

Can Women Lead the Church in Prayer?

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“Therefore, I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension” (1 Tim.2:8 NASB).

Introduction

This brief article is not about women’s role and ministry in the church. The scope of the article is limited to the question of **who should lead in prayer in the church?** In my estimation, 1 Tim.2:8 clearly answers this question without a shadow of doubt. But this verse is generally overlooked in most discussions on women’s ministry in the church. 1 Timothy 2:1-8 deals with several matters related to the prayer of the church. In his instructions on prayer, Paul specifically lays down the pattern of public prayer in the assembly and answers the question, *who should lead in prayer in the church?* This has become a controversial and debatable issue even among conservative evangelicals. Even when we agree on the limits the Word of God places on women in areas related to the leadership, teaching, and exercising authority, many of us are not quite sure about their role in leading in prayer. What does the Scripture say?

The Scripture is very clear on *who* should lead in public prayer in the church. **1 Timothy 2:8** addresses this issue.

A Brief Expository Analysis of 1 TIM.2:8

“**Therefore**” indicates that this verse goes with the preceding section on prayer. Paul continues his instructions on “prayers” begun in verse 1.

“**I want**” (KJV: “I will”): The apostolic authority is represented in Paul’s words “**I want**” (“I purpose,” “I will,” “I command” or “I determine”). It is futile to argue that this is Paul’s suggestion, or this is just a personal preference for Paul. A better rendition would be, “I demand/command that the men.....” The tone of the verb (*boulomai*) “indicates that it refers here to ordering by apostolic authority.”¹ According to Guthrie, “the authority shines out in the opening verb *boulomai* (I will) which should be regarded almost as a command. Scott likens it to a royal decree.”²

Paul calls upon the men to lead the congregation in Prayer. “**The men**” is with the definite article (“the men”). This is reflected in most translations (NASB, ESV, NIV, NKJV, Darby, RSV, CSB, NET etc.) Paul’s use of the term “**the men**” is gender specific. The word is *aner* – it refers to the **male members** of the church in Ephesus. The inclusion of the article marks a class – “**the males.**” It exclusively means “males” as opposed to “females” in contrast to the word translated

¹ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 128.

² Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 73-74.

“men” (*anthropos*) in verses 1, 4, and 5 where *mankind* is in view including men and women (this difference is not felt in English, but in the Greek, it is plain). Paul is intentional and categorical about who should lead in public prayer. It is men; literally **“the men.”** *Paul is not saying he doesn’t want the women to pray. He is saying he wants the men to lead in prayer in the assembly of God’s people.*

The idea that men should lead in prayer cannot have surprised those who are used to the Synagogue. The Christian assemblies followed some of the customs in the Jewish Synagogue, where women were forbidden to speak. Men are to be leaders in their homes and in their churches. This is God’s will revealed in His Word. Leading in prayer is a strategic frontline ministry neglected in many churches. Men set the pace and lead by example. **Paul does not say “I want people to pray.... He says I want men to pray” in the church.**

It is important to note that the context of the passage (1 Tim.2:1-8) is evangelistic prayer. All Christians are obligated to pray for the salvation of souls and spiritual awakening of the people and rulers. Yet in the assembly Paul specified that **men are to lead the congregations in prayer.** Paul lays down the rule of the restriction of public praying to the men in the assembly.

“In every place” (KJV, NKJV, NIV: “everywhere”) refers to the meeting place of the people of God, where Christian congregations assemble (every place of public worship). Early Christians initially met in homes and many of the first churches were house churches. In its four occurrences in Paul’s epistles (1 Cor.1:2; 2 Cor.2:14; 1 Thess.1:8), the phrase “every place” refers to the gathering of the church, wherever you are meeting. The reference to “in the churches” in 1 Cor.14:34 could well be equivalent to “in every place.” This is the apostle’s express instruction and requirement for every assembly.

Conclusion

Paul’s instruction in 1 Tim.2:8 is very clear, despite many unsuccessful efforts to twist their meaning or introduce forced interpretations. The verse does not say as some commentators would like us to believe, “as long as men are in control of the worship service, women can pray” or she must pray in such a way as not to usurp the place of the men.³ Others try to downplay or dilute the usage of “the men” in this verse.⁴

In the passage discussed above women are not permitted to do audible and public exercise of prayer in the gathering of the church. But they have all freedom to be engaged in prayer in other settings. It may be asked whether women can say “amen” or take part in singing. I find no prohibition in relation to these matters in the Word of God. I believe the answer to this tricky question is clear in the minds of those who ask it. It is the whole company of believers joining in singing and praising God. **It is a participatory role and not a leading role.**

³ Homer A Kent, Jr., *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 102-103.

⁴ E.g., Gordon Fee. *1 And 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1988), 71.

Is the silence of women in the church a denial of their priestly role? Men and women are believer-priests before God (priesthood of all believers). But let us not forget the fact that **Scripture restricts women's public functioning as priests in the meetings of the church.** Public praying in the assembly is the representative role of leading the assembly in prayer. That person is acting as the mouthpiece of the assembly. I believe a representative role is a leadership role. Though I do not present it as strong case, there are no recorded examples anywhere in Scripture of women leading in public prayer in the assembly of God.

Women must not lead in public prayer in the church. This conclusion based on the study of 1 Tim.2:8 is consistent with the principles of normal, literal interpretation of the text. Only through false hermeneutical gymnastics one can reach a conclusion other than what is obvious in the text and defended in this article.