

Women's Role in Worship  
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The question of women's role in worship as currently discussed has to be considered (as most biblical questions) on two levels — exegesis and hermeneutics. For clarity purposes, exegesis determines what the texts actually say when interpreted contextually and linguistically. Hermeneutics deals with how the statements are to be applied to the late twentieth century church. In my opinion, the second of these offers more ground for dispute than the first does. I have understood my assignment to deal with exegesis of relevant passages.

I was taught in college debate that the starting step for any discussion was definition of terms. We could save a lot of time and exchange if we reached an agreement to begin with on the definition of worship. Are we talking about what takes place on Sunday morning, on Sunday night, on Wednesday night, in a Sunday Bible class, in a college chapel, in a home devotional, in a home Bible study at any time, or in an explanation like Aquila and Priscilla gave Apollos? People will never persuade each other if they jump from limb to limb as the discussion proceeds. The term worship needs a clear, agreed upon definition.

Equally important is an agreement on what is going to be considered as a basis for settling the question discussed. In my opinion, we have groups across the country who are not in agreement upon what sort of evidence forms a basis on which the question is to be settled. Therefore, they can dispute with each other and exclude each other, but they cannot make any progress in reaching a mutually agreeable solution to the question.

We need to make clear in our own thinking and to each other whether the difference of opinion is because passages properly exegeted do not say what some are interpreting them to say or whether the difference is for some other reason. One can agree that the passages are saying what the other says they say, but for some reason or another feel that they are not to be considered normative for the late twentieth century church. Openness and clarification of thought are essential to understanding.

## I. WOMEN MINISTERING

We all know that Peter's mother-in-law, when healed, arose and ministered (*diakonein*) to the assembled group (Mt. 8:15; Mk. 1:31). Jesus had women who ministered of their substance to his party (Lk. 8:3). Jesus was entertained in the home of Mary and Martha (Lk. 10:38-41; cf. Jn. 12:2). Though the verb used in each of these cases is *diakonein* from which the nouns *diakonos* and *diakonia* derive, to argue that these acts were more than domestic and financial would be stretching a point.

Dorcas was renowned in Lydda for the garments she made the widows (Acts 9:39). Lydia offered Paul and his party hospitality in Philippi (Acts 16:15).

Paul was surrounded by a group of women who are considered as fellow-workers. We will consider first Phoebe who is a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchraea—a statement made of no other woman in Scripture. Paul says that "she has been a helper (*prostatis*; Vul.: *adstittit*) of many and of myself as well" (Rom. 16:1, 2). The noun *prostatis* occurs in the N.T. only in this passage. The noun *diakonos* occurs in thirty N.T. passages for various sorts of service with twenty rendered in the KJV as "minister," seven as "servant," and three as

“deacon.” The verb *diakonein* occurs in 37 N.T. passages rendered with the translation variety “ministered unto,” “serve,” “minister,” and nine other miscellaneous terms. The noun *diakonia* occurs 34 times rendered “ministry,” “ministration,” “ministering,” and nine other miscellaneous ways.

That only Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8, 12 are transliterated as “deacon” follows the pattern Jerome set in Latin in the fifth century. It is likely that theological motivation determines this inconsistent practice. In church organization passages, Jerome used *diacon* in Phil. 1:1, *diaconus* for the Timothy passages, and he used *quae est in ministerio* for Rom. 16:2; in other passages he used *minister*, the Latin equivalent of English “minister.”

The Greek indeclinable noun *diakonos* has feminine modifiers in the N.T. only in the case of Phoebe. In dealing with this passage, the KJV merely followed its announced policy of using a variety in rendering.

The English translator has the problem of deciding whether to transliterate the four cases (Rom. 16:2; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12) or to translate them as is done with all other cases of *diakonos*. Whichever way the term is dealt with, the English reader still has the problem of what thought pattern he is to adopt. A person in the N.T. can be a *diakonos* and his/her work a *diakonia* and not be an appointee.

