

Women In The Church: Drawing The Line Between Truth And Tradition

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Time passes quickly. Soon we shall find ourselves in another year of national election, complete with primaries, promises and pontifications. During the election Year of 1988, the media developed a phrase to describe much of the discussion of issues coming from the candidates. This phrase was “more heat than light.” Considering that it came from the media, it is actually a fairly useful phrase. For indeed, too often political candidates attempt to enflame the minds of the voters against the opponent, rather than enlighten the minds of the voters with a thoughtful discussion of the issues.

“More heat than light.” As confessional church bodies, the WELS and ELS also run the risk of such a circumstance when discussing the issue before us today, namely, the role of women in the church. Has there been a hotter topic in the organized church in the past 20 years? We have felt the heat of this topic. Because it is so potentially divisive and difficult to explain, we have perhaps been a little less willing than we should to study what the Word of God has to say about women in the church within our individual congregations. Speaking as a parish pastor, your essayist confesses that he does not exactly relish the thought of discussing this topic with adult confirmation classes. Why? Because of the heat it generates.

But your essayist must also confess that such an attitude is weak and less than noble. To examine the issue of women in the church and feel only heat is to ignore the light. We must recognize that scriptural principles that militate against the world and our flesh are, by necessity, going to be “hot topics.” But we have not been left in the dark; God has given us the light of his word. For this reason, we do well to plunge into what the Scriptures say about women in the church, and to do so without fear. The floor committee that reported on the COP statement “The Scriptural Principle of Man and Woman Roles” at the August WELS convention wisely formulated this resolution: “Resolved, that the congregations, circuits and conferences of the synod be urged to give immediate, careful and prayerful study to the statement.” May our discussion today serve this goal. For the more we allow God’s light to shine through open and honest discussions of this issue, the less intimidating heat we shall feel.

A few words about the exact purpose of this essay are in order. First, this writing will be limited to a discussion of the Man/Woman principle enunciated in Scripture as it applies *to the church*. Thus was the assignment. Much could be written about the biblical Man/Woman principle as it applies to women in society. Indeed, our conferences and circuits should be encouraged to give that area of “Man and Woman Roles” their continued prayerful study because it is probably the hardest to understand and apply to practical situations. However, this essay will only apply to women in the church.

Second, this is an essay stressing application, not principle. Because your essayist truly believes that the timeless Man/Woman principle has been correctly expounded in our circles, there will be no attempt to prove that such a principle exists in this essay. Rather, it shall be our purpose to *apply* the basic principle to specific situations within our congregations. By doing so, it is hoped that the abundant talents of our women may be better utilized in service to the Lord on the local congregational level. Because we are in basic agreement with the principle that has already been mined from the Scriptures through exegesis, there will be little exegesis in this essay. In the essayist’s mind, that work has already been done. *Applying* what has been determined as the principle is in greater need of our attention.

Third, what is to follow is by no means an expert analysis. Your essayist has often asked himself what qualifies him to write on this topic. Certainly not experience. My experience with the issue of “women in the church” boils down to two points: a) There are women in my church, and b) I am married to one of them. Therefore, many of the ideas proposed here are not born out of experience, but rather on honest application of God’s Word. If we seek to apply Scripture in keeping with its spirit, then every one of us may feel qualified to speak on this topic.

But at the same time, we may not always speak for each other. When discussing applications of a principle, it is never wise to develop a “code of canon law” that must be practiced everywhere regardless of local circumstances and experience. Rather, it might be more appropriate to call these applications “case law”-general, moral principles which are applied to each individual circumstance. Such an understanding is more in keeping with the scriptural (and Lutheran) principle of Christian freedom.

I. IDENTIFYING THE PRINCIPLE

Of course, before we seek to apply a timeless biblical principle to our individual situations, we must first have a principle to apply. What exactly is the authoritative principle pertaining to the service of women in the church according to the Bible? We may derive our answer from a number of scriptural sources.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the inspired apostle Paul spoke to the issue at hand quite directly. Writing in chapter eleven, Paul addressed the topic of women serving in the organized church when he wrote:

“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... For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman but woman for man” (1 Co 11:3,8,9).

We should ask ourselves: What principle is being expounded here? Where is the timeless truth that we shall seek to apply? The simple principle mentioned in these verses is that of headship. The apostle refers to a timeless truth here, and he uses the word “head” (Greek *kephale*) to express it. Some have argued about what the word head means in these verses, saying that it means “source” rather than “someone who holds authority.” But when we study the usage of this word throughout Scripture, and secular forms of Greek literature for that matter, we see that *kephale* primarily implies authority. To be the head of something or someone means you have authority over something or someone.

