

# WOMEN IN WORSHIP: A PERSONAL VIEW

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The place of women in public worship has been fully discussed elsewhere and I see no need to go over this ground again (see bibliography at end). The following is merely a personal view and, I trust, a stimulus to thinking further.

## IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Jewish women often played a leading role in many areas of life. *Miriam* the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand and all the women followed here with tambourines and dancing. She sang to them:

Sing to the LORD  
for he is highly exalted.  
The horse and its rider  
he has hurled into the sea. (Exod 15:21)

I guess the men were all watching! And what dare we say about the tambourines and dancing?

*Deborah* was also a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, who was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel where the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided. She and Barak, the son of Abinoam, sang this song:

When the princes in Israel take the lead,  
when the people willingly offer themselves—  
praise the LORD! (Judg 5:2)

They sang together, man and woman, leading the worship; and the land had peace for forty years.

*Hannah* may not have had a large congregation but at least Eli and

Elkanah were with her and her child Samuel when she gave thanks to the Lord. Three men lived to record a woman's magnificent worship prayer!

My heart rejoices in the LORD;  
 in the LORD my horn is lifted high.  
 My mouth boasts over my enemies,  
 for I delight in your deliverance.  
 There is no-one holy like the LORD;  
 there is no-one besides you;  
 there is no Rock like our God. (1 Sam 2:1-2)

#### GREEK AND ROMAN INFLUENCE

It was the influence of the Greek and Roman world that was to colour the thinking in the New Testament era. Josephus, a Jewish historian who was a contemporary of Paul, wrote that 'the woman is inferior to the man in every way'. Women were seen as less intelligent than men, as playthings and incapable of learning. They could attend worship at the synagogue, but it was not required of them.

It is against this background that we consider the ministry of Jesus in Luke's Gospel.

#### IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

Luke seems to have had a special place for women, perhaps because he was a doctor. His gospel stresses the importance that Jesus gave to women. He lifted them up and gave them a place in life, restoring the traditional Jewish view that women should be respected. To Jesus they were not empty-handed sex symbols, merely created to bear children and reward male desire. Jesus allowed women to minister to him, listen to him, discuss theology with him, be last at the cross and first at the tomb, and he entrusted a woman to evangelize her village (John 4).

Luke gives us three examples of women in worship. *Mary*, the mother of Jesus, composing that wonderful 'Magnificat' which both men and women down the centuries have used in their own worship.

My soul praises the Lord  
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
 for he has been mindful  
 of the humble state of his servant.  
 From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
 holy in his name. (Luke 1:46-49)

*Anna*, also a prophetess, 'never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying'. She 'gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem'. (Luke 2:37-38.) A woman, openly and publicly speaking in the temple of God!

The third example from Luke is the woman in one of the synagogues who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her he called her forward, saying, 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.' Then he put his hands on her and immediately she straightened up and praised God. In front of everyone, in the synagogue! I wonder if this was also a symbolic healing and that Jesus says to all women, 'You are set free . . . to praise'? *Worship must sometimes be the spontaneous outburst of a person set free.* It cannot be bottled up but must be expressed. I have called this 'worship and response'. Worship can also be linked with creativity and with service.

#### WORSHIP AND RESPONSE

Mary worshipped God when she said to the angel Gabriel, 'I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said.' The ultimate in submission and an act of adoration.

Luke tells also of a woman who had led a sinful life who brought an alabaster jar of perfume to the Lord. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. Jesus said of her, 'her many sins have been forgiven for she loved much'. *Worship must sometimes be allowed to be the outward public expression of a sinner's love for Christ.*

Mary of Magdala had only to say one word in her private worship in the Lord's real presence, 'Rabboni'. Through her tears she saw the Lord. *There must be room for response, often emotional, in worship.*

#### WORSHIP AND CREATIVITY

Creativity in worship can include a wide variety of subjects especially dear to women (though not exclusively so!).

#### Artistic work

We can't all paint a ceiling in the Sistine Chapel but in some cathedrals

each kneeler is worked in tapestry by women. Other churches have begun making banners which are then hung to the glory of God and used to draw worship from praising hearts.

### Flowers

By using her gift in artistic floral arrangements, a woman can present her worship to the Lord. (I don't mean to be sexist—we have a man who sometimes arranges flowers in our church—but I mean to demonstrate that women can also do this!)

### Dance

This frightens some people because they imagine the foxtrot or a disco! The dance in worship which has come to be most acceptable and helpful is that of the small group which moves in celebratory patterns before the Lord and before the people, just as a quartet may sing or a music group may play.

### Music

This is of great importance in worship, whether it be a single harmonium or a group of musicians with guitars, drums, flute, synthesizer and violin. How many churches realise that the pace of the organ leads the worship? The organist, who is often a woman, is actually responsible for the leading and the quality of the worship. Solo singing is another area where, if used sensitively and prayerfully, a woman (or man) may offer praise and worship.

### Hymn writing

Over the years when women were not allowed to be heard in church, congregations were lustily singing words of praise and worship written by women. Very often those women never dreamed that their words would become great hymns. Out of interest, I list 25 such hymns, to indicate something of our heritage.