Since the evidence is not conclusive one way or the other in connection with Phoebe, in trying to solve the question, one may need to consider the import of 1 Tim. 3:11 where the qualifications for *diakonoi* are interrupted by “The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.” The question here is how to understand *gyne*. As Greek had only one word *aner* for designating both the male and the husband, so also it had only one word *gyne* for the female and the wife. The usage parallels rural American usage where a man may say, “That is my woman,” meaning, “that is my wife.” The Greek usage creates an unsolvable obscurity where the person who contends that 1 Tim. 3:11 is speaking of wives cannot by linguistic phenomena alone convince the person who argues that the passage speaks of female appointees, and vice versa: the person who thinks it speaks of female appointees cannot convince the person who thinks it speaks of wives. The qualifications given for women in the passage, however, if they are for appointees is quite brief and defective as compared with male qualifications. Nothing is said about marriage state, and nothing is said about family. The next chapter specifies that the widow is to be the wife of one husband (1 Tim. 5:9), but that is not said here of these women.

The only way to deal with an obscurity of this sort is to move out of the N.T. to see if a convincing usage can be found elsewhere. The governor Pliny of Bithynia, writing the Emperor Trajan about A.D. 111-113, tells of having interrogated two maids called *ministrae* of the church in his region. But this Latin text is no less obscure than the two N.T. passages we have considered. It is not certain whether these were appointees or were merely serving women. We have no Christian Latin writings of this period to know what Christians themselves would call these women. Greek Christian writings of the period offer no instance of *diakonos* with feminine modifiers.

Church organization texts in Christian writings of the second century attest the existence of elders and deacons, and, after Ignatius, they know of the one bishop over the elders and deacons, but they contain nothing of female deacons. It is not until one comes to the Church Orders of the third century that the practice of appointing female deacons is met. Even at that time, these women were not functioning in oral roles in worship. They aided at female baptisms, were doorkeepers seeing that women were seated in the proper place, and aided widows. The texts of this period also know an order of “widows,” not merely as recipients of charity, but as part of the church organization.

It is this line of evidence and argument which convinces me that the practice of appointing female deacons does not have N.T. authority. However, apart from that question, in whatever way Phoebe served the church in Cenchraea, there is no text that tells of her having a role in worship. One should not read the modern meaning of "deaconess" into this text.

Among Paul's fellow workers were Eucdia and Syntyche who are to be helped, for Paul says of them, "they have labored side by side with me in the gospel" (Phil. 4:3). Exactly what they did will always remain a conjecture. Paul is not specific.

An English translation like the NRSV which renders Phil. 1:14 as "most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear" invites the uninitiated to assume more than the text says. First, *adelphoi* is made in the translation to include women which is merely a value judgment on the part of the translators who have gone out of their way to eliminate sex oriented language in their translation; and second, whether the speaking described is public or private is not specified. This passage should not be made into a proof text for women's role in worship.

The Epistle to the Romans in addition to Phoebe has a surprising list of feminine names in the greetings given in the last chapter. The couple, Priscilla and Aquila, are listed as fellow workers who have risked their necks for Paul's life. To them Paul and all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks. Paul greets the church in their house (Rom. 16:3). This interesting couple with whom Paul worked in Corinth (Acts 18:2) had in Ephesus taken Apollos (*proselabonto auton*) and expounded (*ektithesthai*) to him the way of the Lord more perfectly (Acts 18:26). In the absence of any data whatever, it is futile to speculate about who of the pair did what, how, and how much. The church evidently met in their house in more than one city. They are in the greeting of I Cor. 16:19, and they are greeted in 2 Tim. 4:19.

In the list of names in Rom. 16 are Tryphaena and Tryphosa as workers in the Lord. There is the mother of Rufus whom Paul also considers as his mother (Rom. 16:12, 13). There is Julia and the sister of Nereus (Rom. 16:15). There is no way to supply the specifics of what these women did. It will not cast much light on the topic for one person to say, "I think they did this" and the other to say, "I think they did not."

