

INTRODUCTION

We come today to one of the most hotly contested issues of our day. 'The role of woman in the church.' There are all sorts of views on this and over the last decade major denominations have been split on this issue. The Church of England a number of years ago decided to ordain woman as Priests and as a result this issue has increased in intensity. Churches of all persuasions have split over this issue; Presbyterians, Baptist's and Independents of all persuasions have been affected by it.

I am not going to give you all the different views on this issue, nor am I going to present the arguments people use from this passage for the ordination of woman. If you want to find that out, then I can lend you a number of books that will do this for you. What I want to do is to give what I believe is the clear teaching of Scripture concerning this issue.

The whole debate concerning the role of women in churches has in my view sadly moved away from Scripture in order to prove the case one way or the other. The traditional teaching that has been held in every generation is suddenly being abandoned. Churches and Bible Colleges across our world are being affected by this teaching on the role of woman, which is mainly being promoted by Christian feminism. Dozens of books have been written defending the new teaching regarding the role of women. But before we move on to the role of women; Paul has a word for men.

1. A WORD FOR MEN (v 8)

In the context of this passage verse 8 is a continuation of all that we have said over the last weeks. We are to pray for everyone because of the seven reasons that I gave last time, but now Paul is concerned with our attitude in prayer. Paul addresses the men, for in public worship in Ephesus it was the men who led the congregation in prayer; therefore he speaks to men rather than woman.

It seems probable that this was a particular problem in Ephesus, perhaps caused by the false teachers who as we have seen in previous weeks were influential within the church. He assumes that the men lifted up their hands in prayer because that is probably the normal posture that was adopted for prayer in their own culture.

However the emphasis is not on posture in prayer for in the bible we have different types of postures. Sometimes people kneeled, at other times people stood up, at others times people lay flat on their face. The posture usually reflected their prayer. For example if you were repentant in prayer you might fall flat on your face, but if you are praising God for his Greatness you might kneel in humility. A number of these postures might be adopted in one single prayer. But that is not important.

What is important is our attitude in prayer. The hands are to be holy which simply means that there is no point going through the motions of prayer if your life is not holy. How can people approach God with unholy hands? How can we approach God in prayer for this lost world if our hearts are corrupted and stained by sin? It's the same teaching as in Psalm 24:4. Paul goes on to apply what he means.

You cannot come to God in prayer if you are harbouring anger in your heart either against God or someone else. You cannot expect your praying to be acceptable to God if we are in dispute with others. Jesus taught very clearly that if you are in dispute with someone or vice versa, then you are to put it right before you come to worship God (Matthew 5:23-24).

So the application for those of us who lead this congregation in prayer (and for us all in private prayer) is simple. When we approach God in prayer we must have pure hearts, we must be in a right relationship with God and with others. Otherwise our prayers will not be acceptable to a Holy God. Now let's move on to consider:

2. A WORD TO WOMAN (vs. 9-12)

The first thing Paul says to these women at Ephesus is:

a) Let Your Dress Reflect Your Profession (vs. 9-10) - It is always dangerous when a man tries to give advice to a woman concerning dress sense, after all, let's face it, us men are hardly qualified to do so. But Paul does so, under the influence of the Holy Spirit and therefore I am able to do so on the authority of God's Word given to these women at Ephesus. So ladies if you have a problem with what I am about to say, take the matter up with the Lord not me, unless it becomes clear that I have misunderstood this passage.

It is probable that in Ephesus some Christian woman were doing the very opposite from what they are been told here by Paul. They probably dressed in immodest ways and without good sense (that is the meaning of the word 'propriety').

This probably came about because the women in Paul's day were very much a depressed group of people. Their culture and society put woman down; they were very much second-class citizens and were used and sometimes abused by the male dominated society whether they were Jew or Greek. However Christianity brought freedom and gave them a status in the church that they had never had before.

They suddenly found themselves being treated as equals with men, as 'all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). Under the influence of the false teachers at least some women used this freedom to dress in immodest ways and to wear very indecent clothing. But all this did, was to draw attention to these women within the church and no doubt distracted the men in the church. So Paul tells them how they should dress not just their bodies but their whole lives (with good works).

They are to dress in sensible, decent ways so as not to attract attention to themselves. They meet in church to worship God, not to show off their wardrobe or figure. They are also told that they are not to go over the top with their hairstyles nor wear over expensive clothes. I am told that in the first Century prostitutes often were the ones who wore expensive clothes and spent a long time making their hair beautiful, with loads of colourful braids.

That might have something to do with what's going on here. Let me just assure you ladies that this passage is **not** saying you should never wear braids in your hair or that you should never change your hairstyle. Nor is it teaching that women should not spend time on their appearance.

This passage is not an excuse for Christian woman to look shabby and to buy only cheap clothes. Paul's command to dress modestly, decently and with good sense will have to be applied by each Christian woman depending on taste, age, price and so on. However what these verses are saying is that Christian women should not go after the latest fashion, they should not be setting the fashion trends within society, and they simply should be dressing sensibly and inexpensively rather than cheaply.

