

Are the differences between men and women facts or fictions? My young granddaughter offers me a headband to put in my hair as we get ready to go to the park. I politely say, "Headbands are for girls. Boys and men don't wear headbands". Am I simply making this up, or am I reflecting some essential distinction between males and females? The view seems to be becoming more dominant in Western culture that there is no inherent reason why women should not behave like men and vice versa. The result is that some women no longer want to be women, and many men no longer know what it means to be a man.

The Bible stands against this trend in our society by insisting that gender is a God-given fact. It recognizes that the identity of every human being is gender-specific. There are essential differences between men and women. And these differences go back to the sixth day of creation, when "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Creation thus establishes the true equality of men and women - both are created in the image of God. At the same time, the distinction between man and woman is divinely ordained.

As a result, we shouldn't be surprised that God sometimes has special instructions for men and for women, especially in the church. The church is God's household, as Paul emphasizes in his purpose statement for this letter (1Timothy 3:15), and every household has its own rules. When it comes to public worship, the Holy Spirit does not hesitate to say that there are differences between men and women. Some instructions are most necessary for men. Other instructions, although they have practical implications for men, are especially appropriate for women.

1. Instructions for the Prayers of Men (v.8)

To the men of the church Paul writes, "I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing" (v.8). Paul is speaking as an apostle of Jesus Christ and the word "want" (or "desire" in some translations) is a word for an authoritative command. God wants his sons to be men of prayer. Having already outlined the content of prayer in vv.1-7, Paul now speaks to the conduct of prayer. First, its location - it is to be offered everywhere. This may refer to every place of worship. God has a universal rule for worship, wherever his people happen to meet - in a church building, in a house, under a tree. But, the word "everywhere" also promises the worldwide success of the gospel. The God who wants all men to be prayed for (v.1), who desires all men to be saved (v.4), and whose Son offered his life as a ransom for all men (v.6), will be praised in all places. His kingdom will continue to grow until he is praised throughout the world. Perhaps Paul is alluding here to the words of the prophet Malachi: "My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations", says the Lord Almighty" (Malachi 1:11). The God who rules the world deserves worldwide praise. One of the verses of the hymn, "The Day You Gave Us, Lord, Has Ended", echoes this sentiment: "As to each continent and island the dawn proclaims another day, the voice of prayer is never silent, nor dies the sound of praise away". There is no place where God's people cannot pray, and in the end, there is no place where they will not pray.

When God's people pray in every place, they are to lift "holy hands". While this mainly refers to the purity of prayer, it also has implications for its posture. The Bible does not demand any single position for prayer. Sometimes it speaks of bowing the head to pray, which is a good way of giving honour and worship to a king. Psalm 95 exhorts us, "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker" (v.6). The mention of kneeling suggests another suitable position for prayer. Getting on our knees is a sign of humility and absolute dependence on God. The Old Testament tells us that Daniel "got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God" (Daniel 6:10). The Lord Jesus knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane to pray (Luke 22:41). Other prayers are offered flat on the ground. Moses often fell face down in the presence of the

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Lord (eg Numbers 16:22, 20:6). When told of the loss of his livestock and children, Job “fell on the ground in worship” (Job 1:20). The angels and elders pray at God’s heavenly throne falling down on their faces and worshipping (Revelation 7:11). When a person is overwhelmed by either the troubles of life or the glories of God, the appropriate thing to do is to fall prostrate on the ground.

For public worship, standing for prayer is often to be preferred. At the dedication of the Temple, Solomon knelt to pray, but the people all stood up (2 Chronicles 6:3, 13). It thus became customary to stand for prayer in the Jewish synagogues. It was also the nearly universal practice of the early church, as we see from the writings of Justin Martyr, Origen, Jerome and Augustine. This is how the Puritans prayed too, as well as nearly every Presbyterian prior to the 20th century. Whether they kneel or stand, Christians may also raise their hands in prayer. This is what Solomon did at the dedication of the Temple and it was the way the priests customarily worshipped in the Temple: “Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord” (Psalm 134:1-2). Lifting hands was common in the early church, even though 1Timothy 2 is the only place it is mentioned in the New Testament. Scripture allows several postures for prayer - and a variety of postures is a help to private devotion and is suitable for the public worship of God.

