

The Role Of Women In The Church With Special Reference To Genesis 1-3

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Genesis 1, 2 and 3 say absolutely nothing in direct reference to the role of women in the church. The importance of these chapters becomes obvious, however, when the New Testament passages, 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 that do mention the role of women in the church in specific terms, refer back to the accounts of Creation and the Fall. Very religious sounding arguments can be made defending our past practices on the basis of faithfulness and condemning our past in terms of love and justice and fairness.

The Bible can be made to say anything. Especially in this current volatile climate of changing attitudes toward women's roles in the home, church and society no one can pretend to be uninfluenced either by the church's past practices or by society's newly accepted standards. We have an old adam that always starts with some predisposition toward the Bible.

The old adam will be overcome only by the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who gave us our Bible led our Lutheran fathers to develop sound rules of Bible interpretation. Our Lutheran hermeneutical principles were drawn from the Bible so that the Bible could speak for itself. These principles allow the Bible to speak clearly. The perspicuity of Scriptures is especially important in controversy. To acknowledge that God speaks clearly means not only that we know what he is saying. Clarity implies that we not make God say more or less than he does.

Lutheran principles of interpretation are based on a grammatico-historical approach to the Scriptures. That means we allow every word to have its most simple and obvious meaning unless the context forces us out of it. Because God speaks clearly, there can be only one literal meaning for each passage taking into account figures of speech. Biblical interpretation also means that what we take to be the meaning cannot be in conflict with other passages of Scripture. Since we believe in inspiration, conformity with the clear meaning of other passages will take precedence over historical and rational pressures upon interpretation. Finally we will always interpret what is less clear in light of what is more clear.

How we interpret Genesis 1, 2 and 3 is as important as what we interpret. I include Genesis 1:26, 27 with a discussion of the more obvious references in Genesis 2 and 3 because of the bearing it has upon the interpretation of Chapter 2. In verse 27 we read, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." The word **man** in this passage is *HA'ADAM*. The noun has the definite article, but it is obviously used in an indefinite, generic sense. Leupold explains, "Though from one point of view it is entirely proper to say that God on the sixth day created **man** (*'adham*), yet, as the rest of the account at once indicates, this term is meant generically; and since by a special work of the Almighty, woman is brought into being, this first amplifies itself into the more exact statement of the case that **the man** (the article of relative familiarity, K. S. 298a) was created **male and female** (*zakhar*, from the root meaning **male**; *neqebhah*, from *naqab* meaning to perforate)."

This passage is so important because of its position in the Genesis story of Creation and the Fall. It is still a part of the overview that God is giving of creation that extends from Genesis 1:1 to 2:3. There can be no doubt either from the text or the context that *HA'ADAM* is used generically. In fact it is used in an even wider sense than it is later. Here **man** means not only

Adam as representative of all men, but Adam as **human** and representative of all, male and female.

The second part of verse 27 is “male and female he created them.” God does not say he created them **Adam and Eve**. He does not say **husband and wife**, even though his address is to Adam and Eve as husband and wife in the verse following. In verse 28 God addresses them; he blesses them; he tells them to be fruitful and multiply; he tells them to rule the earth. Yet even that address must be understood as being given to Adam and Eve as representatives and prototypes of all who are to follow. Many years later the same blessing and the same command would fall upon Noah and his sons.

Genesis One is God’s summary statement on creation. Thus verse 27 of Chapter 1 states the simple truth of which the *Toledoth* beginning in Genesis 2:4 is the expansion. Any other understanding leads to the critical opinion that Genesis is merely the collection and editing of varying independent creation traditions. The generic use of *HA’ADAM* and the clear statement that the first two people God created were “male and female” representative of those who would follow are points of context that cannot be ignored in the interpretation of Genesis 2.

Genesis 2:18 is a part of the expansion and explanation of Genesis 1:27. After giving us the details of man’s creation from dust, the Garden of Eden, and God’s instruction concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Moses writes, “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’”

There are two focal points of interpretation in this verse that have a bearing upon the role of women in the church. One is the word *HA’ADAM*. Is what God is saying about Adam here meant to be understood only of Adam the individual? Or is it meant to be understood of Adam the first man and representative of all men? Or is it meant to be understood in both ways?

Our interpretation must not violate sound Lutheran hermeneutical principles. We must therefore satisfy the simple linguistic usage of the word and its use in the immediate context. The presence of the definite article in front of *ADAM* tells us that the word is not being used as the name Adam. Hebrew use of the definite article indicates that the word is used generically. Yet the immediate context demands that what is said must also apply to Adam as an individual. He is the only individual Adam there at the time. He is a member of the class to which God is speaking.

