

Why Women Should Speak Up in the Church

As I continue to think through a third way on gender, I am burdened for the voice of the helper that God gave to the man. Was Eve designed only to help with her hands or her body? Or was there something in her words that God designed to be helpful to Adam?

The great passage that is used to squelch female voices is I Peter 3, on winning a disobedient husband over without a word. Paul talks of women keeping silent in the church as well, but the context there is the authoritative teaching in the position of elder. I think Peter and Paul's instructions are good, true and to be obeyed today. But remember that these are not the only Scriptures on women speaking.

While some verses on women instruct keeping silence, others affirm the use of words as a sign of wisdom and virtue, notably in the classic wisdom chapter on Image-bearing womanhood, Proverbs 31.

"She opens her mouth with wisdom, and in her tongue is the teaching of kindness" (Prov. 31:26).

There are many more verses on women speaking in the Bible, but I am not going to give a survey of them right now. The issue isn't whether a woman is or is not to speak. The issue is what she should speak and how she should speak. We are as constrained by James 3:10 as the men in our churches are.

Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. Brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be.

Going forward, I offer this encouragement first to women, and then to men.

Women: I encourage you to cultivate the voice that God intended for you to use when He created you as a strong helper for the man. This means recognizing what tears down and putting that off as the old man. The Bible has strong words for negative speech for men and women, along with a few choice words for women alone. Because of our particular gifting to come alongside a man in aid, the negative words we say in a moment can deeply wound a man, like the nurse you expect to administer pain medicine who instead injects you with poison. Gossip, slander, malice ... these are antithetical to the role of ezer, and we must deliberately push into who we are in Christ that we may recognize these words and put them away.

But a big mistake we make as women in conservative churches is that we put off without also putting on, especially in terms of the voice of the helper. The put off/put on process for women and their words is not to put off gossip and put on silence. It is to put off words that tear down and put on words of life that God intended you to use. The end result of transformation in Christ is that we put on words that aid our churches, aid our families and aid our friends.

Men: I encourage you, like the women, to cultivate the voice of women in your life. Thabiti Anyabwile wrote a great article for The Gospel-Centered Woman on the neglect of pastors to disciple and use women in their congregations. If you have women who gossip in your church, the tendency is to preach against gossip and encourage silence instead of doing the real work of cultivating life giving speech among these women. But I add a second encouragement as well—as you encourage women toward better speech, then respect that voice when she uses it! This second step has been a missing link in a lot of homes and congregations. Listen when women speak with wisdom. Respect the role of helper, and value God's image bearing role in women. What if husbands, pastors and leaders in churches started valuing the voices of women who were speaking into their lives with wisdom?

The main problem seems that some men can't distinguish between women speaking with wisdom and women speaking with authority. They are so afraid of a woman telling them authoritatively what to do that they can't hear feedback or suggestions from them without defensiveness. To be fair, women can and should work on how to say the good things they have to contribute in a way that doesn't create hurdles for the one who needs to hear it.

For both men and women, the Bible indicates the same words said in different ways can have very different results. But men, whether a woman says it exactly right in your estimation or not, don't let yourself be deceived into thinking her tone negates the truth of what she offers you. That particular temptation seems a tool of Satan to undermine the woman as the helper God intended.

I'll end with a positive observation. I am seeing much more evidence of men in the church respecting the voice of the helper in just the last 6 months or so than I have for many years previously. I appreciate The Village Church's current sermon series on Biblical manhood and womanhood in particular. One thing that has been clear in the series is that Matt Chandler values women in his church speaking into his life. In one particular illustration he gave about his wife, he shared the wise way she pointed out a problem area in his life to him. She spoke with wisdom in a way that was easy for him to receive.

But, in the same illustration, Matt also acknowledged that he needed to listen to her input whether she said it exactly right or not. That can be a missing link for men—discounting the wisdom of what was said because a woman didn't articulate it as softly as the man thought she should. Honestly, men, admit that sometimes you just don't want to hear it from a woman, and there is no amount of soft terms that would make her words acceptable to you. For some men, the choice for women's voices seems to be between the negative of gossip and

nagging manipulation to the positive, in their heads, of women who don't say anything challenging at all. In silencing, ignoring or shaming women for speaking, those men lose a valuable gift God has given them for their flourishing.

If you want wisdom from the women around you, and you should, I encourage you to consider the voice of the helper, the ezer, as part of the help God intended her to provide. Then respond accordingly even if it makes you temporarily uncomfortable. May we all work toward cultivating wise, helpful speech in ourselves and others, and may we listen well when the ezer speaks wise and helpful words to us personally.

*Adapted from **Wendy Alsup's** blog, . Wendy has authored three books including By His Wounds You are Healed: How the Message of Ephesians Transforms a Woman's Identity. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.*