

Service of Women in the Church

Scriptural Context

The New Testament is replete with affirmations of that women have a vital role in making valuable contributions to the work of the church and the advancement of the gospel. Women and men are equally members of the priesthood of all believers by faith in Jesus. They are both called to "*declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.*" (1 Peter 2:9)

1. The concept of creation is critical for addressing Scripturally with the topic of male-female identities. Also of great importance is the concept of new creation—that is, God's work and will as revealed in redemption. Two terms have come into general theological usage to indicate these realities:

A. **The Order of Creation.** This refers to the particular position which, by the will of God, any created object occupies in relation to others. God has given to that which has been created a certain definite order which, because it has been created by Him, is the expression of His immutable will.

B. **The Order of Redemption.** This refers to the relationship of the redeemed to God and to each other in the new creation established by Him in Jesus Christ (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17). This new creation constitutes participation in a new existence, in the new world that has come in Christ. It is a relationship determined by grace.

How do these two orders relate to each other when applied to male-female identities? According to the order of creation, God has assigned individual identities to each gender. He "*from the beginning made them male and female*" (Matt. 19:4). The identities and functions of each are not interchangeable; they must remain distinct. This is the burden of the apostle Paul as he references the opening chapters of Genesis in those passages concerned with women in the church. Some key verses are:

1 Corinthians 11:7a-9. *Man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man* (ESV). The apostle affirms male "headship" on the basis of Gen. 2:18-25, which teaches that the man did not come from the woman but the woman from the man and that the woman was created for the sake of the man. (cf. Eph. 5:22-33)

1 Corinthians 14: 34-35. *As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church* (ESV). Paul cites the Law (cf. Genesis 2) as the basis for the submission of woman.

1 Timothy 2:11-14. *Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.* Paul appeals to the temporal order of God's creation ("*Adam was formed first*"; cf. Gen. 2:20-22), as well as to Eve's having been deceived in the fall (Gen. 3:6), to show that women should not teach or exercise authority over men in the church. This does not mean there are not teaching exceptions.

That God desires the husband to be the head of his wife and the wife to be submissive to her husband's authority is rooted deeply in both the Old and New Testaments. While this Biblical topic may be difficult to address because it is so easily subject to misunderstanding and abuse, it is the Creator's intention that

we gratefully recognize and receive the ordered relationship of headship/submission as an arrangement whereby the welfare of others may be served. We have not properly understood the interrelated concepts of headship (1 Cor. 11:3) and submission (1 Cor. 14:34) if we take them to be equivalent to superiority or domination.

The three Scriptural principles concerning women in the church converge in Paul's specific directives regarding a woman's role in the church. (cf. 1 Cor. 14:33b-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-15) The following conclusions seem warranted.

1. Silence.

First, that Paul is not commanding absolute, unqualified silence is evident from the fact that he permits praying and prophesying in 1 Corinthians II. The silence mandated for women in 1 Corinthians 14 does not preclude their praying and prophesying. Accordingly, the apostle is not intimating that women may not participate in the public singing of the congregation, spoken prayers, testimonies or even an appropriate prophecy (Anna and Elizabeth).

Secondly, it must be underscored that Paul's prohibition that women remain silent and not speak is given in reference to the worship service of the congregation (1 Cor. 14:26-33). The command that women keep silent is a command that they not take charge of the public worship service, specifically the preaching and teaching-learning aspects.

2. Teaching and Authority. While the thrust of Paul's comments in 1 Tim. 2:11-15 is similar to that in 1 Corinthians 14, he makes a more explicit point in this passage. A woman is not to teach or to exercise authority over man. His instructions are directed to the church setting not civil society. Paul specifically forbids women to publicly preach the Christian faith in a church setting.

Paul is not contending that Christian women are to avoid teaching under any circumstances. Elsewhere the New Testament indicates that women did teach in a context other than the worship service (e.g., Priscilla, Acts 18:26). The apostolic restriction in 1 Timothy 2 pertains to that teaching of God's Word which involves an essential function of the pastoral office. It is inappropriate to apply this principle to the Sunday school teacher, the Christian day school teacher, or the home Bible study teacher.