In the N. T., women are joint-heirs of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7). They are to adorn themselves with good deeds (1 Tim. 2:10). Older women are to teach younger women (Tit. 2:3). Duties for younger women are given in Tit. 2:4-5. For the younger widow, Paul suggests marriage, bearing children, and managing households (I Tim. 5:14). The believing woman who has relatives that are really widows is to relieve them so that the church not be burdened (1 Tim. 5:6). The widow, who is to be cared for by the church is one well-attested by her good works. The explanatory list is that she has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way (1 Tim. 6:10).

Though the quip that one is certain that the women in Paul's list of workers did not solely bake cookies may seem clever and may fit what some have made the major work of some women in the modern church, it really does not deal responsibly with the explicit teaching of the N.T. on the very wide diversity of good works in which women should engage. I also hasten to say that I have no inclination to downgrade the work of cookie baking. The number of potlucks and receptions of various groups in my congregation, plus the amount of food prepared for the sick and for the bereaved, at times causes the women to say with justification that they are overburdened.

It is quite interesting that in the N.T. we read of numerous males who were either false teachers or were negligent. Hymenaeus and Alexander have made shipwreck of the faith (1 Tim. 1:19, 20). Hymenaeus and Philetus have swerved from the truth by saying that, the resurrection is already over. They overthrow the faith of some (2 Tim. 2:18, 19). Demas has forsaken Paul, having loved the present world (2 Tim. 4:10). Alexander the coppersmith did Paul much evil (2 Tim. 4:14), and Diotrephes loved to put himself first (3 Jn. 9).

There are warnings about female sins in the passages about widows (1 Tim. 5:11-13; cf. Tit. 2:3); and there are instructions for wives (Eph. 5:22-24; Col.3:18; 1 Pet. 3:16). However, there seems to be only one case where a woman in the church is specifically denounced, and that is under a figurative name. It is "that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess who is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols" (Rev. 2:20).

## II. GALATIANS 3:28

Gal. 3:28 has been considered a crucial verse in the discussion of women's activities: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This verse is one of those which does not occur in a context of discussing male and female activities in worship. In exegesis, where one asks a passage a question the writer was not discussing, he merely confirms himself in a position he has already consciously or unconsciously accepted. Paul's topic in this verse is equal opportunity in salvation for all. The words cannot be taken in a physical sense. Slaves remained slaves, free men remained free, men remained men, and women remained women. That will always be true until men can become mothers and women can become fathers—an absurdity that will never happen. But, nevertheless, all can be descendants of Abraham according to the promise.

To make the words of Gal. 3:28 declare a blanket wiping out of all distinctions in duty is not dealing with scripture in a responsible way. These words did not restrict Paul from giving lists of duties to older men, younger men, older women, and younger women (1 Tim. 5:1; Tit. 2:1-6). It did not prohibit giving instructions for widows that are not given for widowers (1 Tim. 5:3-18; 1 Cor. 7:39-40). It did not prohibit separate instructions to wives and husbands (Eph. 5:21-33) and to men and women (1 Tim. 2:8-15). It did not prohibit giving special instructions to slaves (Eph. 6:5-9; Tit. 2:9, 10).

Krister Stendahl expounded from Gal. 3:28 the argument that women's subjection came from the fall of Genesis 3 but was removed by Christ. He, however, could only recognize that such a teaching was never understood in the early centuries and had to argue that it did not bud forth until the late twentieth century and the feminist movement. The interpretation is based on a doctrine of ongoing revelation. In my opinion, the case is defective on both ends. That women's subjection came from the fall does not jive with Paul's argument of 1 Tim. 2:13: "Adam was first formed and then Eve" or with the argument of 1 Cor. 11:8: "For man was not made from woman, but woman from man." That submission ended with Christ is not the topic of discussion of the passage. Therefore, I think that the question of women's role in worship has to be determined apart from Gal. 3:28.

