

ONE SMALL STEP FOR WOMAN: A BETTER UTILIZATION OF WOMEN THROUGH
SMALL CHANGES IN CHURCH ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

BY
MARK M. BURGER

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

PROF. STEPHEN GEIGER, ADVISOR
WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

MEQUON, WI

FEBRUARY 20, 2026

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
ARE WE THERE YET?	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	2
THE DOCTRINE OF MAN AND WOMAN ROLES	4
Creation is Foundational	4
Headship and Submission	5
Application of the Doctrine	10
NEW TESTAMENT INTEGRATION OF MAN AND WOMAN ROLES WITH ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES	13
Organization Formats	14
Specific Male Leadership Roles	17
Organizational Structure Flexibility	20
Women’s Roles in the New Testament	22
THE CENTURIES FOLLOWING THE NEW TESTAMENT	24
The Deaconess in Early Church Writings	25
TRANSITIONING TO TODAY	28
Framework for Application	29
BLENDING CHURCH ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND THE SERVICE OF WOMEN	30
Man’s Attitude	31
Communication	32
Clarity of Terms	34
Maintaining Flexibility – Ministry Action Teams	35

Maintaining Flexibility – Service Positions	38
Miscellaneous Service Roles.....	39
Non-Permittable Practices	40
CONCLUSION	41
BIBLIOGRAPHY	42

ABSTRACT

This paper will demonstrate how important it is to re-evaluate church organizational structures in order to make the best possible use of the gifts of the women in your church. The principles for leadership that God has given are clear: men are supposed to be the leaders who wield authority. But God has not provided one perfect organizational structure that perfectly balances male leadership and female submission. When creating that structure for an individual church, there is much freedom. Yet taking a look at how the believers in the New Testament and the following centuries used this freedom can provide a basis to build on in the present day. The author concludes that making changes, even small changes, in church organizational structures can open the door for women to become more involved, and that all churches should take time to evaluate what parts of their structure prevent the service of women.

ARE WE THERE YET?

Are we there yet? For any parents who have taken their children on a road trip, this is an all-too-familiar phrase. The longer the drive is, the more your kids are going to repeat that question again and again! And why do they ask? Your children want to get to the destination so they can enjoy their time there!

When it comes to the utilization of the women in our congregations, that question is applicable: Are we there yet? In our utilization of the women in our congregations, are we at a spot where we as a church body feel like we are being fully faithful to God's Word while also being fully faithful to the women sitting in our pews? Our church body, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, is taking steps to address this, and there is an opportunity for growth at the local level. Now, before the discussion can become "What can we do to better include women?", another question must be asked: "What is preventing our women from serving?" This discussion is certainly a long journey, but it will also be a fruitful one that results in a more unified, joyful service of all of God's people. In this paper, I intend to demonstrate that a better understanding of the principles of the New Testament and the way the early church utilized women in church organizational structures can lead to changes in current church organizational structures, which help men and women to more fully serve out their roles in God's kingdom. Yes, this is one very specific stop on the journey that is the discussion of man and woman roles, but it is an important one to make before we can say: We're there!

LITERATURE REVIEW

In my research, there were three main areas of study: general principles regarding man and woman roles, the application of man and woman roles in church organizational structures in the New Testament and centuries following, and the modern application of man and woman roles in church organizational structures.

For the general principles regarding man and woman roles, I relied heavily on Nathan Pope and the Pastoral Letter written by the Conference of Presidents. In both of these documents, the point was the same: man has been given the role of being in authority, and woman has been given the role of serving as helper. For evidence, I read a few exegetical articles (Degner and Becker) that dug deeply into the Greek to better explain certain doctrinal passages regarding the principle of male headship and female helper.

For the application of man and woman roles in church organizational structures in the New Testament and centuries following, there were three types of resources I used. The first consisted of writers who took broad overviews of church organizational structures (Pope, Perry Shaw, and Bruce Gustav). They agreed that there is not one defined church organizational structure that must be followed, and that in the New Testament, we see different titles and structures. Shaw was more focused on how the New Testament church utilized their flexibility to serve the missional-ecclesial focus¹, whereas Pope focused more on the reason for their flexibility (that God gave principles of male leadership but did not give a set structure). The second type of resource I used consisted of translations and assessments of ancient church documents, such as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Alistair Stewart-Sykes) and the *Apostolic*

1. Perry W. H. Shaw, "The Missional-Ecclesial Leadership Vision of the Early Church." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 37, no. 2 (2013): 138.

Constitutions (James Donaldson). The third type of resource consisted of assessments of how women fit into the organizational structures of the early church. James Hurley focused on the New Testament, while Roger Gryson focused on the centuries following the New Testament. Similar to the overviews of organizational structures, Hurley wrote that there were no definitively set roles for women, but it is clear that women did serve in various capacities within those structures.² Gryson offered interesting insight on how the use of women grew as the early church grew, based on the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*.

For the last area of research, the modern application of man and woman roles in church organizational structures, I used a variety of writings produced by Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod pastors (Pope, Daniel Leyrer, Jon Hein, Kurtis Wetzel) and one document produced by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The documents by the WELS pastors all agreed: God has given us much freedom when it comes to utilizing women within organizational structures. Many of them also feared that we have not done a good enough job of valuing and listening to the women in our churches, as well as fully utilizing their gifts (the LCMS document agreed with this as well). The one place of caution is where the LCMS document begins to apply the scriptural principles. According to the LCMS, women are allowed to vote since women are not placed above men, but on the same level as men. However, both the WELS pastors and the LCMS document agreed that women should not serve as pastors.

2. Note: In his book, Hurley also wrote about the doctrinal principles regarding men and women roles. I did not use his book in that area of my research, so I cannot speak to his stances regarding the relationship between male headship and female helper.

THE DOCTRINE OF MAN AND WOMAN ROLES

My aim in this paper is not to do an in-depth study regarding the doctrine on man and woman roles. There are writers out there who have done an excellent job discussing the doctrine, both on a topical level and on an exegetical level. Specifically, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has done some important work on updating our statements about man and woman roles in recent years. For example, in September 2024, the WELS Conference of Presidents (CoP) provided a Pastoral Letter entitled “*Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles*,” which succinctly summarizes the doctrine presented in the Bible as well as some practical applications. In addition to this, in Fall 2025, Northwestern Publishing House published a new book, *God’s Design for Male and Female*, which is a compilation of essays from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary professors on the topic of man and woman roles. This book also includes the Pastoral Letter from 2024. Before I begin the application of this principle, it is still important to highlight some of the key passages that discuss man and woman roles.

Creation is Foundational

When it comes to man and woman roles, we must go back to the creation of the world. Why is this necessary? Not because it is some clever argument someone came up with, but because God himself inspired the writers of the New Testament to do so! Regarding the fact that a woman is not to have authority of man, Paul wrote, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim 2:13 NIV). Paul quoted Gen 2, a special chapter that gives us a glimpse into the creation of the first man and the first woman, Adam and Eve. When the topic of authority comes up in the roles of man and woman, God makes it clear: he gave a certain order, and he demonstrated that order

when he created Adam and Eve. Man has authority because he was created first. And Gen 2 describes the woman, who was created second, as “a helper suitable for him” (Gen 2:18).

Headship and Submission

The order of creation reflects the two roles God has for man and woman: headship for the man, and submission for the woman. In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul gave a clear discourse describing each of these roles. But before describing these roles, it is helpful to remember the attitude God wants all Christians, both man and woman, to have when serving one another. Jesus said to his disciples, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:12–13). Whether a Christian is in the headship role or the helper role, Christ wants the Christian to demonstrate an attitude of sacrificial love. This is important to keep in mind as Paul lays out the specific roles that God has for his people: Love one another as Christ loved you.