*Father of mercies, in Thy word*

*Lord of all hopefulness*

*Come Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire*

*Our blest Redeemer, ere he breathed*

*Just as I am*

*Thou didst leave Thy throne*

*Nearer my God to Thee*

Anna Steele

Jan Struther

Harriet Auber

Harriet Auber

Charlotte Elliott

Emily Elliott

Sarah Adams

*O Saviour, I have naught to plead  
 At the name of Jesus  
 In heavenly love abiding  
 I am not skilled to understand  
 Once in royal David's city  
 There is a green hill  
 All things bright and beautiful  
 Jesus calls us o'er the tumult  
 Never further than Thy cross  
 My God I thank Thee who has made  
 None other Lamb, None other Name  
 Take my life and let it be  
 Lord, speak to me  
 Thy life was given for me  
 Thine for ever, God of love  
 Still, still with Thee  
 Father, hear the prayer we offer  
 O perfect love*

Jane Crewdson  
 Caroline Noel  
 Anna L Waring  
 Dora Greenwell  
 Mrs Alexander  
 Mrs Alexander  
 Mrs Alexander  
 Mrs Alexander  
 Elisabeth R Charles  
 Madelaine Proctor  
 Christina Rossetti  
 Frances R Havergal  
 Frances R Havergal  
 Frances R Havergal  
 Mary F Maud  
 Harriet B Stowe  
 Lotte M Willis  
 Miss Blomfield  
 (Mrs Gurney)

It is also extremely interesting to note that in *The Believer's Hymn Book* 76 hymns are written by women, and in *Hymns of Light and Love* 127 are by women. In each case, about 15% of the total.

We should add to this list Joyce Stunt, who wrote the following beautiful hymn:

What shall I render unto Him,  
 Who died for me yet lives again,  
 Who came to earth and suffered here,  
 Such weariness and woe and pain?

What shall I render unto Him,  
 Whose love was strong enough to bear  
 My griefs and sorrows and my sin,  
 My punishment and load of care?

What shall I render unto Him,  
 Who fills my heart with happiness,  
 Who gives me joy and hope and peace,  
 And clothes me with His righteousness?

All things are His; I have no wealth;  
 I am not strong; I have no fame;  
 But He is great, and all on earth  
 Shall one day bow to His great Name.

What would'st Thou have of me, O Lord?  
 There is naught else that I can bring,  
 Save my own self and all I have;  
 Accept, I pray, my offering.

#### WORSHIP AND SERVICE

The following is not an exhaustive list of women who worshipped God by serving him, for, of course, that would include all committed Christian women. But I seek to show that a number of women have by their service and/or their writings come into the public eye and have thereby prompted others, many of them men, to worship and serve God.

Such a list includes the mystics like Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich; but more recently Amy Carmichael, Gladys Aylward, Evelyn Underwood, Catherine Booth, Dorothy Sayers, Rita Snowden, Corri Ten Boom, Mother Teresa, Elisabeth Elliott, Joni Eareckson, Edith Schaeffer, Helen Roseveare, and Catherine Marshall.

A reflection on their life and work will show that women are capable of deep worship and of its expression; that women have much to give both to God and to the church; and with our missionary force of women today we recognize that women too can 'declare his glory among the nations'.

#### WORSHIP TODAY

I would venture to suggest that in the past in Britain, in churches of all denominations, women have been allowed to worship *privately* in any way they wished but that *publicly* they have been restricted to *led* worship rather than *open* worship where they could take part audibly; to *liturgical* worship in the sense that they could only join in the singing of hymns rather than *spontaneously* ask for a song; and to *silent* worship during the prayers, rather than *vocal*.

The exception was, of course, the women's meeting, at which a woman could lead the public worship spontaneously and vocally since there were no men present.

In recent years, it has been accepted almost totally by the Christian world that whenever there is a period of open worship, open discussion or open prayer, a woman has as much right to pray, read a scripture or choose a hymn as has a man. This is backed up by such verses as 'There is neither . . . male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28) and 'Your sons and your daughters will prophesy . . . Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit . . .' (Acts 2:17f).

This has caused little problem in a church where most of the worship is led from the front by a priest, vicar, or minister. In that setting, everyone (both men and women) has to keep silent during the moments when worship is being led.

The problem arises in the Christian Brethren setting where after many years of agonising over it, it is decided that women can take part in discussional Bible study or housegroups and that they can pray in the prayer meeting. What happens about the 'morning meeting', the 'breaking of bread', the 'worship meeting'? The one basis of Brethrenism was always the priesthood of all believers, but in practice, of course, it meant all *male* believers.

If worship is not led by one man and is non-liturgical, it must be open to both men and women to participate, otherwise the women feel like second class citizens in the kingdom of heaven. If the elders decide that a woman should not teach or lead the worship, surely they will not deprive the church of 60% of its gift in worship. A woman's share in the vocal public worship enriches the Body of Christ and complements the man's contribution.

Surely worship is a child saying '*Father, I love you*'; or a loved one telling her Lord that '*He is everything*' to her; or a grateful heart saying, '*Thank you, Jesus*'. If the church feels that a woman should not actually give thanks for the bread and wine, this part of the service could be led by an elder.

Many women are still suffering from feelings of rejection and unworthiness because in the past so many joys in worship were forbidden to them.

In the days of the early church, Lydia and Nympha hosted churches in their homes; Euodia and Syntyche worked side by side with Paul; Priscilla was a fellow worker and Philip had four daughters who prophesied. We can only speculate how they worshipped. But the Holy Spirit at work in a church brings it to life. He brings a freshness into every new age of church life. As musical forms and people's cultures change, we must be ready to move with him or we will stagnate.

In totality of worship surely there will be beautiful flowers offered to the Lord; bodies offered in dance movement; banners and music; instruments and voices; composition; and sacrificial service, blending with audible public praises from overflowing hearts.

The psalmist encourages us:

'Let everything that has breath, Praise the Lord!'

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