

## PROPHETESSES AND WOMEN PASTORS

The Bible refers to various prophetesses. Miriam (Exodus 15:20) was a prophetess, and led the women's chorus to Moses' song of victory after the crossing of the Red Sea. Nehemiah mentioned a prophetess Noadiah, who had been trying to intimidate him (Nehemiah 6:14). There was the prophetess Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). In the New Testament there were Anna (Lk 2:36) and the four daughters of Philip (Ac 21:9). Those who argue in favour of women pastors, in spite of what the Bible says (1 Cor 14:33-40; 1 Tm 2:11-14), often assume that, because there were prophetesses in Bible times, there may be women pastors today. Do these prophetesses supply precedents that allow the argument that there can therefore be women pastors?

Quite simply, we do not expect prophets or prophetesses any more, because God's revelation is closed. There are no prophets or prophetesses any more, just as there are no apostles any more.

In the case of the judge Deborah, it would be foolish to argue that she was acting improperly. When the God seized any persons and bade them speak for Him, they had to do so, as even Balaam's donkey did. The situation in Israel was spiritually desperate. Everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes and what the LORD considered evil. When Deborah spoke to Barak in the Lord's name, Barak did not want to go and call soldiers together on Mount Tabor to prepare to fight the Canaanites unless Deborah came with him. He was behaving in a cowardly and unmanly way (Judges 4:8).

Origen made the general point about how prophetesses functioned. He was writing about the Montanist heresy in Phrygia, which surfaced about AD 170. Montanists had a prophet, Montanus, and two prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla. They prophesied in God's name in the first person. Origen wrote: "The disciples of the women (those who were instructed by Priscilla and Maximilla) did not adhere to this commandment. They did not belong to Christ the husband of the bride. "There were", they say, "four daughters of Philip the Evangelist, and they used to prophesy. And if they used to prophesy, why is it strange that our prophetesses" (as they allege) "also prophesy?" We shall resolve this difficulty by saying, first, "As to the claims that your prophetesses used to prophesy, show the signs of prophecy in them!" Secondly, "Even if the daughters of Philip used to prophesy, yet they used not to speak in the churches; for we do not have this in the Acts of the Apostles. It did not happen in the Old Testament, either. The Scriptures testify that Deborah was a prophetess. Miriam, the sister of Aaron took a tambourine and went out from among the women... You would not find that Huldah, though she was a prophetess, spoke to the people, but to some particular person who had come to her."

It is not warranted to assume that prophesying is the same thing as preaching. Prophecy included new revelation and included the foretelling of future events. For example, Agabus foretold a famine in Judea, and that, if Paul went to Jerusalem, he would be imprisoned (Ac 11:28; 21:11). In the Old Testament there were two tests of a false prophet. If he advocated worship of other gods, he was a false prophet; and, if what he predicted did not happen, he was a false prophet.

Some who argue for women pastors on the basis that Paul wrote, in 1 Corinthians 11, "Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered also dishonours her head." There are several fallacies in such a use of the passage. A number of translations, like the *NIV*, put a heading that assumes that 1 Cor 11:2-16 referred to a context of congregational worship. However, the passage does not explicitly mention an assembly for worship. There is no use of the standard verb "come together." That standard expression certainly occurs in the next section, about the Lord's Supper. The idea that an assembly for worship and only that is in view is wrongly imported from the next section (1 Cor 11:17-18, 33-34).

Again, the assumption that this applies only to a worship assembly is wrongly based on the words "pray" and "prophesy." It is mistakenly assumed that a worship assembly is the only place where Christians prayed or prophesied. This assumption is unwarranted. It cannot be proved that women prophesied in public assemblies. All the instances of women prophetesses can easily be explained as their speaking on an individual basis, like Deborah to Barak. Anna told people about the infant Jesus in the temple, but we do not have to assume that she preached in front of assembled people in the temple. Similarly with Huldah, and the daughters of Philip. When Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos better, they also took him away from the synagogue to do it (Ac 18:26).

Other things in 1 Cor 11:2-16 also applied outside an assembly for worship. Angels do not restrict their presence to worship assemblies. The husband was the head of the wife outside the assembly for worship as well. The women did not wear the head covering only during assemblies for worship. The reference to long hair and nature is obvious. Whether hair is long or short rests on usage over time. The reference to custom observed by the churches of God cannot be restricted to what Christians did in their worship assemblies, because Christian members of churches were governed by such principles in their lives elsewhere.

Did women actually lead prayer or prophesy before Christian assemblies? In 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul

said, “*Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head.*” That, of course, does not, as some maintain, permit a deduction that women actually did regularly lead prayer individually or prophesy in public worship, or that they were permitted to do so. First Corinthians 14:33-40 settles that. Women were to be silent in congregational assemblies. Paul did not contradict himself in 1 Cor 11:5.

The argument for women pastors sometimes runs like this: 1) In 1 Cor 11 Paul talks about women having covered heads in congregational worship. 2) In 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul says, “And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head.” 3) Therefore a woman could pray or prophesy in congregational worship provided that she covered her head. 4) Since 1 Cor 11:2-16 does not talk about a commandment of the Lord, as in 1 Cor 14:37, but about a custom (1 Cor 11:16), and the custom of the covered head no longer applies, there is no obstacle against a woman’s praying or prophesying in public worship today even if her head is uncovered. 5) Therefore, when Paul wrote that women should keep silent in the churches (1 Cor 14), he forgot what he had said in 1 Cor 11, and, to put it bluntly, he contradicted himself. What happens then is obvious. When enough blue smoke has been made about the issue, the case is said to be unclear, and the conclusion is speciously drawn that there may be women pastors.

Against this, what Paul wrote about the custom of the covered head applied more broadly than only in public worship. Furthermore, it is illogical to argue from an “Anyone-who” kind of statement, when it is followed by a negative statement or a statement of disapproval, that the particular kind of activity did occur provided that conditions were met, or might occur in other contexts. For example: a teacher may say: “If any boys climb up on the school roof during the lunch hour they will be severely disciplined.” That does not permit a conclusion that boys must necessarily have been climbing up there previously, or that they may climb up there at times other than during the lunch hour.

Paul does not contradict himself. What he wrote in 1 Cor 14:33-40 about women’s silence in church assemblies meant that women were not permitted to lead in prayer or give prophecies in church assemblies, even if their heads were covered.

Those who oppose women pastors have probably paid too little attention to the distinction in 1 Corinthians 14:35 between church and home. Women may and should speak to their husbands at home. Even though early Christians worshipped in private homes, it was still easy for them to distinguish what was church from what was home. Of course there may also be women teachers in Christian schools. They are teaching children, not men (1 Tm 2:12), and they are working in the place of the parents.

When St Paul gave God’s command that women were not permitted to speak in the churches, the kind of speaking that was meant was the speaking of one individual before an assembly. It is foolish to argue that, if women had to be silent, women would not even be permitted to sing in church or join in the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. For Paul showed in what he had just written that the kind of speaking that he had in mind was the speaking of an individual person in a Christian assembly while the rest listened: “Whenever you come together, each has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (1 Cor 14:26). It was not so that, if a person had an inclination to speak, that was all the justification that was needed. Those who spoke in tongues were limited to two or at the most three, and speaking in tongues was not permitted at all in the congregation if there was no one who could interpret. All could prophesy one by one, but, if something was revealed to another person, the first one had to be silent. The spirits of prophets had to be subordinate to other prophets (1 Cor 14:26-32). When women are gifted in particular ways, the Lord’s command shows them when and where they may use their gifts, and, if any woman does not acknowledge this, God does not acknowledge her (1 Cor 14:37-38).