The fact that Christ is offered by Paul as the first example of authority, or headship, should not be lost on us. Our Savior shows us what headship can and should be. Christ’s example of headship is undergirded by service, love, humility and sacrifice. Though he is Lord God from eternity, Jesus did not use his authority to “lord it over” us sinners. In fact, just the opposite is true. His greatest lordship was displayed when he humbled himself unto the cross in our service. Yet his example of serving, sacrificing headship in no way removes the authority from the word “head.” Even as Christ shed his blood, his position as “King of kings and Lord of lords” was never stripped from him.

It is crucial that we observe another point from these words of Paul. In order to explain the headship of man over woman in the church, he takes us back all the way to creation. In so doing, Paul gives the headship or authority principle its timeless quality. The inspired writer is saying that the way that the Creator made man and woman in the beginning has a direct bearing on how man and woman may serve in the church. The fact that the woman was created as a “helper” for the man is offered as the basis for man having authority over woman in church affairs today.

It has been said that in the discussion of Man/Woman roles, everything goes back to Genesis. This is a true and perceptive statement. For at creation God established a timeless plan that the children of God should always seek to remember and implement. That timeless plan is the much-heard-of "Order of Creation." We believe that the Creator had a purpose in bringing about the head/helper order of creation. In other words, we do not uphold the principle of man's authority in the church because of an unfortunate quirk of fate that allowed for man to be created before woman. Rather, we uphold the authority principle because we trust that the omniscient Creator had a divine plan at creation for doing things the way he did. By inspiration, Paul certainly seems to think so. For in this first passage from 1 Corinthians he establishes man being the head of the woman in the church, as a principle, and he uses the Creator's plan to prove the principle.

While speaking of the authority principle in a general way in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul speaks of how this principle impacts upon women in the church in 1 Corinthians 14. There he writes, again in the context of the organized church:

"As in all the congregations of the saints, 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" (1 Co 14:33-35).

We might say that with this passage Paul proposes the other side of the authority coin. According to the apostle, if man is to have authority in the church, then women "must be in submission." That word "submission" sends shivers up the spine of even the most confessional Lutheran, not to mention the militant feminist. Perhaps no other principle in this discussion of women in the church has generated more heat than light. Such a condition exists because of the great misunderstanding over the biblical idea of submission. Generally speaking, when we hear the word "submission" we think of two concepts: forced oppression and inferiority.

However, any honest study of the submission principle includes neither the ideas of forced oppression or inferiority. While the verb that is translated "be in submission" may speak of a submission created by force, the context must dictate how this submission occurs. In this case it is obvious that Paul is making a direct appeal to the Corinthians that their women *willingly* submit in church affairs. Such an understanding is also in keeping with the form of the Greek verb, which might be better translated "submit themselves." This is the same word spoken of Jesus, who submitted to Mary and Joseph (Lk 2:51) and submitted to the cross (Php 2:8). Surely we understand our Savior's submission to his Father's plan of salvation to be a willing one. It was a submission of choice. It was a submission chosen for the ultimate benefit rendered. This is the same submission referred to by Paul in regard to women being in submission in the church.

The fact that woman's submission in the church may be compared to Christ's submission to the cross should end all aspersions cast on the biblical principle of submission. To submit oneself is not to be inferior. To submit oneself is not to be horribly unequal. To submit oneself is to follow God's plan. Here again we go back to Genesis (although Paul does not mention Genesis in this particular passage). The principle of submission-enunciated here is perfectly in line with the principle of authority proposed in 1 Corinthians 11. If these principles truly are God's will, should they not be desirable? If they are part of God's plan, should we not follow them eagerly? Perhaps when we remember that God has a plan and that plan includes submission, then submission will not be identified with inferiority. In fact, then submission on the woman's part should be given all the glory of authority on man's part. For they both represent consecrated children of God seeking to follow his plan.

Thus far Scripture has led us to a timeless principle concerning the service of men and women within the church, namely, that of authority for man and submission for woman. In a third passage the apostle Paul applies this principle for us. Instructing his young colleague Timothy in matters of the church, Paul writes:

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Ti 2:11-13).

It is interesting to note that the COP statement refers to this passage as an application, and not a principle. Such an observation is important. For while there are some elements in this passage which refer to the authority/submission principle, there are other elements which serve as primary applications of that principle. For instance, that a woman is not to teach is not a principle. That a woman must be silent is not a principle. Paul himself encourages women to teach and speak in other portions of Scripture (Tit 2:3,4; 1 Co 11:5,13).

