

The Role of Women in the Church

by Stephen J Lawrenz

[Presented at the Mankato Pastoral Conference at Le Seuer, Minnesota, Dec. 7, 1976]

Introductory Remarks: Before I begin, I would like to make some introductory remarks. I have enjoyed working on this paper in that it brought to my understanding some important principles on attacking the question, "What is the role of women in the church?" What I have come to understand after much reading is something I wish to share with you this afternoon. You might recast the title of this paper to read, "Principles which establish the correct understanding of what the role of women in the church is". Still, however, the paper can properly be called, "The role of women in the church".

All New Testament quotations are taken from the New International Version.

Introduction

The subject of this paper is much discussed in this decade, the decade of woman's liberation, people want to know, "What does God allow women to do in His church?" A foremost question is, "Why can't a woman be a pastor?" In our synod we especially hear, "Why can't women vote in the church meetings?" Since the rhetoric of women liberationists is quite impressive in its ability to arouse strong emotions, we as pastors may more and more often find some of our own lady members smoldering underneath with resentment over our stand on the role of women in the church. One thing we can be sure of: the more often the woman liberation cause is seen in print and on the screen, the more often members of our congregations will demand answers for all sorts of situations where women and church mix. In typical human fashion our members may think that the Bible has a set answer for every such situation, as if the Bible is a manual of regulations.

Your colleague never thought of the Bible as a regulation manual, but unwittingly he looked upon it as such when he first considered this paper's subject. He knew of many of the questions people were asking, and it baffled him to find answers for them. After some time was spent studying the subject, and talking to pastors, he realized that many different burning questions about women and their role in the church can be worked out by several basic principles. These basic principles will be the framework of this paper. They are:

1. The Order of Creation, A Moral Law
2. The Absence of Ceremonial Laws for the New Testament Christian
3. The Law of Christian Love, A Moral Law

The writer believes that unless these principles are understood and applied, a pastor will flounder on the topic, perhaps with devastating results, either to himself, or to his parishioners, or to both.

The First Principle, The Order of Creation, A Moral Law

The second chapter of Genesis, verse 18, gives us the first look at a woman's place in God's creation. God said to Adam,

It is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him an help meet for him.

In this verse we note that Eve was to be a helper. This gave Adam the head position. This "head and helper" situation is also shown by St. Paul when he wrote in I Corinthians 11:9,

For man did not come from woman, but woman from man, neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.

In I Corinthians 11:3 St. Paul pointed out that women are subordinate to men,

Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the women is man, and the head of Christ is God.

A few chapters further in connection with a Corinthian situation he indicated to us the proper respect a woman is to show to men according to the Order of Creation,

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.

In I Timothy 2:12 Paul makes the same assertion,

I do not permit a woman...to have authority over a man.

This same Order of Creation is brought out in the state of marriage of which St. Paul speaks in Ephesians 5:22-24,

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Note that the head-helper Order of Creation was not the authorization of tyranny by men over woman. Paul continued in Ephesians 5 by pointing out what the Order of Creation should be. In this case he used marriage as an example,

Husbands; love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her....husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.

The fall into sin produced man's sinful nature and its bad effects. Of particular interest here we read Genesis 3:16,

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

The order of Creation was still intact, but now the word "rule" entered into the situation. Here God is showing us what sin did to the use of the Order of Creation. Before the Fall into sin there had been perfect harmony and co-operation between Adam and Eve, with Eve as Adam's helper. Now there was strife. Now Adam would rule over Eve with an iron hand. Eve no doubt chafed under the rule and withdrew her co-operation. She undoubtedly strove to be anything but a helper, following in some way or other precepts which the woman liberationists demand today. Sinful nature threw out of existence the perfect state of the Order of Creation. Adam was no longer willing to undertake his leadership with the perfect love shown in Ephesians 5; and Eve was no longer appreciative of her position as Adam's helper.

The Order of Creation is often misunderstood amidst the propaganda which plays up female suppression. Subordination, the role of the helper, is pictured as the bondage of tyrannic subjugation. Not so! Subordination is not a degrading role. As an example of this, consider a top-notched nobel prize-winning

scientist, He is not likely to be the head of the company for which he works. The company's power lies in the office of the company's president. One would be astonished to hear the scientist make charges that he was tyrannically suppressed because he was not the head of the company, but rather someone working under the president. None of us would say that the scientist was degraded because he was not in charge of the company. We all realize that he is worthy in his position, and helps the company the most in it. So it is that the helping role given to women in the Order of Creation is not an oppression, but is the orderly place God gave women in His order of things. God is a God of order.

