

HEARING THE HELPERS:
AN EXAMINATION OF HOW WELS WOMEN UNDERSTAND THE TEACHING OF
THE ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN IN AN AGE OF FEMINISM

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Abstract

The feminist movement's influence reaches across today's culture and into the church. There is a stark contrast between modern society and the Bible's teaching of the roles of men and women. This can be tremendously difficult for the Christian woman. How do WELS women in particular come to grips with what God says about the roles of men and women when daily influences tell them it is nothing short of oppressive? Many have written about the roles of men and women in the church, family, and society. However, there is an understandable lack of female voice in scholarly materials from confessional Lutheran church bodies as to how women interact with, understand, and process this doctrine. Without challenging or compromising Scripture's teaching, this thesis aims to listen to, analyze, and learn from the experiences of women in our churches on this issue. The results of this research underscore the difficulties many WELS women face today as they consider and seek to live under the biblical doctrine of the roles of men and women in an age of feminism. This study also demonstrates the unique insights women have into congregational life and the importance of careful communication of scriptural truth.

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Introduction

My grandfather tells the story about a German-American Lutheran church where men used to sit on one side of the church and women and children sat on the other side. That was the custom. No one challenged it, until one day some liberal woman in the congregation decided that she wanted to sit with her husband in church, so she walked in and sat down on the wrong side! It caught on. Eventually the congregation abandoned the old practiced and families sat together in church. The practice did not make sense in her time and culture, and there was no scriptural basis for keeping it, so it changed.

Who was this progressive Lutheran lady? My great-grandmother. By today's standards, my great-grandmother would seem to be anything but liberal. She was a deeply traditional, conservative Christian woman. According to the cultural standards and expectations of the time, however, her action was quite progressive.

Twenty-first century America is very different from the early twentieth century America my great-grandmother knew. A changing culture and evolving societal norms bring to the church of the twenty-first century very different issues with which to wrestle. Perhaps one of the most pressing is the influence of feminism on the church. Societal norms that do not conform to church teaching and life create new challenges for women today. Especially challenging is the Bible's teaching of the differences between men and women and their roles in the church and society.

This thesis seeks to understand how WELS women process and apply the biblical doctrine of the roles of men and women in an age of feminism. I will explore this inquiry first with an overview of the historical background of feminism and a review of pertinent literature on the subject. I will then lay out the purpose of this study and my research question, describe the interview participants and research methods, and finish with a discussion of the findings of my research.

Historical Background & Literature Review

To set the scene, a review of the feminist movement and feminist literature reveals an ever increasing clash between the historic biblical teaching of man and woman and the culture of twenty-first century America. Throughout the years, the movement has had tremendous influence on the church, and the church has responded in various ways.

The feminist movement in America has occurred in what most scholars and historians describe as three waves, each with its own unique movements. Julia Wood, a communications professor, author, and leader in contemporary feminist studies, sees this common division of feminist movements as somewhat helpful for organization, yet she also notes that a common thread of feminist ideologies is woven through all of them. The two ideologies she identifies throughout the feminist movement are liberal feminism and cultural feminism. Liberal feminism sees men and women as mostly equal and demands equal rights, roles, and opportunities for women. Cultural feminism understands men and women to be fundamentally different, which means they have different rights, roles, and opportunities.¹ Naturally, then, because two conflicting ideologies have permeated women's movements over the years, different emphases and outcomes have occurred with each wave. Each wave also experienced significant resistance to reform.

The first wave of feminism (from about 1840 to 1925) primarily focused on increasing women's political rights. However, first wave movements also included a variety of issues including the abolition of slavery, the temperance movement, women's suffrage, and charity work. While much of the work of this era focused on social, political, and economic equality for women, matters like slavery and charity enlarged not only women's rights, but also the rights of entire classes of people. Lucretia Coffin Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were influential women of the time who organized the first women's rights convention in New York in 1848. The famous 1851 speech credited to Sojourner Truth, "A'n't I a Woman?" raised greater and more public awareness to the cause. In 1920 the 19th Amendment gave women the legal right to vote in the United States. Rhetoric of this first wave focused on equal status of women with men and contended that "women are just as able-bodied as men."²

For the time, the feminist movement made great strides, but women's movements had not radically changed the home, nor the norms of society. Many women during the time of feminism's first wave still believed that men and women are fundamentally different. Female

¹ Julia Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture, 10th ed.* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 69.

² Meredith Minister, "Religion and (dis)ability in early feminism." *Journal of Feminist Studies In Religion* 29, no. 2 (September 2013): 6.

presence in most positions in society was still rare. As the two World Wars hit, these issues were left alone for a time until women's movements could regain momentum again in the 1960s.

When the second wave of feminism came in the United States (lasting from about 1960 to 1995), the country was in the middle of the Vietnam War. While taking up protests of the war, feminists of this era also devoted themselves to a number of efforts to raise awareness of inequality and to rally for change. Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, to a large degree energized liberal feminism in the 1960s. In it, Friedan gave voice to countless women who struggled with a certain "problem with no name." She described how political and societal structures prevented women from personal growth and stifled opportunities for women.³ She argued that traditional standards for women and the domestic roles assigned to them thwarted any occasion for female fulfillment outside the home. NOW (The National Organization for Women), led in part by Friedan, was established in 1966. The organization's official purpose "is to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men."⁴ NOW continues to fight for equality for women in political, professional, and educational settings.

As in the first wave of feminism, activists took varied approaches and tactics in the second wave to advocate for equality. Revolutionary feminists staged high-profile events and public protests against Miss America pageants and other organizations that perpetuated the oppression of women. The issue of abortion and reproductive rights, though also an issue in the first wave of feminism, hit the spotlight in its second wave. The monumental Supreme Court decision of 1973, *Roe v. Wade*, made abortion a woman's constitutional right. Lesbian feminists and separatist feminists moved beyond the rhetoric of equality to female preference over men. Rather than trying to reform society, these feminists sought to put women first and simply rejected a culture they saw to be oppressive and male-dominated.

The third wave of feminism (from about 1995 to the present) is the most difficult to define. It picks up on many of the successes of second wave feminism and is in some ways the most radical of the three waves. Moving beyond issues of equality with men, this third wave of feminism focuses also on differences among women. Ethnicity, class, disability, sexual

³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: W. W. Norton, & Co., 1997), 57-200.

⁴ Quoted in Wood, 82.

orientation, and gender identity are the topics of the day in modern feminism. The goal of modern feminism is to capitalize on the feminist victories of the past and incorporate them into everyday life. Such feminist efforts have brought reform into schools, organizations, the workplace, and in churches. Sheryl Sandberg, a woman who has had significant influence in Washington D. C., at Google, and at Facebook, encourages women in her book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* to take advantage of all the opportunities that feminism has brought them and to be influential leaders in the workplace and in society.⁵ The issues of modern feminism also broaden beyond the workplace to include advocacy for more expression of individualism, as well as support for homosexual and transgender rights. Social media have provided a tremendous platform for communicating and promoting the feminist agenda.

Over the years, a number of backlashes have occurred in reaction to the changes in thought, policy, and culture that feminism has brought to modern American. Many backlashes, like the antisuffrage movement (1870s through 1920) were unsuccessful in thwarting the women's movements of the day. Feminism was largely successful in ultimately silencing voices that called for female submission and biblical values by representing them as something archaic and demeaning. The effort to stop the Equal Rights Act, however, was successful in the 1970s. More recently, negative reactions to feminism have portrayed the feminist movement as a war on boys and masculinity and an attempt to domesticate men. Authors have challenged the feminist ideal and attempted to guide men back to embracing masculinity⁶ and developing manly character.⁷ Mary Kassian's book, *The Feminist Mistake: The Radical Impact of Feminism on Church and Culture*, outlines how, in her view, feminist movements have hurt society and the church.⁸ She recognizes the real damage that feminism has done to society and the church, but she also paints with a rather broad brush and fails to distinguish between different kinds of feminism. While her work has not had nearly the impact that Frieden's did, Kassian, with a

⁵ Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 3-172.

⁶ John Eldridge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2001), 2-217.

⁷ Stephen Mansfield, *Mansfield's Book of Manly Men*, (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2013), 1-245.

⁸ Mary Kassian, *The Feminist Mistake: The Radical Impact of Feminism on Church and Culture*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 7-299.

growing number of supporters, argues for a return to the Bible's view of men and women and the roles it assigns to each gender.

In many ways, the feminist movement in all of its waves has shaped modern culture and society in the United States and around the world. In the fight for equality between men and women, women's movements, from the perspective of liberal feminism, have led many to believe that men and women are really the same, should be treated the same, have the same rights, and should be able to fill the same roles. Meredith Minister contends that "the rhetoric used by first-wave feminists challenged religious understanding of female inferiority by sustaining religious discourses that accepted the superiority of able-bodiedness."⁹ In other words, women are just as capable as men, and by using rhetoric that spoke of capability, women found a path toward equality by doing the same things men do. The example of strong black women like Sojourner Truth demonstrated such capabilities. Minister argues, though, that such rhetoric excludes less capable people (like the disabled) and sets up a system where the less able-bodied become inferior. Many seek to tell and use the American historical narrative in light of feminism's achievements to further the cause. However, too often they tell the narrative in line with popular "national myths" that may be politically convenient, but not entirely true.¹⁰

Feminism's influence reaches into the church as well. Perhaps Bible translations have forced the church to grapple the most with gender issues in communication and language. The NIV's most recent translation in 2011 demonstrates a major shift toward gender inclusive language in the Bible. For example, many believe that in today's setting it is not enough to say that God "wants all men to be saved."¹¹ Recognizing that language and the way words are used changes over time, the NIV's translators maintain that the original Greek words formerly translated "all men" are broad enough to include both men and women (God "wants all people to be saved"), a thought that, for many today, is not immediately evident by the word "men." It would be unfair, however, to imply that gender-inclusive language is driven purely by a reaction to or conformity with the feminist movement. Certainly feminism has brought the issue to the

⁹ Minister, 6.

¹⁰ Deborah Whitehead, "Feminism, Religion, and the Politics of History." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27, no. 2 (September 2011): 8.

¹¹ 1 Ti 2:4.

forefront, but the Christian church has also become more sensitive in recent years to communicating clearly what the Bible says to people in today's culture.