But God is not nearly as interested in the posture of prayer as he is in the purity of prayer. He wants men, especially, to “lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing”. The reference to “holy hands” refers to temple worship in the Old Testament. God’s people consecrated themselves by washing their hands before prayer (Psalm 26:6). Clean hands symbolized a pure heart. When Paul mentions the outward sign of holy hands, he is talking about the inward reality of a holy life. One kind of unholiness, especially was causing problems in the Ephesian church: the sin of dissension or disputing. That is why Paul warned the church to pray “without anger or disputing (quarrelling)”. Clearly angry words were being exchanged in the church and the result was “constant friction between men of corrupt mind” (1Timothy 6:5). The sins of anger and argument have particular relevance for men. Of course, there are occasions when women disturb the peace of the church. But, as a general rule, men are more likely to agitate the church. Men are typically like that. They are critical and competitive. They are quick to argue and slow to listen. They would rather be right than reconciled. They get angry when they don’t get their way. So the Bible reminds Christian men not to fight.

Arguments are harmful to the body of Christ in many ways, but especially because they hinder the church’s prayers. Bitterness and resentment result in sour prayers. Remember that Jesus taught that if we are having a dispute with someone, we should not come to worship at all until the matter is settled: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). A man can lift up holy hands in prayer only if he has a right relationship with his brothers, not only in the local church, but also in the wider Christian community. Reconciliation is especially important when it comes to leading public worship.

When Paul refers to men praying in v.8, his point is not that men only should pray but rather that everywhere the church of Jesus Christ exists there should be men who pray. He is not forbidding women from praying. Although the first house churches may have had seasons of open prayer, congregational prayers were conducted by the elders of the church.

The connection between the spiritual life and the prayer life holds true for everyone who prays, doesn’t it? We see Peter referring to it in his first letter, “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your

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prayers” (1Peter 3:7). An inconsiderate husband is an ineffective intercessor. The power of prayer is directly related to its purity. The prayers of an unholy man will go unanswered, while the petitions of a righteous man are “powerful and effective” (James 5:16). Of all the incentives we have to lead holy lives surely the most compelling is so that God will answer our prayers.

How can unholy men lift holy hands in prayer? Surely the only sincere way to pray is as a confessing sinner. Therefore, we come like the tax collector to pray “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). The only pure prayer is a penitential prayer. This explains why Christians always pray in the name of Jesus. He is the only mediator between God and man. He offers cleansing from sin through his blood shed on the cross. So as Christians we pray like this, “Lord, I know you answer only the prayers of the righteous, but answer my prayer anyway, not because I am righteous, but because Jesus Christ is righteous, and because his blood is the atonement for my sin”. Whenever we pray in the name of Jesus, God will hear us out, unrighteous though we are (Hebrews 4:15-16).

2. Instructions for the Prayers of Women (vv.9-10)

The apostle Paul also gave instructions for the prayers of women. Since these instructions touch on the subject of fashion, it is hard not to approach them with some trepidation: “I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God” (vv.9-10). No beauty salons? No fancy jewels? No fashion statements? If this verse seems out of touch with contemporary culture, that is all the more reason to listen to what it says. Which is more likely - that the Bible is out of date or that our culture is out of line? God’s Word critiques every culture, as Mavis Price reminded us at last week’s Missions Morning Tea. Often the Scripture that most shocks and surprises us, or even angers and offends us, is the Scripture we most need to hear. The word “also” in v.9 sets the context, doesn’t it? Paul is still addressing the subject of public worship. He assumes that women will be present in the assembly to praise God, and perhaps even to pray aloud (see 1Corinthians 11:5). While men are to pray without argumentation, women are to pray without showing off.

In Hellenistic society, elaborately braided hair was a sign of extravagant luxury. Paul’s wording is significant: “not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes”. The combining of a fancy hair style with fancy jewellery was a sign of vanity. Some women spent hours fixing their hair and spangling their hairstyles with gems. Such finery must have been a temptation to women in the Ephesian church. Some of them, at least, were wealthy (1Timothy 6:17). Luxurious living must have seemed particularly inappropriate in a community where other Christians were poor.