Here is what Paul wrote regarding male headship:

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband (Eph 5:22-33).

This entire section of Scripture could be summarized in one short sentence: “Man is head, woman is to be in submission.”³ First, I will focus on the headship role of man (verses 25-33). The description of headship is a description of having authority. But how is authority defined? Nathan Pope, the author of the *Impact Series* book on feminism, pointed to John Brug’s simple definition: “The ability to make things happen.”⁴ Pope demonstrated how the Bible uses this definition in the account of the Roman centurion in Luke 7. “For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it” (Luke 7:8). In this situation, the centurion asked Jesus to heal his daughter. He demonstrated great faith by confessing his belief that Jesus could heal his sick daughter with just a word. Then came his statement from verse eight. Pope is certainly right that a part of authority is the ability to make things happen, but that is not all there is to authority. This account of the Roman centurion demonstrates a broader view of what it means to have authority. First, there are two entities involved. In this case, it is the Roman centurion and Roman soldiers. These men are all on the same team, working towards a common goal. Having authority is not only the ability to make things happen, but it is the ability to make a decision that the other members of the team must follow, just as when a Roman centurion commands his soldiers to a certain action, they must follow his orders.

But how does the use of authority change for a Christian? Anyone in authority can make a binding decision that does not come from a place of love. Yet, as mentioned earlier, a Christian ought to remember Christ’s command: love one another as I loved you. This means that a

3. Nathan Pope, *Feminism: Understanding and Balancing Its Impact on Marriage, Family, and Church*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2003), 242.

4. Pope, *Feminism*, 216.

Christian should use authority with a sacrificial love. What does that look like? The CoP offered another, more detailed definition for this: “Authority is the entrusted responsibility to make a binding decision for the good of others.”⁵ Note what the CoP adds here. First, it is an entrusted responsibility. The wielding of authority requires the recognition that this is not to be taken lightly! Second, the decisions of someone in authority should be for the good of others. In Eph 5, Paul demonstrated how Jesus exemplified what it means to make a binding decision for the good of others. He cleansed the church, making her holy. He gave himself up for her benefit. He removed every stain and blemish from the church. He loved the church as his own body. Kurtis Wetzel summarized this aspect of authority well: “Authority means dutiful service, self-sacrifice, assuming responsibility, genuine concern, and love for all.”⁶ Authority is not the wielding of power alone; it involves an attitude of care for those who are bound by the decisions made by the one in authority. Both parts of authority are necessary for man to remember as he makes decisions that bind all those under his authority, especially women. If a man ever needs a reminder of how to show this care while wielding authority, he only needs to look back to Eph 5. Model the relationship of Jesus and the church! Remember how he exercised his authority for you: giving up his life to make you perfect. Then, think about how you can reflect that self-sacrificial love in your practice of headship.

What does the other side of this relationship look like, the side of submission? From a secular standpoint, the word “submission” does not have good connotations. It is taken as

5. WELS Conference of Presidents, “Instruction, Encouragement, and Guidance Regarding God’s Unchanging Truths as Presented in ‘Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles,’” in *God’s Design for Male and Female: Pastoral Letter, Doctrinal Statements, and Essays*, ed. Curtis A. Jahn. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2025), 15.

6. Kurtis J. Wetzel, “Hearing the Helpers: An Examination of How WELS Women Understand the Teaching of the Roles of Men and Women in an Age of Feminism.” (Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2016), 27. <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/4249>

showing weakness and a lack of drive. But that is not the way God talks about submission! The CoP addressed this in their definition of submission:

The basic definition of submit is the same in the Greek and English: to place oneself under. Negative connotations or bad experiences can immediately cloud the meaning, but godly submission is recognizing and placing yourself under the authority that God has entrusted to someone on your behalf for your good and for the good of others. Submission does not confer an inferior status. God's Son, born under the law, willingly submitted to his earthly parents (Luke 2:51). As our perfect Savior, Jesus ennobled submission with his entire life of service and sacrifice. He who is head of all things chose to be submissive to earthly authority.⁷

Simply put, to submit oneself is to place oneself under the authority of someone else. Remember the picture of Christ and the church! Submitting to Christ is done without question. The church sees how Jesus submitted himself to God the Father perfectly, not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the church. This was the role Jesus willingly took on in order to carry out the plan of salvation. In the same way, woman is to submit to the authority of man, not because he will always be a perfect leader, but because this is the role God has given to woman.

Now, because of sin, these roles are not always carried out perfectly. Both the man and the woman need to go back to Christ to remember where their roles come from and how Christ modeled those roles. However, just because the other side of the relationship isn't perfectly carrying out their role, it does not mean that someone has an excuse to not carry out their role. Yet it is much easier for someone to carry out their role when the other side is carrying out their role well. Consider a team. It is not hard to imagine how frustrating it can be for the leader of a team when the members of his team are constantly criticizing him and assuming the worst about his decisions. On the other hand, it is hard to be a member of a team when it is clear that the person in charge of the team does not care about the people on the team. Now, this does not

7. WELS Conference of Presidents, "Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles", 16.

make the roles on the team illegitimate. What it does mean is that God has already laid out the best blueprint for the relationship between man and woman! It does work best when everyone is putting their best effort forward to carry out their role in the way that God has described it.

There are certain passages in the Bible that could be misunderstood when it comes to the roles of man and woman. Consider the following Bible passage: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Taken by itself, someone could read this passage and conclude that there should not be any difference between the roles of man and woman! But that would not be treating God’s Word with the respect it deserves. “This text reveals how believers appear before God, but it does not speak to issues pertaining to order in the church or the specific functions of women in the congregation.”⁸ When you look at the context surrounding Gal 3:28, it is clear that Paul was not writing about the role of authority, but salvation. Both men and women are “heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29), sharing in the salvation that Jesus won for all people, not just some people. When it comes to salvation, man and woman are equal in God’s sight. If anyone tries to quote a passage to speak against the roles of man and woman, it is important to check the surrounding context first. God does not lie (Num 23:19); he does not contradict himself. God established the roles of man and woman, and he meant what he said.

8. Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice*, (Saint Louis: The Commission, 1985), 27.

Application of the Doctrine

How does this relationship of headship and submission play out? More will be said in detail further on in this paper about the practical interaction between the head and the helper, but it is beneficial to bring up a few application points here. First, what does communication look like in this relationship? Going back to the team picture, it is clear that every team needs a head. Logically, where does this take the picture of headship? It takes the picture “to the constant need for communication between team members.”⁹ A coach will never know what the team thinks unless he communicates with the team. In the same way, the body of believers needs to be in constant communication! The head will never know what the body needs unless he communicates with the body.

There are also some other prescriptive passages in the Bible that detail how the headship-submission relationship was practiced among the believers of the New Testament. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians:

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people. Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church (1 Cor 14:33-35).