Despite such sensitivities, however, the Christian church still faces numerous accusations of being male-dominated and sexist. Many churches and theologians seek to undermine such impressions by emphasizing equality and equal status between men and women. John Alsup describes Paul's words in Galatians, "There is no male or female,"¹² as "the eschatologically New placed in the mouth of people who are, in fact, both male and female by the God who raised Jesus from the dead and who makes its reality encounterable and more powerful than all former and concurrent brokenness."¹³ Alsup sees the current reality of male and female differences as inherently broken and problematic. He says that by keeping the vision of the New in mind (life after the resurrection where gender distinctions are erased), we will, at least in part, be able to experience the equality and unity we yearn for and will finally see in eternity. By reading more into Paul's words than the apostle ever intended, Alsup essentially disregards the differences between men and women and sees such distinctions as only a reality of a corrupted world. Patricia Wilson-Kastner describes religious feminism's desire for a unity of all humanity: "If we could identify one single theme which dominates the concerns of feminists of all sorts, it is the search for a less dualistic and more wholistic understanding of the human being and the human relationship to God."¹⁴ She challenges old interpretations of the Bible in light of the new knowledge and progress of feminism: "Feminism requires us to reconsider the patriarchal imagery present in the minds of those who wrote Scripture and most of its interpretation, and to rethink notions with a more humanly inclusive base."¹⁵ She rejects radical feminism and argues instead for a wholistic, inclusive understanding of humanity found in its creation, sinfulness, and redemption in Jesus Christ.

Radical feminism forces us to recognize that our culture has created a divisive notion of the human; radicals have simply turned it upside-down to exclude those who excluded them for so long. Christian feminists are attending to a comprehensive and inclusive notion of the human which recognizes the many variables in the constitution of the

¹² Gal 3:28.

¹³ John Alsup, 98-99, "Imagining the New: Feminism, Galatians 3:28 and the Current Interpretive Discussion." *Austin Seminary Bulletin (Faculty Ed.)* 105, no. 2 (1990): 98-99.

¹⁴ Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Contemporary Feminism and Christian Doctrine of the Human." *Word & World* 2, no. 3 (1982): 239.

¹⁵ Wilson-Kastner, 242.

person, including gender, but which insists that the most fundamental reality is the unity of humanity in creation, the alienation we call sin, and our redemption in Christ.”¹⁶

In many ways, this approach is quite biblical. Men and women are equal before God and co-heirs of eternal life.¹⁷ A wholistic view of humanity in terms of creation, sinfulness, and redemption in Christ is in conformity to the teachings of the Bible. However, it is a distortion to appeal to this principle in a way that erases gender distinctions or any notion of divinely prescribed roles for men and women. Such a misunderstanding leads to a reconsidering of the “patriarchal” views of Scripture to a supposedly more enlightened understanding of men and women. Such an approach quickly elevates one biblical truth over another, leaving the Bible’s teaching of the roles of men and women abandoned for something “new.”

The issue of identity is central to Christian feminists striving for equality and to their care for the oppressed and marginalized.¹⁸ These are noble and worthwhile goals, but modern feminism defines gender identity as constructed and changeable, a view that is contrary to biology and Scripture, and historically has been unacceptable in the church. In an attempt to harmonize Scripture and culture, McLeod-Harrison writes,

To be fully human does not require sex or gender but it does require God’s image.... the thin essential properties of humanity, being rooted in God’s creative work, remain forever whereas the human cultural creations of gender and sex do not. In the beginning we are sexed and gendered (Genesis). In the end, neither (Galatians). Hence the solution to the apparent contradiction of the Christian scriptures on gender.¹⁹

Such a harmonization twists Scripture to make it seem to say very confusing things. Certainly, the way a person enacts gender can be socially constructed in certain ways, but the notion that the Bible says that sex and gender are cancelled in Christ and in eternity is a radical one with no scriptural basis. There clearly is a difference between men and women (on earth and after the resurrection), and all attempts to erase those differences conflict with the Bible, not only in terms of sexual identity, but also as it relates to gender roles in the church and in society. For better and for worse, the dominance of feminism has forced the church to think through matters of

¹⁶ Wilson-Kastner, 242.

¹⁷ 1 Pe 3:7.

¹⁸ Kate Lassiter, “No Easy Resolution: Feminist Pastoral Theology and the Challenge of Identity.” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 23 no. 1 (Summer 2013): 1.

¹⁹ Mark S. McLeod-Harrison, “Christian Feminism, Gender, and Human Essences toward a Solution of the Sameness and Difference Dilemma.” *Forum Philosophicum* 19 no. 2 (March 2014): 190.

equality and human identity, and to refine how it speaks about issues of men and women. Whether or not it chooses to react to or engage in this discussion, every congregation is faced with the issue. Of course, different churches and theologians have handled the task quite differently.

Because of feminism's presence in society and in the church, many have become quite critical of the church and the Bible. Some say that the only path to influence for women in the church is to deny their femininity in order to be more like men. "For women in Christianity, then, the road to power lay in *denying* one's sexuality and reproductive faculties, sublimating such impulses and needs in the service of God."²⁰ Some point to the fact that women are far less involved in leadership roles in their churches than men are as a sign of inequality.

Women are, overall, more likely to perform supporting rather than leading roles in the production of the Sunday morning worship service. They are also more likely to undertake the less public roles associated with the worship service (e.g., preparing the altar for service, ironing the altar linens, etc.). At the same time they perform a whole array of tasks outside of the Sunday morning worship service—tasks that are key to sustain the church and to giving church life its particular flavor.²¹

Many in and outside the church display such examples as proof that women do most of the work in congregations but are shoved to the background while men hold positions of prominence.

Some even find that the Bible is used to justify sexism and abuse. They see a strict interpretation of the Bible as "life-denying" for women, demanding that they submit to men even in cases of abuse. This notion leads some to advocate for a much looser interpretation of the Bible because taking it literally would be demeaning to women.²² "As one w[h]o often gets the phrase 'biblical values' thrown at any notion of gender equality I propose, I know too well that it has become a euphemism, used particularly by very conservative individuals and organizations, to deny people justice and their human dignity."²³ Such an interpretation may sound just and convincing, but it makes a wrong assumption about what the Bible actually says. Scripture does teach gender equality in status before God,²⁴ as well as differences in the roles God has ordained

²⁰ Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, "Family Feminism or Individual Feminism?: Different Histories, Different Paths to Gender Equity." *Hawwa* 1, no. 2 (2003): 136.

²¹ Zoey A. Heyer-Gray, "Gender and Religious Work." *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 470.

²² Sarojini Nada, "'The Bible Says!' Feminism, Hermeneutics and Neo-Pentecostal Challenges." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 134, (July 2009): 131-146.

²³ Nada, 136.

²⁴ Gal 3:28.

for men and women.²⁵ Those who invoke passages that teach gender difference in roles and authority to defend abuse and degrading actions toward women egregiously distort the Bible by ignoring its command that men love and respect women.²⁶ Role distinction in the Bible do not put men and women on different levels or attach greater value to one or the other. Rather, the display and practice of headship and submission is meant to be a powerful witness to the relationship between Christ and his Church, a beautiful one of love and respect.²⁷ The fault, then, is not with the Bible or too strict a hermeneutic. The fault lies in those who make caricatures of what Scripture says and fail to understand or willfully reject the truths it teaches.

Others argue that churches who teach and emphasize a headship principle perpetuate an authority-submission relationship between pastors and parishioners. Marion Maddox argues that material on gender from ministry leaders like the musical group Hillsong “reproduces and intensifies the tensions inscribed in the wider culture. The pressure to be—and, even more, to look—perfect, while living out complex interplays of submission, autonomy, and authority, gives a theological gloss to many women’s everyday experience.”²⁸ Such examples demonstrate that the church and culture clash on this issue. While such views often misunderstand the beauty of head and helper relationships as God instituted them, they also identify significant church issues like the perception of power relationships and the marginalization of women.

Over the years, the Christian church has attempted to make sense of all of this and to offer reactions. Serene Jones describes the church’s current tension as a “bounded openness”—bound to certain rules, yet trying to still be open to others, to God, and to the world.²⁹ Catholic women faced with contradictions and confusions between society and their church often find comfort and inspiration in the virgin Mary, a maternal friend they can relate to experientially. “For these women, Mary’s high esteem in the Catholic church is continuing evidence that women are highly regarded in the church, particularly for their roles as mothers and the vehicles

²⁵ 1 Co 11:3-16; 1 Co 14:34-35; 1 Ti 2:11-15.

²⁶ 1 Pe 3:7.

²⁷ Eph 5:25-33.

²⁸ Marion Maddox, “‘Rise Up Warrior Princess Daughters’: Is Evangelical Women’s Submission a Mere Fairy Tale?” *Journal of Feminist Studies In Religion* 29, no. 1 (2013): 25.

²⁹ Serene Jones, “Bounded Openness: Postmodernism, Feminism, and the Church Today.” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology* 55 no. 1 (January 2001): 59.

through which the faith will be transmitted to their children.”³⁰ Others are not content to simply leave the issue in purely pious terms. They seek to challenge the status quo as they work to implement the changes they have observed in society into their own congregations. Many churches have formally changed their practices to publicly display their desire to embrace equality. In 1969, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod officially reported a change in teaching on the roles of men and women. It stated that nothing in the Bible prohibits women’s suffrage in the church and that the Bible’s teaching about women not exercising authority over men only pertains to holding the pastoral office.³¹ Still further, a growing number of churches have now adopted the practice of ordaining women as pastors. In many instances, the feminist movement has led churches to simply ignore gender differences and roles, to embrace sinful sexuality, and even to redefine God in terms of “goddess.” These are indicative examples of how numerous Christian churches have failed to inform on the basis of Scripture and instead have displayed an eager willingness to abandon historic practices and teachings to conform to the ideals of modern feminism.

In other corners of Christendom, however, the church has reacted negatively to the influences of women’s movements. Many have seen the influence of feminism as a threat to Christianity and a “threat to Christian values.”³² A rather strong movement has risen within the church to counter the effects of feminism in the church and home. Books like *The Feminist Mistake* plead with Christians to embrace gender differences and biblical roles again, recognizing the great damage the feminist movement has done to society, and especially the church.³³ D. A. Carson, after doing an in-depth study of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36, concluded that Paul really does teach role distinctions for men and women and that men are to fill the authoritative role of headship, specifically in congregations and in public worship.³⁴ Such

³⁰ Michelle Spencer-Arsenault, “Mother Mary: The (Re)Construction of a Female Icon.” *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 482.

³¹ “Woman Suffrage in the Church.” [article on-line]; available from <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=321>; Internet; accessed 9 November 2015.

³² Maddox, 10.

³³ Kassian, 7-299.

