

Women's Place in the Local Church

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Published and distributed by
Thru the Bible Radio Network
P.O. Box 7100
Pasadena, California 91109-7100
(800) 65-BIBLE
www.ttb.org

All Scripture references are from the *New Scofield Reference Bible*.

I exhort, therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men, for kings, and for all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God, our Savior, who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time. For this I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity. I will, therefore, that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; in like manner, also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with godly fear and sobriety, not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array, but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority 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, was in the transgression. Notwithstanding, she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and love and holiness with sobriety. (1 Timothy 2:1-15)

Today there are two extreme positions relative to the place women should occupy in the local and visible church. Both positions use 1 Timothy 2 to support their stand.

One group permits women to occupy a place of prominence and leadership in all public services. They have women preachers, teachers, choir directors, and officers. In fact, no position in the church is shut to them. As a result, women are not only prominent, but they are dominant in the church. Some of these women are very capable, have wonderful ability, and are used mightily of God.

The late Harry Ironside was once walking with one of his brethren, and they crossed a park where a woman was preaching. His companion said, "Isn't it a shame that a *woman* is there preaching in the park!" Dr. Ironside, in his characteristic manner, said, "Yes, it is a shame there is not some man to take her place." *God is using women, especially on the mission field, to do the work that men should be doing.*

When I was a young pastor in Nashville, Tennessee, a tent was put up across the street from my church. The Baptist preacher in town was a good friend of mine, and together we went over to meet the husband and wife team who were going to hold meetings. The wife did the preaching, and the husband did all the leg work. We watched him putting up the tent and setting out the benches and all that sort of thing. He also led the singing. That's all right if you like it that way, but I don't. However, the Baptist preacher and I gave the meetings all the support we could, because they had good meetings and she *did* preach the gospel.

This is an example of the fact that God has used some of these groups who have women preachers in a definite way; but I think, frankly, that He has used them in spite of, not because of, the position of women among them.

The other extreme position on this issue is taken by those who do not allow women any place at all in their public services. You never hear the voice of a woman in public in their meetings, not even in singing. I have had opportunity for good ministry among some of these folk, but believe me, they push their women to the background. I fear that they lose a great deal of talent and that the women could make a marvelous contribution if they were permitted to do so.

To illustrate this, allow me to tell you a story, and I hope you understand that I do so in a facetious manner. There is a little town in the Midwest where there lived a very prominent maiden lady. Everyone agreed that she would have made some man a wonderful wife, but she had never been asked and she died an old maid. The society editor for the local newspaper who normally would cover such a story was out of town, and the sports editor was asked to write up a little notice of this lady's death. He concluded the article with these words:

Here lie the bones of Nancy Jones:
For her, life held no terrors.
She lived an old maid, she died an old maid:
No hits, no runs, no errors.

Churches miss something when they will not use the talent of their women. God can and will use them in His work.

Between these two extremes, there are many other churches that vacillate back and forth from one position to another.

But why do we have all this confusion regarding this very practical issue? The confusion has been brought about by an unfamiliarity with the Roman world of Paul's day and also by a misunderstanding of this passage of Scripture. So let's look at what the Word of God actually has to say about it.

First of all, let's consider the world in which Paul the apostle lived and a factor of which we hear very little. It is the Mystery religions which were very dominant in the Roman world of Paul's day. They had an influence on the everyday life of the average individual to an extent that we cannot even imagine. It is impossible to understand fully a great deal of what Paul and the other New Testament writers had to say without a knowledge of these Mystery religions.* Paul met these religions on every hand, and a knowledge of them will explain some things that he wrote.

God *has* used women. In the Word of God we see Deborah, Queen Esther, Ruth, and others. In church history, we find women like Mary Fletcher and Priscilla Gurney. There are multitudes of others whom God has used in a wonderful way.

However, in the Roman world the female principle was a part of all the heathen religions, and women occupied a prominent place in them.

Influence of the Mysteries

The Mystery religions exerted a potent influence over the Mediterranean world — including the Roman, Greek, and oriental cultures — from 300 B.C. to A.D. 300, from Alexander the Great to Constantine in Rome. They were a dominant factor during the century that began with the Emperor Augustus and saw the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ as well as the ministry of the apostle Paul. That century ended with the Emperor Domitian. This was the period of greatest growth for “the cult of the ruler” — that is, when the ruler himself was exalted, deified, and in many cases actually worshiped.