Paul goes on to say that instead of concerning themselves with their dress sense and hair styles the thing that Christian women ought to be dressing themselves with is good deeds, for that would be appropriate for woman who profess to worship God. The word 'profess' means to make a public announcement. Just as a woman who wears extremely expensive clothes and fanciful hair

styles is making a public announcement about herself, in the same way, Christian women by their godly life which will be full of good works will make a public announcement about their worship of God.

So in our 21st Century world as the ungodly people in our society look at Christian women, what ought to draw their attention is not their dress sense or hair styles but their lives of good deeds. Those good deeds are presumably the same as those that are expected of widows (5:9-10). Peter in his letter makes the same point but puts it slightly differently (1 Peter 3:3-4). Christian women are to make the gospel attractive not by their dress sense or hairstyle but by their good deeds.

b) Let A Woman Learn, Not Teach (vs. 11-12) – Verses 11-15 go together and these verses are the most disputed verses when it comes to the subject of woman preachers. It is such a vast subject that I am not going to have time to deal with it fully this week. But we do need to think what Paul means by submission and by teaching in order to ascertain the meaning of these verses.

i) Learn in Quietness and Full Submission – The word that is translated ‘quietness’ is used two other times in nearby verses. It is used v 2 of this chapter where it refers to the quiet life, which all godly people should lead. But the most help to us is in v 12 where it is translated as ‘silent.’ In the context of this passage and this verse Paul says that Christian women are not to have authority over men, but to be silent or quiet.

This quietness that Paul is referred to is the opposite of exercising authority over men. Don’t exercise authority over men instead be silent. So what does Paul have in mind when he tells Christian women to be quiet or silent? Well it is clear he does not mean quiet in the absolute sense, but more like a quietness of spirit that respects and honours the leadership of the men that God has called to oversee the church.

So verse 11 says that women should learn in quietness and full submission and verse 12 helps us to understand that what is meant by ‘quietness’ is the opposite of exercising authority over men. So the point is not whether a woman should remain completely silent in church, as some churches have taught over the years; but whether she is submissive and supportive of those God has called to oversee the church which we will see in chapter 3 is the eldership. Therefore ‘quietness’ means not speaking in a way that compromises the authority of the eldership in the church.

It was likely that because of the new found freedom in Christ that these Christian women found, that some of them were usurping the authority of the eldership by claiming to be teachers and by working against the established eldership within the church. The role of Christian women is not one of teacher but of learner (v 11).

The role of a Christian woman is not to publicly teach but to submit herself to the authority and teaching of the eldership, and to do so in an attitude that reflects her agreement of her God given role within the church, which is one of learning. For Paul to encourage women to learn was quite revolutionally in his day.

Those who came from a Jewish background did not take the teaching of women for granted as we do in our society. For Judaism in Paul’s day did not hold women in high esteem. Although they were not barred from the Synagogue, neither were they encouraged to learn. In fact many Rabbis refused to teach women, and some likened it to throwing pearls to pigs.

The status for women in Greek society was not much better. Greek women tended to live very confined lives; often they lived in their own quarters and met no one but their husband’s. They rarely appeared on the street alone or attended any public function. Women were very much inferior in a male dominated society. So you can see just how revolutionary Paul’s teaching is

here. He encourages women to learn and to do so, in such a way that their attitude will reflect their support for the God given role of the eldership in teaching.

Any pretence to be a teacher was clearly not learning in quietness and submissiveness. It was in fact a rejection to her God given place in the life of the church.

This is important and I will take it up again next time as we look at the important verses of 13-14, but we live in a day when women have been pushing not just for equal status, which is right and proper but equal in function as well. This view that men and woman are equal in function as well as status has crept into the church and has been accepted without question by the church at large.

Christian women sometimes say that God has made men and women in his image therefore any function, which is open to men, should also be open to women. This is why women have been pushing for teaching recognition within churches, so that we now have women Ministers and elders in evangelical churches.

But Although God has made men and women one in Christ as far as status is concerned we are not one in function. As soon as Christian women learn that, the better for their own spiritual well being as well as that of the church. I have known Christian women who live their lives frustrated because they believe themselves to have the gift of teaching but have been unable to exercise that gift in the public worship of their local church. Sometimes they have sought to undermine the teaching of the eldership by their criticism of the preacher, or of the leadership given by the eldership.

Such a woman is not fulfilling her function within the church; her role is to learn from the teaching of the eldership, and to do so in a quiet submissive way so that her attitude is one that reflects God's ordering of the church, which is male eldership.

I suppose the question I leave with our ladies is one of roles in this church. Are you frustrated with your role, or do you recognise that God has given you a specific role within this church?

You are not to teach but you are to learn and to do so with the right attitude, an attitude that is submissive to the eldership and one that fully supports the men that God has called to oversee the work of God in this place. Only you can answer that for yourself, and hopefully next time we will be able to look at why God has given both men and women their own particular roles within the church

Amen