At first glance, someone might misunderstand these passages to be teaching that women should be completely silent in church. However, that is not what Paul is saying here. Once again, look at the surrounding context! Right before these verses, Paul wrote about instructions given to prophets. Siegbert Becker summarized it this way:

In that connection it should not be difficult to see what kind of silence Paul is imposing on women as a class in the congregation, if we keep in mind that the apostle himself makes clear that the legal principle he is applying is not that women are to keep silent but rather that women are to be in subjection, ‘as the law says.’ There are especially two

9. Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Women in the Church*, 212.

activities referred to in this context that involve speaking, the one is prophesying, one by one (that is, not jointly but singly), and the other is judging the prophesying.¹⁰

Becker went on to explain how the woman would be acting outside of subjection by speaking in either of those two ways. If she stood up to prophesy while a man was prophesying, she would essentially be telling the man to be silent.¹¹ Paul did instruct the believers of Corinth to judge the prophecy given in church, but “if a woman in that situation were to pronounce a judgement on a male prophet, this again would put her in a position where she would violate the legal principle, ‘Let them be in subjection.’”¹² Once again, the context provides clarity. The problem was not with speaking as a whole; the problem was speaking in a manner that would lead to a violation of the roles of authority and submission.

Paul also provided us with another application of the principle in 1 Tim 2:11–13: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve.” The question here is this: Is all teaching, in essence, an exercise of authority? Samuel Degner, a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, provided excellent commentary on this section. Degner began by discussing the relationship between διδάσκειν and αὐθεντεῖν. “He [Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary professor David Kuske] is correct, of course, that διδάσκειν must not be taken to stand alone as an absolute. Elsewhere in Scripture, women are allowed—and even encouraged—to teach. Thus, διδάσκειν in 1 Tim 2:12 must be limited in some way.”¹³

10. Siegbert W. Becker, “An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36,” in *God’s Design for Male and Female: Pastoral Letter, Doctrinal Statements, and Essays*, ed. Curtis A. Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2025), 70.

11. Becker, *God’s Design for Male and Female*, 71.

12. Becker, *God’s Design for Male and Female*, 71.

13. Samuel Degner, “Revisiting the οὐδὲ of 1 Tim 2:12,” *WLQ* 122, no. 3 (2025): 227–228.

Degner then showed that the context of 1 Tim 2 narrows the scope of διδάσκειν. He began with the wider context: “Prayer, attire, learning and teaching in 1 Tim 2 are written against the backdrop of the gathering of believers....to teach the assembled people of God would mean to teach men in a public setting.”¹⁴ Leading up to these verses, Paul has been discussing public worship, something that includes an exercise of authority. Then, Degner provided evidence for his position in the immediate context of verses 11 and 13: “Paul explains that a woman’s behavior in such a setting has to do with submission to headship, a role that is grounded in the order of creation.”¹⁵ This is not a problem with a woman teaching; it is a problem with a woman teaching in a way that requires authority! “Thus, in the context of the gathering of believers, teaching is not permitted to women because it would subvert the principle of submission.”¹⁶ Thus, not all teaching, in its essence, is an act of authority.

Attention must also be given to ἀθεντεῖν. This verb is a *hapax legomena*, which means that it only occurs one time in the Greek New Testament. If that is true, how can modern readers be certain about its meaning? To begin, look again at the immediate context! Paul connects his discussion with the order of creation: man first, then woman. To take ἀθεντεῖν as anything other than “to have authority” would be hard to argue; this is the most natural way to take it. In addition, doubt concerning the definition of ἀθεντεῖν is a recent problem. Pope pointed out that the meaning of ἀθεντεῖν was not questioned until the twentieth century, when women’s suffrage became an issue.¹⁷ In early translations of the Greek Bible, there was no question about how to

14. Degner, “Revisiting the οὐδὲ of 1 Tim 2:12,” 228.

15. Degner, “Revisiting the οὐδὲ of 1 Tim 2:12,” 228.

16. Degner, “Revisiting the οὐδὲ of 1 Tim 2:12,” 228.

17. Pope, *Feminism*, 221.

translate αὐθεντεῖν. Pope cited multiple manuscripts that use other words which clearly mean “to have authority”: the Itala (second to fourth centuries), the Vulgate (fourth century), the Syriac and Peshitta (second or third to seventh centuries), and the Gothic (fourth century).¹⁸ Paul once again states the principle: men have the role of authority, not women. And one way to apply that principle is by not allowing women to teach in a public gathering of believers that would include men.

NEW TESTAMENT INTEGRATION OF MAN AND WOMAN ROLES WITH ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Before I discuss how our WELS churches can do a better job of creating space for women to serve in overall ministry, it is important to examine what the New Testament has to say about church organizational structures (the systems and positions put in place to carry out ministry), and especially how they included women in their plans. As the fledgling Christian church began to grow, it needed to become more organized! The more they reached out into the world, the more ministry opportunities they saw, and the more problems that popped up. In the New Testament, God provided descriptions and principles of organization, including the qualifications for those male leaders, as well as the inclusion of women in the ministry.

18. Pope, *Feminism*, 226.

Organization Formats

Pope provided a succinct summary of the various ways the New Testament church set up organizational structures. I will be relying on his summaries as I describe these structures.

The first structure he saw was apostolic ministry.¹⁹ Consider Paul. He had great authority over the church. For example, when Paul went on his missionary journeys, he appointed and ordained clergy for the new churches that he was establishing and visiting.²⁰ In the WELS today, a similar role might be a district president or a synod administrator.²¹ These are people who hold positions of authority over a majority of our synod! Yet this is not a perfect one-for-one equivalent. Pope pointed out that Paul had a unique position: “He [Paul] explained that his position came about by the ‘command’ (1 Timothy 1:1) or the ‘will’ (2 Timothy 1:1) of God.”²² Our current district presidents and synod administrators did not receive direct calls; God called them through the church.

The second structure Pope identified was the pastor-led local parish.²³ Early on, the formation of congregations is evident. On Paul’s first missionary journeys, he visited congregated Jews (Acts 17:2).²⁴ In addition, consider the letters Paul wrote! He wrote them to believers congregated in different cities. Consider the way Paul addressed his first letter to the Corinthians: “To the church of God in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2). Churches were forming, and they

19. Pope, *Feminism*, 194.

20. Pope, *Feminism*, 194.

21. Pope, *Feminism*, 194.

22. Pope, *Feminism*, 194.

23. Pope, *Feminism*, 196.

24. Pope, *Feminism*, 196.

needed leaders. Various descriptions of these leaders are used throughout the New Testament. In Titus 1:5–9, interchangeable nouns are used (elder and overseer) to describe the leaders of these parishes as men who are supposed to use sound doctrine as they encourage and refute those who were teaching false doctrine.²⁵ Other words are also used to describe these men: teacher (Eph 4:11) and pastor, someone who oversees like a shepherd (Acts 20:28).²⁶ Once again, our churches function in much of the same way today: we have pastors!

The third structure is convention-led, world congregationalism.²⁷ This structure is demonstrated in Acts 15. There was a large gathering of believers in Jerusalem to discuss the issue of whether or not Gentile converts needed to be circumcised. But who was there? Pope noted that almost every big-name leader in the early Christian church would have been there, such as Peter (Acts 15:7), Paul, Barnabas, and Silas (Acts 15:22).²⁸ And Luke even includes one more detail: this was a gathering of men (Acts 15:13). This group was representative of the church in Jerusalem, which served to make a decision for the church as a whole in a mother-daughter type relationship.²⁹ Yet this was not just a meeting of the big-name leaders; it also included lay leaders and pastors:

At Jerusalem the apostles and the elders were in attendance. We could call these two groups the clergy, the pastors, or the theologians—whatever word you want to choose to set them apart from other male leaders in attendance—and then the lay leaders. These leaders are generically described as ‘the church’ (Acts 15:4) or ‘the whole church’ (Acts

25. Pope, *Feminism*, 197.

26. Pope, *Feminism*, 197.

27. Pope, *Feminism*, 197.

28. Pope, *Feminism*, 198.

29. Pope, *Feminism*, 199.

15:22). That is, these men represented everyone else in the church, from men to women to children.³⁰

Decisions were not just made church-by-church, individual leader-by-leader; the church also functioned on a larger scale. The parallel example in the WELS today would be synod or district conventions.

