

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #113:
ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN IN PUBLIC CHURCH LIFE:
A STUDY OF 1 TIMOTHY 2 (PART ONE)

By John Temples

In 1 Timothy 2, Paul gives some instructions governing the roles of men and women in various aspects of church life. These instructions apply to public assemblies of the church for worship, Bible study, or fellowship, but not just such assemblies. Verses 1-7 tell us that the church, both as individuals and when we are assembled, should pray for all people, specifically for rulers. And when we pray, we need to recognize Christ as our sole Mediator.

Verse 8 also deals with prayer, but particularly public prayers and prayer leaders. Verse 8 declares that in Christian assemblies, leading of prayers is restricted to men. Let's look at each part of verse 8:

“I will” or “I desire.”

KJV--“I will” (meaning “it is my will that”)

“I desire”--NKJV, ESV, ASV

“I want”--NIV, NASV

This wording is sometimes misunderstood. Some have concluded that Paul's instruction here is just a personal preference--it would be nice if only the men led prayers, but it is not a requirement. However, the Greek word means to intend, to will, to urge. Strong's Concordance says it means “to will deliberately, to have as a purpose, to be minded.” It is not just a personal desire or preference, but a Spirit-inspired apostolic directive. Paul's “I will” is really “God's will” (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

“That the men”--the Greek word is *andras*, meaning the men specifically as opposed to the women. Paul here avoided the generic word for mankind, both men and women, which is *anthropos*.

“Pray”--lead a public prayer (implied by the context and by the use of *andras*).

“Everywhere” means “in every place where Christians assemble, in every place where public prayer is offered.”

Does this mean a woman cannot pray, or lead a prayer? By no means. But it does mean that a woman may not lead a prayer in any setting where Christian men are present.

In verse 8, Paul names three requirements for men leading prayer. (We sometimes think only of the one--“lifting up holy hands”--and do not notice the other two.) The three requirements are:

- Lifting up holy hands
- Without wrath
- Without doubting

Let’s talk about these in order.

“LIFTING UP HOLY HANDS”

Hands cannot be literally holy. “Holy hands” stands for a holy life or a holy person. This is a *synecdoche*, a common figure of speech where a body part is named but the whole person is meant. We speak of “hired hands”--we mean hired persons. Or “all hands on deck,” referring to all sailors. We say of a murderer that “he has blood on his hands.” Of course, we mean the entire person is guilty of murder, not just his hands.

There are many examples in Scripture where “hands” means the whole person. Here are some:

- Innocent hands--Genesis 20:5. (Hands cannot be innocent, but people can.)
- Strong hands--2 Samuel 2:7. (“Now therefore, let your hands be strengthened, and be valiant.”)

- Righteous hands--2 Samuel 22:21. (“Now the Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me.”)
- Sinful or iniquitous hands--Psalms 7:3, Proverbs 6:17 (“hands that shed innocent blood”--obviously a reference to murderous persons).
- Defiled hands--Isaiah 59:3.
- Bloody hands--Ezekiel 23:37.
- Lawless hands--Acts 2:23.
- Generous hands--Acts 11:30. “Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.” (Did just the hands of Barnabas and Saul go, or did they themselves go?)

So “lifting up holy hands” is a figure for “approaching God with a pure heart.” The emphasis is on the position of the heart in relationship to God, not necessarily the physical position of the hands. Some might insist, though, that based on this verse, one leading in prayer should or must raise his hands. But since the Bible speaks of people praying in many different positions (standing, kneeling, lying on the ground, chained to a Roman guard, etc), this conclusion is not warranted.

Well, MAY a prayer leader raise his hands if he wants to? Yes; but his posture might send a wrong signal and be misinterpreted. Wayne Jackson says:

“Some have inquired as to whether there is any wrong with people raising their hands when they pray, even in the public assembly? In some churches this is becoming more common. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this practice. Perhaps, however, a word of caution would not be out of place, and admittedly one must be cautious here. First, this practice in the modern community of ‘Christendom’ is generally identified with the hyper-emotional ‘Pentecostal’ people who are known to thrust aside scriptural restraint for the so-called ‘charismatic’ experience. One may wish to consider whether he wants to leave the impression that he is inclined in this direction. Second, the phenomenon is finding some level of a ‘comfort zone’ among the more liberal congregations of

the Lord's people. The 'hands up' stance may send a signal to some that a 'more contemporary' worship format is being tested — something more emotional and less formal. Third, one might consider whether such a novel practice might create a distraction for others. These are 'judgment' factors, but it seems that a prudent Christian might want to reflect upon them.”
(www.christiancourier.com)

Here is another quote from an Internet blog. This writer also draws the conclusion that “lifting up holy hands” is a figurative expression:

“It is noteworthy that human hands are used in contexts throughout Scripture to signify a holy or unholy life. Job spoke of the pureness of his prayer because his hands were not involved in violence (16:17). David spoke of washing his hands in innocence so as to approach the altar of God (Psalm 26:6). In the NT, hands are also associated with either a holy or unholy life...James calls believers to ‘draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.’ Surely, James is not telling sinners to merely go and wash their hands. Thus, the hands are a synecdoche—a part that represents the whole—referring to a holy life lived by the man so that his prayers will be heard by God.”
(<http://harvestbiblechurch.net/blog/holy-hands>)

So, the conclusion of the matter is this: Paul's emphasis in 1 Timothy 2:8 is not on a certain physical posture of a man leading prayer. “Lifting up holy hands” is a figure of speech where hands represent the condition of his heart.

The second requirement stated in verse 8 for an acceptable prayer is “WITHOUT WRATH.” Here is a quote from Alexander MacLaren: “I do not think that Christian people generally recognise...the close and inseparable connection which subsists between their right feelings towards their fellow-men and the acceptance of their prayers with God....An angry man is a very unfit man to pray, and a man who cherishes in his heart any feelings of that nature towards anybody may be quite

sure that he is thereby shutting himself out from blessings which otherwise might be his....'First go and be reconciled to thy brother,' is as needful today as when the word was spoken."

The third prerequisite for acceptable prayer: "WITH NO DOUBTING." The Greek word actually means "with no disputing or arguing." Paul is not talking about uncertainty concerning God's answering your prayer, but about letting fusses and arguments with your fellow Christians impede your prayer.

Here is verse 8 in some different versions:

NIV: "Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing."

ESV: "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling."

NASB: "Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension."

NLT: "In every place of worship, I want men to pray with holy hands lifted up to God, free from anger and controversy."

So Paul is saying that men who lead prayer ought to be right with God (have "holy hands") and right with their fellow men ("with no wrath or disputing").

To summarize verses 1-8, Paul has given instructions regarding prayers of a public nature, whether in the church assemblies or in any other group setting where Christians are engaged in religious activities. He tells us what the nature and subjects of our prayers should be in verse 1. In verse 2, he reminds us to pray not just for ourselves but for governmental authorities. In verse 5, he points to Christ as our only Mediator (that is why we always voice our prayers "in Christ's name"). And in verse 8, he decrees that only men are to lead prayers in groups of men and women. He also says that men who lead prayer should lift up holy hands--that is, lead a blameless life.

In Part 2 next week, we will look at verses 9-15. --John Temples

