

The Practical Application of the Role of Women in the Life and Work of the Church in the Area of School Visitation

Erich Sievert

The question before us today concerns itself with the practical application of the role of women in the life and work of the church in the area of school visitation. To come directly to the point we are to consider whether or not women teachers should be asked to serve as school visitors for our Christian Day Schools.

From the very outset, let it be clearly stated that the question has not arisen because of undue influences and pressures. There has been no cry on the part of our women teachers that they have been treated unfairly either by not being given consideration for appointment to the office of school visitor or by not being visited by women school visitors. Nor have we been influenced by the sociological changes relative to the position of women in modern society and certainly not because of the woman's liberation movement. Ours is a matter which we wish to discuss primarily because there is some feeling on the part of male teachers and school visitors themselves that the Gospel ministry as it functions in our Christian day schools might benefit, especially in the area of the primary grades, through the use of women as school visitors to those grades.

Since the ministry of visiting Christian day schools projects the woman into an area of greater responsibility within the church, it is in place to consider the matter in the light of what God's Word teaches about women's role in the life of the church. In considering the appointment of women to the office of school visitor we must look to God's Word for instruction and guidance.

To begin with, we remind ourselves that the Scriptures set forth that the highest calling and the first calling of woman is that of a wife and a mother. In that role woman was to be subordinate to the man who was to exercise leadership.

To exercise dominion over the woman, as would a dictator, was not included in God's injunction, however. Paul in Ephesians 5 states, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands as unto the Lord., for the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the Head of the church. Husbands love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of the water of the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it be Holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies."

It should be remembered that in the home the woman shares the authority with the husband, however. He is the head but as far as the children are concerned the mother's authority is equal to that of the father. The Lord explicitly stated, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord." The Fourth Commandment explicitly states, "Honor thy father and thy mother that it may be well with thee and thou mayest live long on the earth."

We further remind ourselves that the Scriptures record numerous examples of women who did much to further the cause of Christ's kingdom. We think of the Shunamite woman and her hospitality to Elisha. We are reminded of a Mary Magdalene, a Joanna, a Susanna and others who were with Christ as He went throughout the cities and villages preaching and showing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God. (Luke 8:2-3.) We recall Mary of Bethany who anointed the Savior for burial. Nor should we fail to list a host of others whom Paul mentions in his letters: Eunice, Lois, Phoebe, Priscilla. Phoebe is worthy of special mention with regard to this topic. Paul refers to her as a servant of the church at Cenchrea. She was what we today would call a deaconess, devoting herself, though not exclusively, to work among women. Paul commends her for her able assistance to many including himself. On one occasion he entreats the Roman Christians to show her every consideration in carrying out certain work that he had assigned to her.

The services and sacrifices, the consecration and dedication, the faithfulness and the decision of believing women are commended and set forth as worthy examples for the church today.

Sad to say, there are some who look upon such examples as license. They would give women full sway in the life and work of the church without heeding certain restrictions which our Lord has placed upon their activities. We must remind ourselves also of these restrictions in pondering the topic of women school visitors. Yes, perhaps such restrictions will influence and should influence us more so than what has been

said up to this point in our discussion.

The first such restriction is recorded for us in I Cor. 14:33-34. "For God is not the author of confusion but of peace as in all churches of the saints. Let your women keep silence in the church for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the Law." Whether the women in the congregation at Corinth were disregarding God's Word and will and were speaking in the public services or whether Paul was merely interested in forestalling such a possibility cannot be established conclusively. There were some who had the gift of tongues and of prophecy. Some of these women, no doubt, were tempted to exercise their gift also in the public service in the presence of men. Thus it was that Paul wrote, "As in all churches of the saints, let your women keep silence in the churches." This speaking of the women in the public service in the presence of the man in reality meant placing them on the same plane with men, granting them equal authority, This was a violation of the fundamental principle that woman was to be subordinate to man. That was God's arrangement, His will. "Let them be in subjection", He says. From this example we see that women did not share in the public ministry when such ministry gave them authority over men.

The second passage having bearing on the discussion today is I Timothy 2:11-12. "Let the woman learn silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man but to be in silence, for Adam was first formed and then Eve."

