

SHOULD WOMEN VOCALIZE IN CHURCH?

During the era of the Old Testament church, it was not customary in the Hebrew culture for women to vocalize when the congregation assembled. They did not teach, preach or pray, but remained silent in the synagogue and temple. They were not permitted to pass comments or even ask questions.

However, Joel's prophecy indicated that times were going to change: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy ..." (Act. 2:17. Joel 2:28). This prophecy predicted that the time was coming when not only men but women also would vocalize publicly by prophesying.

There were of course, during Old Testament times, cases of women prophesying, but they were the exception, not the general rule, and often due to the absence of a man suitable for the task. The prophetesses were Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4:4), Isaiah's wife (Isa. 8:3) and Huldah (2 Kng. 22:14). 2 Chr. 34:22). The prophetic ministry of some of these prophetesses also involved a teaching ministry as can be seen by reading the accounts.

But Joel's prophecy indicated that the time was coming when vocalization by women would not be the exception. Reference to "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" indicates that women would vocalize as regularly as men. The prophecy does not say: "your sons and occasionally your daughters shall prophesy."

And so the New Testament opens by introducing us to women prophesying: Elizabeth (Lk. 1:41-45), Mary (Lk. 1:46-55) and Anna (Lk. 2:36-38).

During the ministry of Jesus, women freely came up to him publicly in front of the apostles and other men and prayed to him, making various requests, and he did not rebuke them for doing so. Sometimes the apostles tried to stop them, but Jesus made it clear that he was comfortable about women praying to him in the company of men.

And so, in Act. 1:13-14 we read that the apostles and other men gathered together in an upper room and continued in prayer "with the women." Both male and female members of the church were praying together!

When the day of Pentecost came, all who were in the upper room were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in other tongues (Act. 2:1-4) declaring the wonderful works of God (v11). The fact that Peter, in order to explain what was happening, quoted Joel's prophecy concerning "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" indicates that the women as well as the men were verbalizing.

Reference is also made in Act. 21:9 to the 4 virgin daughters of

Philip the evangelist who prophesied.

It is also evident by the reference in 1 Cor. 11:5 to “every woman who prays or prophesies” that women as well as men prayed and prophesied at church meetings.

In response to this it may be said that because prophesying required possession of the Holy Spirit, women cannot pray or prophesy in church unless they possess it. There are two points that need to be observed in relation to this. Firstly, the same would have to apply to men who are also referred to in the same context as praying and prophesying in church meetings (1 Cor. 11:4). Whatever praying and prophesying signifies, they have exactly the same meaning in relation to men and women. Therefore, if absence of the Holy Spirit means women cannot pray or prophesy in church, then the same applies to men. Secondly, possession of the Holy Spirit is required to prophesy but not to pray. Lack of the Holy Spirit therefore cannot prevent men or women from praying. As we have seen in Act. 1:13-14, both men and women were praying together before the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost.

It should also be noted that the women’s head covering in 1 Cor. 11:5 applies to those who pray or prophesy. It would therefore be inconsistent to not allow women to pray in church but insist that they all have a head covering.

Now, several chapters later in 1 Cor. 14:34 Paul says this: “Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted to them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also says the law (i.e. the Old Testament. e.g. Gen. 3:16).

If, as some believe, this means women are not allowed to pray or prophesy in church, then this would make Paul contradict himself because he plainly refers to women praying and prophesying in church a few chapters earlier as we have seen. It is most unlikely therefore that he is referring to praying and prophesying when he says women are not permitted to speak.

It is evident from the context that Paul is referring to women questioning the teaching either by interjecting the speaker or chattering about his teaching while the meeting is in progress. This conclusion is inferred from Paul’s statement in the next verse (v35) where he says: “If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is a shameful thing for women to speak in the church.” It is clearly implied here that the speaking in which the women were indulging related to asking questions, and possibly expressing disagreement. If they wished to learn anything they were to ask their husbands privately at home, because it was indecorous, uncomely and undignified for women to be questioning, challenging or contending with men in public assemblies, especially if it involved contradicting and disagreeing with them. It was as a result of Eve being deceived into questioning, disagreeing with and contradicting

God's instruction given through Adam, that women were placed in submission to men (Gen. 3:16). For this reason Paul says: "they are commanded to be in submission, as also says the law."

But this by no means meant that women could not pray or prophesy. All that Paul was opposed to was women questioning, finding fault, disputing and setting up their own judgement in opposition to the brethren. To do this was to usurp authority and was regarded as disrespectful and arrogant. They were allowed to question statements made by brethren but privately, not publicly.

It is evident from the general contents of the epistle to the Corinthians that there was considerable carnality, disobedience and disorder in the church. Reading behind the lines it seems that some of the women were very assertive and domineering, causing the apostle to remind them that man is the head of the woman (11:3) and that woman should be in subjection to man (14:35).

