 Paul begins discussing prayer, before going into a digression in 2:3-7. Thus, the topic has been prayer from the beginning of the chapter. 2:1-2 deals with the kinds and topics of prayer and 2:8-10 with the character and conduct of those who do the praying.

How, then, do we decide whether Paul means only men praying or men *and* women? For me, it boils down to asking if there is anything I know about God that would lead me to suspect he would have a different set of rules for men and women for such a fundamental act of Christian piety as prayer. I can think of nothing. In fact, one NT text (I Cor. 11:4-5, 13) is strong evidence to the contrary.

Questionable assumptions

Before moving to that passage, let me mention some assumptions that are made by some who believe that I Tim. 2:8-10 prohibits women from praying aloud in formal Christian assemblies. In some cases elements that are not found in the text are read into it.

- q That the passage forbids women from praying out loud in the presence of men but does not prohibit them from praying in front of other women or small children.
- q That lifting of hands in prayer and the prohibition against women wearing fancy hairstyles, gold, pearls and fine clothing can be dismissed as not applying today, but the assumed prohibition against women praying aloud in mixed company, which is implied at best, cannot be dismissed.
- q That the passage is talking about “leading” an *audible* prayer.

This last assumption deserves special attention. The concept of “leading” a prayer is a modern, not a NT one. The argument usually goes this way. Men are the God-approved leaders of the church; therefore, they should be the leaders in the public assembly. To have a woman lead others in a prayer would be to usurp the God-given leadership authority granted to men alone.

I believe that when the issue is framed this way, it shows that we have bought into the world's view of ministry and leadership. It assumes that when someone does something publicly, as in a Christian assembly, it is an expression of authority. The problem with this is that it runs counter to Jesus' view of ministry and leadership. When the mother of James and John wanted special positions of authority and prestige for her sons in Jesus' kingdom, Jesus responded, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matt. 20:25-27).

So, when someone regards such acts as wording a public prayer or passing a communion tray as expressions of authority over the congregation, rather than as acts of service in ministering to others, he has been duped by a worldly definition of ministry. As long as our primary model for male leaders is that they are authority figures, rather than servants, we show that the world, rather than Jesus, has shaped our understanding of leadership and public ministry. Thankfully, neither Jesus nor Paul limited service (ministry) to men.

Summary

To summarize, the conclusions to be drawn from this study of I Tim. 2:8-10 are

- q That women may not pray out loud in mixed Christian assemblies is merely an inference some make; it is *not* stated in the text.
- q 2:8-10 probably discusses both men and women praying, a view supported by I Cor. 11:4-5, 13, and
- q Nothing in this passage puts any limitations on settings in which women may pray aloud in the presence of others.

I Cor. 11:2-16

The context

This passage begins a large section relating to activities during the assemblies of the Corinthian congregation. The latter half of chapter 11 (11:17-34) deals with abuses of fellow Christians at the Lord's supper during their assemblies. Its connection with the discussion of praying and prophesying in the first part of the chapter (11:2-16) is seen in the way each section is introduced. 11:2 begins, "I praise you," and 11:17 begins, "I have no praise for you." Chapters 12 and 13 then initiate a discussion of spiritual gifts which culminates in a treatment of the way they are exercised in the congregational assemblies (chapter 14). In each of the three passages directly dealing with the assemblies, Paul is attempting to correct wrong behavior.

Thus, in 11:2-16, Paul is discussing conduct during the congregational assemblies in Corinth. This is also the conclusion that was reached by almost everyone in the class who filled out the questionnaires both before and after the study of the passage. Nothing in either the initial reading or the serious study of this text points to anything other than the normal mixed assemblies of the Corinthian church.

What is clear

This is one of the most difficult passages in the NT. Much of the background that could explain what was behind some of Paul's statements has been obscured by time. There are, however, two points that are abundantly clear.

- q *Paul assumes that both men and women were praying and prophesying in the assemblies in Corinth.* His point was not whether men or women should pray or prophesy during the assemblies but rather the appropriateness of their head covering or lack of it while they prayed or prophesied.
- q *Paul makes no distinction between men and women in their practice of praying and prophesying.* Judging from this text, what men did in praying and prophesying, women did also. The only hint of any difference between the genders on this matter is in the issue of their head coverings.