### III. FEMALE PROPHESYING

The prophecy in Joel spoke of "sons and daughters prophesying" (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17). Anna in Jerusalem was a Jewish prophetess (Lk. 2:36). Philip had four virgin daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). Prophesying is an activity that can possibly be done either in an assembly or privately. It can possibly be done in worship or out of worship. Since none of these passages specify the place, I do not know anymore about where it took place, the number, and the makeup of those present than does the next person. The woman Jezebel in the Apccalypse calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling the Lord's servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols (Rev. 2:20).

Paul in 1 Cor. 11:5 speaks of women praying and prophesying. Praying can be done either silently or orally, most of the praying I do in worship or out is silent. One assumes that prophesying had to be oral, but could be done either in a gathering or out. However, despite the fact that Paul does not mention "when you come together as a church" until 1 Cor. 11:17-18, it is widely assumed that the preceding verses deal with a worship gathering. One can argue, nevertheless, that what is said about a man's hair (1 Cor. 11:14) is not limited to such a setting. In view of the use of "when you come together" in vss. 17, 18, and 34, together with "Now in the following instructions" of v. 17, a strong case can be made against verses 2-5 describing what happens in the assembly.

If one assumes that these women were prophesying in the Corinthian worship assembly, then it is gratuitous to demand that Paul condemn the practice here rather than do it two chapters later as he does in chapter 14. I am not inclined to argue that Paul contradicted himself as is done in one treatment I have read.

### IV. LIMITATIONS ON WOMEN'S ACTIVITIES

The N.T. has no limitations on women working with other women. As is well-known, Paul is specific that older women are to teach younger women (Tit. 2:4). In America, there are more women than there are men. The church has great need for an army of dedicated women teaching other women.

There are only four passages in the N.T. which place any sort of restriction on women's activities.

### ELDER AND DEACON

The elder by qualification is to be the husband of one wife (*mias gynaikos andra*; 1 Tim. 3:2) and the deacon is also to be the husband of one wife (*mias gynaikos andra*; 1 Tim. 3:12). For the present discussion, we do not have to determine the meaning of this term beyond the fact that a female cannot qualify. These areas of service are excluded for her.

### PAUL AND CORINTH

As is well-known, Paul instructs the Corinthians, "As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches" (1 Cor. 14:33, 34). Often about the Corinthian instruction, people say, "Paul is only talking about a Corinthian situation." That assertion does not seem to fit what the text says. Paul's words are "as in all the churches of the saints." Paul is restricting activity in Corinth to conform to what

"all the churches of the saints" were doing. In the synagogue, women worshiped, but they did not have public roles. It would appear that Paul is saying that "all the churches of the saints" have a similar practice.

The verb *sigan* (Vul.: *tacere*) occurs in five N.T. passages: for the silence of the crowd at the Jerusalem gathering (Acts 15:12, 13), for the preaching of the gospel having been kept secret for long ages (Rom. 16:25), for the silence of women in all the churches of the saints (1 Cor. 14:34), for the silence of the tongue speaker when there is no one to interpret (1 Cor. 14:28), and for the silence of the first speaker among prophets when another has a revelation (1 Cor. 14:30). There is no logical reason to suppose the verb changes meaning between verses 28 and 35.

Paul continues, "They are not permitted to speak (*lalein*)." The previous paragraph instructed the language speakers to speak one, two, or at the most three and that in turn. Also, two or three prophets are to speak successively. Women are not to speak. Logic demands that "speak" means the same thing in all these verses.

We do not know to what passage Paul is alluding when he says, "they [the women] should be subordinate, even as the law says." *Hypotassein* also occurs in Eph. 2:22; Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; and 1 Pet. 3:1 where women are to be submissive to their husbands, and occurs in numerous other Christian submission passages that include both men and women; and the noun *hypotage* concerning women occurs in 1 Tim. 2:11. This word occurs for submission to the gospel (2 Cor. 9:13), for the submission of the elder's children (1 Tim. 3:4), and with a negative for Paul's refusal to submit to the Judaizers (Gal. 2:5).