As in the case of the women's liberation movement, which maintains women are equal to men, and who cut their hair short like men as a visible outward sign of equality, it seems that women in the church at Corinth were doing the same. This was a violation of the original creation model in which God created women with long hair and man with short hair. Such hair lengths were divinely designed as one of the outward signs of femininity and masculinity, and it was a shameful thing - an insult to God to change that by a man wearing long hair and a woman wearing short hair. To do so was to blur the boundaries and distort the distinction set by God between the original male and female model. (For the same reason, God regarded it as an "abomination" for a man to wear women's clothing and for a woman to wear mens clothing Deu. 22:5). As far as God was concerned; if a woman cut her hair short like a man, she may as well shave it all off and be done with it!

It is therefore not very satisfactory for Christian women to feel justified having short hair like a man so long as they wear a hat or a scarf on their head when they meet with the church. Paul is quite adamant that a woman's long hair "is given her (by God) for her covering" (1 Cor. 11:15).

It is also not very satisfactory for a church to not allow women to pray at meetings, yet let them publicly question the teaching of the brethren and even challenge and contest it, not to mention being allowed to exercise authority to vote men into office. In view of the fact that women in New Testament times were allowed to pray in church but not question, it should be a challenge to any church which does not allow women to pray but allows them to question! Sometimes questions can be framed and expressed in such a way as to affirm a point, and really amount to an attempt to teach in a subtle or disguised form! It is quite possible that some sisters in the Corinthian church were doing this.

There is only one other passage of Scripture which is regarded by some as teaching that women should not be allowed to pray or vocalize in church. It is in 1 Tim. 2:11-14: "Let the women learn in silence with all subjection. I do not permit a woman to teach, nor to usurp (exercise) authority (i.e. dominate) over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived became a transgressor."

Reference here to women learning in silence with all subjection is a reaffirmation of what Paul said in 1 Cor. 14:34-35. They were to listen and learn without chattering or interjecting with questions. If they had any constructive or controversial questions and enquiries, they were to ask them in private. Such instruction would result in avoiding the risk of turning a meeting into a mind game or battle between the sexes which, if done maliciously, can be designed to demean and belittle the headship and authority of man. However, as mentioned before: stating that the women listen and learn in silence is not a command to not pray. There is a difference between questioning man at a church meeting and praying to God in heaven.

The same applies to Paul's next statement: "I do not permit a woman to teach." He does not say: "I do not permit a woman to pray or prophesy." How could he? To do so would be to contradict himself for he clearly indicates in 1 Cor. 11:5 that women did pray and prophesy in church.

Teaching is not the same as praying or prophesying. They are different ministries or functions. In Rom. 12:6-7 teaching and prophesying are listed under different headings and related to different categories. They are different gifts. According to 1 Cor. 14:3, "He who prophesies speaks to men to edification, exhortation and comfort." It was a positive, constructive, devotional ministry designed to build up, encourage and comfort. But teaching could involve deeper more academic and technical aspects of the Word of God and was more likely to relate to controversy resulting in confrontation, dealing with false doctrines. This ministry required the authority to rebuke and command (1 Tim. 4:11), and it was not as appropriate for a woman to exercise it as it was for a man.

The fact that Paul, after stating that he does not permit a woman to teach, then says they should learn in silence with all subjection, suggests there is a connection between the two statements. The implication is that by not remaining silent, and questioning or challenging the teacher, they were assuming the role of a teacher. Questions that challenged the validity of teaching and that were designed to prove the male teacher wrong and the woman right, amounted to usurping authority over the man. For this reason Paul goes on to refer to Adam being formed (and instructed) first and to Eve being deceived, resulting in her assuming the role of a teacher, advocating something that was in opposition to what God through

Adam had taught. When faced by a major decision, Eve did not consult Adam, but took it upon herself to question and challenge what she had been taught by Adam. And by hearkening to Eve's advice (teaching), Adam allowed her to have authority over him, instead of fulfilling his role as head and rebuking her for her folly. So both sinned and were punished.

The statement that "Adam was first formed, then Eve" is made by Paul to convey that by this very act, God designed that man should be the teacher and have the pre-eminence. Speaking to the woman in Gen. 3:16 God said: "Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." For this reason the elders who exercised "rule" (1 Tim. 5:17) over the church were always men and not women. One of the reasons for this, as expressed in a book written by a woman, is because it is recognized that many (not all) women, by reason of their biological make-up are more prone to be swayed by emotions, instinct and wishful thinking than by reason and logic, and are usually less able than men to detect false teaching when plausibly presented.

One of the indictments levelled by God against the members of the apostate Old Testament church was that "women rule over them" resulting in being led astray (Isa. 3:12).

However, reference is made by Paul in Tit. 2:4-5 to an important teaching role that the older and more mature women were allowed to exercise, namely: "that they may teach the young women to be sober (sensible and not scatter-brained), to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, pure, busy at home, good, obedient to their husbands, that the Word of God be not blasphemed."