³⁴ Donald A. Carson, “‘Silent in the Churches’: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36,” *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* [article on-line]; available from <https://bible.org/seriespage/6-silent-churches-role-women-1-corinthians-1433b-36>; Internet; accessed 9 October 2015.

examples illustrate how other pockets of Christianity are willing to take a decidedly unpopular, yet scriptural stance on the issue of men and women's roles. Christianity is quite divided on the issue.

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) has devoted a fair amount of time and energy to clarifying this issue in light of Scripture and offering practical advice on the matter. In response to NOW's success in the 1960s and the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution, Wilbert Gawrisch wrote an essay examining the roles of men and women for the family, church, and society as laid out in the Bible.³⁵ In it he addressed the pressing issue of whether or not women may vote in the church. WELS theologians have written exegetical studies on the doctrine, demonstrating from the Bible that it is God's will that men fill positions of headship and authority.^{36 37} Further studies are available that apply this principle to Christian organizations like Martin Luther College³⁸ and WELS Lutherans for Life.³⁹ Parish pastor Nathan Pope wrote a book on the topic with practical guidance and advice on the scriptural principles and applications for men and women in different areas of life.⁴⁰ Two essays by WELS pastors give an overview of Christian feminism's approach to the Bible and an analysis on the basis of Scripture.^{41 42} In 1997, WELS published a set of official statements on the roles of Men and Women in its *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*. In it, the synod maintained that the Bible teaches that men and women are equal in status before God and that God has ordained the roles of head and helper for men and women in the home, church, and the

³⁵ Wilbert R. Gawrisch, "Man and Woman in God's World." *WLS Essay File* (October 1975), 1-29.

³⁶ Carl J. Lawrenz, "The Role of Man and Woman According to Holy Scripture." *WLS Essay File* (n.d.), 1-10.

³⁷ David P. Kuske, "The God-given Roles of Man and Woman in the Christian's Everyday Life." *WLS Essay File* (March 1994), 1-16.

³⁸ David P. Kuske, "The God-given Roles of Man and Woman Applied at MLC." *WLS Essay File* (September 1995), 1-20.

³⁹ Edward C. Fredrich, "The Roles of Men and Women in WELS Lutherans for Life." *WLS Essay File* (November 1985), 1-3.

⁴⁰ Nathan R. Pope, *Feminism: Understanding and Balancing Its Impact on Marriage, Family, and Church*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003), 3-263.

⁴¹ Thomas J. Fricke, "What Is the Feminist Hermeneutic?: An Analysis of Feminist Interpretation of the Bible." *WLS Essay File* (October 1991), 1-9.

⁴² Robert Koester, "The Spirit of Biblical Feminism: An Analysis of Biblical Feminist Hermeneutics." *WLS Essay File* (n.d.), 1-20.

world.⁴³ As a church body that strives to uphold the timeless teachings of the Bible in an ever changing world, WELS consistently subscribes to this teaching to the present. While the teaching and principles are timeless, how they are most effectively communicated may change in a society dominated by feminist influences. WELS committees tasked with evaluating Bible translations have addressed the issue of gender inclusive language, arguing in many cases for a shift from “man/men” to “people” where the original meaning is not gender specific.⁴⁴ This evangelical response to the issues feminism raises exemplifies a desire to best communicate biblical truth to people today. At the same time, WELS has consistently demonstrated an unwillingness to compromise doctrine in light of popular contemporary movements.

For better or for worse, feminism has had tremendous influence on the Christian church. Because it has affected the way many communicate, teach, and even translate Scripture, it is an issue with which every denomination and congregation must wrestle. The church must carefully consider feminism’s influence and implications. In maintaining its view of the Bible’s teaching of the roles of men and women, WELS takes a minority position on this issue in twenty-first century America. The stark clash between a traditional understanding of this teaching and our society makes this teaching more and more difficult for WELS women today. How do women in WELS deal with such a clash? How do they understand what their church teaches them in the context of today’s culture?

Purpose of the Study

The plethora of materials available about feminism, religion, and the roles of men and women might make another paper dealing with the subject seem superfluous. However, a careful study of the materials on the roles of men and women reveals a rather large gap in the research and writings done to date. Many have written about women’s rights and about what the Bible teaches on male and female roles. Many have researched, evaluated, and critiqued, but very little of this research has been done from the perspective of women in the church—specifically a confessional Lutheran church body like WELS.

⁴³ Commission on Inter-Church Relations of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2002), 61-69.

⁴⁴ WELS Translation Liaison Committee, “‘Man’ and ‘Men’ in Contexts where Women are Included.” (May 2014); available from <http://bibletranslation.welsrc.net/download-tlc/more-tlc-documents/>; Internet; accessed 1 January 2016.

This lack of female perspective may seem natural in a church body whose pastors and theologians are men, but there is tremendous value in filling this gap. It seems only fitting that a study of this kind would be conducted in an evangelical Lutheran church that has a high regard for Scripture. The Bible teaches that the head of woman is man. If the head is going to be any head at all, it will take the time to listen to the other parts of the body—and listen with genuine concern. Men as spiritual leaders are to lead with the same love and compassion that Jesus has for his Bride, the Church, for whom he died.⁴⁵ Women are valued members of the church. Considering the variety of influences in society and the confusion those influences bring to women in our churches, Christian men are scripturally obligated to listen to the specific challenges and concerns these women face in everyday life, empathize with their struggles, and serve them by sharing their burdens.⁴⁶ Only by truly listening and understanding first can church leaders offer specific guidance and clarification that truly meets Christian women where they are.

Plenty of materials exist from the feminist and secular side of the issue. Some have researched the apparent theological dissonance that exists for feminists who are engaged in “patriarchal religions,” but the findings are less than conclusive.⁴⁷ Many in WELS have written on the issue of men and women’s roles. There is, however, little to no material that asks how WELS women come to grips with all of this in their experiences in society and in the church. In fact, “there is comparatively less qualitative work that explores the experiences of lay women in the church.”⁴⁸ This research seeks to bridge that gap and give voice to WELS women and their unique experiences. Such knowledge helps us as we seek better to communicate the truths of God’s Word to the people who live in today’s world with its unique context and challenges.

I want to be clear that in no way do I intend to question the Bible’s teaching or criticize practices in our churches with this study. Interview participants demonstrated neither ill will toward their church body nor fundamental doubts of Scripture. Some did, however, describe struggles with understanding applications of the doctrine. The accounts recorded below are stories from real women who wrestle with these issues and strive to live under this teaching in an

⁴⁵ Eph 5:25-33.

⁴⁶ 1 Pe 3:7.

⁴⁷ Sherrie Steiner-Aeschliman and Armand L Mauss, “The Impact of Feminism and Religious Involvement on Sentiment toward God.” *Review of Religious Research* 37, no. 3 (March 1996): 255.

⁴⁸ Heyer-Gray, 469.

age of feminism. This research seeks to listen to their stories and understand the data from these interviews in light of a convergence of pertinent communication theories.

Theoretical Perspectives

When we communicate with one another, there are a host of communicative and psychological processes at play. These processes do not cease when teaching and applying the Word of God. The use of communication theories in this study in no way denies that the teaching and believing of biblical truth are matters of the spiritual realm where the Holy Spirit works supernaturally. By applying communication theories to the processes of teaching doctrine, I am not trying to interfere with or intrude into the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit through the Word. Lutheran theology rightly understands that the Holy Spirit alone works in this miraculous way. Nothing in our presentation of the Word can improve it or make it somehow more efficacious. As I discuss the findings of this study in light of communication theories, I do so under the assumption that the Holy Spirit works above human comprehension through the Word of God.⁴⁹

The reason for incorporating theoretical perspectives in a study like this is because these processes of communication are always at play, even as the Holy Spirit does his work supernaturally. The Spirit chooses to work through the *Word*—through communication. All of Scripture, finally, is God’s revelation—his communicating to us through the means of human thought and reason. Therefore, it would be irresponsible to shut our eyes completely to these processes at work in communication because the Holy Spirit has chosen to work in, with, and under them. Communication theories help us understand meaning not just in conversations with each other, but also in Scripture. Studying communication theories does not change the focus or power of the ministry of the Word. Such study does, however, enrich our understanding of the human realities of communication and helps us to see what went wrong when communication fails.

Studying communication theories helps foster sensitivity to the situation, needs, and resistance of the listener. It is never enough to simply say, “I told them, so now they must know.” We should not be content to simply get the words out. We care whether or not people

⁴⁹ 1 Co 2:12-16.

understand what is being communicated. For example, a pastor can speak the beautiful forgiveness of the absolution in worship, but if he does so with an angry voice and a scowl on his face, the happy words he is speaking will clash with his inflection and facial expression, producing a performative contradiction. It clouds the communication of grace and creates confusion. If a person leaves thinking or believing something different than what the pastor actually said, the trouble is not with the Word, but with the way it was communicated. Naturally, a pastor will want to consider this as he presents the message of forgiveness to the congregation. In other words, just as a broken sound system at church hinders the effective communication of the efficacious Word and needs to be fixed, so too those who speak the Word can do so in a way that hinders or enhances the sharing and understanding of the gospel.

A unique combination of communication theories helps to explain the data found in this research. The following are scholarly perspectives which experts' peers have reviewed and tested, and are generally respected in the communication field. Since there are legitimate shortcomings to almost any theory, I will also provide a brief critique along with an overview of each theory.