With such clear evidence from this passage that women prayed and prophesied in the assemblies in Corinth, it is a mystery that some have concluded that the NT forbids such practices by women. That mystery will in part be explained as we move to the third and final passage – I Cor. 14:34-35.

I Cor. 14:34-35

Although this passage does not discuss women praying, the fact that it directs women to “remain silent” in the assemblies and states that “it is disgraceful for a woman to speak” in them has caused some to conclude that praying aloud would violate Paul's instructions here. Hence, this passage has become a key one in the debate over women praying out loud in the assembly.

“As in all the congregations of the saints”

A key question to be answered regarding these verses is whether Paul intended his words to apply to every congregation or merely to Corinth, based on particular circumstances unique to that church. If the words “as in all the congregations of the saints” (14:33b) begin the sentence in verse 34 (as the NIV punctuates the text) rather than conclude the sentence in verse 33, a case could be made that Paul intends his words for every congregation.

Either is possible, and scholars are deeply divided on the alternatives. What tips the scales in favor of the words going with verse 33 is the fact that in all three of the other places in I Cor. where Paul makes a similar statement (4:17, 7:17 and 11:16), the words conclude the previous thought rather than begin the following one. Therefore, “as in all the congregations of the saints” should not be taken as a part of the discussion of women.

Corinthian assemblies only

There are other indications that Paul is addressing a specific abuse in Corinth and does not intend his words for universal application. The presence of these verses can only be explained if they are a part of the overall discussion of misconduct around tongue speaking and prophecy in the Corinthian assemblies. That is the subject of all the rest of the chapter, including both immediately before and after verses 34-35. Therefore, they should be taken as a further example of verbally disruptive activity in Corinth. To apply these verses more broadly would be to wrest them from their context with no satisfactory explanation of why Paul places them here.

Note further that both tongue speakers and prophets are told to be silent in the assembly when not doing so would be disruptive (14:28, 30). Hence, the rule of “silence” for these wives (14:34) should also be taken as relating solely to the point of abuse, not to absolute silence in the assemblies. Who would argue that Paul intends total silence of the tongue speakers and prophets, rather than simply silence as it related to the disruptive use of their gifts? Why should it be any different with these wives?

Other limitations in application

Not only do verses 34 and 35 apply specifically to Corinthian assemblies, but even within this congregation the application was limited. Paul is writing only about married women and only a special group of them, namely, those who have Christian husbands who are capable of answering questions about what went on in the assembly on a given day.

We do not know precisely what these wives were doing that was disruptive, but 14:29 may give us a hint. “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.” It may be that certain wives were destroying the flow of the prophets’ communication by continuing to interrupt them with questions as they weighed what was being said. As a matter of fact, the word “speak,” which is used twice of women in this passage, refers to repeated speaking, not to the simple act of speaking. Paul is not addressing an occasional question by one of these wives, but rather their repeatedly speaking up in a way that was disruptive.

Finally, the concluding words, “it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church,” should be taken as referring to the specific unacceptable conduct of these wives in Corinth, not to the conduct of all wives in all assemblies everywhere. Note that in 11:4-6, where the words “dishonor” or “disgrace” are used three times, Paul is referring to specific customs of the day, not to a universal rule.

Summary

In summary, Paul’s teaching about the conduct of certain wives in 14:34-35 can only be properly understood within the context of specific verbal disruptions in the Corinthian assemblies. These wives, as well as tongue speakers and prophets, were to be quiet in the assemblies when their speaking would be disruptive. Nothing in Paul’s teaching would prevent any of the three from speaking in ways that were “fitting and orderly” (14:40). Therefore, nothing in 14:34-35 should be taken as in any way calling into question the previous conclusion that women prayed and prophesied in mixed Corinthian assemblies.

Conclusion

Having looked at all three of the key passages in Paul, the evidence against women praying out loud in mixed Christian meetings has been found to be wanting. Evidence that they did pray (I Cor. 11:5, 13), on the other hand, is quite compelling. We should forever put to rest the notion that somehow God disapproves of women wording verbal prayers in any kind of setting.

Recognizing that all in our congregation may not read the evidence this same way, it now becomes our task to determine where we stand as a congregation and then to decide how we are going to apply what we believe the scriptures to teach. This must be done in the spirit of the I Corinthian letter, which teaches that freedom and knowledge are not to be used against other brothers and sisters in a hurtful or unloving way.

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