James Legge, the very scholarly historian, said concerning the Mystery religions of this period that there had probably been no time in the history of mankind when all classes were more given over to the thought of religion. And Aust said of the Mysteries, “The hero is less honored

than the saint; the religious movement put its seal upon the century.”

Some of the great men of the past were members of the Mystery cults. All classes were found in their ranks — from the Emperor and princes to the artisan, laborer, and slave. The outsiders held them in reverential awe. Andocides, the Attic orator, and Alcibiades, the spoiled favorite of the Athenians, were both implicated in and convicted of the serious charge of profaning the Mysteries. Socrates was chided because he did not join.

These religions came into the Roman world because of its contact with the East. This contact brought together that which was bad in both and wedded them through Greek philosophy and religion (actually, at the time, there was a bankruptcy of Greek religion). Alexander the Great scattered all of this throughout the Mediterranean world.

The Mysteries appealed to the emotions rather than to the intellect. It was Aristotle who called attention to this. They were a combination of a secret lodge and a playboy club, but blended with religion. Because they were secret orders, even to this day we do not know a great deal about the rites that were performed in them.

However, we do know certain things. For instance, women were very prominent in them. There always was a female deity somewhere in the Mysteries, and in the initiation gross immorality was practiced. It seems they would select a heathen goddess, then attribute to her all the attributes of the other goddesses. An example is this quotation from one of the Mystery religions regarding “Isis of a thousand names:”

Parent of nature, mistress of all the elements, the firstborn of the ages, whom the Phrygeans adore as the Pessinuntian mother of the Gods, the Athenians as Minerva, the Cyprians as Venus, the Cretans as Dictynion Diana, the Sicilians as Proseprina, the Eleusians as Demeter, others as Juno, or Bellona, others Hecate or Rhamnusia, while the Egyptians and others honor me with my proper name of Queen Isis.

The most prominent of these cults was the Eleusinian Mysteries. They began in Eleusis, the Greek city, but before long they spread out and even the Emperor Augustus was a member, as was Marcus Aurelius. They had a great lodge or temple in the city of Rome. Cicero declared that Athens had given nothing more wonderful to the world than the Eleusinian Mysteries. It probably ranked highest of all of them, yet they engaged in some of the most satanic and diabolic orgies imaginable.

But probably the worst of all the Mysteries was the cult of Dionysus. It was very prominent in the areas to which Paul went in Asia Minor and Greece. It has been termed the crudest and most immoral of all the Mysteries. Plato criticized it, saying, “An immorality of drunkenness seemed to be considered the Dionysian reward of virtue.”

Women were in the majority in this cult, and the initiation was horrible. First, you would go through a ritual to make your application for membership. If you were accepted, you would be brought in for the initiation. A robe would be put upon you, and you would be taken down into a pit. Above you would be a latticework upon which a living bull was driven. As the bull was being slain, your head and garments would be saturated with its blood. You would lift up your face, letting the blood run into your eyes, ears, and nostrils, and then you would drink it! Then, before the bull died, the female members would make a rush for it, biting its flesh and eating it raw. Actually if there were enough women in attendance, they would consume the entire animal!

It was said that this would change a person, and I can understand that it would bring about

quite a change to go through an initiation like that! We hear the results of fraternities that have put on initiations today, and we can imagine what this ancient ritual did to its initiates!

Another Mystery religion, probably the one with which Paul came in contact more than any other, was known as the Great Mother. This cult of the Great Mother who loved the shepherd boy Attis is without doubt one of the most corrupt of all. It was very popular in the Roman Empire. The Ides of March that Caesar was warned against was a celebration of the Great Mother cult. On March 24 there was a celebration of the Day of Blood. This day exceeded the Dionysian orgies in frenzy and barbarism. This is also the cult that Paul encountered in Ephesus. The Ephesians gathered in the amphitheater and were about to mob him, and for about two hours they shouted, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians." This was the cult of the Great Mother.

You see, Paul moved into the Roman Empire and preached the gospel to people steeped in this sort of thing. Many of them came to Christ, and so Paul told the women how they were to act when they went into public worship. Having some knowledge of the Mysteries will help us appreciate what Paul wrote to Christians who came out of that darkness and into the light of the gospel.

Women's Place in the Early Church

The second source of confusion relative to a woman's place in the local church results from an uncertainty as to what Paul actually said. Let me remind you that Paul, who wrote in such glowing terms of the ministry of women, would certainly not relegate them to the limbo of the lost or to a place of ignominy in the church. He would not have done a thing like that.

