



The Service of Women

A Christian Response

The Christian response to the service of women in the church emphasizes the full equality of women and men in their relationship to God and creation, and rejoices in the distinctive identities and responsibilities which God has bestowed on men and women in their service to Him.

Man and woman are equal in having the same relationship to God and to nature.

The theological foundation for what the Holy Scriptures teach about the status and service of men and women in the church is set forth in Gen. 1:26-27: "Then God said, 'Let us make man [Hebrew, *adam*] in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

The Hebrew word *adam* in this text refers to "man" in the corporate or generic sense and is inclusive of both sexes, male and female. Both woman and man were equally created in the image and likeness of God. They knew and trusted God perfectly, and lived their lives in conformity with His will. Both men and women are equally distinct from all other creatures made by God and are given dominion or authority over "every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28). There is therefore no basis in the account of creation—nor in any Scriptural text—for suggesting any kind of "superiority-inferiority" relationship between man and woman.

Genesis 3 contains the tragic account of the fall of our first parents into sin, resulting in the loss of the original righteousness which was the essence of the divine image or likeness. Yet through its clear proclamation of the restorative power of the Gospel, Holy Scripture—in both the Old and the New Testaments—continues to uphold and affirm the image of God in both sexes. By virtue of their baptism into Christ Jesus, women and men are fully and equally members of the priesthood of all believers. They are co-heirs with Christ of all the gifts and blessings of His church, and are called to "declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

The distinctive identities of man and woman should be reflected in the church.

Equality does not imply sameness. Perhaps the most profound theological expression of this truth is found in Scripture's teaching regarding the Trinity. Christians confess with the Scriptures and with the ecumenical creeds that the three persons of the one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are co-equal in substance, majesty and glory, and are equally deserving of our worship and praise. To deny this is heresy—just as it would be heresy to deny that there is no distinction at all between

the three persons of the Trinity. They are equal, but they are not identical. In God's wise and mysterious economy, each divine person of the Trinity, in full cooperation with the other persons, contributes uniquely to God's great and gracious works of creation, salvation and sanctification.

In addition to being created equally in the image of God, both man and woman were given distinctive identities by God: "From the beginning," Jesus said, God "made them male and female" (Matt. 19:4). These unique identities—and the unique blessings and responsibilities which God in His Word attaches to them—are rooted not in the fall, but in God's creation. To be sure, the fall has also corrupted the relationship between man and woman as originally designed by God, so that what was intended by God as a blessing is often misunderstood and abused by both women and men. But the design itself is part of the created order which God Himself pronounced "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

The oneness of male and female in Christ affirmed by St. Paul in Galatians 3 does not nullify the distinction between them given by God in creation, but rather sets both men and women free to relate to each other in accordance with God's original will and plan. When St. Paul insists that "there is neither male nor female . . . in Christ Jesus," he does not mean that faith in Christ obliterates any and all distinctions between the sexes. Woman does not "become" man (or vice-versa) through faith in Christ, any more than Jew "becomes" Greek (or vice-versa). All of the redeemed are equal before our gracious God, but each retains his or her unique and God-given identity and is called to respond to God's grace in Christ in ways that, according to Scripture, are commensurate with that identity.

Subordination is for the sake of orderliness and unity.

In Ephesians 5:21 the Apostle Paul admonishes all Christians in love to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." Each of us in our relationships with one another is called to "have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant . . ." (Phil. 2:5-7).

St. Paul goes on in Ephesians 5 to speak specifically to wives and husbands about marriage as reflecting, in a real and mysterious way, Christ's relationship with His church. "Wives," writes St. Paul, "be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . ." (Eph. 5:22-25). The headship of the husband is rooted in and exemplified by the headship of Christ himself: self-giving, self-sacrificing, exercising leadership and authority only and always for the sake of serving, saving and sanctifying His beloved bride. The submission of the wife is rooted in and exemplified by the church's submission to Christ, which is a willing, joyful and grateful response to the bridegroom's undeserved and inestimable love.

In 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 and 1 Timothy 2, St. Paul addresses the subject of headship and subordination in the context of worship and service in the church. In 1 Corinthians 11:3 St. Paul

says, "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God." This "headship" is rooted in creation, "For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (1 Cor. 11:8-9; cf. 1 Tim. 2:13). In applying this headship principle to worship practices, St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14, "As in all the churches of the saints, the woman should keep silence in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord."