Pope also included administration by deaconate.³¹ Although this is an organizational structure, it seems that, according to Acts 6, this was a subset under the local congregation and apostles, where authority was delegated to the specific group of deacons from those who were already in a position of authority. “They [the apostles] offered a basic strategy to remedy the problem, and they asked the brothers to carry it out. So came about the deacon system to regulate this important but nonpastoral work.”³² This final example highlights the fact that authoritative decisions are not made only by pastors, but that authoritative decisions can be made by men appointed into these leadership roles.

What can we take away from these examples in the New Testament church? We are told where governance is supposed to happen: in the church (Acts 15:30). And we are told who is supposed to do it: leaders (Heb 13:17).³³

30. Pope, *Feminism*, 199.

31. Pope, *Feminism*, 203.

32. Pope, *Feminism*, 203.

33. Pope, *Feminism*, 203.

Specific Male Leadership Roles

Within those examples of organizational structures, there are two specific roles that are described for men: elder/overseer and deacon. First, the elder/overseer. In the New Testament, two words are used to describe this same position: πρεσβύτερος (elder) and ἐπίσκοπος (overseer). How can we be certain that these two terms are referring to the same position? In Titus 1:5–9, Paul wrote to Titus instructing him to set up leaders in the churches in Crete. In his discourse, he started with the term “elder,” but in verse seven, there is a shift to “overseer.” This change is connected by the word γὰρ, which equates the two terms.³⁴ Paul is further describing the role of the elder, who is also then described as an overseer. In addition, there is nothing in the context of Titus 1 that would make a reader see these two positions as different. Paul did not write, “But the overseer must...” or “On the other hand, the overseer must...” He simply continued his line of thought regarding the same leadership position. Bruce is not alone in this understanding; James Hurley agrees that the two terms are used interchangeably throughout the New Testament.³⁵ For the sake of consistency, I will refer to this position as “elder” throughout this section.

Paul, in his letter to Timothy, included an extensive list of qualifications for elders:

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap (1 Tim 3:1–7).

34. Gustav M. Bruce, *The Apostolic Church: Founding, Nature, Polity, Worship, Impact*, (Minneapolis: Lutheran Brotherhood Insurance Society, 1963), 60.

35. James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 225.

When it comes to leadership, God has a very high standard. Now, not every man is going to fit these qualifications. God takes this very seriously! Serving as an elder is “a noble task,” and God works through his church to make sure the leaders match these qualifications.

As for the job of an elder, Gustav Bruce categorized it into six functions: to shepherd the church (1 Pet 5:2; Acts 20:28; John 21:1–17) with Jesus as the model (1 Pet 2:25), to oversee while not being domineering (1 Pet 5:2–4; 1 Tim 5:17), to preach and teach the word (1 Tim 4:13–16; Titus 1:9), to admonish, exhort, rebuke (2 Tim 4:1–5; Titus 1:13), to pray for and with the sick (James 5:14), and to join the apostles in decision making and ordaining other elders (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4; 21:8; 1 Tim 4:14).³⁶

Following his qualifications for the elder, Paul continued with his description of qualifications for deacons:

In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus (1 Tim 3:8–13).

It is important that Paul included these instructions where he did in 1 Tim: “The word [deacon] is again used in an official sense, denoting the office of deacon in the congregation and setting forth qualifications of deacons as the qualifications of bishops, i.e. pastors, overseers, have been set forth in the preceding part of that chapter.”³⁷ Other official uses of the word “deacon” are

36. Bruce, *The Apostolic Church*, 61–62.

37. Bruce, *The Apostolic Church*, 49–50.

found in Phil 1:1, Col 1:7, 1 Thess 3:2, and 1 Tim 4:6. This was not just some other job for anyone, it was another official position within the church.

In regard to their function, Acts 6 demonstrates the type of work carried out by the deacon. As mentioned earlier, the widows were being overlooked in the distribution of the food. The apostles at the time did not want to neglect the ministry of the word in order to solve this problem. Thus, they appointed seven men to deal with this issue. The word “deacon” itself does not appear in this chapter. However, the Greek root *διακονία* is used to describe their work. Hurley described the difference between the work of the deacons and that of the elders:

The elder’s calling is to foster the spiritual growth of the congregation, and the deacon leads in ministering to its physical needs and showing the love of Christ to outsiders through meeting their physical needs. Elders teach with formal authority and exercise disciplinary authority to protect the flock; deacons do not share this task. As described, the task of a deacon does not involve the sort of teaching and exercising of authority which 1 Timothy 2:11-12 reserves to men.³⁸

In this instance, part of their service included caring for physical needs. However, this does not mean that their service was limited to that alone; Acts 6 simply describes one form of their service.

Although elders and deacons shared many similar qualities in the lists that Paul wrote, they did have different functions. As important as it is to have a proper church organizational structure, which includes men as the leaders, the qualifications of those leaders are just as important.

38. Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 228.

Organizational Structure Flexibility

God did not provide one necessary church organizational structure which perfectly utilizes the roles of both men and women. There were descriptive passages, but not prescriptive passages. Pope reminds us that as helpful as these descriptions are, “nothing short of direct statements from God about the nature of church government are morally binding on Christians.”³⁹ This means that the church has flexibility when determining the organizational structure it wants to employ.

The believers in the New Testament show that flexibility. Shaw explained why they utilized that flexibility: “The missional-ecclesial vision of the early church shaped its governance. Organizational change occurred whenever the shape of governance was hindering the spread of the gospel and the formation of a community that reflected the incarnate character of God.”⁴⁰ Simply put, since the goal of the church was mission work to reach the lost, the church needed to be able to adapt to any challenges that would prevent the Word of God from reaching the lost. An example of this can be found by going back to Acts 6 once again. The apostles did not want to forfeit time spent spreading God’s Word in order to make sure the widows were properly included in the distribution of food. So, they were flexible and came up with a solution: appoint seven men to focus on that specific need. This allowed the apostles to continue their mission work.

Yet remember Pope’s caution: this does not mean that present-day Christians need to have the exact same practice! To demonstrate this point, we must look more closely at the contexts of those passages which describe the church organizational structures in the New Testament. First, consider the appointment of deacons in Acts 6. Perry Shaw wrote, “When taken

39. Pope, *Feminism*, 204.

40. Shaw, “Missional-Ecclesial Leadership,” 138.

in its context it becomes clear that Luke's concern in Acts 6:1-6 was *not* to prescribe a model for church governance and decision-making procedures. In point of fact, we have no precise details of how the Seven were actually chosen."⁴¹ In reality, there are many details about the selection of those deacons which we do not know! We cannot claim to make an organizational structure based on this section of Scripture.

Another passage to consider is 1 Cor 12:28: "And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues." One question about this passage is the order of the list. What is it indicating, if anything? Shaw helps provide clarity:

In 1 Corinthians 12:28 Paul speaks of God's appointment of first apostles, second prophets, third teachers. Irrespective of whether this is a chronological or hierarchical priority or both, or a prioritization based on benefit to the faith community, or simply a listing device, the repeated mention in Ephesians 4:11 suggests that these are stable, permanent roles that were widespread in the early church.⁴²

Regardless of the order, what should be taken away (in light of the repetitions in Eph 4) is that these are different positions of ministry that God has provided for the Church. It would not be right of us to read an organizational structure into this passage; rather, we can be thankful for the gift of varied ministry that God has provided.