Therefore certain forms of teaching and proclaiming God’s message are allowed, even encouraged among women, according to Paul. But the timeless principle must speak to and control this teaching and proclaiming. This is what we see happening in this passage. It is the authority/submission principle which dominates the passage and gives us its clearest interpretation.

The quietness and silence to which Paul refers is the proper attitude of submission with which God would have women adorn themselves in the church. The teaching that Paul prohibits is that teaching which exercises authority over men. The inspired apostle has taken the authority/submission principle and used it to enlighten our understanding of how women may properly serve in the church. And once again he has gone back to Genesis to support his proposition. By connecting this passage for the New Testament church to the plan God ordained at creation, Paul reminds us that the authority/submission principle is timeless and always pertains. This principle is binding for every age in which the church finds itself. Therefore it is vital that we start with this principle in every discussion of how we may better utilize the talents of women in our congregations. We should always remember that there is a principle of authority/submission; but at the same time we should remember that there is only one principle. Ignoring the principle is to militate against God’s will. But manufacturing principles that are not contained in Scripture is just as harmful. A God-pleasing application of the authority/submission principle is what we seek in the next section.

II. APPLYING THE PRINCIPLE

Once a scriptural principle is clear, one would think the application of that principle would be rather easy. That is the way it should be. For in giving us a timeless moral principle, the Lord has given us a clear direction regardless of the times in which we are living. However, the reality is that applying a scriptural principle is not easy. Too often the clear water of the principle becomes muddied by our own peculiar traditions. This is particularly true of the discussion of how our women may serve in the church. It is important in this discussion that we constantly draw a heavy line between what we know to be scriptural truth and what we know to be our own tradition. To your essayist, drawing the truth/tradition line is the key to applying God’s principle to the various situations that exist within our congregations. When the truth/tradition line is blurred, the usual result is an unhappy, unscriptural removal of opportunities for service to the Lord afforded to the women of our churches.

Consider the birth of a tradition. Generally speaking, traditions grow out of the culture or society of the times. Traditions within the church spring up with noble purpose, namely, to reflect God’s timeless truths in a timely way within certain place and time. Yet, reflecting God’s

truth is not the same as God's truth. To put them on the same level will cause real problems interpreting what the Bible has to say about women in the church. For instance, what would we do with 1 Corinthians 11? There Paul speaks both of God's timeless truth concerning women in the church and the reflection of that truth in the congregations of his day. The truth is the authority/submission principle, as we have seen. The reflection of that truth is the practice of women covering their heads in worship. At that place and time, covering the head was a culturally acceptable way of showing that the authority/submission principle was understood. Yet, it is the truth that is timeless, not the reflection of the truth. Therefore, our own lack of following the custom mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11 in no way violates the principle of 1 Corinthians 11. Why? Because we have drawn the line between truth and tradition.

Your essayist's father, a parish pastor for 44 years, remembers an incident from early in his ministry that illustrates what happens when the truth/tradition line is blurred. A certain woman, after hearing our position on the role of women in the church, remarked: "That's not Lutheran. That's not Catholic. That's German." Apparently, as she viewed our practices within the local congregation, it was not only the biblical principle that she saw. She also saw some cultural, ethnic traditions being passed off as principles. No doubt her observation was fairly accurate. Because many of our traditions have originated in the German, male dominated environments of past decades, there may have been a tendency to extend the authority/submission principle further than Scripture itself dictates. Perhaps some of that tendency has been handed down to us. All the more reason for us to go about the painful process of determining whether we are letting truth or tradition be our guide in the area of women in the church.

Our Savior urged those around him to make just such a distinction. Christ once closed a discussion on the Old Testament Sabbath laws with these words: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27). He wanted the Pharisees to see the principle behind the Sabbath: a time of rest and worship *for the good of man*. The traditions and "riders" the Pharisees had added to the Sabbath had made it a burden rather than a benefit. In the same way, Jesus quoted Isaiah when referring to teachings that are more traditional than scriptural: "They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Mt 15:9). The church must heed this warning in every age. She must clearly distinguish between God's timeless truth and anything that smacks of being a "rule taught by men."

The distinction between truth and tradition was also on the minds of the Lutheran confessors. By no means did the reformers desire to be "tradition-bashers" whose aim was to destroy anything that even reminded one of the Roman Church. On the other hand, they were quick to challenge the Roman idea that traditions that had become common church usage were on a par with Scripture. From Article XV of the Augsburg Confession, entitled "Of Ecclesiastical Usages," we read: "Concerning such things men are admonished that consciences are not to be burdened, as though such observance was necessary to salvation" (*Trig* 49:2). Clarifying this point in the Apology, Melancthon writes: "The Gospel clearly testifies that traditions ought not to be imposed upon the Church. . . in order to burden consciences, so that to omit them is to be accounted a sin" (*Trig* 447:11). Indeed, how tragic it would be for us to give our people the impression that to break with tradition is sinful when, in fact, no scriptural truth has been transgressed.