Standpoint Theory

In the feminist theory known as standpoint theory, Sandra Harding and Julia Wood assert that people see and understand their world differently based on their membership in different groups and classes. A person's standpoint, then, is a position that is "earned through critical reflection on power relations and through engaging in the struggle required to construct an oppositional stance."⁵⁰ This means that standpoint is more than just a position assigned to a person based on race, gender, or class. Standpoint is shaped by a person's social location and ultimately only achieved by exploring and understanding a different vantage point than one's own. The circumstances of people's lives impact how they will understand and construct their social world. Most interesting to my study is the insight standpoint theory brings to understanding marginalized or minority groups. It claims that such a group, because it is not the one in power, will naturally have unique insights and understanding of a certain society. It should be noted, however, that this study does not accept uncritically the assumptions of

⁵⁰ Wood, 59.

standpoint theory. Somewhat postmodern in their approach, standpoint theorists claim that there are no absolutes in understanding right and wrong, with each standpoint equally valid. Yet the viewpoints of the marginalized are held up as less biased and closer to truth. This can be problematic, however the basic premise of standpoint theory, which finds great value in a minority group's experiences and views, is one that is highly respected and one that enriches this research.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance helps us to understand the distressed mental state people feel when they "find themselves doing things that don't fit with what they know, or having opinions that do not fit with other opinions they hold."⁵¹ When people think or act in a way that is contrary to their beliefs, it creates stress and mental tension, or dissonance. Because such dissonance is unpleasant, this stress moves people to take action to change in order to reduce dissonance in their lives, and there are a number of ways that a person can minimize the dissonance. Especially pertinent to this research is Festinger's submission that selective exposure is one way of dealing with cognitive dissonance. When behaviors or beliefs conflict in a person's mind (e.g., belief that personal health is important and love for wedding cake), that person may simply shut off influences or arguments from one side to diminish the dissonance (e.g., stop reading health magazines during a summer with a lot of weddings). In addition, Festinger found that behavior can shape belief, even in some cases of forced compliance. In an experiment where university students were asked to lie to other students in exchange for payment, those who would receive one dollar in return actually started to believe the lie more than those who were promised 20 dollars. Those who had minimal incentive to lie experienced the greatest cognitive dissonance. In order to minimize this tension and justify their actions, they changed their beliefs to conform to their behavior. Such insight is quite significant for this study. While Festinger's theory does not refer to the Spirit-worked belief in a Christian, believers can form other beliefs apart from the Holy Spirit's working, which this theory helps us to understand. Critics point out that Festinger and those after him fail to provide a way to measure dissonance.

⁵¹ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1957), 4. Quoted in Em Griffin, *Communication: A First Look at Communication Theory*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 205.

Without being able to measure this stressing mental state, it may simply be assumed that it is present when it is not. Yet the theory continues to dominate among scholars after 50 years and its strengths shed light on my interviews for this research.

Aristotle's *Rhetoric*

Believing that rhetoric is “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion,”⁵² Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, classified those means into three categories or kinds of proof: *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. *Logos* is the logical proof of an argument. This would be the rational line of thought in the argument that the speaker is using to persuade the audience. *Ethos* is the ethical proof. This is the way the speaker is portrayed through the presentation of the argument. It is not enough for a listener to simply hear logical reasoning. The speaker must also *appear* credible. Quite relevant to this study are the three qualities Aristotle identified in *Rhetoric* that build greater speaker credibility in the ethical proof: intelligence, character, and goodwill. Finally, *pathos* is the emotional proof. This is the category that has the greatest effect on the audience’s feelings—the emotional appeal. More than simply subjective sentiment, however, this proof appeals to the highest motivations. All three proofs have varying effects on persuasion. When the persuasion fails, the question becomes: Which of these three proofs is involved? These proofs are instructive to understanding communication of biblical doctrine. Before assuming that it was not God’s will persuade a person, the speaker may find a personal weakness in one of these proofs which hinders the listener’s understanding. It may be, however, that the listener is operating outside the realm of this theory and is sinfully resistant. Like all theories, Aristotle’s proofs are somewhat narrow in scope. While his theory reveals one insight by focusing in one direction, it also may conceal another by not focusing in a different direction. Aristotle’s explanation of *ethos* was especially narrow. He only addressed speaker credibility at the time of presentation, failing to take into account the listener’s history with the speaker and context, something social scientists understand and often address today. However, since the theory has survived more than 2,400 years, it is a very reliable, time-tested one which enriches this study.

⁵² Aristotle, *Rhetoric* [book on-line] (accessed 15 November 2015); available from <http://rhetoric.eserver.org/aristotle/rhet1-2.html>; Internet.

Elaboration Likelihood Model

Understanding that the human brain is not able to fully think through every possible issue in a person's life, Richard Petty and John Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model explains "the probability that you will evaluate information critically."⁵³ There are two routes a person can take to process information. The first is the central route. This route involves the most critical thinking as the person actively considers the information, compares that information to previous knowledge, and carefully comes to a conclusion. The second route is the peripheral route. The person who processes information through the peripheral route does much less critical thinking and makes judgments and decisions on the issue very quickly based on other factors that are not central to the issue. Motivation and ability to consider the argument are the two main factors that determine which route a person will take. The motivation component of personal relevance to the individual is one most applicable to this study. Over time, the theory has become more complex and less predictive, which is a weakness for a social-scientific theory. It also does not define what makes a strong or weak argument. However, the elaboration likelihood model's two-path hypothesis has proven to be quite enlightening in explaining why an issue of great interest and importance to one person seems trivial to another. This strength of Petty and Cacioppo's model enriches the data here as well.

Research Question

The following research question guides this study: How do WELS women process and apply the way they are taught the biblical doctrine of the roles of men and women in an age of feminism?

Participants

For the majority of the research for this project, I collected data in the form of interviews from women who are members of a WELS congregation. According to the accepted practice of qualitative research, I selected five women I thought would provide data-rich stories and would have valuable insight to share. To narrow the scope of this research, I limited the sources to

⁵³ Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss, *Theories of Human Communication*, (Belmond, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 74.

married women within a 15-year age range. By no means do these five participants represent all women in WELS, so I do not generalize for the entire synod on the basis of such a small population. However, they are real women in our midst with stories and challenges that exemplify and help us understand real situations in WELS congregations. The following is a brief demographic of the five participants in this study:

Participant A is 24 years old and has been a member of WELS her entire life. She attended what she describes as a “very liberal and feminist” college and expressed her struggles in understanding how the doctrine of man and woman’s roles should be applied.

Participant B is 26 years old and has been a member of WELS her entire life. She shared that she finds this doctrine challenging.

Participant C is 38 years old and has been a member of WELS her entire life. She works for a Fortune 200 company, has taken a significant interest in this Bible teaching, and sometimes struggles to understand its application in WELS.

Participant D is 23 years old and has been a member of a WELS congregation for the past two and a half years. She admitted that this is not a topic she often talks about or has carefully considered.

Participant E is 31 years old and has been a member of a WELS congregation for the past five years. She is married to an atheist and says that this teaching is not a pressing issue for her.

The backgrounds, stories, and journeys of these five women are varied and unique in their exposure to feminist ideals and in their experiences with learning and grappling with the doctrine of man and woman’s roles. I am grateful for their honesty and openness in our discussions. The insights they shared greatly enrich this research.

Research Methods

The bulk of this qualitative study revolves around the five interviews conducted with the participants described above. Prior to the interviews, I asked for written consent from each interviewee to audio record the interview. All the material from the interviews is kept secure and confidential, and the interviewees themselves are anonymous. Each participant was given a copy of this study to review before final submission, and I explained that they would have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

The interviews I conducted were semi-structured. I followed a prepared set of questions⁵⁴ but frequently left the script to follow up on things that seemed significant. I met with three participants in person to conduct the interviews. One interview was done over Skype and one over the phone. All five were audio recorded and lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and 20 minutes.

In an effort to take a balanced approach to the interview process, I looked for other means of collecting data. Conscious of muted group theory, I had one interview (with Participant E) conducted by a female interviewer so that the entire interview was done without a male present. A respected theory among scholars and one often paired with standpoint theory, muted group theory suggests (with much research to support it) that women will often alter their chosen style of communication in a conversation where men are present. They may feel a need to change their tone or refrain from sharing certain things with men that they would not withhold in a conversation with only women. While it is difficult to know how different the interview would have been if I had conducted it, the fact that Participant E was very open about her childhood, home life, and certain struggles, in addition to the fact that some participants I interviewed expressed fear of possibly “saying something wrong” to a seminary student was enough evidence to validate my decision.

After all the interviews were recorded, I typed them out into transcripts and color coded themes that recurred in the interviews. I finished with 13 different categories or themes. The following quotations (of the many available from the interviews) illustrate each theme:

How man/woman roles were displayed during childhood: “My dad always did the family devotions after supper.”

Societal influences: “In the ‘90s, there was so much women power and all that where women were starting to be heads of household and the whole single mom thing seemed to be more visible.”

How the doctrine challenges: “I’m stubborn and independent and strong.... That selfish part of me that doesn’t want to take the back seat at times—that part I struggle with.”

⁵⁴ The interview questions are printed in the appendix on page 43.

Feelings of equality: “I don’t really say that I’m a feminist, but I don’t say I’m not a feminist either because I do like having equal opportunities like voting rights, and women should be treated with respect.”

Feelings of inequality: “In this strong sort of [church] culture... you start to think, ‘Okay, women aren’t allowed to do this or that.’ You start to feel devalued, you know?”

Where the doctrine makes life difficult: “[My college roommate] would always be like, ‘Why are you getting an education if you want to be a stay-at-home mom?’ And that was something I constantly had to defend. That was kind of hard.”

Differences with previous generations: “You have the older segment of our population that’s been brought up in that and that’s all they know. And they’re okay with that. But you have this millennial generation that’s coming in and I think they can identify more with this. They’re looking for ways to get involved. They want to make an impact.”

Cherished aspects of the doctrine: “I like the idea of the man taking care of the woman.... I understand that God didn’t really put it there to be demeaning to one party.”

More female involvement: “My belief is that we could do more to use women’s gifts more broadly.”

How the teaching is applied: “I just see a complete lack of female representation.”

How the doctrine is taught: “I feel like it wasn’t something where we actually talked about the principle a lot.”

Calls for more discussion/education: “I [would like to see] more education around the controversial topics, making them not so taboo.”

Impression of the pastor who taught the doctrine: “[When the pastor rushes past the doctrine,] it makes me think he’s ignorant because he doesn’t realize that the issue’s bigger and needs more dissection and explanation.”

After organizing the data by themes, I searched for communication theories that interpret and unlock meaning in the data of these interviews. Many theories are helpful in this regard, but the four that most closely connected to the data in these interviews and that offered the most insight to this research were standpoint theory, cognitive dissonance theory, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, and elaboration likelihood model.

Findings & Discussion

It was an enlightening process for me to interview the participants in this study and pour over the transcripts. They shared the things they cherish about this doctrine as well as some difficult experiences and past hurts. A few displayed strong emotions during the interview. It is important to hear their voices and to ask how many other women in our synod also struggle with this. What follows are the findings of the five interviews.

