

The Church at Prayer

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THE earliest reference to Christians gathering together for prayer is in the first chapter of the book of Acts, where it is recorded that they met in ‘an upper room’ (literally ‘the upper room’: perhaps the very same one in which our Lord had previously met with his disciples, Lk 22:8, 12; Jn 20:19) and that there ‘all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication’ (Acts 1:13, 14). Then, after the remarkable outpouring of the Spirit, we read that, along with many new converts, they ‘continued stedfastly...in (the) prayers’ which, once again, indicates public, corporate prayer (Acts 2:42).

After Jewish persecution broke out, two of the apostles were arrested; but following their release, the historian tells us that they returned to their meeting-place and that, along with fellow Christians, they engaged in further prayer. These believers ‘lifted up their voice to God with one accord’, with the result that ‘the place was shaken where they were assembled’ and ‘they were all filled with the Holy Ghost’ (Acts 4:24ff).

The next example of a prayer-meeting was when Peter was imprisoned and appeared to be in extreme danger. Herod Agrippa had already executed James, brother of John, the beloved disciple. It looked as if Peter was about to suffer the same fate. ‘But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him’ (Acts 12:5). The disciples could hardly believe their own senses when Peter, who had been delivered by an angel, unexpectedly joined them, even while they were still believingly and fervently ‘praying’ (Acts 12:12).

There are other references to Christian believers uniting in prayer, as in Acts 13:3, 14:23, 16:25, 20:36, and 21:5. Furthermore, there are clear allusions to the practice in the New Testament epistles: for

example, in 1 Corinthians 14:15- 17, 26 and 1 Timothy 2:1, 2.

Quite evidently, it is our duty to meet together for prayer; but while all should join in such praying, I believe Scripture teaches that it is the responsibility of the men present to lead the congregation in prayer. In this connection, the following points are relevant and should be considered:-

Ancient Patriarchal Practice

Public prayer began in the time of Enosh, Adam’s grandson. At that time, there was an alarming increase in wickedness and the godly decided to meet together for the purpose of presenting their united petitions to the God of grace. ‘Then’, we are told, ‘began men to call upon the name of the Lord’ (Gen 4:26). While it is true that the word ‘men’ is not in the original Hebrew, the immediate context mentions a believing father and son, which appears to suggest that they managed and directed these public prayers. Be that as it may, it is plainly taught elsewhere that congregational prayer was conducted by men.

At this point, we might profitably consider the other public occasions when people ‘called on the name of God’. In every single case, men - not women - were involved. At Bethel, for example, ‘Abraham’ assembled his extended household and, after erecting an altar, ‘he...called upon the name of the Lord’ (Gen 12:8, 14:14. See other instances of this in Gen 13:4 and 21:33). Later, Isaac did just as Abraham had done before him. Gathering his servants before the altar in Beersheba, we read that ‘he...called upon the name of the Lord’ (Gen 26:25).

From the beginning, therefore, it was only the men who prayed audibly in public assemblies.

Jewish Rites and Ceremonies

When the ceremonial law was introduced, two rites symbolized the presentation of prayer: the offering up of incense and of sacrifice. This much is made clear by David when he says, 'Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice' (Ps 141:2. See also: Rev 5:8; 8:3, 4. Ps 51:17). Now publicly, these rites were performed by men.

The incense, consisting of four fragrant ingredients, was originally offered by Aaron, the High Priest. On the Day of Atonement, he alone officiated with incense at the golden altar (Lev 16:12, 13). The law also required 'Aaron' to 'burn thereon sweet incense every morning' and 'at even' (Exod 30:7, 8). However, in the light of subsequent events, it is clear that this service did not belong exclusively to him, for the lower priests were allowed to share in this ministry. Remember what is written of Zacharias, father of the Baptist. 'According to the custom of the priest's office', we read, 'his lot was to burn incense'; and 'the whole multitude...were praying without, at the time of the incense' (Lk 1:9, 10). While this must be granted, it is important to observe that the prerogative belonged only to Aaron's male descendants.