So, if there is no one set organizational structure, what can we say about church organizational structures in the New Testament? The believers utilized various organizational structures that best fit their context while appropriately applying the principle of male headship. As described earlier, the WELS certainly takes some parts of those structures and applies them to church organizational structures today. But Christians still have the freedom to be flexible and

41. Shaw, "Missional-Ecclesial Leadership," 132.

42. Shaw, "Missional-Ecclesial Leadership," 134.

change the organizational structure in order to best fit current ministry opportunities. That means modern organizational structures will certainly have some differences from those in the New Testament,⁴³ while still implementing the unchangeable principles.

Women's Roles in the New Testament

How did the women in the New Testament participate in ministry? First, we must explore the description of Junia in Rom 16:7. This is the only place in the New Testament where one could wrestle with the question of whether a woman is described as an apostle. In the Greek, it describes Andronicus and Junia in this way: οἵτινές εἰσιν ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις. How should that phrase be understood? Is Junia being called an apostle? To begin, it must be noted that Junia is not directly called an apostle. She is called ἐπίσημοι, which the NIV translates as “outstanding.” The real question is this: What does ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις mean? The NIV offers a simple translation: “among the apostles.” This is the simplest way to understand the phrase: because of Junia’s work, Junia was well-known by the apostles and was recognized for her work. In addition to the Greek, Hurley warns that we do not know for certain if Junia was a woman!⁴⁴ Overall, it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions from this verse. If Junia was a woman, then the takeaway is that a woman was involved with ministry, which was well-known by the apostles.

43. For example, a major branch of the ministry of the WELS in the present day is elementary education. Yet, in the New Testament, nothing is said specifically about how to organize a school or a Board of Education.

44. Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 121.

In Rom 16, there is another clearer passage about women's involvement in ministry. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae" (Rom 16:1). There is a mention of a deaconess!

The role of the New Testament deaconess is fleshed out further in 1 Tim 3:1–13, specifically verse 12. In 1 Tim 3, Paul wrote to Timothy about the qualifications for different roles in the Church. He started by describing the qualifications for overseers/elders, then deacons, and then he mentions γυναῖκας, "women." Who are these women? Women could be referring to women in general, the wives of the deacons, or to female deacons. Hurley believes it is describing deaconesses. First, Hurley pointed out that Paul did not add a qualifier for women, such as "*their* women," which would make the reader think of these women as the wives of the deacons.

Hurley also pointed out that there is a lot of parallelism. Paul started this section by saying that overseers "must be" and then lists off different qualifications. When it gets to the deacons in verse eight, Paul says "likewise", and the reader is supposed to supply "must be." It is obvious that he is referring to a different group. Then, in verse eleven, Paul repeats "likewise" again, this time referring to "women."⁴⁵ This is his conclusion: "All three classes must be persons who hold public respect. This would naturally be important if they were to act on behalf of the church."⁴⁶ In addition, when you compare the list of qualifications for the deacons to that of the women, they are parallel: worthy of respect, not double tongued/slanderers, not given to much wine/sober, not pursuing dishonest gain/trustworthy in all things.⁴⁷

45. Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 230.

46. Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 230–231.

47. Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 231.

One argument someone might make against “women” referring to deaconesses is the fact that Paul did not use a specific word, such as διακόνους. Hurley offered this explanation: “The fact that Paul used *diakonos* to introduce the men in 1 Timothy 3:8 explains the necessity of another word in verse 11 if he wished to turn attention to women deacons.”⁴⁸ Paul needed to make a distinction, so Hurley argued that he used the word γυναικας to make that distinction. In the end, this is not the only solution to 1 Tim 3:11. However, I do think that Hurley makes a solid argument in favor of deaconesses.

Regardless of the proper terms to describe female ministry in the New Testament, it is clear that women were involved. Consider Priscilla teaching Apollos, Mary and Martha caring for Jesus, Phoebe, Lydia and her service in Philippi, the women who used their homes as churches early on. Women were involved with ministry; that much can be said with certainty.

THE CENTURIES FOLLOWING THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the centuries following the New Testament, the church continued to grow and organize as ministry efforts continued to spread. As this growth happened, how did the organizational structures grow? And more specifically, how did women stay involved? One of the best examples of this is the role of the deaconess. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* and *Apostolic Constitutions* provide a detailed look into the way the role of the deaconess grew within the church.

48. Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 231-232.

The Deaconess in Early Church Writings

The first important document is the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, which can be translated as “the teaching of the Apostles.” Although there is some uncertainty regarding the origins of this document, Alistair Stewart-Sykes provides a careful argument that places the compilation of this document somewhere between the early third century and early fourth century, coming from Syria.⁴⁹ It is also important to note that this document is considered pseudepigraphal, which means that the authors wrote this document in order to give the impression that the apostles were the original authors.⁵⁰ In the end, this document can still be beneficial for understanding the organization of the early Christian church.

The information about deaconesses is not extensive, yet there are a few noteworthy mentions. First, the authors described how the deaconess received her ministry position.

You are to choose and appoint deacons from all the people who are pleasing to you, a man for the administration of the many things which are necessary, a woman however for the ministry of women, since there are houses where you can not send a deacon to the women because of the pagans but you can send a deaconess, and in many other matters there is need for an office of deaconess (*Didascalia Apostolorum* 3.12).⁵¹

The church leaders were supposed to appoint women to be deaconesses. This is reminiscent of the way that deacons were selected in Acts 6. In the *Did. Apo.* and Acts 6, it is important to remember that not all of the details of that appointment are laid out.

Although the function of the deaconess is left open-ended here, the writers went on in this paragraph to list a few of the functions at the time, such as offering special assistance when

49. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *The Didascalia Apostolorum: An English Version with Introduction and Annotation*, Studia Traditionis Theologiae 1 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2009), 54-55.

50. For further discussion regarding pseudepigrapha in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, see Stewart-Sykes, 22-25.

51. Stewart-Sykes, *The Didascalia Apostolorum*, 193.

women were baptized and ministering to the sick (Did. Apo. 3.12).⁵² According to the Did. Apo., it is also clear that the ministry of the deaconess was no small task; the early Christians respected these women.

On this account we declare that the ministry of a woman, a deaconess, is particularly useful and important. Our Lord and Saviour also received ministry at the hands of women, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James and mother of Joses, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. You too have need of the ministry of a deaconess in many things (Did. Apo. 3.12).⁵³

Even then, the inclusion of women in ministry was a point of importance.

The *Apostolic Constitutions* is a similar document from the late fourth century. The first six books of the Apost. Const. are an edited reproduction of the Did. Apost., while the seventh and eighth books are compilations of later material.⁵⁴ The edited materials in the first six books, as well as the two additional books, demonstrate how the position of deaconess changed and continued to be utilized in the early church.⁵⁵

At this point in time, not only were these women appointed, but they were also publicly set apart for the office of deaconess, as evidenced by the laying on of the hands of the bishop and an accompanying prayer (Apost. Const. 8.20).⁵⁶ Once again, the need and respect for the position of deaconess is highlighted in the Apost. Const., demonstrated in a comparison of the deaconess to the Holy Spirit on two points.

52. Stewart-Sykes, *The Didascalia Apostolorum*, 193–194.

53. Stewart-Sykes, *The Didascalia Apostolorum*, 193.

54. James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts, eds., *Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, 2 Clement, Early Liturgies*, vol. 7 of Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writing of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 388.

55. Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, trans. Jean Laporte and Mary Louis Hall (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1976), 54.