We must accept that what is said applies both to Adam as an individual and as a representative of the males to follow. If our interpretation is correct it will not violate the wider context or other clear passages of Scripture. First we will remember that this verse is a part of the expansion of Genesis 1:27 in which *HA’ADAM* was used generically in an even wider sense and in which God’s human creatures were referred to as “male and female,” not Adam and Eve or husband and wife. This substantiates the interpretation which sees Adam as the representative of all males.

The verses following show that **man** also refers to Adam as an individual. God asked Adam to name all the animals to impress upon him personally the truth that it was not good to be alone and the truth that no suitable helper for him existed in creation.

The parenthetical comment in verse 24 seals the case in the wider context for requiring a generic understanding of *HA’ADAM*. He writes, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” The way God created Adam as male pertained to all males. Adam had no mother and father. Yet what was true about him was true of all men to follow, all men who would have mothers and fathers.

The second focal point of interpretation in verse 18 is the Hebrew word, *EZER*. There is no ambiguity or confusion about the root meaning of this word or its etymology. It means **help**. When it is used in reference to a person, it means **helper**. The point of controversy in interpretation with reference to the role of women in the church is whether or not **helper** connotes submission or subjection. The word in the immediate context which can help our interpretation is *KENEGHDO* The King James translates, “a help meet for him.” The NIV has, “a helper suitable for him.” Literally we might translate “corresponding to him.” The woman was to be complementary to man.

There is a number of things from the immediate use and context of the word *EZER* that requires understanding it as denoting submission to the man. First there is the simple meaning of the word: **helper**. It has been suggested that in the Old Testament God is referred to as **Helper**, and that thus **helper** cannot automatically be considered a term denoting submission. Yet the word’s most frequent use and our context here does not allow anything but an idea of accountability. God was not and is not “made” a helper as the woman is “made” a helper here.

2:18 directs God’s thoughts and actions for the man. God is concerned about his being alone. Twice God speaks of this **helper** in reference to the man, God said, “I will make for him...” And God said the **helper** will be “suitable for him.” Since **helper** in its natural and most frequent meaning and use denotes submission, any interpretation suggesting that the **helper** here is equal and not subordinate would have to be forced by the immediate context. The context does not do that. It supports and reinforces the idea that the **helper** was for man.

The wider context and the witness of Scripture as a whole bear out this interpretation. Since the *Toledoth* was introduced in Genesis 2:4, Moses has given us the following information. God created man. God created Eden and placed man there. God gave man the care of the Garden. God instructed man in regard to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now God expresses his concern to provide a suitable helper for man. Man was created first. Man was assigned the work directly. Man was given the spiritual instruction about the tree. Woman is to be man’s helper. The wider context certainly does not in any way suggest equality of roles. The fact that the woman knows about God’s command in chapter three might even indicate that the man instructed her.

The emphasis on the man’s helper being “for him” and “suitable for him” is not lost on other Bible writers. St. Paul writes in I Corinthians 11:8, “Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.” This is a clear reference to man and woman before the Fall. Even though St. Paul is speaking to a custom of his day, his mention of the fact of creation in support of the custom, requires our interpretation of **helper** as being an indication of submission. He specifically uses the word “authority” and makes reference to the creation account in such a way as to suggest his hearers should be able to come to the same conclusion when recalling the same account.

Thus God assigned roles to man and woman at Creation, before the marriage of Adam and Eve, and before the fall into sin. The immediate context requires this interpretation. The word **man** and not the name Adam is used by the NIV throughout chapter 2 except in verse 20. The mention of male and female by God in Chapter 1 supports this interpretation. The parenthetical remarks in 2:24, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother...” insist that God created Adam and Eve as prototypes for what all men and women would be and not just as two individuals.

This is the only interpretation happily in harmony with Scriptural principles of hermeneutics. That there was a submissive role assigned by God to woman as a part of her created nature and a leadership role assigned to man before the Fall is required also by the beautiful picture St. Paul ascribes to the relationship of Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5. It is inconceivable that the relationship between Christ and the Church would be spoken of as an ideal reality if it were based upon a relationship of punishment due to sin. That the roles assigned to Adam and Eve were roles they possessed as prototypes of male and female outside of their own marriage relationship is attested to by Christ. When he speaks about creation, he too says first that God created male and female, and for this reason a man (not a husband) will leave his father and mother to marry.