As far as the sacrifices are concerned, we know that, generally speaking, they were offered by the same persons (i.e. Aaron and the other priests: Lev 16:9, 10. Exod 29:38-44); but even when this duty was performed by others - as it sometimes was, both before and after the institution of the priesthood - those made responsible for it were all men, whether Noah, Jacob, Samuel, or the 'young men' who, at Sinai, 'offered offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings' (Gen 8:20; 31:54; 1 Sam 9:13; Exod 24:5).

Tabernacle, Temple, and Synagogue

In their various places of worship, the Jews were

accustomed to having men offer up prayers on their behalf. This was true of the Tabernacle where, in the court, the High Priest sought pardon for 'all the iniquities of the children of Israel' while (according to Jewish authorities) the people remained prostrate and in silent humiliation (Lev 16:21).

On a more regular basis, similar intercession was probably made when 'the priests, Aaron's sons', offered Israel's daily 'sacrifice' (Exod 29:38-42). Not that this was confined to the official priesthood. In his office of intercessor, Moses also spoke with God at 'the door of the tabernacle' and, although at a distance, 'all the people rose up and worshipped' (Exod 33:9-11).

However, there is not the slightest evidence to suggest that a woman ever performed this duty. The case of Hannah (1 Sam 1) can hardly be cited, for she was not at a public meeting, neither was there a congregation present. Besides, we are expressly told that 'she spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard' (1 Sam 1:13).

Much the same could be said of the Temple, only there men like David, Solomon, and Jehoshaphat occasionally led in prayer (1 Chron 29:10-19; 2 Chron 6:12-42; 20:5-13). Among the lesser known men who did so, mention should be made of Mattaniah, 'the principal to begin the thanksgiving in prayer', and the other brethren named along with him, Bakbukiah and Abda (Neh 11:17).

In the Synagogue (which was a divine institution, Lev 23:3), prayers were not always said by the 'chief ruler' or 'messenger', but by any man in the congregation who was called upon to pray. As for the women, Dr Kaufmann Kohler informs us that 'they attended the service, but could take no part in the common service' (Hastings' Dictionary of the Apostolic Church). This is of considerable importance for our purpose because synagogue worship exerted a profound influence on the worship of the early Christian Church. There every good

reason for believing that this particular practice was carried over into Christian worship services.

Special Meetings for Prayer

God often called his people together for solemn prayer. One such assembly was convened in the prophet Joel's day. It was to include everyone (even young children), but the people were only to offer prayer through their representatives, 'the priests, the ministers of the Lord'. Told to stand in the open court 'between the porch and the altar' (i.e. facing the Holy of Holies, with the congregation behind them) these men made humble and penitent supplication, saying, 'Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach...' (Joel 2:15-17). On another occasion, when the temple was being rebuilt, we read that the people of Bethel, recognising their need of God's favour, sent some of their number to 'pray before the Lord'. Prominent among these intercessors were 'Sherezzer and Regemmelech' and, in connection with our present study, it is surely significant that they were accompanied by 'their men' (Zech 7:2).

Life in the Early Christian Church

The first recorded public prayer of the Christian church is recorded in Acts, chapter 1. Looking back for a moment to verse 14, we gather that although women were present, they do not appear to have engaged in audible prayer. 'These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women...' (Acts 1:14). Now who exactly is intended by 'these'? Clearly the brethren named in the previous verse: Peter, James, John, Andrew, and so on. 'These all continued...in prayer...'

So what about the women? Did they also speak in prayer? The order of words in the Greek (more or less the same as in our Authorised Version) strongly suggests that they did not. Had the order been, 'These all, with the women, continued with one accord in prayer', the verse might have lent some authority to the practice; but as it stands, it appears

that the men led the company in prayer while the women silently prayed with them.

As for the prayer recorded in Acts 1:24, 25, we believe Peter was probably responsible for it. A vital matter was being considered (the election of someone to replace Judas) and since Peter had already taken the initiative in addressing those assembled (v 15ff), it is likely that he was also their spokesman in this solemn prayer (vv 24-26. Note: Peter refers here to the divine knowledge (v. 24), as he does later in Acts 15:8).

There are other examples of corporate prayer in the book of Acts, but the references are too general to assist us in our present enquiries (Acts 4:23ff; 12:5). In Acts chapter 13, however, we are told that, in the church at Antioch, a number of men (five are actually named) 'ministered to the Lord and fasted' (Acts 13:1, 2). The former word ('ministered') suggests that they were engaged in Divine service, while the latter word ('fasted') is usually mentioned in association with prayer (e.g. Acts 13:3; 14:23; 1 Sam 7:5,6; Dan 9:3; Matt 17:21). We conclude that here, as elsewhere, it was the custom for men to lead in public prayer.