Paul then instructs that if there is anything the women desire to know, they are to ask their husbands at home.

He then states that it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. *Aischros* occurs for the shame of a woman's being shorn or shaven (1 Cor. 11:6), for the shame of speaking of what some sinners do in secret (Eph. 5:12), and for the shameful gain for which Cretan teachers teach what they ought not (Tit. 1:11).

Paul shames the Corinthian people by interjecting, "'What!'" and by asking the question, "Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only one it has reached?"

Apparently covering the entire matter of the chapter, the apostle then states, "If any thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. If any one does not recognize this, he is not recognized." This affirmation of authority is a unique statement in the epistles of Paul.

## 1 TIMOTHY 2

All know that women have the privilege and duty of prayer. The widow is described as giving herself to supplication and prayer day and night (1 Tim. 5:5). Anna, the Jewish prophetess at the temple at Jesus' dedication, was so engaged (Lk. 2:37).

In the light of the prayer privilege and duty, the careful student of the Bible then has to ask himself what is to be made of the fact that after speaking of praying for everyone (*anthropoi*) and of God's wanting all people to be saved, using in each case the Greek term which can include both men and women, Paul then

distinguishes between obligations of the males (*aner*) and females (*gyne*). In every place, the males should pray lifting holy hands without anger or argument, and women should dress in unostentatious, suitable clothing. The sequence of mention is "everyone," "the males," and "females." The KJV is in error here in its omission of the definite article which is in the Greek text with "men." The rendering is corrected by all twentieth century translations. Strangely enough, there is not a definite article with "women" in this passage. "The men" should do one thing, and "women" should do something else.

Paul elaborates that the dress is not to be with braided hair, gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but should be with good works.

Paul states that a woman is to learn in silence (*en hesychia*) with full submission (*en pase hypotage*). The prepositional phrase *en hesychia* is only twice in the N.T. (1 Tim. 2:11, 12), but occurs in Greek writers of this period for silence. The prepositional phrase *en hypotage* also occurs for the submission of the elder's children (1 Tim. 3:4), the noun *hypotage* as the object of the preposition *epi* occurs for obedience (1 Cor. 9:13), and the noun alone with the negative occurs for Paul's not submitting to the Judaizers (Gal. 2:5).

The verb *hesychazein* occurs in five N.T. passages. It expresses the Pharisees being silent, not answering Jesus' question (Lk. 14:4) and occurs for the women's inactivity on the Sabbath while Jesus was on the cross (Lk. 23:56). It occurs for the Jerusalem Jewish objectors to Cornelius' baptism being silenced (Acts 11:18), for Paul's party at Ptolemais remaining silent except to say, "The Lord's will be done" (Acts 21:14), and the Thessalonians are to aspire to live quietly (1 Thess. 4:11).

A derived adjective *hesychos* occurs twice. First, for the quiet life Christians are to seek to live (1 Tim. 2:2), and second, for the quiet spirit for which Christian women are to seek.

The noun *hesychia* (rendered *silentium* in Latin by Jerome) occurs four times. First, for the quiet of the mob at hearing Hebrew when Paul addressed them from the stairs (Acts 22:2); second, for the quietness in which the Thessalonians were to work (2 Thess. 3:12.1, and then twice as the object of the preposition *en* here in 1 Tim. 2:11, 12. I had a compilation made of the occurrences of this prepositional phrase in Greek literature for the first four centuries of the Christian period, but have not yet had the time to examine all the cases in detail to see what interpretation they support.

Greek has no problem of speaking to a woman of "your husband" (*sou aner*; Jn. 4:16, 18), or of speaking of "her husband" (*aner autēs*; Acts 5:10). It can speak to a group of women of "your own husbands" (*tois idiōis andrasin*; 1 Pet. 3:1) and about a group of "their own husbands" (1 Pet. 3:5). Despite the footnote to 1 Tim. 2:12, giving the alternate "her husband" in the NRSV, there is no possessive pronoun in this verse in the Greek text.