Chapter 3 of Genesis helps to present the context for the principle of the established roles of man and woman in Creation and does not set forth the principle itself. It is important to note in Genesis 3:16-19 nothing of what God established as good in Creation was abolished. There will still be the relationship between man and woman to fulfill the command to be fruitful and multiply. What changes because of sin is not the existence of that relationship or God's command to exercise it. What changes is that the birth of children will now be accompanied with pain. Man's relationship to the earth does not change after the fall. He is still to work, still to plant, still to subdue (Note Genesis 9:1). What changes is that now because of sin man's relationship to the earth will be accompanied with painful toil, thorns and thistles and the sweat of his brow.

Sandwiched right in between God's restatements of these two relationships is God's comment on the relationship of man to woman. God is not creating a new relationship in verse 16b anymore than he was creating new relationships to his command to be fruitful and multiply or his command to work and subdue to the earth. What God is doing in verse 16b is the same as what he did before and after he said, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." He is telling Eve how sin will change a relationship which had already been established. A relationship that had been established in creation and in perfection as a fully enjoyable one would now be accompanied by unwillingness and resentment.

Again the wider context and the witness of other passages of Scripture support the interpretation demanded by the local context. God told Adam that the ground would be cursed, not because he was deceived, but, "Because you listened to your wife," (v 17). God's curse of the ground because Adam listened to his wife says two things. First, there must have been something wrong in listening to his wife. Second, whatever order, principle, or law that made it wrong for him to listen to his wife must have been established before the Fall and must have been known to Adam.

God's full report to Adam of the cause of his chastisement was, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree..." It might be argued what the real reason for the chastisement was his eating of the tree, and that the mentioning of his listening to his wife was only a narrative accounting of what happened before the actual sin. But that suggestion does not take into account Paul's inspired interpretation of this verse in 1 Timothy 2:14: "And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner." Adam was not deceived by the devil. He sinned because he forsook his role as leader and listened to his wife. He did not only sin against the command not to eat of the tree. He sinned against the moral requirement to be the leader of his family.

Although Genesis 3 does not for the first time set forth the principle of the roles of man and woman, it does clearly help delineate the legal and moral nature of God's order of creation.

The order of creation as history is recorded in Genesis 2. God's assignment of roles to the man and woman as prototypes for all men and women is taught especially by verses 18-24 in that chapter. But the specific mention that God's role assignment was a part of his holy will and law is given in 3:17 when God mentions Adam's violation of this law as one of the reasons for the chastisement which is imposed upon him.

Not all of God's law was given on Mount Sinai as a part of the formal Ten Commandments. Not any of God's law took written form before the Flood as far as we know. Yet Adam and Eve were held guilty on the basis of their knowledge of God's law. In paradise God's law was written in perfection and completion upon their hearts.

God's order of creation is a part of his moral law. It was established as a part of what God declared "good" at the end of the sixth day. Adam was held morally accountable for breaking this law. The Old Testament believers observed this law in their married life and in their church life. The moral aspect of the order of creation is reestablished in the New Testament. St. Peter speaks of the beautiful women of the Old Testament: "They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master." When St. Paul mentions how women should conduct themselves in the churches he says, "They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says." Paul was speaking about this law, the order of Creation. No new law was given after creation regarding the position of women. When writing to Timothy the same apostle gave as his first reason for reason for the submission of women in teaching, "And Adam was formed first, then Eve." (1 Timothy 2:13). He is not making a new law or merely reacting to custom. He is applying an existing law.

Our practice in regard to the role of women in the church will be much influenced by Genesis 1-3. Although these chapters say nothing specific about women's role in the church as such, Genesis does clearly express the law, yes, the moral decree of God on which the New Testament passages draw. Genesis requires us to see that God's assignment of roles for men and women was not just for Adam and Eve; that it was not just for husbands and wives; that it was not given only after sin had marred the relationship between God and man and man and woman. God gave these roles in love and perfection as a part of his creating male and female.

The knowledge that our loving God established these relationships in the perfection of paradise will not only determine our practice of establishing women's roles in our churches, it will also frame and form our attitude toward our practice. Love is the summary of the law. We need never be defensive of our practices as being unloving, bigoted, Germanic, satanic, or chauvinistic. God is love. God is a God of order. That he loves his Church is without question. That he gives order to his Church in these last days of disorder will be hard to defend and rationalize to a world with itching ears. But it will never be considered anything but a blessing to us.