These passages have been interpreted in a variety of ways, many of which call into question the authority, harmony and unity of the text of Scripture itself. Any interpretation which takes the Scriptures' claims about its own authority seriously, must come to terms with the following truths. First, St. Paul himself views these instructions regarding worship not as his own time- and culture-bound personal advice, but as a "command of the Lord" based on "the law" (i.e., the order of creation), valid and applicable to Christ's church in all times and places. Second, in view of everything else that the Scriptures—including the letters of St. Paul (cf. Gal. 3:28)—teach regarding the relationship between men and women, it is clear that the "headship" and "subordination" spoken of here do not teach or imply any "superiority" or "inferiority" whatsoever in the relationship between men and women. Rather, headship and subordination are, according to the Apostle St. Paul, realities that reflect the good and gracious will of God and that are rooted in the very structure of God's creation itself (cf. 1 Cor. 14:40).

Women are not to hold the public teaching office in the church, the office of pastor.

The three principles discussed above converge in St. Paul's specific directives regarding women speaking and teaching in the congregation in worship. In 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, St. Paul instructs women to "keep silence" and not to "speak." In 1 Timothy 2:11-12 the apostle says, "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no women to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent." As in 1 Corinthians 14, St. Paul—writing by divine inspiration—bases this admonition on God's own order of creation (1 Tim. 2:13).

What is the precise meaning of these passages? It is important to note, first of all, that in each of these texts St. Paul is giving instruction for the Christian congregation gathered for public worship. In 1 Corinthians 14 St. Paul uses the word for speaking (*laleo*) that is frequently used to refer to public preaching (cf. Mark 2:2), rather than the more general word for speaking (*lego*). In 1 Timothy 2:12 St. Paul uses the word *didaskain* (to teach) when he says that he does not permit women to teach men, a word which is used throughout this apostolic letter to refer to the formal, public proclamation of the Gospel. According to St. Paul, it is a violation of the relationship which God established between woman and man at creation for a woman to do the authoritative teaching in the public worship assembly which is to be carried out by the one who holds the divinely instituted office of oversight in the congregation, i.e., the office of pastor.

Obviously, the apostle is not saying in these passages that women may not talk in church at all or that all teaching of men by women is contrary to God's will—unless we want to make St. Paul contradict himself. In 1 Corinthians 11 he had just provided some suggestions as to what customs the congregation might follow when women did pray and prophesy during public worship.

St. Luke reports that in Ephesus a woman, Priscilla by name, was engaged together with her husband Aquila in teaching Apollos, a male leader in the church, in a situation outside of the public worship service of the congregation (Acts 18:26). St. Paul is referring here to a specific type of “speaking,” “teaching” and “authority”—the authoritative speaking and teaching that belongs by God’s design to the office of the pastor.

In a fallen world, of course, both headship and subordination—including headship and subordination in the church—can be (and often have been) misunderstood and abused. It is imperative therefore that God’s baptized people live with each other day by day in sincere repentance and forgiveness, and that the church strive constantly to make it clear that biblical headship and subordination are radically different than popular or contemporary secular interpretations of these concepts. All those—male and female—who have been entrusted with any kind of authority in the church must assume the attitude that Jesus modeled and required: “Let the greatest among you become as youngest, and the leader as the one who serves” (Luke 22:26).

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the service of women in the church.

On the basis of the Scriptural passages and principles discussed above, it is the position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) that “those statements of Scripture which direct women to keep silent in the church and which prohibit them to teach and exercise authority over men, we understand to mean that women ought not to hold the pastoral office or serve in any other capacity involving the distinctive functions of this office” (1969 Convention Resolution 2-17). This position on the ordination of women to the pastoral office has been reaffirmed repeatedly by the LCMS over the years. At the same time, the Synod has adopted numerous resolutions strongly encouraging the service of women in the church.

While the LCMS believes that the Scriptures teach that women may not hold the pastoral office or perform its distinctive functions, the Synod has a long and rich history of making use of and encouraging the service of women to the Lord and His church in various other offices, and for this we give humble and heartfelt thanks to God. The self-denying service and leadership gladly given by the many faithful women who have served over the years as deaconesses, Christian day school teachers, parish workers and in numerous other professional and volunteer offices and capacities have been of immeasurable value and importance. We rejoice that nearly half of the Synod’s full-time church workers are women—a total of over 9,000 women in professional full-time ministries—and we praise God for all of the women and men—laypersons and professional church workers alike—who give generously and sacrificially of their time, gifts and energies in countless ways to the service of Christ and His church.

In 1985, the Synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations issued a report on *Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice*. It was distributed throughout the church and was commended for study and guidance by three successive synodical conventions. The Synod continues to give high priority to discussing and studying a wide range of issues relating to the service of women in the church, and implores God’s wisdom and guidance in this and every endeavor to reach out boldly with Christ’s Gospel in accordance with His good and gracious will.

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