You remember that when he sent his letter to Rome, he sent it by Phoebe, and instructed the believers to receive her. She was a deaconess in the church in Cenchreae. He said,

I commend unto you Phoebe, our sister, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchreae, that ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatever business she hath need of you; for she hath been a helper of many, and of myself also. (Romans 16:1, 2)

Then in his letter to the Philippians, he revealed that women were prominent in that church, writing,

I beseech Euodia, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord. And I entreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women who labored with me in the gospel. (Philippians 4:2, 3)

It is evident that women occupied an important place in the early church. Of the people Paul mentioned, you will find that the majority of them were women who were assuming prominent roles. We need to keep this in mind as we determine what Paul was saying.

Should Women Lead in Prayer?

In 1 Timothy 2, Paul was talking about public worship. He gave instructions on what the church was to do when it came together and dealt specifically with the subject of prayer:

I exhort, therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men. (1 Timothy 2:1)

When the church comes together, we ought to pray for the world — not *around* the world, but *for* the world.

For kings, and for all that are in authority...

We are also to pray for people in authority and public office.

...That we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God, our Savior, who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:2-4)

By the way, this last statement is an answer to those who say there are some people who are predestined to be lost. The Word of God makes it very clear that no one is so predestined. God “will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.” All people are savable.

Next Paul gave instructions on how each sex is to pray. First of all, the men:

I will [desire], therefore, that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. (1 Timothy 2:8)

“Holy hands” means hands that are dedicated to God. If you are going to pray with your lips, your hands ought to be dedicated to God. Our Pentecostal brethren major in holding up their hands while praying. Frankly, I think it is a wonderful way of praying — the hands and the mouth both dedicated to God. The custom has scriptural sanction! The men are to pray, Paul said, with their hands dedicated to God. In other words, the life and the lips are to be saying the same thing.

He added, “without wrath.” That is, we are not to pray with a bad disposition. The word for “wrath” is the same kind of wrath God has, but we can’t have it like He has. When you and I get angry we are vindictive, and we should never pray with that attitude.

He also said, “without...doubting,” which means without disputing. We should never pray a horizontal prayer — we are not to pray to answer somebody. Have you ever heard anyone pray like that? There’s a story about Dwight L. Moody, who called one time upon a brother to pray in one of his services. When the man directed his prayer to the other denominations that were present, Mr. Moody said to him, “Brother, open your eyes. You’re not praying, you’re preaching!”

You see, there is a lot of praying today that is really preaching and is not praying to God at all. So Paul instructed the believers to hold up hands dedicated to God, without wrath (not a vindictive prayer), and without disputing — not motivated by a wrong spirit, not praying *at* somebody. These are instructions given to men as they pray.

Prayer was still the subject as Paul went on to give instructions to women. Where did this idea arise that women are not to pray in public? Paul didn’t say that at all. Somebody may object, saying, “But Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14:34, ‘Let your women keep silence in the churches.’” Yes, he did, but notice the context — it’s only in reference to talking in tongues.

Believe me, if that were enforced, the tongues movement would die out in a week! Paul was referring merely to the subject of 1 Corinthians 14, which is speaking in tongues. He was not saying that women are not to speak at all in the church.

What about Adornment?

In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with godly fear and sobriety, not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array, but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. (1 Timothy 2:9, 10)

Let me rephrase this in order to bring out what Paul had in mind: “In like manner also [referring to the same subject, which was prayer], my desire is that this is the way women are to pray.” Although Paul did not repeat the word “pray,” he clearly implied it. You see, he expected women to pray publicly.

“That women adorn themselves in modest apparel.” Notice they are to *adorn* themselves. You will be interested to know that the word for “adorn” here is the Greek word *kosmeo*. Does that remind you of an English word you have heard? We get from it our word “cosmetic.” Now you may think the Bible says ladies are not to use cosmetics, but it actually says here, “In like manner, I desire also that women pray using cosmetics.” The English word “cosmetic” relates to making for beauty, especially of the complexion.

I believe that God intends all of us to look the very best we can. It is tragic when Christians feel they are being pious by looking shabby. God expects us to do the best we can with what we’ve got. It may seem hopeless in some cases, but even then I think we ought to adorn and improve our situation.

Many years ago at Dallas Theological Seminary, the wives of the students got this idea that the more unkempt they looked, the more pious they were. Some women went around looking as if they hadn’t combed their hair in a week! Boy, you wondered what was up there when you looked at them! Finally, Dr. Chafer called in all the wives and gave them a real talking to. He said, “This is not piosity, this is nonsense! You are disgracing the Lord when you look like this.” God wants His children to look the best they can.