In relation to this it is interesting to note that in the statement of Paul in 1 Tim. 2:12 concerning a woman not being permitted "to teach nor to usurp authority over the man:" the Greek word translated "nor" is elsewhere translated "so much as" (Mk. 6:31. Lk. 6:3. 18:13. Act. 19:2. 1 Cor. 5:1). On this basis, Paul's statement could be rendered: "I do not permit a woman to teach so much as to (i.e. to the extent that she) usurp authority over a man." If so, this would make it a qualified statement, defining a limit to the woman's teaching role. A woman was allowed to teach, so long as she did not usurp authority over a man. Teaching the younger women to love, respect and obey their husbands and to love their children would certainly fit within this boundary of teaching.

Taking it a stage further: although it seems contrary to divine order for a woman to teach publicly in the church when men are present, there are examples of women being used by God to give instruction on a personal level to men. These examples demonstrate that men do not always know best and women are quite capable,

especially when led by God, of being wise, understanding and discerning. Here are some examples:

Although Abraham made a similar mistake to Adam when he hearkened to the voice of his wife Sarah (Gen. 16:2), resulting in the birth of Ishmael, “a wild ass of a man,” God later told him to “hearken unto her voice” (Gen. 21:12). Sarah had asked Abraham to remove Ishmael from the camp but Abraham didn’t approve. But it was God’s will for Ishmael to be removed, so He told Abraham to do as Sarah requested. In Gal. 4:30 Sarah’s words are equated with “Scripture.” Her words were divinely inspired instruction (teaching) from God. However, this did not cause Sarah to become haughty and arrogant by trying to usurp authority over Abraham. She maintained a meek spirit, and remained in subjection, and was obedient to her husband, calling him lord (1 Pet. 3:1-6).

When Moses embarked upon his mission for the God of the covenant, but had failed to fulfil the sign of the covenant (circumcision) in his own sons, God “sought to kill him” (Ex. 4:24) probably by inflicting him with a sickness, making him bed ridden. Moses’ wife Zipporah intervened and circumcised the sons, remonstrating with Moses for failing to do his duty, resulting in him being spared by God. On this occasion Zipporah was more up with the play in relation to God’s will than Moses.

When Nabal refused David’s request for provisions, causing David to set out on the warpath with his army with murderous intent to kill Nabal and his men, Nabal’s wife Abigail took the initiative and arranged for provisions to be taken to David. Both Nabal and David were out of order, and it required a woman to set things in order and to prevent murder. David blessed Abigail (and God) for her “advice” which prevented him from taking the law into his own hands and acting contrary to divine teaching (1 Sam. 25). Although Abigail was in the right and David was in the wrong, she remained humble and called him “lord.” Giving David instruction did not go to her head causing her to usurp authority over him.

When Joab, the captain of David’s army, set out to destroy a city with all of its inhabitants in order to capture a rebel who had fled there for refuge, “a wise woman” in the city called to Joab from the city wall and talked him out of causing an unnecessary massacre by promising that the head of the rebel would be cast to him over the wall (2 Sam. 20).

These and other examples from Scripture demonstrate that women are more than capable of giving instruction and advice to men in accordance with the will of God, but true humble women of God do not do it “so much as to usurp authority over a man.” Such women do

not allow their ego to become inflated, resulting in overstepping the mark of their calling by trying to take over the reigns to rule and dominate the men in a spirit of rivalry.

“Every wise woman builds her house, but the foolish pluck it down with her hands” (Pr. 14:1). A woman is in a unique position either to build or break down the house of God; to unify or to disrupt and divide the church.

Coming back to 1 Tim. 2:11-12: Paul’s counsel is set against the backdrop introduced in chapter one. There he referred to problems in Ephesus of a doctrinal nature, such as “fables and endless genealogies,” “vain jangling,” “things that are contrary to sound doctrine.” Likewise, in chapter four he wrote of “profane and old wives’ fables,” and in chapter five, of widows “not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not.” He closes the epistle by saying to Timothy: “Avoid profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: which some professing have erred concerning the faith.”

1 Tim. 2:11-12 is therefore clearly in the context of Paul’s counsel concerning serious problems with false and silly teachings for which some sisters were at least partly responsible. Hence Paul’s words in 4:7: “Have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women;” and in 5:11-13, of younger widows who were idle, and went from house to house gossiping and making mischief, talking about things not proper to mention; and in 3:11, of wives who must not be false accusers.

For centuries, Ephesus had been a centre of religions which celebrated and exalted the status of womanhood. The temple of the goddess Diana was situated there and was one of the seven wonders of the world. Thousands from all quarters flocked there to worship the virgin goddess. It is possible that in the same way that the feminist movement and women's liberation became strong influences in society, resulting in women becoming more assertive and competitive with men, so it was in Ephesus, with the result that some sisters there in the church had a struggle conforming to God’s pattern of womanhood, and to submit to the headship of their brethren and husbands.

If so, 1 Tim. 2:11 could be seen as being directed at women who were inclined to be over assertive or disputative, and disinclined to receive instruction or correction from men.