3. Authority. What is the relationship between teaching, learning, and exercising "*authority over man*"? The verb Paul employs in 1 Tim. 2:12 (*authentain*) occurs only here in the New Testament. A careful review of this passage indicates that the terms "*teach*" and "*exercise authority*" parallel each other. They are intentionally linked. The kind of teaching referred to in the passage is tied to exercising authority. The authority forbidden to women is that of the office of pastor and would of good order and practicality include those who exercise direct authority over that office, such as the elders (1 Tim. 5:17; cf. 1 Thess. 5:12). While there is no "Thus saith the Lord" regarding positions such as congregational president and vice president, the historic Lutheran position has held that women may not serve as an elder or as a president or vice president of the congregation, since such offices are either identified with the functions of the pastoral ministry (in the case of elders) or may exercise authority over the pastor(s) (in the case of a congregational president or vice-president).

The theological matrix for the apostle's inspired teaching on the silence of women in the church and the exercise of authority is the order of creation. In 1 Tim. 2:13 Paul points to the order of creation as the basis for the instructions given in verses 11 and 12. God made Adam before Eve; that is, He created man and woman in a definite order. The conclusion drawn is that the leadership of the public teaching office

belongs to men. Assumption of that office by a woman is out of place because it is a woman who assumes it, not because women do it in a wrong way or have inferior gifts and abilities. The oversight and supervision exercised in the office of the public ministry is that of preaching and teaching of the Word and administering the sacraments in a church setting.

Qualifications for office

1 Timothy 3:1-7 contains the biblical qualifications for a pastor: *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil (ESV).*

We also find the biblical qualifications for a pastor/elders in Titus 1:5-9: *This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*

Both passages assume that only men are to be pastors. Paul addressed this directly in 1 Timothy 2:12, where women are not allowed to teach or have authority over men in the church. The pastor of a church, by definition, is called to teach men and exercise authority over them. Additionally, whether for either pastor or elder, a woman cannot meet the biblical qualification of being the husband of one wife.

Divine Model

Apart from Scripture, there is the divinely-ordained model, example or paradigm to be considered. We are not given specific reasons as to why Jesus chose 12 men as disciples, however we do know that Jesus sought God's direction (Luke 6:12-13). Whatever the reason, God guided Jesus to have 12 male disciples. By God's divine choice all of the apostles were men.

Further, since the church encourages husbands to exercise their God-given headship in a God-pleasing way at home, it holds that the church should correspondingly encourage men to exercise leadership in their congregation. Congregations do well to organize themselves in ways that complement and reinforce the family, for the church is "*the household of God*" (1 Tim. 3:15).

Some Scriptural Conclusions

1. In sharp contrast to the deprecation and suppression of women in ancient cultures, and especially in Rabbinic Judaism, the Gospel record affirms their value and dignity. Jesus clearly shows His regard for women, created equally with men in the image and likeness of God.
2. In the order of creation, God has placed woman in a position submission to man in the context of the marriage relationship. This relationship of submission, however, is radically different from "secular"

interpretations of it. The Scriptural concept of submission is a matter of function between two persons of equal worth and not a matter of inferiority/superiority. The submission of woman to man is not a dominative subordination.

God is not a cosmic male chauvinist, who is punishing women and rewarding men by commanding the respective roles in marriage! Rather, they reflect His wise and loving care for us as we obey. Although many in the secular world dislike the word "submit," ALL Christians must submit to proper authority: government (Rom. 13:1); employers (Titus 2:9); church leaders (Heb. 13:17); and family (Eph. 5:22; 6:1). To live in rebellion to authority is to live in defiance of God Himself, who ordains all authority.

The church is in no way degraded by submitting to Jesus Christ. To the contrary, it is to the church's glory to submit to Christ. Neither is it degrading for a wife to submit to her husband as outlined in Scripture. In fact, we are told it results in (Eph. 5:27), *"her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless."* Submission results in her ultimate good.