In the Mystery religions, the women adorned themselves like courtesans, that is, like high-class prostitutes. Paul said, “I want God’s women to adorn themselves, but not like that. I want them to adorn themselves in modest apparel, with godly fear.” The word “modest” is *kosmios*, meaning orderly and becoming. Paul adds, “and sobriety.” In all of the Mystery religions the women were drunk, loud, and boisterous.

Paul said, in effect, “I want Christian women, when they come to the church services and pray publicly [he didn’t intend for them to take a back seat], to be dressed with modest apparel, not like courtesans, but looking the very best they can.”

A Christian woman is not to be overdressed. Some wag said,

The “practically nothing”
my wife has to wear
Fills all three closets,
plus one that we share!

This is the case, I'm afraid, with many Christian women.

Again, when Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, he said:

But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head, for that is even all one as if she were shaved. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn; but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. (1 Corinthians 11:5, 6)

Why would Paul say that a woman, when she comes in to pray publicly, should have her head covered? Because of a woman's conduct in the Mystery religions. Right in the city of Corinth there was that temple to Diana (or Venus), and in it were a thousand "vestal virgins" who were nothing more nor less than prostitutes. It was immorality in the name of religion. These women had disheveled hair, and they were drinking and carousing. However, many of them turned to Christ and were converted. So Paul told them that they were to be the opposite of what they had been while in the Mystery cults, giving a testimony to the world that they had been converted.

In like manner, also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with godly fear and sobriety, not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array. (1 Timothy 2:9)

"Braided hair" probably refers to the elaborate interweaving of the hair with gold or pearls. Let's read what Peter wrote on this subject:

Whose adorning, let it not be that outward adorning of braiding the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel. (1 Peter 3:3)

It is not saying that no jewelry is to be worn. If it did, it would also prohibit all clothing! They were to be the opposite from that which represented the Mystery religions of that day.

Inner Adornment

Although Christian women are to be adorned and dress modestly and in style, Paul made it very clear that their important adornment is to be on the *inside*.

But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. (1 Timothy 2:10)

Note again what Peter wrote to wives, and he was a married man (we're not sure about Paul):

But let it be the hidden man of the heart in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. (1 Peter 3:4)

That is the inward adornment, which Paul also talked about. A Christian woman is to be beautiful on the *inside*.

One of the most tragic things today is to meet an attractive woman who is as vacant and empty as she can possibly be. Years ago, a talented Hollywood writer made the statement that he had never met so many people with vacant minds and beautiful bodies in all of his life. This same thing can be said of some Christians today. They put all the emphasis on the outside. There needs to be adorning on the inside, my friend.

I love camellias. Down in Texas I never could raise them but had to raise roses instead. Roses have a wonderful fragrance, but when I came out to California I fell in love with camellias. I think they are the most beautiful flower there is, although a camellia has no fragrance whatsoever. One morning I went out to cut some, and I held one of those big, lovely, open flowers. I looked at it and said, "You are just like some women I know. You are beautiful on the outside, but have no fragrance at all."

A Christian woman should be more than a beautiful shell. Paul talked about Christian women having something on the inside. After a woman is a Christian, she will want to grow in love and holiness — becoming a beautiful person on the inside.

What about Headship?

First, let's look at Peter's words in 1 Peter 3:6. It is interesting that in this passage, Peter was talking to Jewish women, and he used Sarah as an example:

Even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord; whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any terror.

"Sarah obeyed Abraham." Have you read Genesis lately? If you do, you will find that Abraham did practically everything that Sarah suggested. She was a beautiful person on the outside; she was also beautiful on the inside. You can't read the story without coming to this conclusion. Sarah had a great influence on Abraham. But, you see, she took the marvelous place of subjection. She was a helpmeet who guided him in many of the decisions he made.

Now let's go back to Paul's instructions:

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. (1 Timothy 2:11, 12)

This moves us into another area altogether. Paul said women are to pray in public and have other ministries, but when it comes to the area of doctrine, they are to stay out of that particular ministry.

However, women, when they have taken their rightful place, have had the greatest influence on men. John Wesley, I am confident, was put into the ministry, humanly speaking, by a woman. Also, you cannot read the life of Abelard without knowing that in the background there was Heloise, a wonderful Christian woman who influenced his life.