Authority vs. Power

Authority is not the same as power. God has chosen to give authority to certain people, but he never desired power struggles in this world. In using standpoint theory here, I do not intend to embrace every facet and implication of the theory. Its terminology related to power and marginalized groups does not apply to God's perfect design. They do, however, often describe the reality of human interaction in a fallen world. In this research, I intend to take captive to Christ the aspects of this theory that, when applied to the data of these interviews in light of God's Word, conform to other scriptural truths. Because men are heads and leaders, they fill positions of authority. Authority as God designed it was never meant to create a power struggle. Rather, those in authority are called to serve.⁵⁵ This is also true of God's design for the roles of men and women.⁵⁶ It is supposed to be a beautiful partnership of equals and a missional witness to Christ and his Church. In a sin-tainted world, however, that design is often corrupted and abused. Women, while they may not be a minority in numbers, can perceive themselves to be the kind of marginalized group that standpoint theory describes when authority in the church become for them synonymous with power, rather than a position of great responsibility and self-sacrifice. Standpoint theory demonstrates that members of a marginalized group, when they seek to understand the vantage point of those in authority, will naturally see congregational life differently and bring unique insights to our understanding of WELS social life—an understanding that men may not automatically see or recognize.

Whether we like it or not, women at times observe male-female relationships in the church in terms of power. Naturally, just as standpoint theory predicts, it will be on their minds

⁵⁵ Mt 20:25-28.

⁵⁶ Eph 5:21-33.

more than it would be on the minds of men in a congregation. Women may feel that in order to be heard in their congregation, their thoughts and views must be expressed by a man. Participant C noted:

Especially when [my husband] started getting more involved [in our church], women would try to recruit him to sort of represent their point of view. They felt like they shouldn't be going and talking to the leaders. That's wrong. They felt like it had to be—if a man wasn't saying that thing, it wasn't going to be taken seriously.

The term “power” might seem too strong for the dynamic between male leaders and women in the church. Yet that is often the perceived relationship. Perceptions matter, especially when they teach something opposite of what Scripture says. There are profound contradictions and break-downs in congregational systems when women feel that they are doing what they are told, yet they are not taken seriously. Unofficial, yet powerful relational messages that teach female inferiority in the church are devastatingly inhibitive and devalue women in the congregation.

For some, the dynamic can be daunting:

It takes a lot of trust to go to a leader and express something. And I don't think our leaders realize how scary that is for a woman.... [After giving a suggestion, I was told,] “We have smart people who will figure that out.” And so that's a very interesting sentence, right? It suggests that we have the leaders because they're smarter.... And so I think women think that sometimes. I went into [a Bible class on the roles of men and women] expecting [to find] where in the Bible does it say this—this men versus women thing. I really was convinced that was going to be somewhere! You know? And then it wasn't! And that was a really strong learning point. And even though the WELS churches never teach that men have a certain set of gifts and women have a certain set of gifts, it doesn't mean that somehow that isn't the belief out there. And so when you...have that belief, it's very scary to approach a leader and say, “Hey, have you thought about this?” And by the time the woman figures out how they're going to do it, it's so sugar-coated and so watered down and so many factors for her own personal safety that I think the man doesn't even recognize it happening. So it'll be a casual conversation in the hallway. [The men] think they're talking to a friend. [The woman] thinks they're leaving going, “Oh, I'm going to take this to the leadership council and they're going to have a discussion about this.” That, of course, never happens. They don't hear back. And you feel like, “Oh, they didn't get back to me.” ... That's the dynamic.... So I see where the letdown is.... At [my congregation], we don't have tyrants. Nobody's trying to make women feel like this on purpose. And yet—yeah (Participant C).

First, this participant demonstrates how she has achieved her standpoint. She has wrestled with the issues and sought to understand not only scriptural principles in Bible class, but also the vantage point of male leaders in her church. Her story demonstrates how women can be quite terrified to speak to leaders who are in a position of authority. Her comments about adjusting her

message and approach “for her own personal safety” also validate the arguments of muted group theory. Again, this was never God’s design. God’s plan for head and helper is to have a considerate, respectful, listening-based relationship. It is the curse of sin, which corrupts even relationships between believers in the church, that produces this disconnect and lack of understanding between men and women, leaving our practices prone to misconceptions. This may seem surprising to pastors and male leaders who work very hard to appear open and approachable, but this dynamic is exactly what Harding and Wood describe with standpoint theory. An all-too-human power relationship may actually be communicated or embedded in the social context. As Participant C noted, the desired communication never happens, demonstrating a significant break down in the relationship. The context and the meaning surrounding it can nonverbally communicate an actual power struggle between men and women in the church based on less-than-perfect applications of God’s perfect principle. Women often observe and experience this struggle in congregations more than men, just as standpoint theory would predict.

The same participant wanted to ask her pastor more about the roles of men and women. She was afraid to at first, but then finally got up the courage:

The first time I chatted, I mean, I was shaking the entire time. Because, I mean, this is my church home and it’s a wonderful church home and all I wanted to do was serve and contribute, and you put that at risk when you [ask about it].

There is fear on the part of some women in approaching or speaking to a congregational leader. Women who are not in positions of authority can be apprehensive about even asking for more instruction on a certain issue for fear of repercussions or giving an unintended impression. This kind of fear is indicative of the power relationships that standpoint theory predicts, not the admiration for the head that men following God’s perfect design would prompt. Spiritual men in our congregations must recognize that this fear is real for women in our midst, be sensitive to it, and interact with women in a way that demonstrates their value and the validity of their input.

At times, however, these misconceptions can lead women to feel underappreciated and devalued in their churches, as if they are not of the same status or equal to men. In reflecting on the fact that she is not welcome to voice thoughts or suggestions at a congregational meeting, Participant B asked, “Is our opinion at that level of the church just not valued as much to be important? That’s how I take it a little bit.” Again, this may not be the intended message from male leaders in her church, but the fact that they may be giving this impression is significant. Even worse than hurting a woman’s feelings are the larger consequences of giving the

impression that she is not equally cherished or important in her congregation and the effect on the church's mission and their work together. Such an unintended (yet real!) impression blatantly contradicts what the Bible says about the worth and importance of each congregational member—male or female.⁵⁷ At times, such an impression can lead women to conclude that men see female contributions in the church as peripheral and secondary: “The things that women do [in the church], they're important too. But it's always just that: They're important *too*. You know? It's like we're the sidekick, like we're the Robin to Batman” (Participant B). Such an impression can lead women to think that they are undervalued or that their contribution is a hindrance to the congregation.

I think there are [some WELS] churches where women get squashed a lot. Historically. They are kind of treated as being negative in general. Like women are supposed to be soft spoken, and all those things.... If a woman would have a backbone, that would be seen as, pardon my French, but being a bitch. That's how it's seen (Participant B).

Participant C told the story about her pastor teaching a Bible class on the roles of men and women and a question that people in the class really struggled with was: “True or false? Men and women are created equal.” She continued,

There's fear and stigma around [it, like you're] being pushy and overstepping your boundaries.... And the last thing I wanted to do was be seen as somebody who had a problem with the principle in my own home church.... And even just struggling to figure out whether I should be part of a committee. It's all—the actions—what we do and what we don't do, it all contributes to what women are concluding.... [That we're] not equal, right? I mean, I don't think [church leaders] see that. And I mean, it feels awful!

This all reinforces the fact that there are women in WELS congregations who feel marginalized at times. This is not necessarily the result of pastors and church leaders actively silencing women, but it can be the dynamic of ungodly power relationships in a sinful world as described by standpoint theory.⁵⁸ Not all participants in this study felt so undervalued in their congregations, however. Participant D said, “I think [the men at my church] do a good job of appreciating the women and thanking them. I never felt that men were favored.” Certainly not every member of a group will feel undervalued. These findings acknowledge, though, that the power struggle does exist for certain WELS women and weighs heavily on their hearts. The Bible's teaching of male headship demands that we be concerned about this. If the application of

⁵⁷ 1 Co 12:12-31; Eph 4:1-16.

⁵⁸ While the topic of communication from the pastor's perspective would be a fascinating and worthwhile discussion, that is not the primary purpose of this study and goes beyond my research here.

a biblical teaching in our churches results in unnecessarily negative experiences for women, men are obligated to take notice, understand why, and take appropriate steps toward fixing it.

Almost as if they subconsciously knew what Harding and Wood meant with standpoint theory, some participants even described how women have unique insights to offer in their congregations, but male leaders often fail to seek out or understand such information. As Participant C shared,

Heads and helpers are made to be together, right? Be with each other, complement each other—they're incomplete without each other. But at our most crucial time, when we are making our biggest decisions, we separate. I'll even hear, "We can't have women in this meeting because we're going to have to decide some things." Well, isn't that when we want women in these meetings? How can all the information [be there]? We tend to do different work. We tend to see different things. We have different information—information that our leaders won't have if we don't give it to them. It's hard to give it to them.... I truly believe now helping is not just waiting until you're asked to do something. Sometimes you have to do something difficult to be a good helper. Not sharing information is not helpful. You have to figure out how to do it in love and respect, and it's really hard to do sometimes.... I think there's connections that we agree are needed between men and women to really understand even unintended impressions and things like that. I don't see a better way to do that than to have men and women working together closely.

This participant asked for the same thing that standpoint theory argues for: that people in positions of power or authority seek the unique insights and information a marginalized group has to offer. Without that information, the group's understanding to make decisions will be woefully incomplete. Women in WELS congregations who have achieved standpoint will naturally have vital information that leaders in their congregations need in order to understand and lead the congregation.

None of this is meant to overly criticize pastors or WELS congregations. Rather, it is to understand the very real struggles women encounter in this area. It helps a person to sympathize with their difficulties. Women have unique insights into congregational life. At times, though, they may feel unheard or even undervalued. We would all be richer and blessed to hear their insights. It is very much God-pleasing to listen to all members of the body of Christ and to demonstrate how we all are one and equal in Christ. While God has given us different roles in our social settings, we are all equally loved and redeemed in his Son. Standpoint theory assumes that power relationships are present everywhere and that we must constantly fight against them. Sin created them, but the Bible demonstrates how the Christian church can be a community where men lead humbly with self-sacrifice and women are empowered for service. In God's

grace, the church can be a place where power relationships are minimized and kept from hindering ministry. Authority means dutiful service, self-sacrifice, assuming responsibility, genuine concern, and love for all. Jesus is the greatest example of this.⁵⁹ As our Head, he leads men in the Church to do the same.