56. Donaldson *Constitutions*), 492.

The first point: “Let also the deaconess be honoured by you in the place of the Holy Ghost and do not do or say anything without the deacon; as neither does the Comforter say or do anything of Himself, but gives glory to Christ by waiting for His pleasure” (Apost. Const. 2.26).⁵⁷ Gryson explains the significance of this passage: “Just as the Paraclete glorifies Christ by doing his will, so deaconesses, a ‘type’ of the Holy Spirit, were not to say or do anything without the deacon, who was a ‘type’ of Christ.”⁵⁸

The second point: “And as we cannot believe on Christ without the teaching of the Spirit, so let not any woman address herself to the deacon or bishop without the deaconess” (Apost. Const. 2.26).⁵⁹ Once again, Gryson provides a helpful explanation:

Just as it is not possible to believe in Christ without being taught by the Spirit, no woman was to visit a bishop or deacon without a deaconess. The deaconess, therefore, seems to have played the role of intermediary between women and the male members of the hierarchy, and perhaps, conforming to a custom whose traces are found everywhere, she was to witness the correctness of their conversation.⁶⁰

There are also some additional tasks given to the deaconess in the Apost. Const. One example of this is found in Apost. Const. 2.58. Here, deacons were instructed to welcome people to liturgical assemblies. They were supposed to make sure that people had seats, whether rich or poor, and even give up their places to older people.⁶¹ In that same paragraph, the deaconess is instructed to do the very same thing for women.⁶²

57. Donaldson, *Constitutions*, 410.

58. Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 61.

59. Donaldson, *Constitutions*, 410.

60. Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 61.

61. Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 61.

62. Donaldson, *Constitutions*, 422.

Finally, does the Apost. Const. provide any details about how these women fit into the organizational structure? Unfortunately, there is no distinct ministry organization or system outlined in the Apost. Const. besides the different ministry positions (bishop, presbyter, deacon, and deaconess). However, it is clear that those early Christians did follow God's design for male and female roles: "A deaconess does not bless, nor perform anything belonging to the office of presbyters or deacons" (Apost. Const. 8.28).⁶³

From both of these ancient documents, a few things are clear: the deaconess was highly respected, had a wide variety of functions, and was considered an important part of the church organizational structure.

TRANSITIONING TO TODAY

So far, I have established that the God-given principle for leadership is that men will serve in positions of authority. However, that does not mean women cannot be involved in ministry. I have also established that God has not defined one organizational structure that all believers must follow exactly. Therefore, Christians have flexibility when determining how to set up their church organizational structures. In the New Testament, it is clear that organizational structures changed. In the early church, it is also clear that positions held by women changed and grew within those organizational structures, although they did not take positions of authority over men. With all of that in mind, how can Christians best apply this doctrine?

63. Donaldson, *Constitutions*, 494.

Framework for Application

James Hurley provided a helpful framework to consider when applying what the Bible says about male leadership and organizational structures. There are three main points to consider:

1. Scriptural instructions:
 - a. Prohibitive: Does Scripture expressly prohibit the activity?
 - b. Permissive: Does Scripture expressly permit the activity?
2. Realities and definitions
 - a. Prohibitive: Does the activity effectively overthrow a biblical norm or motive, but escape censure on a technicality of definition?
 - b. Permissive: Is the activity in fact in keeping with the obvious purpose of Scripture, but prevented by a technicality of human definition?
3. Perceptions
 - a. Prohibitive: Is the activity likely to be misunderstood or perceived in such a way that it leads to confusion or becomes a stumbling block?
 - b. Permissive: Can the activity be explained sufficiently that it is not likely to be wrongly perceived or to become a stumbling block?⁶⁴

These three checkpoints are useful when considering a change within a church organizational structure in order to better include women. The first checkpoint is a reminder to go back to God's Word and see if something is explicitly commanded or forbidden. The second checkpoint turns attention to the way a church defines something. If a church has a position that could be operated by a woman (such as a treasurer), but, according to the constitution, the treasurer has authority (such as a place on the church council), then that definition of treasurer could be adjusted in order to allow a woman to fulfill that role.⁶⁵ The third checkpoint is a reminder to consider the Christian brothers and sisters. Paul's discourse in Rom 14 highlights why this is important. Even though something may be permissible according to Christian freedom, a Christian should not

64. Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 246.

65. The constitution could be changed to allow the treasurer to work and present a budget without having the authority to have the final say. This position could then be defined as an advisory position to the church council.

want to confuse someone who might have a weaker faith. I would also add to Hurley's explanation that Christians should consider how a visitor perceives a church's practices. If something put into practice looks similar to another church body, a Christian might not want to continue that practice in order to make a clear distinction between their church and other church bodies that do not teach the whole truth.

BLENDING CHURCH ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND THE SERVICE OF WOMEN

It is not overstating to say that WELS churches can still do a better job of including women in ministry, in more ways than just serving as greeters or preparing meals in the church kitchen. My aim for the remainder of this paper is to give concrete applications on how WELS churches can change their organizational structures in order to make better use of the gifts of the lay women who are sitting in their pews.⁶⁶

66. To be clear, the roles of female teachers and staff ministers are great applications of using the flexibility God has given us in organizational structures to include women in ministry. The staff minister position is an accurate application of the deaconess from the New Testament and Early Church history. But since it is already clear that these women are involved in the organizational structure of churches to which they are called, I want to focus more attention on the lay women who are more likely to be overlooked.

Man's Attitude

Before anything changes within organizational structures, there must be changes within each individual man. Male leaders need to carefully consider their words and actions. A report published by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod also pointed out the danger of man's failure to follow Jesus' example:

Attitudes and actions which suggest that women are insignificant or inferior, or that they have no valid existence apart from men, originate in the fall. Moreover, such a posture toward women is inconsistent with the example of Jesus' governance of those who live in a subordinate relationship to Him (Eph 5:25).⁶⁷

The attitudes and actions described include crass jokes and side comments. There is no place in the life of a male leader to give the impression that they have superiority over a woman due to the role of headship that God has given to man. Kurtis Wetzel explained how this can negatively affect the male leader: "Careless comments and quick judgments can devastatingly hurt his perceived character."⁶⁸ Thoughtless words can quickly change a woman's perception of the male leader. They may feel overlooked, undervalued, or unheard. This could lead to a woman being less driven to participate in church ministry. Wetzel also pointed out that "whether we like it or not, women at times observe male-female relationships in the church in terms of power."⁶⁹ This means that instead of viewing men as those who have been given the responsibility of being a self-sacrificing leader, women may view men as someone simply having more power than them, which leads to a sense of oppression in the church. Because of this perception, women may feel

67. Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod CTCR, *Women in the Church*, 32.

68. Wetzel, "Hearing the Helpers," 22.

69. Wetzel, "Hearing the Helpers," 22.

uncomfortable talking to men, especially male leaders.⁷⁰ Even before a conversation is started, men should be thinking about this and letting it shape their words and actions! Then, men ought to take the initiative in starting the conversation.

Special attention should also be given to single women. Pope pointed out that single women have “an emotional and experiential disadvantage in understanding and applying them [passages about women in church life].”⁷¹ Consider a passage like 1 Cor 14:35, where women are instructed to talk to their husbands at home if they have a question about something in church. Single women do not have that option! Pope encourages men “to be more sympathetic and open to the concerns of single women.”⁷² This is simply the attitude a man should exhibit in his church.