But God says that doctrine is one area He has reserved for men. You can see the wisdom of this. Many of our present-day cults were founded by women. Madame Blavatsky and Mrs. Besant were responsible for Theosophy, which is an admixture of Spiritism and Buddhism. The Fox sisters started Spiritism in its modern form. Mary Baker Glover Patterson Fry Eddy founded Christian Science. It is interesting that women have been founders or they are prominent in

this matter of cults today.

It is no accident, therefore, that Paul warned here in 1 Timothy, “I permit not a woman to teach” — that is, to come into the place of doctrine.

“To be in silence” obviously does not mean silent in the sense of not saying anything, but silence in that she is not to “usurp authority over the man.” This is a question of headship. Someone must have the authority. In the home, in the church, in a business corporation, in government, there must be somebody who is at the head. God has placed man in the position of headship.

For Adam was first formed, then Eve. (1 Timothy 2:13)

Man is the head by priority of creation.

And Adam was not deceived, but the woman, being deceived, was in the transgression. (1 Timothy 2:14)

To put this in good Americana, Adam was not deceived, but the woman was really taken in. She was sold a bill of goods. She was the one who was grossly deceived. This suggests that Adam, when he took of the fruit in the Garden of Eden, did it deliberately. He knew what he was doing. He had a choice: He could either walk out of that garden with Eve in sin or stay in the garden and bid her good-bye. He chose to go with her.

My friend, we have a Savior who did a similar thing for the human family. He could have stepped out of this world and returned to heaven. He was without sin, so He did not have to die. But Jesus said that He would willingly lay down His life:

No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.
(John 10:18)

He did not have to go to the cross, but because He loved us, He took our place.

For he hath made him, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Saved in Childbearing?

Notice now the concluding verse of 1 Timothy 2. This is one of the most difficult verses to deal with. It looks as if the Bible is saying a woman can be saved by bearing children:

Notwithstanding, she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and love and holiness with sobriety. (1 Timothy 2:15)

What does “saved in childbearing” mean? There are several views. One is that the difficulty in rightly understanding this verse is due to the translation of the little preposition “in,” which in the Greek is *dia*, meaning “through,” so that it should read: “Notwithstanding she shall be saved

[preserved] through childbearing.” Paul had just given the illustration of Adam and Eve. When Eve sinned, God said to her, “In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” (Genesis 3:16). That curse is not removed. After a woman is a Christian, she will still bring forth children in sorrow. But even though she suffers and travails, she will be preserved, not *by* this, but *through* this. Although the curse of Eve is still upon her when she bears a child, she is still saved.

Another view is that since it was the sin of Eve that brought sin into the world, now every time a woman bears a child, she brings a sinner into the world — that is all she *can* bring into the world. But Mary brought the Lord Jesus, the sinless Savior, into the world. So how are women saved? By childbearing, by Mary’s bringing the *Savior* into the world. Don’t ever say that woman brought sin into the world unless you are prepared to add that woman also brought the Savior into the world. My friend, no *man* provided a Savior — a *woman* did. However, each individual woman is saved by faith, the same as each man is saved by faith. She is to grow in love and holiness just as a man is.

The important thing is the fact that “they continue in faith and love and holiness with sobriety.”

Capsulized

Let’s review what the Bible says about the position of women in the local church. God wants them to have a part; He gives no restriction against them praying publicly. But He does not want them to be like the women in the Mystery religions. They are not to be drunken or have disheveled hair or be dressed like courtesans when they pray publicly. He does not say that women are not to dress in style, nor does He say they are to have no ministry in the local church. Women have a definite place, as men have a definite place. When women take that place, God certainly honors them in their service to Him.

A Hindu woman once said to a missionary, “Surely your Bible was written by a woman.” The missionary asked, “Why do you say that?” The woman replied, “Because it says so many kind things for women. Our writers never refer to us but in reproach.” May I say to you that the Word of God is the one Book that has elevated womanhood in this world. Paul preached this gospel in a world that saw womanhood degraded and depraved. The preaching of that gospel lifted them up to their God-given place. It does not rule them out of a ministry for God.

However, let me repeat that God does not call women into the area of doctrine. When Gypsy Smith was holding meetings at First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, a woman came to him one night after the service and said, “I am called to preach.”

In his inimitable manner, he said to her, “How many children do you have?”

“Five.”

“That’s wonderful! God has called you to preach, and He has already given you your congregation!”

God has given women a marvelous place to function in both the home and the local church; He has given man a marvelous place to function in the home and in the church. One is not greater than the other. But woman’s place is one that only a woman can fill. Man’s place is one that only a man can fill. God honors and blesses when we recognize and observe this distinction.