In this regard the COP Statement does WELS/ELS Christians a service by saying: "The role relationship principle governing the ministry of women is restrictive *only in regard to authority over men*. Women are encouraged to participate in any office or work of ministry *where this principle is not applicable*" (emphasis ours). In other words, if we simply adhere to the one principle that the Bible prohibits a woman's authority over a man in church affairs, then

our forms of ministry will be God-pleasing. But there is real work involved— sometimes work we would rather not undertake—in examining the practices of our own congregations as to whether women are serving in accordance with God’s truth or our own traditions.

Let us now look at some specific situations. Many church bodies, including the largest among Lutheranism in the United States, currently ordain women into the office of the pastoral ministry. By not following suit, are the WELS and ELS clinging to their own traditions? Or are they affirming scriptural truth? To answer these questions we should return to the biblical principle that governs these cases. Actually, there is nothing in the Bible that prohibits a woman from being ordained or holding the office of pastor. What the Bible does say is that a woman should not have authority over a man in the church. God’s will is violated when this is done, whatever the office or form of ministry. Therefore we must ask: Could a woman be a pastor in one of our congregations and at the same time be submissive and not have authority over men? Clearly not. It would be impossible to argue that being a pastor is not a position of authority over men in our congregations. Scripture’s description of the pastor includes the idea of holding authority. Writing instructions to the pastor Titus, Paul writes: “Encourage and rebuke with all authority” (Tit 2:15). Likewise the writer to the Hebrews encourages his readers to submit to the authority of their pastoral leaders (Heb 13:17). Though the pastoral ministry is to be carried out in a spirit of servanthood, this in no way strips away the characteristic of authority.

However, wherever authority over men is not an issue, the office of pastor would be open to women. Luther wrote: “If only women were present and no men, as in nunneries, then one of the women might be authorized to preach” (*LW* 30:55). There would be nothing unscriptural about a woman serving as a pastor or chaplain in an all-woman situation, such as a woman’s crisis center or penitentiary.

In the same way, many of the works of ministry carried out by our pastors could be carried out by our women. But, again, we must examine them in the light of the authority/submission principle enunciated by Scripture for women in the church. For instance, though authoritative teaching of Scripture is certainly a pastoral task, nevertheless we have encouraged our women to be authoritative teachers in our elementary schools. We allow this kind of teaching for women because authority over a man is not an issue. The same holds true for our women Sunday School teachers. We might further apply this principle to Bible Class instruction in our local congregations. Whether a woman may lead a Bible Class or devotional group within the congregation may be ascertained by asking ourselves this question: Are there men over whom the woman will have authority in this situation? Thus we shall be letting the principles of God’s Word rule. Your essayist believes, therefore, that women may lead a women’s Bible study or devotional group, for it would be a form of ministry in keeping with the scriptural principle.

Forms of ministry within the public worship service should also be analyzed under the light shed by God’s truth. The reading of Scripture within our services might be a good example. Would it be violating the authority/submission principle to have a woman read the Scripture lessons from the lectern on a Sunday? An interesting question, but the real question should be: Is reading the Scripture lessons an exercise of authority over the men in the congregation? The congregation must come to a determination on that question first. Some might consider it an activity that is subordinate to the authority of the pastor in the church, much like singing a solo or a Christmas recitation by our children. However, others might view the reading of Scripture as an essential element of the pastor’s authority. Before introducing the practice of woman lectors, therefore, a congregation must honestly grapple with it as it pertains to the biblical principle of women in the church.

Other forms of service within the worship setting, which have been traditionally male in our circles, are easier to resolve. Take the ushers, for instance. While helping to organize a LWMS rally at his church, your essayist was told to have some men on hand for the opening devotion. Why? Well, to usher and collect the offering, of course. So ingrained is the tradition of male ushers that they were even thought necessary for an all-woman LWMS rally. But in all seriousness, does the authority/submission principle prohibit women from being ushers in our worship service? The function of the ushers does not seem to be one of authority, but one of assisting those who have come to worship. If that be the case, then ushering would be on the same level as sitting next to a newcomer and helping him with the liturgy. Surely we would desire our women to carry out that function.