Communication

Communication is key when it comes to fostering cooperation between men and women. When Wetzel interviewed different women for his paper, he wrote that “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.”⁷³ Men do not know everything. But that is why God has given the helper: women! Yet when men forget about their helper, they lose out on valuable insights. Going back to the picture of a team, Pope made the point that logically, there

70. Wetzel, “Hearing the Helpers,” 23.

71. Pope, *Feminism*, 207.

72. Pope, *Feminism*, 207.

73. Wetzel, “Hearing the Helpers,” 26.

should be “the constant need for communication between team members.”⁷⁴ Yes, men are sinners. There will be times when they forget to communicate. But let this be an encouragement that there are many blessings for your team when you strive to be in continual communication with all your members!

So, how can there be better communication? Pope mentioned that in his church, he set up a Women’s Concerns Committee. In his church, they have meetings with two different groups: married women and unmarried women (single or widowed). This would give the women an opportunity to openly communicate with the pastor about different problems or upcoming decisions at church. It gave them a place to be heard! Pope, while acknowledging there was no prescribed way to select which women serve on this committee, wisely allowed the women at his church to vote for the women who would serve on this committee. This gave all the women the chance to have a voice.⁷⁵

In the Example A constitution put together by Pastor Jon Hein,⁷⁶ consensus building is encouraged as a way to communicate (Article VI, Section 2).⁷⁷ Minnesota District President Klatt, in a recorded presentation regarding these two constitution examples, highlighted the benefits that come from consensus building. Everyone’s views are heard, including the women! As mentioned above, they have valuable insight to share with men. Consensus building also

74. Pope, *Feminism*, 212.

75. Pope, *Feminism*, 239.

76. Please note that both Example A and Example B are working documents which include an example of a church constitution along with commentary. The final editions of these constitution examples should be completed in the near future. Pastor Hein also asked that I refer to these as “examples.” Example A is primarily for smaller churches; Example B is primarily for larger churches.

77. Jon Hein, Constitution and Bylaws Example A, 10.

allows time for questions and clarification. This prevents any rumors or false narratives from being spread. Consensus building also creates broad buy-in, which leads to more volunteerism. In this situation, DP Klatt pointed out that the Council of Ministry is the oversight group that makes a decision based on the consensus building.⁷⁸

Clarity of Terms

When it comes to communication, clarity of terms is also crucial. For example, there is an important difference between a congregational meeting and an open forum. According to Pastor Hein, “If it is a gathering to ‘ask questions, share opinions, and provide input on congregational information that has been shared,’ that gathering is called an open forum. If it is believed that a formal vote will need to be taken on some issue...it is generally called a ‘congregational meeting.’”⁷⁹ Using these terms consistently and making sure that all of the people at your church know what these terms mean can remove large stumbling blocks that hinder open communication with women.

There is also a necessity for clarity of terms when it comes to the positions being established within a church organizational structure. DP Klatt pointed out two important terms: oversight and management. Oversight includes the exercise of binding authority, whereas management indicates task and service focus, which excludes the use of binding authority.⁸⁰

78. Dennis Klatt. “Church Constitution and Bylaws,” 2025 MN District Leaders Workshop, Google Drive video of presentation, 1:10:06, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RZSIM_F6ghTrmVZt3RLBxQuhepRUp6sf/view?pli=1 (site discontinued), 25:00.

79. Jon Hein, Constitution and Bylaws Example B, 15.

80. Klatt, “Church Constitution,” Google Drive video, 12:44.

These lead back to Hurley's second checkpoint regarding realities and definitions. If there is clarity of definitions, then there can be more positions that women are able to fill within a church organizational structure.

Finally, even when we do our best to select terms which highlight a distinction in roles, remembering the fundamental biblical principle remains important. For example, while the term "management" might be used to label a role that does not expect to involve authority over men, circumstances may arise that require such an authoritative decision. All involved understand that in such a case, seeking a decision from those responsible for oversight is the proper next step.

Maintaining Flexibility – Ministry Action Teams

As seen in the New Testament and early church, the believers utilized their God-given flexibility to meet ministry opportunities. In Example B Constitution Bylaw Article VI, Section 1, the same type of flexibility is encouraged with Ministry Action Teams. Hein provided this definition of a Ministry Action Team: "service positions who operate at the discretion and under the authority of the Council of Ministry."⁸¹ DP Klatt provided further clarification on what a Ministry Action Team (MAT) is. It is a group appointed by the Council of Ministry, and the candidates are all communicant members. He stressed the importance of defining duties and responsibilities here. A MAT will not exercise headship or authority over others in the congregation. However, within a MAT, there may be certain positions that do exercise authority (for example: leading a devotion).

81. Hein, Example B, 37.

Regarding the work of a MAT, Klatt pointed out how a MAT can be extremely beneficial for the congregation as a whole. For example, instead of a Council of Ministry spending time putting together certain policies, a MAT can be tasked with forming and recommending a policy to the Council of Ministry who would then ratify it.⁸² In this case, a proposal would be the use of expert testimony from that specific MAT, not an exercise of authority. There is an understanding that the Council of Ministry is still authoritative, and it can step in if there is disagreement within that MAT.

When it comes to setting up an MAT, Hein provided some helpful insight. He explained that a MAT “works well for a ministry activity that is more of an ongoing effort. Common examples: a Fellowship Team, an Evangelism Team, a Worship Team, a Property and Grounds Team. These Ministry Action Teams may have a lot of responsibilities.”⁸³ These groups may ask people outside of the MAT to assist in their work, but it is important to remember that asking someone to serve need not represent a binding decision. DP Klatt gave the example of a MAT asking a man to paint the walls of the church. A woman on the MAT asking this man to paint is not an exercise of authority. He can say no without being insubordinate.⁸⁴ Instead of appointing an entire MAT, a Council of Ministry may also select a coordinator who can gather volunteers.⁸⁵

Can these coordinator positions be filled by a woman? The short answer: yes. Consider the definition of the position. As long as the MAT or the coordinator is not making authoritative

82. Klatt, “Church Constitution,” 27:15.

83. Hein, Example B, 35.

84. Klatt, “Church Constitution,” 26:28.

85. Hein, Example B, 35.

decisions, it can be a man or a woman. Going back to DP Klatt's example of painting the church, asking someone to assist with a task is *not* an authoritative action.

Hein highlighted one more important blessing that comes with utilizing MATs:

So, as the title of Bylaws Article IV, Section 1 indicates, the goal is to provide complete flexibility to congregational leadership. A common frustration in congregations is that they're constitutionally required to have this-or-that committee or group. This model makes that unnecessary. Church leadership will establish whatever amount of organization is needed to efficiently carry out the ministry plans.⁸⁶

If church constitutions have a more flexible structure and identify ways of serving that don't require authority, church work suddenly becomes much more efficient and much more inclusive since there are more roles that can legitimately be filled by either men or women.

Now, in bigger churches, there may be some MATs that would naturally need to exercise authority to carry out their functions. How can we allow women to serve on this MAT while not exercising authority? Hein's idea of a group within a group provides a helpful structure.

In some cases (as this model constitution will illustrate), the congregation might choose to have an organizational 'group within a group.' For example, take the vital ministry task of pursuing members who are drifting from church. The first steps in attempting to reclaim those members is simply evangelical encouragement. For example, if a member is absent from church for four straight weeks, another member calls them with encouragement. 'Hey, just calling to see if everything is ok. I've missed you at church.' If the absent member is a woman, perhaps that phone call might be better received if it came from another woman. So, this model suggests having a Soul Care Team, consisting of men and women, within which is the Board of Elders, which would consist of men. The Soul Care Team would provide those initial inquiries and encouragement to straying members. When the straying member's obstinacy rises to the level of requiring admonition, an Elder would step in for that church discipline work. This would represent 'a more robust male and female partnership' that would be beneficial to gospel ministry.⁸⁷

86. Hein, Example B, 36.

87. Hein, Example B, 24.

By forming a MAT in this way, there is still a group that can exercise authority while still including women in the overall work of that MAT.