From this Word of God it can be clearly seen that women were to be in silence in the public service, not preaching or teaching, functions which would place them into a position of authority over the man. We must not misunderstand the words of Paul, however, when he says "I suffer not a woman to teach." That does not mean women are not permitted to teach religious truths altogether. The point is that they are not to exercise authority over the man in matters of doctrine and practice, though conceivably a woman could set a man straight if he were teaching and preaching false doctrine. Nor do Paul's words apply to women teaching the Word to members of their own sex. Conceivably, women could lead a ladies group or in a Bible study. Certainly she could teach children of either sex.

It ought to be self-evident from these references that it is contrary to the will of God that women serve in the public ministry as pastors or in any capacity where they might exercise authority over the man in matters of doctrine and practice. (I personally wonder sometimes about women choir directors having men and women before them and explaining the text of the anthem being sung. The same goes for papers which they are expected to deliver at conferences in which instruction might be given in God's Word.)

Shall we then simply ignore the role of women in the life and work of the church? In Romans 12 our Lord instructs us "having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given us, whether prophecy, let us prophecy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth on teaching." It is God's will that the church use the special gifts with which He has endowed its individual members, be they given to male or female, all of course within the God-given directives in the limitations which God has set before us as to such service by women. Let us remember, in applying such a principle, however, that it applies only to the public teaching and preaching and then only insofar as the principle of not exercising the authority over the man may play a part.

In our circles we have made use of the differing gifts of both men and women in our churches. As a church, with regard to women, we have found no difficulty in calling them to serve as ministers of the Word in our Christian day schools, We have called limited numbers of them into our Lutheran high schools. Our colleges have extended them calls to serve as music instructors, physical education instructors, elementary supervisors, deans of women, and the like. Some women have functioned as principals of their schools, have directed choirs, assist in YPS work. We have asked them to accept offices in our teachers' conferences, we have asked them to deliver papers at such conferences and invite them to participate in the discussions that take place at our conferences. Nor do we command them to be silent in their individual schools. They share in our faculty sessions and even have a vote in the most of them.

It is time to ask the question, "Shall we as a church, and specifically the Minnesota District Board for Parish Education, become innovative and ask women to assist the church in promoting the welfare of its Christian day schools as school visitors?"

For me, personally, the matter rests in two areas. The first is that they do not usurp authority over the man in matters of doctrine and practice growing from that doctrine. Secondly, they must understand clearly, even as must be the case in their status today as teachers, that they do not forget their status over against the man.

The matter of women school visitors has been brought up at various occasions in the past. As long as I have been teaching and that is nigh unto forty years, when there have been discussions on improving the system of school visitorship, the matter was mentioned but never given serious thought. Oftentimes the very individuals who have brought up the subject and suggested that it might be better for our schools to have a woman teacher visit a room taught by a woman, especially at the primary levels, have been school visitors themselves. The very individuals who have unashamedly confessed their ineptness at offering suggestions for the primary teachers have been visitors themselves. One need not enter into a long discussion as the merits of such an arrangement. The woman teacher with experience is at home in the subject matter of the primary grades; she understands the capabilities and characteristics of this age group better than does the male who does not work with them day for day; she is best capable to sympathize with their short attention spans, their tendencies to wiggle and move about, their general immaturity better than the male species who perhaps has taught only in the upper grades and whose expectations are sometimes excessively demanding.

I, personally, have given this matter a great deal of thought and find nothing that vitiates against God's will in the life and work of the woman in the church in the calling of women teachers to visit the classrooms of our Christian day schools, specifically taught by women and, in particular, at the primary level. Nor do I see any problems arising in the relationship between the woman as school visitor and other school visitors. Should they visit schools as a team, the woman school visitor could be of tremendous assistance to the male even as Phoebe was to Paul at Cenchrea.

In her relationship to the school personnel where she visits and especially the principal, there should be no greater problem than what might exist in her relationship to the principal and school personnel in the school where she serves as a teacher. Her role should be really no different.

Finally, I would advance this point for your consideration. Do school visitors not serve only in an advisory capacity? Their office is not one of authority over the teachers they visit, but as servants of God promoting the welfare of God's kingdom. Would the woman's position as visitor be any different in that respect? I think not.

Therefore I would recommend to this body that:

1. It endorse the appointment of qualified women teachers as school visitors.
2. It restrict the functions of this office of women as school visitors to classrooms taught by other women teachers.
3. For the present restrict the functions of this office of women as school visitors to the primary grades, and, if desirable, that it be expanded to higher grades taught by women teachers after a trial period of two years.