The Teaching of the Apostles

As with all matters relating to church practice, the teaching of the New Testament epistles is of paramount importance. What do the apostles say about women taking an audible part in public prayer?

In 1 Corinthians 11:5, Paul anticipates that women will be present at public worship, participating in the congregational prayer and prophecy (this latter term often denotes praise, as in 1 Sam 10:5 and 1 Chron 25:1-3). However, it is crystal clear from remarks made later on in this epistle that he did not approve of women praying aloud.

Chapter 14 contains Paul's directions concerning the exercise of miraculous spiritual gifts, particularly tongues-speaking. He states that tongues-speaking

could assume the form of a prayer; and if it did, it was imperative for that utterance to be interpreted (or translated), because otherwise the prayer would be of no benefit to the people present. To Paul, it was essential that a speaker should be understood by the whole church. He therefore resolves that his own public praying will involve both the spirit and the mind. 'What is it then?', he says, 'I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also' (1 Cor 14:15). This is the context in which the apostle writes the following: 'Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak...' (1 Cor 14:34).

The speaking intended is public speaking, such as takes place in a time of open prayer. Women are not permitted to engage in this, because 'they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law' (v 34b). What exactly does that mean? It means that we should regard speaking in a service as an act of authority, the exercise of which on the part of women is contrary to that subordinate position assigned to them in the Old Testament (Gen 3:16).

Thus far we have dealt with the more negative side of the question. It is time now to consider a scripture which clearly and unmistakably assigns the duty to Christian men. 'I will therefore that (the) men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting' (1 Tim 2:8).

Here, the apostle is giving directions about the conduct of public worship and, more particularly, about praying in public. He begins by stressing the importance of such prayer (1 Tim 2:1a - the phrase 'first of all' might be rendered 'most important of all'); then, he proceeds to mention the various kinds of prayer (v 1b), the general scope of prayer (vv 1c-2a), the real purpose of prayer (v 2b-4), and, finally, the grounds on which such prayer is offered (1 Tim 2:5-7). This leads him to indicate the persons who

should do the praying in a Christian meeting - '(the) men' (1 Tim 2:8).

Quite evidently, Paul is referring here to the male members of the congregation. He puts this beyond doubt by the prefixing of a definite article (in the Greek), by using a word which designates only males (andras - not, as in verses 1, 4, & 5, anthropous, which is a generic word comprising both sexes i.e. human beings), and then by marking a contrast with 'the women' in verse 9 ('In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel...'). In the church, only the prayers of the men should be heard. The women should assume a quieter and more becoming role.

An Appeal to Christian Men

It is common for the apostle to request prayer from the various churches (e.g. Eph 6:19; Col 4:3), but when more specific, he asks for the prayers of the 'brethren'. Writing to the Romans, he says: 'Now I beseech you, brethren,...that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me' (Rom 15:30). Again, in his letters to the Thessalonians, he directs appeals to the same group 'Brethren', he says, 'pray for us; and again, 'Finally, brethren, pray for us...' (1 Thess 5:25; 2 Thess 3:1). This is best accounted for by the fact that, when the churches held their prayer-meetings, it was the 'brethren' present who lifted up their voices in solemn but fervent intercession.

Christian women are often richly endowed with spiritual gifts. In the church, they fulfil a vital function and there can be no doubt that they render a truly invaluable service. This accords with what we read in the Word of God (e.g. Acts 9:36; 16:15; Rom 16:1-2,3,6,12; Phil 4:3; Titus 2:3-5). The Lord has been pleased to bless his work through their prayers, whether offered in private devotions or along with other women (as in Lk 2:36, 37, Zech 12:10-14, and Acts 16:13). Their attendance at church prayer meetings is, I believe, essential to the continued supply of the Spirit and the greater prosperity of Christ's kingdom. However, in the presence of men,

they should offer silent prayer within the sanctuaries of their own hearts. The brethren should pray with

audible voice, leading the congregation to the Throne of Grace.