The puzzling passage is "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men, but she is to keep silent." (1 Tim. 2:11). The Greek sentence has two infinitives (*didaskein . . . oude authnentein andros*) which share one translation object—*aner* (man). Our people widely engage in sophistry based on the KJV wording "usurp authority" by making the stressed idea of this passage "usurp." They then conclude that anything elders ask a woman to do is legitimate. "Usurp" has been dropped in all twentieth century translations. In addition, elders are not a legislative body to permit what Scripture forbids, if indeed this is a prohibition as it appears to be. This passage then adds, "She is to keep silent (*einai en hesychia*).

Paul bases his instruction on the order of creation. Adam was first formed, then Eve. A second stage is "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor."

His final statement is a puzzle to everyone: "Yet woman will be saved through bearing children if she continues in faith and love and holiness with modesty." Catholics argue that Mary's bearing Jesus makes her the second Eve. But though Scripture knows of the second Adam, it knows nothing of the second Eve. Others consider the passage to promise survival in childbirth to faithful women. This case would be hard put by statistics to show that faithful women have any better percentage of survival than non-faithful women. Another case considers that Paul is saying that childbearing is the lot of women, but that faith, love and holiness with modesty are required for salvation.

## V. SOME GREEK LINGUISTIC PHENOMENA

In N.T. Greek, there are some linguistic phenomena to consider. Women were not among the twelve Jesus selected or in the seventy (Lk. 10:1, 17). The apostles had wives (1 Cor. 9:1). The term *apostolos* ("apostle") as a wider circle than the twelve for persons never confused with the twelve (Acts 14:4, 19; 1 Cor. 9:5-6). There were also the apostles of the churches (2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2: 25), but the term *apostolos* is not used in the N.T. for women.

The word *kerux* ("preacher"; 1 Tim. 2:1; 2 Pet. 2:15) and the verb *keryssein* from which the noun derives are never used in the N.T. for a woman. The word *evangelistes* ("evangelist"; Acts 21:8; Eph.- 4:11; 2 Tim. 4:5) is never used for a woman. This phenomena continues through the writings of the Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists of the second century. The description of worship of the second century (Justin Martyr *Apology* 67) also does not have women as oral participants. This evidence reflects how the early church interpreted Paul's teaching.

The noun *disaskalos* ("teacher") is not applied to a woman in the N.T., but the compound *kalodidaskalos* ("teacher of good"; Tit. 2:3) does describe older women when teaching younger women. The verb *didaskalein* for women occurs in the prohibition of teaching men of 1 Tim. 2:12. That verb is not used for the joint work Aquila and Priscilla did with Apollos. There *ektasthesthai* (which occurs three times in the N.T.) is used. Elsewhere it is for Peter's explaining to the circumcision party what had happened at the house of Cornelius (Acts 11:4) and for Paul's explaining matters to the Jews in his house in Rome (Acts 28:23). The KJV, ASV, and RSV translated this verb as "expounded," and the NRSV renders the passage as "they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately" (Acts 18: 26).



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The passages at which we have looked furnish the biblical data to consider as relevant to the topic of women's role in worship. All need to be careful that they do not expand the limitations beyond that which the passages specifically prohibit. The past has made limitations that these passages do not state.

Over the past one hundred fifty years our congregations have a pattern of dealing with disputed questions by division with each side going its own way. One does not have to be a Solomon, a prophet, or a son of a prophet to realize that all across the nation we are again at such a juncture. The young adult singles' class (not the old people against the young people and not men against women) in a congregation known to me recently lost about forty persons (almost half the membership of the group) when it decided in favor of oral prayer participation for women. The same congregation has lost others for the opposite reason—because there were not more leadership roles for women.

If we have not already waited too late, surely there are people of good will among us who value peace, unity, and fellowship more than they value winning an argument and having their own way who can and will work for a compromise solution to our problem where all can worship and work together in the unity for which the Lord prayed. I am not nominating myself for that role.