

BARRIERS TO PRAYER

1 Timothy 2:8-15

So, then, it is my wish that men should pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, with no anger in their hearts and no doubts in their minds. Even so, it is my wish that

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women should modestly and wisely adorn themselves in seemly dress. This adornment should not consist in braided hair, and ornaments of gold, and pearls, but – as befits women who profess to reverence God – they should adorn themselves with good works. Let a woman learn in silence and with all submission. I do not allow a woman to teach or to dictate to a man. Rather, it is my advice that she should be silent. For Adam was formed first, and then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived, and so became guilty of transgression. But women will be saved through child-bearing, if they continue in faith and love, and if they wisely walk the road that leads to holiness.

THE early Church took over the Jewish way of praying, which was to pray standing, with hands outstretched and the palms upwards. Later, Tertullian was to say that this depicted the attitude of Jesus upon the cross.

The Jews had always known about the barriers which kept people's prayers from God. Isaiah heard God say to the people: 'When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood' (Isaiah 1:15). Here, too, certain things are demanded.

(1) Those who pray must stretch out holy hands. They must hold up to God hands which do not touch the forbidden things. This does not mean for one moment that sinners are barred from God; but it does mean that there is no reality in the prayers of people who then go out to soil their hands with forbidden things, as if they had never prayed. It is not thinking of anyone who is helplessly in the grip of some passion and desperately fighting against it, bitterly conscious of failure. It is thinking of those whose prayers are a mere formality.

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1 TIMOTHY

2:8-15

(2) Those who pray must have no anger in their hearts. It has been said that 'forgiveness is indivisible'. Human and divine forgiveness go hand in hand. Again and again, Jesus stresses the fact that we cannot hope to receive the forgiveness of God as long as there is hostility between us and our neighbours. 'So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift' (Matthew 5:23-4). 'If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses' (Matthew 6:15). Jesus tells how the unforgiving servant himself found no forgiveness, and ends: 'So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart' (Matthew 18:35). To be forgiven, we must be forgiving. The *Didache*, the earliest Christian book on public worship, which dates from about AD 100, has it: 'Let no one who has a quarrel with his neighbour come to us, until they are reconciled.' The bitterness in people's hearts is a barrier which hinders their prayers from reaching God.

(3) Those who pray must have no doubts in their minds. This phrase can mean two things. The word used is *dialogismos*, which can mean both an *argument* and a *doubt*. If we take it in the sense of *argument*, it simply repeats what has gone before and restates the fact that bitterness and quarrels and venomous debates are a hindrance to prayer. It is better to take it in the sense of *doubt*. Before prayer is answered, there must be belief that God will answer. If people pray pessimistically and with no real belief that it is any use, their prayers fall to the ground. Before we can be cured, we must believe that we can be cured; before we can take to ourselves the grace of God, we must believe in that grace.

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We must take our prayers to God in the complete confidence that he hears and answers prayer.

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

I Timothy 2:8-15 (*contd*)

THE second part of this passage deals with the place of women in the Church. It cannot be read out of its historical context for it springs entirely from the situation in which it was written.

(1) It was written against a Jewish background. No nation ever gave a bigger place to women in the home and in family matters than the Jews did; but officially the position of a woman was very low. In Jewish law, she was not a person but a thing; she was entirely at the disposal of her father or of her husband. She was forbidden to learn the law; to instruct a woman in the law was to cast pearls before swine. Women had no part in the synagogue service; they were shut apart in a section of the synagogue, or in a gallery, where they could not be seen. A man came to the synagogue to *learn*, but, at the most, a woman came to *hear*. In the synagogue, the lesson from Scripture was read by members of the congregation – but not by women, for that would have been to lessen ‘the honour of the congregation’. It was absolutely forbidden for a woman to teach in a school; she might not even teach the youngest children. A woman was exempt from the stated demands of the law. She had no obligation to attend the sacred feasts and festivals. Women, slaves and children were classed together. In the Jewish morning prayer, a man thanked God that God had not made him ‘a Gentile, a slave or a woman’. In the *Sayings of the Fathers*, Rabbi Josē ben Johanan is quoted as saying: “Let your house be opened

wide, and let the poor be your household, and talk not much with a woman.” Hence the wise have said: “Everyone that talks much with a woman causes evil to himself, and desists from the works of the Law, and his end is that he inherits Gehenna.” A strict Rabbi would never greet a woman on the street, not even his own wife or daughter or mother or sister. It was said of woman: ‘Her work is to send her children to the synagogue; to attend to domestic concerns; to leave her husband free to study in the schools; to keep house for him until he returns.’

(2) It was written against a Greek background. The Greek background made things doubly difficult, as the place of women in Greek religion was low. The Temple of Aphrodite in Corinth had 1,000 priestesses who were sacred prostitutes and plied their trade every evening on the city streets. The Temple of Diana in Ephesus had its hundreds of priestesses called the *Melissae*, which means the *bees*, whose function was the same. The respectable Greek woman led a very confined life. She lived in her own quarters into which no one but her husband came. She did not even appear at meals. She never at any time appeared on the street alone; she never went to any public assembly. The fact is that, if in a Greek town Christian women had taken an active and a speaking part in its work, the church would inevitably have gained the reputation of being a place frequented by loose women.

Further, in Greek society there were women whose whole life consisted in elaborate dressing and braiding of the hair. In Rome, Pliny, the Governor of Bithynia, tells us of the Emperor Caligula’s wife having a dress covered entirely in pearls and emeralds. Even the Greeks and the Romans were shocked at the love of dress and of adornment which characterized some of their women. The great Greek religions were called the mystery religions, and they had precisely the

same regulations about dress as Paul has here. There is an inscription which reads: 'A consecrated woman shall not have gold ornaments, nor rouge, nor face-whitening, nor a headband, nor braided hair, nor shoes, except those made of felt or of the skins of sacrificed animals.' The early Church did not lay down these regulations as in any sense permanent, but as being necessary in the situation in which it found itself.

In any event, there is much on the other side. In the Genesis story, it was the woman who was created second and who fell to the seduction of the serpent tempter; but it was Mary of Nazareth who bore and who trained the child Jesus; it was Mary of Magdala who was first to see the risen Lord; it was four women who of all the disciples stood by the cross. Priscilla with her husband Aquila was a valued teacher in the early Church, a teacher who led Apollos to a knowledge of the truth (Acts 18:26). Euodia and Syntyche, in spite of their quarrel, were women who laboured in the gospel (Philippians 4:2-3). Philip, the evangelist, had four daughters who were prophetesses (Acts 21:9). The older women were to teach (Titus 2:3). Paul held Lois and Eunice in the highest honour (2 Timothy 1:5), and there are many women's names held in honour in Romans 16.

All the things in this chapter are mere temporary regulations to meet a given situation. If we want Paul's permanent view on this matter, we get it in Galatians 3:28: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' In Christ, the differences of place and honour and function within the Church are all wiped out.

And yet this passage ends with a real truth. Women, it says, will be saved in childbearing. There are two possible meanings here. It is just possible that this is a reference to the fact that Mary, a woman, was the mother of Jesus and that it

means that women will be saved – as all others will – by that supreme act of childbearing. But it is much more likely that the meaning is much simpler, and that Paul means that women will find salvation not in addressing meetings but in motherhood, which is their crowning glory.

We must read this passage not as a barrier to all women's service within the Church, but in the light of its Jewish and its Greek background. And we must look for Paul's permanent views in the passage where he tells us that the differences are wiped out, and that men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, are all eligible to serve Christ.

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