Maintaining Flexibility – Service Positions

Another way that women can be included better is by creating more service positions within a church organizational structure. These positions can be seen as advisory to the Council of Ministry. One of the positions that could be changed from an authoritative position to a service position is the treasurer or financial secretary. This is how Hein described it: “The position of treasurer (or financial secretary) is not used in this model, as that is the office that a) typically requires the most training/expertise, and b) can most easily be structured as a service position, one open to any supremely qualified male or female member of the congregation.”⁸⁸ The position of treasurer was not even included in the constitution! As Hein highlighted, the reason was to maintain flexibility in order to shape that position to the member who best fits it, whether that is a man or a woman. This is just one example of one position that could be tweaked in order to give qualified women the opportunity to serve. Each church ought to assess its ministry positions and consider which positions must have authority, and which positions would not require the exercise of authority. If they find that a position would not require authority, they can potentially modify that position so that someone, either male or female, could serve in it.

88. Hein, Example A, 31.

Miscellaneous Service Roles

There are many other roles that do not require a committee that can be filled by women. Consider the position of ushers. In most WELS churches, it is common for men to serve as ushers. Can women serve in this position? Pastor Daniel Leyrer wrote, “The function of the ushers does not seem to be one of authority, but one of assisting those who have come to worship. If that is the case, then ushering would be on the same level as sitting next to a newcomer and helping him with the liturgy. Surely we would desire our women to carry out that function.”⁸⁹ More so than just serving as greeters, women can serve as ushers to assist with worship services. At some churches, however, the usher has the additional responsibility of overseeing who participates in the Lord’s Supper. They may have to ask someone who is living in unrepentance or who is not a member to not participate. In this situation, the usher would need to be a man since they would have the authority to prevent someone from participating in the Lord’s Supper. There may be other exercises of authority that a position description for an usher could envision. Once again, it comes down to how a church defines that position. Positions just like this may traditionally be filled by men, and the perception that a particular role conveys authority is not to be ignored. At the same time, we must ask ourselves: What is the definition of this position, and can it change?

89. Daniel P. Leyrer, “Women in the Church: Drawing The Line Between Truth and Tradition,” WELS/ELS Pastor-Teacher Conference at Cannon Beach, Oregon, October 10, 1991, 7. <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/3059>

Non-Permittable Practices

Some church organizational structures may incorrectly allow women to serve in roles that have authority. One example of this is the practice of women serving as pastors. Leyrer wrote, “It would be impossible to argue that being a pastor is not a position of authority over men in our congregations. Scripture’s description of the pastor includes the idea of holding authority.”⁹⁰

There really is no way to spin the position of pastor in order to not include authority. Paul, when giving instructions to Titus about serving as a church leader, told him to “encourage and rebuke with all authority” (Titus 2:15). You cannot have a pastor who does not have authority.

Another problem to discuss is women voting at congregational meetings. Let me be clear: can polls be conducted within consensus building in order to see where the consensus lies? Yes, but that is not the ultimate decision. Pope succinctly explains the problem: “It is one thing to voice one’s thoughts or advance a proposition. It is another to tell or command men to do something.”⁹¹ When the result of a vote affects all the other members of the church, that is a binding decision; that is authority. For that reason, women cannot be allowed to vote when the outcome of the vote is the binding decision.

If you are ever uncertain whether or not a practice involving women in church organizational structures would be considered permissible, it would be wise to go back to Hurley’s framework and especially consider the “prohibitive” questions.

90. Leyrer, “Women in the Church,” 6.

91. Pope, *Feminism*, 238.

CONCLUSION

God is clear regarding the roles of man and woman: man is to be the leader; woman is to be the helper. This does not in any way make man superior to woman. But our application of these principles can occasionally give the wrong impression. We can begin to change this negative impression by utilizing the flexibility that God has given to us when it comes to setting up the organizational structures within our churches.

Being flexible in these structures is not something new. In the New Testament church and the centuries following, these structures grew and changed as the ministry opportunities grew and changed. But two things remained the same: men carried out the leadership role by wielding authority, and women were still involved in various ways that did not undermine male authority.

In our churches today, we ought to mirror that flexibility in our church organizational structures. It would be a blessing for leaders in WELS churches across America to take time to carefully look at their organizational structures and ask the question: Are we there yet? Are we doing everything we can to involve women within our organizational structures while maintaining the God-given principles for man and woman roles? You may find that your church is lacking in some way, but this is meant as an encouragement to take the initiative to make sure that every part of the body of Christ is included and put to use. Even the little changes we make, a definition here or a policy there, can make a big difference. Together, we can get closer to the end of this journey.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Becker, Siegbert W. “An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36.” Pages 65–73 in *God’s Design for Male and Female: Pastoral Letter, Doctrinal Statements, and Essays*. Edited by Curtis A. Jahn. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2025.
- Bruce, Gustav M. *The Apostolic Church: Founding, Nature, Polity, Worship, Impact*. Minneapolis: Lutheran Brotherhood Insurance Society, 1963.
- Degner, Samuel. “Revisiting the οὐδὲ of 1 Tim 2:12.” *WLQ* 122, no. 3 (2025): 225–31.
- Donaldson, James and Alexander Roberts, eds. *Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, 2 Clement, Early Liturgies*. Vol. 7 of Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writing of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994.
- Gryson, Roger. *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*. Translated by Jean Laporte and Mary Louis Hall. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1976.
- Hein, Jon. Example Constitution A.
https://welsmn.org/resource/Example_A_Small_Congregation_with_Explanations_2.pdf
- Hein, Jon. Example Constitution B.
https://welsmn.org/resource/Example_B_Large_Congregation_with_Explanations_2.pdf
- Hurley, James B. *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.
- Klatt, Dennis. “Church Constitution and Bylaws.” 2025 MN District Leaders Workshop. Google Drive video of presentation, 1:10:06. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RZSIM-F6ghTrmVZt3RLBxQuhepRU6sf/view?pli=1> (site discontinued).
- Leyrer, Daniel P. “Women in the Church: Drawing the Line Between Truth and Tradition.” WELS/ELS Pastor-Teacher Conference at Cannon Beach, Oregon. October 10, 1991.
<http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/3059>.
- Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations. *Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice*. Saint Louis: The Commission, 1985.
- Pope, Nathan. *Feminism: Understanding and Balancing Its Impact on Marriage, Family, and Church*. Impact Series. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2003.

Shaw, Perry W. H. "The Missional-Ecclesial Leadership Vision of the Early Church."
Evangelical Review of Theology 37. no 2 (2013): 131–39.

Stewart-Sykes, Alistair. *The Didascalia Apostolorum: An English Version with Introduction and Annotation*. Studia Traditionis Theologiae 1. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2009.

WELS Conference of Presidents. "Instruction, Encouragement, and Guidance Regarding God's Unchanging Truths as Presented in 'Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles.'" Pages 1–25 in *God's Design for Male and Female: Pastoral Letter, Doctrinal Statements, and Essays*. Edited by Curtis A. Jahn. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2025.

Wetzel, Kurtis J. "Hearing the Helpers: An Examination of How WELS Women Understand the Teaching of the Roles of Men and Women in an Age of Feminism." Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2016. <http://essays.wls.edu:8080/handle/123456789/4249>.