One particularly important note we must make before we proceed to the second principle this paper makes, is that the Order of Creation is an immutable principle established by God to govern man. It is therefore a moral law.

Also, it is important to note the Order from two perspectives. From one perspective a woman has the God-pleasing role of a helper to man. From the other perspective a woman has the commandment to stay within that role, as St. Paul says in I Timothy 2:12,

I do not permit a woman . . . to have authority over a man.

In the words of the King James Version, a woman is not to "usurp authority", which this paper defines as imposing her will and judgment upon a man.

The Second Principle, The Absence of Ceremonial Laws for the New Testament Christian

For principle two this paper will examine three New Testament passages that place restrictions on the woman's role, or that is, activity, in the church. They are I Corinthians 11:3-16, I Corinthians 14:31-35, and I Timothy 2:11-15. Before we consider these passages, it is advisable to hear them in their entirety,

I Corinthians 11:3-16: Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God, 4) Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. 5) And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. 6) If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. 8) For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; 9) neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10) For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. 11) In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12) For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. 13) Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14) Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, 15) but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. 16) If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

I Corinthians 14:34-35: Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 35) If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

I Timothy 2:11-15: A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12) I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. 13) For Adam was formed

first, then Eve, 14) And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15) But women will be kept safe (or: be saved) through childbirth, if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

The first passage, I Corinthians 11:3-16, had long been a problem in the mind of this paper's writer. Already in the seventh grade of grade school in Confirmation class he was told that the command that women should wear hats in church was followed in the Roman Catholic Church, but we didn't follow it. It no longer applied. For a believer in Divine Inspiration, it seemed as if he was being told to disregard what the Bible, God's Word, said to him. It wasn't until your writer researched this paper that his mind was put completely at ease about this passage. At this point the second principle enters in, namely:

The Absence of Ceremonial Laws for the New Testament Christian

We have only the moral Law to follow now that Christ has come. The Old Testament ceremonial laws are abrogated, and furthermore, no new ceremonial laws are added to us in the New Testament.

Is the command that women are to have their heads covered in church a moral law? Certainly not. Then of course we must look at the spirit of St. Paul's words rather than the letter. A little historical understanding sheds light on what moral law(s) St. Paul had in mind when he gave the order. It was improper dress for a woman to appear without a head covering, as it was improper for a man to cover his head. Likewise it was culturally improper for a man to have hair a woman's length, and a woman to have cropped hair. Cropped hair for a woman indicated prostitution. All those improprieties were disservices to God, and a harmful detraction to the spread of the Gospel. From these observations we can see that Paul was attempting to prevent the breaking of the moral law. The moral law is revealed in the spirit of Paul's words. We had to look at the spirit of his words. Taking Paul's words according to the letter results in misinterpretation because taking it according to the letter sets up a ceremonial law, and new testament believers no longer are under the yoke of ceremonial laws.

In verse 10 Paul said,

For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.

A head covering represented marriage and obedience to a man, so we can understand why St. Paul in this verse insisted upon a head covering. Paul was thinking of a moral law, the Order of Creation, i.e. the place of man and women in God's creation.

The writer of this paper used to be troubled over the next verse, I Corinthians 14:34-35,

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

Before the writer understood principles 1 and 2, he couldn't understand why I Corinthians 11's commandment to cover the head was declared void in our circles, but I Corinthians 14's "Let the women be silent in the churches" was held to. As with I Corinthians 11, let us ask ourselves, "Is the command for a woman to remain silent in the churches a moral law?" In answer we must realize that the command can't be taken as absolute, as every precept of the moral law is. Women can speak in the church, and do so without committing a sin. Women recite creeds and sing in the liturgy, and no-one can say they are disobeying a commandment of God. To say that they were would be to manufacture a ceremonial law out of Paul's words. Since there are no new testament ceremonial laws, let us look at the spirit of Paul's words rather than the letter. According to the spirit of Paul's words, he had the Order of Creation in mind. In some way or other the Corinthian women were stepping out of their God ordained role, and lording it over the men when they spoke in the church: Therefore Paul commanded

them, as a commandment of God, to stay silent. This was to keep the Order of Creation in operation, a moral law of God.

In I Timothy 2:11-15 we read,

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a women to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be kept safe (or: be saved) through childbirth, if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety.

In these verses we must once again ask if the commands, taken by the letter, are a part of the moral law. As for the command not to teach, we can readily understand that it is not a moral law. We therefore perceive that the moral law is found in the Spirit behind the words.