Internal Angst

While the struggles illuminated by standpoint theory reveal different vantage points, cognitive dissonance names the even greater internal struggle this teaching presents to women in our present culture. Festinger's hypotheses with cognitive dissonance are tremendously helpful in understanding how these women grapple with some of the complex issues this doctrine of man and woman presents them with in today's culture. As the literature review above demonstrates, a real clash exists between values and beliefs taught by society and those taught in the Bible and in WELS congregations. Feminism has brought many today to the belief that there are essentially no differences between men and women. The notion that certain tasks or roles be limited to one or another is labeled "sexist" or "archaic." Yet the Bible teaches that there are distinct differences between men and women. Participant D, who came to WELS through adult instruction, said that at first, "It was shocking to me when [the pastor] said that women can't be pastors—in that role, because I had definitely seen women in that role." Her previous experience and this new teaching created mental stress, shock—cognitive dissonance. Men and women are equal, yet they are also expected to serve in different capacities. These two values can cause tension when applied to real life, as Participant A explained: "[The] teaching is that men should be the head in all situations, if possible. And that was hard for me because I was like: Sometimes the men don't step up." For her, the difficulties of dealing with this doctrine in life situations became more confusing. These tensions of values between society and faith create very real dissonance and internal angst in the minds and lives of WELS women.

This same participant told the story of how she was excelling in college and offered many promising opportunities for internships and further study. She became pregnant shortly after getting married and was suddenly faced with a difficult decision: Should she continue her studies and work full time, or stay at home with her child? Without using the term, she actually

⁵⁹ Mt 20:28.

described the kind of cognitive dissonance that Festinger says people experience when two values are held in tension. Her emotional retelling of the experience illustrated how stressful and difficult this dissonance is: “I didn’t want to give up the time with my family. I knew that I would be 100% in my studies... and then I would have to give up seeing the first year of my child’s life.... I would feel really torn if I was working full time and being a mom because I know myself well enough to know that I would feel like I was not doing either one enough.” As she tried to determine how best to serve God and her family in her role as a woman, she had to choose between two deeply held values: using her gifts to contribute to society, and being there for her family to raise her child and support her husband. She described how the stress of making the decision only increased as she thought about how she admired her mom for being a stay-at-home mom and as she felt pressure from professors and fellow students to continue her studies.

Modern culture rarely distinguishes between status and role, and it can be difficult to leave cultural understanding behind when walking into church. Participant A’s experience in this regard illustrates cognitive dissonance in another way. Here too she described the clash between two personal values: upholding God’s design for the roles of men and women, and encouraging female participation in worship life. She expressed actual frustration over the dissonance she felt as she wrestled with the principles: “[At a nearby church,] they were having women [Scripture] readers, and that was very frustrating for me. But it made me kind of struggle with that a little and see different sides. Because what is the difference between having a woman reader and having a woman sing a response or something? If you’re singing the words verses reading them up in front of church?” Wrestling with the issue can be stressful as a person seeks to understand and deal with the mental clash. Festinger says that because cognitive dissonance is unpleasant and stressful, people will take steps toward reducing or eliminating the dissonance.

The desire for women to serve in a meaningful way in their congregations seemed to be the most pressing source of cognitive dissonance for participants in this study. Here we see the tension between two deeply held values. One value (the importance of being involved and making a significant impact in a certain community) may at times clash with other values (holding to God’s Word and trusting the applications of biblical principles in a congregation). This dissonance arises, then, when women find the application of the doctrine hindering them from engaging in tasks and church activities that would seem to them to be meaningful service.

Participant C shared, “Everywhere else, we say, ‘If I’m able to make a contribution, I should be making that contribution,’ and in your church you feel like you should not be making that contribution because that work has been fused with authority.” Participant B added, “When people look for a job, they want a job where they can make an impact. Same thing with a church. Why would I want to go to a church where I didn’t think that I could actually *do* something?” And again, “Our generation is being brought up now with women [leadership] now not only in the workplace, but also in the home. Being leaders, being equal, having that value. And that’s where I feel like it’s a fine line with our WELS teaching. It’s important.” Participant C, who works for a Fortune 200 company, described her struggle to harmonize her belief in using God-given gifts with also fitting into the applications of the biblical principle in her congregation.

It felt like, if anything, shouldn’t [I] be doing this work for God’s kingdom? I mean, selling more [product at work] is great, but shouldn’t [I] be contributing in this way? And that’s when I started asking questions because I really wanted to have a firm grounding in the principles before I started suggesting things that were abnormal. I kind of felt like a square peg in a round hole. Sometimes it felt wrong to want to be making those kinds of contributions. And that was a really tough thing because... you feel wrong for not using these gifts and I also feel wrong for wanting to use these gifts.

Trying to deal with the tension between different values creates dissonance and consternation for some women in our churches. It can be quite difficult at times for them to balance the desire to serve and the applications of scriptural principles set up in their congregation. In fact, without a clear sense of status before God, role distinctions will create intense angst and confusion. In many cases, women have resorted to decreasing the dissonance by not serving to their potential in order to keep from challenging current applications and practices. When this is the case, many who are member of the body of Christ are kept from carrying out the meaningful service God desires in believers.

Sometimes life situations put women in a position where the functional role they fill does not seem to align with the value of upholding the Bible’s doctrine of the roles of men and women. This too creates cognitive dissonance. One such example is when a wife fills a vacuum of spiritual leadership in the home: “Honestly, in [my relationship with my husband], I feel like I’ve been the spiritual leader.... I feel like I’m the one who’s like, ‘Let’s read our Bible tonight.’ And that part’s hard because I feel like I pray about it a lot.... Why won’t God make him more of my spiritual leader?” (Participant D). This wife knows what Scripture says, but she sees

herself filling a role her husband is supposed to fill. And yet, she is not willing to ignore time in Scripture with her family. She is conflicted.

Participant E, who is married to an atheist, shared how the internal dissonance from filling this role at home has led to disagreements with her husband:

And that right there is another big huge disagreement since he makes the money, he decides where it goes. Whereas I think that [the children's] spiritual education is more important than their physical education as far as earthly things. So that's another thing where he'd be more likely to spend money on earthly things and I'm more likely to spend money and time on church activities.

Here she struggles with love for her church, devoting herself to the church, and the spiritual education of her children, and loving the head of the household who does not approve. She experiences dissonance and angst, though this angst is created by issues at home, not at church. Certainly she is not the only woman in our midst who experiences such struggles. The church is in a unique position to empathize with the challenges women in these situations face, and to offer encouragement and guidance from God's Word. This requires that men adopt a posture of understanding and concern to serve them best in their specific circumstances.

Dealing with the issue of the roles of men and women can be quite difficult. Whenever we experience cognitive dissonance, we want to make decisions that will reduce the mental stress. One way that people can do this is through selective exposure. By avoiding information or situations that present this clash, cognitive dissonance is reduced. It was surprising at first to hear that most of the interviewees (including some who have taken a special interest in the topic of roles of men and women) do not discuss the issue much with other people. Participant B admitted, "To be perfectly honest, I don't think that I talk to people who aren't in the church about the roles of men and women, specifically because it is a challenging issue." Festinger's theory explains the reason why. It is mentally stressful. Certain personalities (because they are very determined to critique the issue) will pursue such discussion. Most, however, will not find the angst of cognitive dissonance worth the discussion. This means that there is a high likelihood that WELS women will actually avoid this topic or pass on opportunities to discuss it with others. The teaching itself is a beautiful, biblical doctrine, but because society has succeeded in redefining the doctrine and its implications, women can feel shy about defending this part of their faith, or even fail to see the doctrine's beauty themselves. Pastors and church leaders cannot take away every source of angst this doctrine may cause women in daily life, but

they can offer much needed guidance in thinking through the issues women face and help them embrace this teaching in all of its beauty.

One of the most eye-opening aspects of cognitive dissonance theory is the notion that behavior shapes belief. The opposite would seem to be the more likely scenario, but Festinger disagrees. This perspective is especially helpful in explaining certain beliefs that are not formed by the Holy Spirit, but flow from certain customs and behaviors in congregational life. Legalistic practices as well as biblical practices that are not properly explained can create alarming, unintended beliefs. On whether women should offer contributions or suggestions in their churches, Participant C commented, “So we just feel like, ‘Oh, well, if I’m not supposed to make that contribution, it must be because we think men are better at it.’ And we feel like men are better suited to it.” Participant B shared: “If someone can sit on a board, someone who can make decisions and have decision power in a congregation... I feel like that holds a higher value that somebody who’s just going to be secretary or something like that.” These examples illustrate Festinger’s argument that beliefs flow from behavior or practices. Women in congregations may form beliefs based on the way things are done around them—beliefs that say men are inherently better at certain things or more valuable. This, of course, is not the doctrine of our churches. In fact, the Bible teaches that all individuals have unique gifts and men are not categorically smarter or more gifted in certain areas than women. However, such false beliefs can quickly grow out of practices that discourage female contribution. This raises questions about whether some “little” practices in our churches are shaping women’s beliefs in ways that men do not realize, and whether other practices which the Bible demands receive proper explanation. Do our applications of biblical principles lead women to adopt non-biblical beliefs (like women do not have the same value as men in the church)? Does the practice of closing doors to women at voters’ meetings teach things beyond what Scripture says with the headship principle? If the applications of the Bible’s principles lead women to believe that they are valued less by God and the church, male leaders are obligated to address this. The little things we do in relation to gender differences in our congregations can actually shape or change beliefs in unintended and alarming ways.

A second way that Festinger says behavior shapes belief is through forced compliance. His minimal justification hypothesis says that blatant forced behavior may get others to conform, but it is not likely to bring their beliefs in line with yours. Instead, offering the smallest

punishment or reward needed to coerce people is actually the most likely to change their convictions (like offering only one dollar instead of 20 in exchange for a lie). This is true because when someone is led to think or do something that is not in line with another personal belief, cognitive dissonance occurs. If exposure to the issue cannot be sufficiently reduced, the person will try to change one of the cognitive elements (a behavior or a belief) in order to alleviate the tension. Festinger says that when people are forced to comply with minimal incentive, the cognitive element they are most likely to change is the belief that was compromised during the forced compliance (students starting to believe the lie they told other students). This would predict, then, that a woman who believes that men and women are equal but is also expected to conform to practices in her congregation that make her feel marginalized through minimal threat or reward, is most likely to resolve that cognitive dissonance by changing her belief, concluding that women may not be equal to men. One would expect that a woman struggling with what seems like an inconsistency would be able to ask her pastor or other members of the congregation about it for clarity. However, Participant C described the risk that women may be taking when they ask questions about applications, knowing that they could possibly be interpreted as taking issue with the scriptural principles themselves: “[As a woman,] the second you open your mouth [to ask about doctrinal applications], you’re never going to be listened to again. And that’s just a hard situation.” Women may fear that if they simply ask questions, they are open to judgment or loss of credibility because they can quickly be perceived as challenging God’s Word. It is not that women are ostracized or excommunicated for having questions. That would be a very high level of threat and punishment, and it would most likely lead a woman to believe that the practice is wrong, not her belief. Subtle, unofficial punishments, however, like merely questioning a woman’s orthodoxy or her acceptance of the Bible, are much smaller incentives. This creates the greatest cognitive dissonance. Festinger’s theory describes how such minimal justification for a decision or belief could lead many WELS women to abandon biblical values and beliefs and conform to established practices in order to avoid subtle judgment—a disturbing notion.