3. The relationship between husband and wife can also be defined as a headship structure of God-Christ-husband-wife, each member of the order superordinated to the succeeding member. This is a theological and not merely a sociological relationship. The submission of wife to husband is analogous to the relationship which exists between Christ and the heavenly Father and Christ and the Church. In both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible uses the marriage relationship to picture the relationship between God and His people. Paul shows that Christian marriage is an earthly picture of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32): *"This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church."* God created man as male and female to reflect His image (Gen. 1:27). In the Trinity, all three Persons are equally God; but to carry out the divine plan, the Son submits to the Father and the Spirit submits to the Father and the Son. There is perfect love and harmony among the members of the Trinity. There is no rivalry or competition. In marriage, the husband and wife are equal as persons before God, sharing in the grace of salvation. Though, as sinners, their love is imperfect still, there is an order of authority and submission to reflect the divine image. That same model of order follows in the church.

Luther and the Lutheran tradition affirmed a divine order built into creation that remains in effect for the home and the church, even when those institutions are impacted by sin and we as sinners fail to act in accordance with God's design. Lutheran theologians and longstanding Lutheran tradition have long affirmed that if a woman is given the office of pastor, she would completely reverse the order of creation by assuming the role of *"head"* of the man.

4. The order of redemption, while affirming that men and women are one in Christ and joint heirs of the grace of life, does not abolish the order established at the time of creation. The distortion of the order of creation brought about by the fall has been remedied by Christ's redemption, but it has not yet become fully manifest in the redeemed. This will happen only in heaven. Therefore, far from annulling the order of creation, the order of redemption sanctifies it. The two orders are held together coordinately within God's purposes. The Lordship of Christ spans both creation and redemption.

5. 1 Cor. 14:33b-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15 speak of women's roles in the pastoral office. The main application of these passages today is that women are not to exercise those functions in the church which would involve them in the exercise of authority inherent in the office of pastor. It necessarily includes those roles that have direct authority over those in the office of pastor.

6. Men who find themselves in positions of leadership and authority must assume the attitude which Jesus Himself required: "... *rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the one who serves*" (Luke 22:26). Christian leadership and service must model Him.

7. Women have all of the God-given rights, privileges, and responsibilities of the priesthood of all believers that men do. God's people are called priests not to confer status but to commission all of them to declare His deeds of salvation. All Christians have been given the responsibility to live their Christian faith in their several callings, including the responsibility to profess and share the Christian faith and to judge all doctrine.

Application in local Church

Scripture seems clear that women may serve in many congregational capacities: deaconess, musician, choir director, Sunday School superintendent, teachers of women and children, member of a worship team, and serving in clearly-defined capacities on committees and councils, to name a few. However, Scripture restricts women from serving in the pastoral office and on boards and positions that have authority over the office.

Application Within the Church Body

In light of Scripture, Christian church body polity may be viewed in much the same way as the structure of the local church. Women may serve in many capacities: authors and editors, contributors to magazines and newsletters, administrative staff, WMF, members of a corporation, and serving on boards or committees that do not have authority or oversight over pastors. However, for boards of directors that have direct oversight of pastors, such as Coordinating Committee, Home Missions, World Missions, and the Schools Board, corporations are well-advised to exercise great caution and engage in serious and substantial debate based on the theological implications of their decisions, before opening that door.

Final Thoughts

Although it seems fashionable in our day to say that women may be pastors, elders, and spiritual leaders over men in the church, the Bible is clear that such leadership is intended for biblically-qualified men. We live in a society where the traditional view of marriage and Scripturally-defined marital roles are increasingly under attack. Large segments of our culture dismiss and even ridicule beliefs such as: (1) the Creator created Adam and Eve as Genesis 2 records, where He made two distinct sexes (2) the Creator's design for marriage; including that a husband be the head of his wife and that the wife willingly submit to her husband; and that a husband should sacrificially love his wife as Christ loved the church.

It is a stubborn fact that the more women assume church leadership positions, the more men tend to step back and allow them to do so. Especially in our cultural context today, both our local congregations and our Association should be concerned about its scriptural image before a watching world. It would be misguided to establish church practice and polity on the shaky ground of cultural values, emotions, or secular sentiment. Church polity should always be supported by Scripture and the historic church's teaching. At the same time, we can joyfully embrace the view that women are a wonderful gift to the church and affirm their vital role in the many and varied ministries the church has to offer.

To God be the glory!