As we enter into the third section of the paper, we will see in a limited manner how to apply the above cited passages to ourselves and others in 1976.

The Third Principle, The Law of Christian Love, A Moral Law

We've seen how it is important for us to understand both the Order of Creation and the absence of Ceremonial laws in the New Testament in order to comprehend the meaning of Paul's words to us. In the course of the writer's research he came upon some who didn't work from these principles, and disastrous summations resulted. Some showed malice toward Paul as a woman hater, others made his passages into existential verses, and others boiled over with the frustration of being unable to understand. They went on to deny inspiration.

Now is the time for us to apply Principles 1 and 2 to our current day situations. This has been left for this portion of the paper because we need yet one more principle, The Law of Christian Love.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.
Matthew 22:37-40.

If we are going to judge a current day situation involving people, we need to use all of God's ten commandments in our judgment. This seems obvious, but yet we need to make sure we pay more than lip service. One common lack of Christian love is when we pronounce a principle and apply it to a person without putting the proper time into checking Scripture to see if our principle is correct.

We should be careful when we apply the injunctions that St. Paul makes in the three sections of New Testament verses we have studied. In all three sections Paul brought forth the Order of Creation. As pastors we can use that Order falsely by putting it to use where it does not properly apply. In the other direction we can make serious mistakes by failing to apply it when it needs to be applied.

In I Corinthians 11:34-35 and I Timothy 2:12 we have Paul's command that Women should remain silent in the church, and if they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home. The application of these passages would come from the spirit of Paul's words. He was striving to keep the Order of Creation intact among those to whom he originally addressed his letters. The Spirit of Paul's words apply to us. Therefore we dare not take the words to the letter, creating a ceremonial law. Accordingly we do not forbid women to sing in church or recite the Nicene Creed. They are not disobeying the Order of Creation when they participate in the worship service in that way. They are not usurping authority over men, that is, imposing their will or judgment upon men.

But we do forbid a woman to speak where she is usurping authority over men. One example is a woman taking on the role of a Pastor. There she, by taking men under her spiritual care, is putting herself over them. Neither can it be said that a woman is not usurping authority because the men of the congregation called her as their pastor. There the offense is not only in the woman who has departed from the Order of Creation, but with the men of the congregation who have departed from the leadership role God gave them.

It is difficult for the writer to conceive of how a woman minister would not be usurping authority over men. But here we must be careful not to make an absolute statement such as "A woman can never be a minister." Such a statement would make Paul's words on the subject into a ceremonial law. A woman could be a minister over a congregation of women. Or by the Law of Christian love a woman could step into a minister's position when the men of the congregation have failed in their role of the Order of Creation by being so weak in their faith that to their shame and to the detriment of members' faith, they neglect to fill the office. The woman would consider this to be a temporary emergency action, of course.

What about women soloists and organists? Do their actions disobey "Let your women keep silence in the churches"? Remember, we do not go by the letter of Paul's injunction, thereby creating a ceremonial law. We go by the spirit of his words.

The spirit commands us to keep the Order of Creation intact. With sound Christian judgment the congregation must realize whether or not the women are abiding by the Order of Creation in their actions. Do their actions usurp authority over men?

Another area for consideration is woman's suffrage in the church. Here careful thought should be given as to whether the voting of women in the church is usurping authority over men. The writer of this paper considers a vote as an exercise of authority, and cannot see how it would be anything but an usurpation.

In Timothy 2:12 Paul commands that women should not teach in the church. Once again, as we have shown, we cannot go according to the letter of the command, but rather according to the spirit of the words. It is necessary, therefore, to use sound Christian Judgment in considering every case. Can a man be taught by a woman? As a minor he is still under adults, but when does a man become an adult? Another question is, "Can a man be taught by a woman?" We would need to consider the subject of the course, its connection with religion, and also the personal relationship between the teacher and student. One on one instruction is not improper if the woman has the correct judgment and Christian behavior. We have the example from the New Testament where Priscilla taught Apollos.

There are many situations that can be discussed. You have heard some, there are many more. Hopefully the brethren will bring some up for our mutual consideration. The purpose the writer sought in presenting this paper was the establishment of the important principles upon which "women in the church" situations can be successfully analyzed and judged. After the three principles presented in this paper are understood and applied, your writer believes that matters would fall into place according to the wisdom and understanding the Lord has given the man entrusted with making the judgment.

As one last note, when we're called upon to judge, we all need to be humble about our own wisdom. With humbleness we need to seek the wisdom of God from His Word, whether it comes directly out of reading the Bible, or from the mouths of fellow pastors, or from our laymen.