

Come to Understanding

They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding,
and they that murmured shall learn doctrine. — Isaiah 29:24

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The Voices of Women

In some circles, there is great confusion about the role of women in God's work. This is partly due to what appear to be conflicting statements made by Paul concerning the role of women in the congregation (the church). First he told the Corinthian women that they should only pray or prophesy with their heads covered:

5 But every woman that prays or prophesies with *her* head uncovered dishonors her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. -1 Corinthians 11

Then he told the same Corinthians that women were not permitted to speak in their congregations (churches):

34 Let your women keep silence in the congregations: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but *they are commanded* to be under obedience, as also says the law.

35 And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the congregation. -1 Corinthians 14

Paul made a similar objection against the women of Ephesus. He told Timothy:

11 Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.

12 But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. -1 Timothy 2

On one hand, Paul acknowledged that the Corinthian women could pray and prophesy as long as their heads were covered. On the other hand, he also told the Corinthian women as well as the Ephesian women to stay silent. He told the women of Corinth that they must be taught by their husbands at home. Furthermore, he told the women of Ephesus that they must not teach nor "usurp authority."

To better understand Paul's objection to the role of the women in Corinth and Ephesus in speaking and teaching in the congregation, it is important to know some of their history. Before Paul arrived with the gospel, women in both Corinth and Ephesus had been leaders in worshipping the goddess. The Corinthian goddess was known as Aphrodite (also called Venus by the Romans), whereas the Ephesian goddess was known as Artemis (also called Diana by the Romans). Both goddesses were said to preside over the lives of young girls.¹

[¹John R. Hinnells, *A Handbook of Ancient Religions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 309.]

Corinth was a wealthy and thriving Greek seaport, which was wholly dedicated to the worship of Aphrodite. The goddess was believed to have been born out of the "foam of the sea." Known as the goddess of love and beauty, it was claimed that by her power, "...gods and men were enslaved."²

Women played an important role in the worship of Aphrodite in Corinth. Her temple was said to have been served by a thousand "sacred prostitutes."³ The "courtesans," as they are sometimes politely called, were elevated in Corinth into:

"...a position they have in no other society attained. The voluptuous worship of Aphrodite gave a kind of religious sanction to their profession. Courtesans were the priestesses in her temples, and those of Corinth were believed by their prayers to have averted calamities from their city."⁴

Paul and his colleagues witnessed as the people of Ephesus, led by their image-making craftsmen, emotionally defended their dedicated worship of Artemis (Diana):

27 So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nothing; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana *Artemis* should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worships.

28 And when they heard *these sayings*, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great *is* Diana *Artemis* of the Ephesians. -Acts 19

As a confused mob gathered into a theater, they captured one of Paul's fellow Jews and went into a frenzy as they shouted their praises for the goddess:

34 But when they knew that he was a Jew, all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, Great *is* Diana *Artemis* of the Ephesians. -Acts 19

Although certain men profited from their image-making occupations, women dominated in the worship of Artemis as the Virgin Mother. The spiritual leader in the temple was a virgin grand priestess, assisted by a college of virgins.⁵

[²George Smith, *The Gentile Nations*, New York: Carlton & Porter, c1854, p. 368; ³William L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1955, p. 11; ⁴William Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1873, p. 308; ⁵Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Third Ed., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003, p. 198.]

So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense,
and caused them to understand the reading. — Nehemiah 8:8

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The role of women as the leaders in goddess worship was also seen among the surviving remnant of Judah that fled to Egypt. With the knowledge and consent of their husbands, the women rejected the Word of God in favor of worshipping the "Queen of Heaven:"

- 15 Then all the men which knew that their wives had burned incense to other gods, and all the women that stood by, a great multitude, even all the people that dwelt in the land of Egypt, in Pathros, answered Jeremiah, saying,
- 16 As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of Yahweh, we will not listen to you.
- 17 But we will certainly do whatever thing goes forth out of our own mouth, to burn incense to the queen of heaven.... -Jeremiah 44

Like the women of Judah, the women of both Corinth and Ephesus led in the worship of the goddess. The women in Corinth worshipped Aphrodite through sexual excesses whereas in Ephesus the women worshipped Artemis through the apparent practice of celibacy. Each diminished the role of the husband and family in the society.

Paul warned Timothy that there were people in Ephesus who had "swerved" from the truth and were trying to teach, even though they didn't even understand what they were teaching:

- 6 From which some having swerved have turned aside to vain talking;
- 7 Desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm. -1 Timothy 1

Since women had dominated in the Ephesian worship of Artemis, it is very likely that many of them still wanted to teach after hearing the gospel. However, unless they were grounded in the Word of God, they could easily be deceived. Paul called such women, "silly women:"

- 6 For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts,
- 7 Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. -2 Timothy 3

If they had understood the law, then they would have taught the sound doctrine, which many needed to hear:

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Institute for Biblical and Historical Studies
Kerby F. Fannin, Ph.D., Director
P.O. Box 260, 114 East Main Street
Addison, Michigan 49220 U.S.A.
biblical@ibiblical.org
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9 Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers,

10 For whoremongers, for those who lie with males as with females, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine;

11 According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust. -1 Timothy 1

Were the women who were grounded in the Word of God also required to remain silent? Apparently not. Corinthian women prayed and prophesied with their heads covered. The four virgin daughters of Philip, in whose home Paul stayed, prophesied:

9 And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy. -Acts 21

The prophetess Huldah was called upon by the high priest to prophesy during the reign of King Josiah of Judah. He asked her to seek Yahweh's direction concerning the newly discovered book of the law. She complied and prophesied:

15 And she said to them, Thus says Yahweh God of Israel, Tell the man that sent you to me, -1 Kings 22

In his letter to the Romans, Paul saluted numerous women who helped him spread the gospel. He began with Phebe:

1 I commend to you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the congregation which is at Cenchrea:

2 That you receive her in the Lord, as becomes saints, and that you assist her in whatever business she has need of you: for she has been a succorer of many, and of myself also. -Romans 16

The Greek word for "servant," (διακονος (diakonos)), also means "minister." The Greek word for "succorer," (προσ-τατις (prostatis)) also means "1) a woman set over others; 2) a female guardian...." [Online Bible Greek Lexicon]

Paul also saluted other fellow laborers, including numerous women. Among these were Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus' mother, his own mother, Julia, and Olympas (see Romans 16:3-15). Making no distinction between men and the women, Paul tells them to greet each other with a "holy kiss" (see Romans 16:16).

However, Paul warned that there are some who would cause divisions to further their own personal ambitions:

17 Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned; and avoid them.

18 For they that are such serve not our Lord Yahshua the Messiah, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple. -Romans 16

Concerning our role in Yahshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ), Paul tells us:

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in the Messiah Yahshua. -Galatians 3