Again, no pastor is trying to force compliance in his congregation. However, this can at times be the perception. While the Bible and the sacraments are the only power to change belief toward Christ, unfortunately, this is not the only way that human belief is shaped. Behavior can

also shape beliefs. Even if the doctrine is right, the understanding may not be because of the practices and ways the principle is applied in congregational life.

Presentation of the Teaching

Aristotle's rhetorical proofs of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* describe human communication. These same proofs are at work in the human communication of God's Word. A study of these proofs helps us understand the artful way the Word of God is presented. In fact, the apostle Paul demonstrated a remarkable consistency with these concepts.⁶⁰ Again, studying these proofs in light of the communication of the Word of God does not diminish the fact that the Holy Spirit alone persuades and converts hearts to Christ. However, when it comes to the communication of the doctrine of man and woman in the Bible, this research demonstrates how Aristotle's proofs are powerful for helping people understand and embrace the doctrine, while weaknesses in one of the proofs put up barriers to understanding.

In terms of the logical proof (*logos*), some participants made very positive comments about how they heard the doctrine of the roles of men and women explained and "arguments" made.

I think [the pastor] made a lot of sense. He backed it up with biblical Scripture and pointed out where it said... that men are called to be pastors and preach and be the leaders, and women are to help. And he pointed out that we're all called to do certain things. So I think he did a good job of explaining it (Participant D).

"Arguments" from Scripture are really just expositions of what the Word says, yet certain ways of communicating are more convincing than others. Good communication is something worthy of every pastor's highest efforts because by not giving his very best in the presentation of scriptural truth, he can confuse or detract from the message. As this quote illustrates, however, good communication can help the hearer see and understand the thoughts in a certain section of the Bible and connect that truth to other sections of Scripture. This participant described how she appreciated the fact that her pastor went back to the Bible in explaining this teaching. He logically tied the teaching back to God's will for her life. The pastor also pointed to everyone's unique callings to give scriptural balance to his presentation and to help her see this teaching tied together with other doctrines of the Bible. She later added, "I felt like the pastor did an awesome

⁶⁰ Cf. Ac 17:2; Php 1:7-8; Phm 19.

job of answering every question and trying his best to point it back to Scripture. So in that sense, I thought it was well-addressed. And it made sense.... It was set up in a safe environment.” A high regard for God’s Word and love for those being instructed leads a pastor to do his best to communicate clearly and effectively. Aristotle’s proofs give guidance for doing just that.

Aristotle’s ethical proof (*ethos*) seems to be the one where more barriers can come between the communicator and the audience when communicating this doctrine. How people deliver this message can positively or negatively impact how others perceive their credibility (regardless of how strong or weak the *logos* is). According to the Aristotelian model, it is not enough to simply lay out what the Bible says if presenters of that teaching give their hearers the impression that they themselves are not credible or trustworthy. The truth may very well be that the presenter is quite honorable, but Aristotle says that if the presenter even gives the impression of not being trustworthy, the likelihood of persuasion is greatly decreased. Even though Aristotle did not discuss personal history with the presenter when discussing *ethos*, we observe today that this too is immensely important. *Ethos* is made up of three different presenter qualities: perceived intelligence, virtuous character, and goodwill.

Participant B, who shared her experience going through a Bible study on the roles of men and women, illustrated how failures with *ethos* can hurt the perceived intelligence of the person teaching the class:

There wasn’t as much discussion as I was hoping for. There were all those key Bible passages. And then there was a line that you fill in the blank. And then a line and you fill in the blank. And the pastor would read it, “Oh, what’s the fill in the blank?” And you’d read it, fill in the blank, and nobody said anything. That was the Bible class. It was weird. There was no extra discussion involved about society at large. And that’s what I was hoping for.... It makes me think he’s ignorant because he doesn’t realize that the issue’s bigger and needs more dissection and explanation. And they may not be an ignorant person, but they are unintentionally making a topic of such huge importance seem like it’s just [no big deal].... It makes me not respect him as much either as a man of God. I mean, we’re entrusting our faith lives to a person in the church. I want somebody who knows those things and recognizes them and gives them the time of day and values the members of his congregation’s opinions and thoughts. You know, we do hold them up as the leader in the church and an expert in the Bible, but we’re in the Bible too. We know it. We have questions about it too. So why not ask us what we think? Let’s talk about it! Or does he think that we all think the same way he does or that the lesson [just needs to be wrapped up in an hour]? That makes me think he’s ignorant.

Again, such an observation does not necessarily mean that the one presenting this information is lacking intelligence. It does, however, indicate that something went wrong which led the person listening to *perceive* ignorance.

Sometimes, opportunities for asking questions, clarifying, and further discussion are cut short because the character of the person presenting the material is compromised in the process. In such a situation, the listener is less likely to pursue the topic any further with that specific presenter.

It's already hard for women to [ask a pastor about this doctrine].... This is tough. This is tough. This is tough. But I have had pastors who kind of go in with the assumption that it is the principle that you're struggling with if you ask questions.... There was one pastor who shared with [my husband] that women are always going to struggle with [the roles of men and women] because they're jealous. They're jealous that they are not in the headship role. And it's like, okay, that might be true sometimes. But if we make that assumption about every woman that asks a question, you're never going to get that information.... I've had discussions with pastors where—I don't have an education in doctrine, right? I'm not a theologian. And so you're going to use words that are wrong, and you have to find a pastor that's going to listen to what you're trying to say versus what you're technically saying. And so I've gotten in conversations where you spend 25 minutes trying to back yourself out of what I didn't mean, you know? And so you have to find the kind of pastor... who has these kinds of listening gifts (Participant C).

Such an accounting demonstrates how a pastor can hurt the perception of his character by the way he talks about this doctrine and presents it. Careless comments and quick judgments can devastatingly hurt his perceived character.

Ethos describes the audience's perception of the speaker. How a pastor seems to feel about his relationship with the audience and whether or not he appears to be transparent and clear about his motivations matter tremendously to those who are listening. Mistakes in this area can even hurt the pastor's perceived good will and lead a listener to think that his intentions toward the audience are less than pure.

All the things that are done to prevent me from ever having to grapple with [the doctrine]—that feels like mistrust. That feels like they don't trust women to be able to be in those sticky situations and handle it. Just as soon avoid it.... I'm not saying a lot of women feel mistrusted. I'm saying once you understand the principle and the safeguards we put in place around it, then you kind of feel like, why can't men and women figure out how to work together in a God-pleasing way? I really believe they can! (Participant C).

This participant described how hurt she feels when her opportunities to serve are limited in order to keep her from being in a situation where she could possibly overstep her role. Because she feels overly protected, it leads her to perceive that sometimes certain men do not have her best

interests in mind. Women at times may question the goodwill of some who teach this doctrine because they feel as if those men do not trust them.

While the participants in this study who touched on *ethos* described it as an area of weakness, that fact does not mean that all communication of this doctrine is weak. Often, WELS pastors lay out this teaching in a memorable way that women can both understand and relate to. This can happen especially through effective use of *pathos*, the emotional proof. Participant A described such a positive experience when her pastor explained:

The helper role is more of a—it's the same...word...as God is our helper and our strength and stuff like that. Where it's not like you're being the maid. You're the help—but as in an emergency vehicle. Like you are there to lift them up, like you are needed.... That really rung with me. People who see the Bible as demeaning toward women need to have it explained to them because that's how it really clicked with me.

In describing the necessity of a woman as a helper and connecting that to God as helper struck an emotional cord with her. This type of communication is not only memorable, but Aristotle points out that an appeal to the highest motivation (like helping someone in need in an emergency), along with logic and credibility, greatly enhance a person's ability to communicate a truth effectively. It also means that failures in one of these areas can put up barriers between the listener and the message.

The apostle Paul instructs men to follow the example of Jesus and take any measure possible (even give up their lives) to lovingly serve their wives.⁶¹ This principle of headship requires that men also serve all the women in their congregations with the same love Jesus has for them. The task of serving others with good communication is far less than giving up one's life. It is a task worthy of our time and attention. As with all doctrines of the Bible, when teaching the roles of men and women, we seek to use the most effective means of communication possible to convey God's truth the best that we can.

Consideration of the Teaching

Initially, one would think that a controversial and troubling issue in today's society like the roles of men and women would be one that all women in a church body like WELS wrestle with. If the issue is presented to women who live in the same culture with the same challenges, it would seem natural that women would give roughly the same time and energy to grappling

⁶¹ Eph 5:25-33.

with the issue. However, Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model suggests that there are two different ways of approaching and processing an issue that is more difficult in our day, and that women from the same culture will consider this issue to varied degrees based on other factors.

The elaboration likelihood model offers two routes for processing an argument or information: the central route and the peripheral route. The central route requires much more critical thinking and elaboration of the issue at hand. The peripheral route takes a quicker approach to making a judgment or decision which relies on other factors to make the decision, rather than investing the time and energy necessary to critically think through the issue. More information comes into our lives than we could possibly consider. By necessity, we must make quick decisions or judgments on some issues, ignore others, and take the time to carefully consider those that are most important. Petty and Cacioppo say that one reason a person would take the direct or peripheral route to processing information is based on personal relevance.

Participant A shared how she went to a liberal feminist college where her beliefs were frequently challenged. This made the issue very relevant to her and forced her to have to grapple with the principle almost constantly. Naturally, she thought this through at a deeper, more critical level. Participant B described a similar experience after transferring to a college where she was exposed to different people and material that forced her to wrestle with it. Participant C described how this challenge came for her at work as she compared her experiences there with her experiences at church. All of this is to be expected as the elaboration likelihood model demonstrates that the issue's personal relevance determines whether a person will take the direct or peripheral route to processing this teaching.