Perhaps most pertinent to this discussion is the question of how women may serve in the administration of the local congregation. Again, it is best to establish the system of binding authority before we begin grappling with individual situations. For the vast majority of our congregations that system of binding authority is the voters' assembly. Therefore, to vote in such an assembly would be an act of authority that binds the will of the entire congregation, regardless of age or gender. For this reason, in the vast majority of our congregations, voting privileges have rightly been limited to adult men. For voting involves authority over men. The possibility exists to view voting differently. A few congregations have allowed their women to vote because they see it as an advisory activity, not an authoritative one. Making your voters' assembly advisory means that some other body, like the church council, holds the authority for making congregational decisions. Of course, then that smaller governing body would have to consist of men. There is nothing unscriptural about this alternate system of church government. However, your essayist wonders why any congregation would want it. Do we really want to establish a hierarchy where the larger body is only advisory to the few who have authority? When such a hierarchy is established just so women may vote in our congregations, then we believe it may rightly be called "a cure worse than the disease."

At the same time, we should recognize that there are important groups within the congregation, which do advise the voters, but do not have authority over the congregation. We usually call these groups committees. In recent years there has been much debate about whether women may serve on church committees in our circles. In most situations these committees work in service to the congregation and are under the authority of the voters' assembly. Yet, to a great degree, our own traditions have dissuaded us from putting women on these committees. If these committees only exist to serve and cannot make binding decisions for the congregation, the question remains: Why shouldn't women serve as members of these committees? Of course, a few caveats are in order. Though a committee may not have authority over the congregation there is still a chairman who has authority *within the committee*. Therefore that chairman should, indeed, be a man. We should also remember that there are certain committees that *do* have governing authority within the congregation. The church council would be a good example. Many congregations with elementary schools have a Board of Education that has some authority over the teachers, both male and female. These governing committees, then, should consist of men, in keeping with the biblical principle. One final remark on committees. If we insist they are only serving the voters, then that must be their function in reality. Both the voters and the committees should understand that the voters' assembly has authority. When voters simply "rubber stamp" every proposition from our part-female committees, we become guilty of trying to evade the biblical principle by means of church politics.

It is biblical to have congregational authority reside in an all-male voters assembly. However, over the years, we feel that some unscriptural customs have developed in our congregations because the purpose of the all-male voters assembly has been misunderstood. The

primary purpose of the voters assembly is to make final decisions for the congregation. On the other hand, its purpose is not to have “a corner on the market” of producing input which will lead to informed decisions. There seems to be a corollary to Paul’s “they should ask their own husbands at home” (1 Co 14:35), namely, that the men should actively seek to gather input from the women of the congregation before making authoritative decisions. Such a practice is only in keeping with the Christian concern for all the needs of a body of believers. To facilitate such a process, some of our congregations have assigned representatives of the voters to hear the concerns of those women who do not have the opportunity to speak to a husband about church affairs. Even more congregations have regular congregational forums which take place before the voters meetings. In these forums any member of the congregation may comment on a matter which is about to come before the voters. We feel this is a way for our women to be more “a part of” their congregation without violating the authority/ submission principle. For the voters still have the final authority and the comments from the congregational form do not bind their will in any way.

This writer feels that congregations that institute a system of holding congregational forums will be happily surprised. When our sisters in the faith are able to speak their hearts in such a venue, good things happen. We preach and teach the gospel among fellow Christians so that faith and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ may grow. Let us remember that it grows also within the hearts of our women. Therefore, their scripturally enlightened understanding of topics like stewardship, evangelism, worship, etc. will be of value to our congregations. A congregational forum where they are able to share their understanding is an opportunity that, in your essayist’s opinion, we should not pass up.

One of the battle cries employed by those who propose women pastors is the theory that God would not give women pastoral gifts if he did not want them to be pastors. We recognize this logic as faulty and unscriptural, since it fails to take God’s timeless authority/submission principle into account. However, we wonder how much of this faulty logic we have actually provoked by our own failure to allow women to use their gifts to the fullest and most biblical degree within our congregations. If we are truly seeking to better utilize the talents of our women in the church, we need to do many things. We need to let the clear, timeless authority/submission principle govern every situation. We need to apply the principle cleanly, without adding the baggage of our own traditions and customs. We need to analyze those situations which exist in our congregations because “that’s the way we’ve always done it,” and hold them up to the light of God’s principle concerning men and women in the church. We need to educate our people lovingly, that the congregation as a whole may better understand what is God’s truth and what is our own tradition. When all these things have been done, and the principle has been applied with the result that women are serving the Lord in our congregation in a new way, let us not judge other congregations that have not made the exact same application. Instead, may we all continue to seek the Lord’s will through his Word humbly and honestly. For those who are honest to God’s Word are honest to God’s people. The result: God-pleasing congregations where women are not afraid, or deprived, of using their gifts to serve the Lord. God grant it for the congregations of the WELS and ELS.