Excessive adornment was a characteristic not only of the wealthy, but also of prostitutes. Remember that Ephesus was home to the goddess Artemis. Members of the Ephesian church could see the temple prostitutes loitering near the pillars of her temple. To dress in their style was almost the equivalent of marital unfaithfulness. But God wants Christian women to take their stand against everything associated with sexual immorality, as well as material luxury. In part, Paul was telling women not to come to church dressed like prostitutes. Such attire was completely unsuitable for a prayer meeting. But Paul was not simply telling women what not to wear. He was also telling them what to wear and how to wear it. Words like “modestly”, “decency” and “propriety” all signify positive virtues.

The Greek word translated “modestly” (“respectably” in other translations) is a form of humility, which is the appropriate attitude for prayer. A Christian woman goes to church primarily to meet God - not men. So “getting ready for church” is primarily a matter of preparing the heart for prayer. A woman who loves to be noticed must remember with whom she is competing. It is God who ought to receive all our attention and affection in prayer. “Decency” has sexual overtones. It implies that women should not dress or conduct themselves in a seductive or suggestive manner. “Propriety” is a broader concept, meaning to be sober and to exercise discretion and self-control. By using these

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terms, the Bible is not telling Christian women to make sure they are always out of style. What is forbidden is not having a hair style, or owning jewellery, or wearing nice clothes, but using such things immodestly or indecently. God does not want his daughters to be overly concerned with how they look. What modesty means in practice may vary from culture to culture. But vanity and immorality come from the heart, and the Lord knows what lies in a woman's heart.

Why does the Bible address these comments to women? Clearly it is not because Christian men are permitted to be immodest or indecent. Nor is it because men never acquire a taste for fashion. Rather it is because women, especially, are prone to lavish their attention on outward appearance. This is as true today as it was in Timothy's times. The fashion industry, the cosmetic industry and the jewellery industry are supported largely by females. Yet God himself cares little or nothing for outward appearance. Remember what God said to Samuel when he sought to anoint the next king of Israel after Saul? "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1Samuel 16:7). God's standards for feminine beauty, therefore, stand diametrically opposed to the standards of modern culture. How many fashion magazines feature tips for inward beauty? The world says beauty is only skin deep, but God turns things inside out. He says that beauty comes from the inward spiritual life. Men are usually part of the problem. By evaluating women primarily by their looks, men make women slaves to their appearance.

If a woman wants to become beautiful to God, here is the fashion statement she ought to make: adorn yourself "with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God". Some of the good deeds Paul has in mind are listed in chapter 5 of 1Timothy: "bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds" (v.10). A woman who adorns herself with good deeds is always well dressed! The same point is made by the apostle Peter in his first letter when talking about the relationship between husbands and wives: "Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewellery and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful (vv.1-5).

The way to become more attractive is through godliness, not flashy and showy dressing. A woman is made beautiful by what she does, not what she wears. As a result, the older a woman gets, the more beautiful she can become! Although she may be aging on the outside, yet inwardly, a godly woman is becoming more and more beautiful all the time. And so true beauty requires nurturing the inward woman. How can you women do that? Ask questions like these: How much money do I spend on my appearance - on clothes, jewellery, cosmetics, hairstyles and the like? How does that compare with my giving to the Lord's work? How much time do I spend in front of the mirror, and how much time do I spend in prayer or serving the Lord in the church? When a Christian woman does look in the mirror, she should look for good works, which are the proof of genuine faith in Jesus Christ. As one commentator says, "Women need to remember that if nature has made them plain, grace can make them beautiful, and if nature has made them beautiful, good deeds can add to their beauty".

Good works are what a man should look for in a woman. When a man notices a woman who is devoted to the Lord, who gives good advice, who handles her professional work with integrity, who loves children, who cares for the sick and is hospitable and helpful to the needy, rather than saying, "She's not all that good-looking, but she really loves the Lord", he should exclaim, "Now there is a beautiful woman!"

(1Timothy 2:8-10; Matthew 5:21-24; 1Peter 3:1-7)

Are you a man or woman of prayer? Entering wholeheartedly into the prayer life of our church, praying especially for the work of the gospel, here and overseas, and the salvation of souls? And cherishing private prayer and time with the Lord daily? Is there anything that might hinder your prayers and prevent you from being an effective intercessor? May the Lord challenge us and give us grace in this most crucial ministry we have as God's people!

Amen

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