

What about Women Praying in Public Church Settings? **by Bob Young**

[Note: an elder in another congregation wrote me asking a series of questions about Bible teaching on this subject. This article is developed from the response I wrote to him.]

The question of the participation of women in public prayer when men are present—including such typical questions as who, when, where, and how—is a difficult topic. The New Testament does not say as much as we would like, and some of the verses which seem to address the subject are not clear to the modern reader. The cultural and religious context of these verses is not clearly visible in Scripture. Thus, different views have been advanced by capable scholars.

Among the verses that may suggest some role for women are 1 Corinthians 11 and 14. Some have also justified the participation of women in public roles based on 1 Timothy 2, although the circumstances and teachings of this passage are much debated.

Without a detailed study of the passages involved (another topic for another paper, and various studies are currently available in print from various authors representing various viewpoints), allow me to set forth some general guidelines which may help the church find its way in this difficult area. Recognize please that these are my opinions, based on study and general biblical principles.

I will address these questions in two areas: private gatherings and public gatherings.

Concerning private gatherings

First, there is no clear biblical reason why women should not participate in worship in the family setting. Husbands and wives may pray together, wives may participate in a family devotion with children, even young sons who are Christians. These are private gatherings.

Second, if the setting is a “family setting”, it is possible that the same principle may be applied when others are present, for example a grandfather or an uncle. Could the “family setting” principle be applied if two Christian couples were concluding an evening of fellowship? I think so, if the third principle presented below is honored.

Third, no action, regardless of how correct, biblical, or proper, is acceptable if it causes another to stumble or act inconsistently with conscience. Thus, if two couples, as in the case suggested above, are concluding an evening but one of the Christians present does not consider shared prayer (including both men and women) to be biblically appropriate, I believe the group, out of courtesy and respect for the faith of those present and involved, should not insist on including the women.

Concerning public gatherings

An entirely different situation arises when a public activity is involved. If the event is “sponsored by the church,” additional dynamics come into play.

First, without deciding whether the Bible allows or disallows the participation of women in any given situation in the contemporary church, the principle set forth in the third point

above suggests that any action that requires another to contradict conscience is wrong. The group should respect the conscience of the “weaker” brother or sister.

Second, it does not matter whether this public gathering is a church assembly, a Bible class, or a small gathering in a home, if it is “church sponsored”, extreme caution should be exercised to honor the conscience of all. A public gathering sponsored by the church may even have faith repercussions for members who are not present.

Conclusion

Allow me to summarize. Regardless of how one understands the Bible teaching about women participating in public prayer in gatherings where both men and women are present, the place of wisdom in public gatherings is to discourage the practice. Arrangements can be made for separate gatherings or other venues to provide both men and women the opportunity to share their prayer lives aloud. On the other hand, if there is an inadvertent participation, I would probably not under most circumstances make it a major issue.