If people take the peripheral route to understanding a teaching of the Bible, however, that does not automatically make them theological lightweights. In fact, we all have to do this to some degree. The human mind can only process so much at a time. Sometimes we need to settle for the peripheral route and revisit the issue later when the opportunity comes. Sometimes other values or biblical teachings are reason enough to accept the doctrine. Participant C said, "[Before really wrestling with the issue,] I think I decided that [the doctrine] was something that I decided to accept because I wanted to be a WELS Lutheran and there were really compelling reasons to do that." Even though she had not directly thought through every implication and

challenge, she was willing to accept the teaching without further consideration (for the time being) because she valued membership in this church body.

As mentioned earlier, Participant E is married to an atheist. In her home, there are essentially no opportunities for spiritual leadership and headship in line with this doctrine of the roles of men and women. “[My husband’s] an atheist and I’m not. As far as the spiritual head of household, I’m the lead, obviously. Just, I’m the one that’s teaching that part of [the kids’] lives.” Out of love for her family and God, she steps in to make sure that her children grow up in the instruction of the Lord. She also said that the issue does not come up for her much at church and she did not express many of the concerns and struggles the other participants did. For most areas of her life, then, this issue is not as relevant because her life situations do not present this issue to her with immediacy. The elaboration likelihood model would suggest that because the personal relevance of this issue is not very high for her, she would take a peripheral route to considering this doctrine. In her interview, however, she demonstrated an understanding of the teaching and a certain level of comfortability with it. It would appear, then, that she does not fit the elaboration likelihood model. Her situation and her comments illustrate how the Holy Spirit can and does work above human processes. While her family situation may at times cause cognitive dissonance (as mentioned above), her strategies for dealing with that and her experiences in her congregation do not consistently raise the issue in a way that makes considering the doctrine and its implications very personally relevant. Despite this, however, she does not rely simply on peripheral cues to avoid considering the teaching. By the working of the Holy Spirit, she simply accepts what the Bible says without putting up resistance or challenging the doctrine.

A personal story from Participant D offers further credence to how the Holy Spirit can work outside of normal ways of processing information. She described how she shared with friends that women should not be pastors, and she was offended when one friend said, “Oh, you’re WELS? That strict synod?” She regretted that she did not know every scriptural argument and the proof passages for the doctrine, but then reflected, “I don’t know. At the same time, I’m a believer in the Bible.” That seems like a simple response, but it is rather profound. This woman had not critically thought through the doctrine, gained articulate scriptural arguments, and memorized Bible passages to defend the teaching, yet she accepted it. She knew

it was in the Bible, and she believed the Bible, so she believed (and defended) the teaching.

Later she added,

A lot of people get mad when [the Bible] says that women should serve their husbands. And I don't get mad about that because it says that husbands are supposed to love their wives like Christ loves the Church. Look at what Christ did for the Church! You can't just overlook that.... I always try to relate it back to the Bible. And if you can point something out to me in the Bible ... I really don't try to challenge it. That's what it says.... And I feel like if he wants it to be a certain way, he can. Why can't he have things the way he wants? Like, if he doesn't want women to be pastors (in that specific role), hey, he sent his Son to die for us. He can do what he wants. And so I guess I'm just really accepting of that.

Here again is an example of how God's Word works in its own way. Without using the term, this woman described herself as someone who has not taken a direct route to considering this teaching. To a certain extent, one could say that by mentioning other Bible truths she believed, this interviewee was relying on peripheral cues (the sovereignty of God, the truth of the Bible, the goodness of God's will for our lives), but that would not quite fit Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model. This participant fits into neither category. The Holy Spirit convinced her by supernatural means—through the message of the Bridegroom who gave up his life for his Church.

In many cases, though, Petty and Cacioppo say that the direct route to processing information is preferred because it requires the most careful consideration and critical thinking. What this means for this research is that women who have more questions and struggle with the doctrine more than their peers are not necessarily questioning God's Word or calling for an abandonment of biblical practice. They are trying to process and understand better a teaching that challenges them. They are giving more time, energy, and cognitive space to considering what God says, what that means for their lives, and how they can apply what God says in a way that is pleasing to him. A person who follows the direct route of elaboration of this doctrine may, on the outside, seem at first to be challenging the doctrine. The reality, though, is that such an approach can be a very good thing because it involves active, ongoing consideration of the teaching to understand it and apply it better.

Central route participants in this study frequently expressed a desire for more discussion and education on this teaching. Women who follow this direct route to considering and understanding this teaching will need guidance, lots of information, and time to carefully process the information. So rather than avoiding the issue, they asked for more honest and challenging

discussion and education to help them process this teaching better. Participant B said, “I don’t really know how I would [have a conversation about this]. It would be tough. But there again, that’s where I’m looking for some direction.” She later continued:

I just think we need to talk about it more. We need to open it up and make it a real issue. Make it a real thing. People just don’t talk about it. Maybe they do. I don’t know. But where is that forum—that forum of honest and raw, just raw people with real feelings? ... I wonder, do other people care about it? Or are they just like, “Eh, whatever. It is what it is. I got other things going on in my life. I don’t need to worry about it.” I was excited about this interview.... I’m just really excited to actually talk about it with somebody who obviously wants to know more about it.... I still do struggle with those application things that are hard. I want to see that in practice and see what that looks like and feels like to be able to really embrace it.

As the elaboration likelihood model demonstrates, there is more to this than just understanding Bible passages and information. Often, women need help grappling with an issue to go beyond surface understanding and to *embrace it*. Participant C said:

I feel like the synod has tried to protect me from—within its four walls—from ever having to grapple with, “Okay, if I do this I’m breaking this principle and if I do that I’m going to break that principle.” And I don’t know how to proceed. So they put these huge safeguards around ever having women in any kind of difficult situation ever. I walk out into the world and within 10 minutes I’m faced with my first difficult choice because they can’t protect us from that. So then I’m left to practice it at work without guidance from church. And I think if we were more willing to—if we’re so afraid of putting women in that situation, which puts so much fear and stigma around making some kind of mistake or being perceived as making some kind of mistake—but what am I supposed to do in the real world? I’m not served then. I don’t have that kind of preparation that I could have if we weren’t so afraid of it at church.

Avoiding the issue is not serving women in WELS. Women like the one quoted above are looking for more guidance and answers from God’s Word as to how they can embrace and live out this teaching in the real world in a God-pleasing way.

A convergence of communication theories pertaining to the data of these interviews brings to light things that are happening in congregational that may not always meet the eye. Such research is of benefit for pastors, church leaders, and the church at large as we seek to grow and work together, to serve one another, and to do so in ways that bring glory to God.

Conclusion

My great-grandmother was not a progressive lady. She was a wonderful conservative Lutheran. However, her choice to sit with her husband in church challenged her congregation to

rethink their culture and practices. It was a healthy challenge—one that led to positive change which in no way violated scriptural principles.

The research laid out in this thesis is just the beginning of the conversation. Before moving forward, we first must listen and understand. These interviews and communication theories help bring to light some of the issues and challenges that WELS women face today. Of course, five interview participants do not represent all women in WELS. However, this type of qualitative research does offer unique and valuable insight to enhance our understanding of the synod at large according to the lived experiences of women in our congregations with feet in two worlds—the church and a feminist culture.

The following are just a sample of the many questions the scope of this research could not cover but are worthy of further study:

How do WELS pastors teach, explain, and apply the biblical doctrine of the roles of men and women in an age of feminism?

In what ways does church polity in different congregations affect female involvement in the church and conformity to biblical principles?

In what ways do the events and emphases of WELS history shape the culture and practices in our synod in relation to gender?

After investing a certain amount of time into a project, people want to know that the work and effort was worthwhile. After completing this research and listening to the stories, joys, and challenges of these five women, if the only result is that I have learned much, the work has truly been worthwhile. I have learned to listen and empathize. I have recognized the necessity to teach challenging truths with patience and compassion. I have also realized in new ways how with headship comes duty, incredible responsibility, self-sacrifice, and enormous expectations from God. I hope, though, that this thesis can do even more. I hope that these women's words will inspire others to continue the conversation, to ask tough questions, and to be willing to hear tough answers. Asking such questions is not easy. It requires relying less on rules and more on principles and love. Opening these lines of honest communication requires wisdom and tremendous patience. Addressing challenging issues evangelically makes ministry messier and more difficult. I hope that some of the participants' frustrations and feelings of marginalization will lead men in the church to sympathize with women and to understand their unique struggles. It takes courageous and gentle direction to wade through the confusion of the world and stay on

track with God’s Word while empowering and capitalizing on this gift that God has given to the church—one of inestimable value: its women. Honestly wrestling with these types of questions requires leadership—the kind of bold leadership that women are begging for from the men of their congregations. It requires the kind of male headship God demands.

In my readings on 1 Corinthians chapter 11, there was a universal upholding of the biblical texts and biblical principles. What struck me was the tone and demeanor: blunt in the 1940s-50s, straightforward in the 1960s and 70s, explanatory and detailed in the 1980s-90s. Each era judged for themselves how best to instruct and convey. How ought we to teach our era, world, churches, people and prospects? Is our struggle with the biblical principle or communication of it? How often do we convey the divine directive? Where and when? Do we shy away from it unless it absolutely must be addressed? What best glorifies God? How about a spirit of love sprinkled with a healthy respect for divine words. This is not to say that love was ever absent through the ages. But can we, must we as pastors intentionalize our tone so as to teach a timeless truth humbly, gently, and lovingly?”⁶²

God bless us to that end!

⁶² Donn Dobberstein, “A Timeless Directive for Men and Women: Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16” (Paper presented at Cypress Winter Pastors’ Conference, Port Orange, Florida, January 26-27, 2015), 26.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. What are your memories of when this teaching was first presented to you in a biblical way?
What do you think about the way it was communicated to you?
How was your relationship with the person who taught you this affected after that?
What were your feelings afterward?
Have you heard it taught in other ways? Describe it.
2. How does this doctrine challenge you?
What do you struggle with?
Why is that in particular a struggle for you?
3. What are things in your daily life that make it hard to live under this teaching?
How do you overcome or resolve them?
What has your experience with this around non-WELS members been like?
4. When you look back on your experience of learning and grappling with this teaching, what has the journey been like?
Are there key memories or pivotal moments? What happened?
5. Do you talk to other people about this?
Who?
What kind of settings?
Do you bring it up? Why or why not?
6. What do you cherish about this teaching?
Why do you cherish that?
Are there things you feel like you understand that most women don't? What are they?
7. Please describe the ways you've seen this teaching applied at the WELS congregation where you're a member.
How do you feel at those moments?
Are there ever things you question? What are they?
8. What could make this better for you?
How would you like to see this communicated better?
What sort of things could be said and done that would help you as you grapple with all of this?

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