

A Response to “Women and the WELS”

Originally presented to a pastors’ conference in 2015, an essay authored by Dr. Bruce Becker and Dr. Paul Kelm which was ultimately entitled “Women and the WELS: Connecting Church Practice with Scriptural Teaching,” has generated much discussion in our church body. This discussion has value. Each generation of WELS pastor-theologians must re-examine our doctrinal statements to make them their own. There were a number of strengths in the essay in this regard. For example, the essay called for a closer look at the applications articulated in the WELS doctrinal statement “Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles,” especially as those applications touch upon the role of women in society, what constitutes authority over men in the church, and the matter of female suffrage in the church. These are key issues with which our church body must wrestle as we seek to apply what the Scriptures say in this area of Christian life.

Applications of Scripture cannot really be discussed, however, when there is no agreement on what the Scriptures say. The WELS doctrinal statement expounds on the biblical teaching sometimes referred to as the “order of creation.” The essay questions that this doctrine exists in Scripture and thus denies that it can be used as the basis for a man/woman principle which is to be applied in our Christian lives. Faulty exegesis and hermeneutics are employed to make the case against the presence of the order of creation teaching in Scripture.

The purpose of this response is to shed light on hermeneutical and exegetical errors in “Women and the WELS” in order to defend a biblical doctrine and to promote faithful hermeneutics and exegesis among us. In no way is this response a questioning of the Christian faith of Dr. Becker or Dr. Kelm or the Christian spirit with which they wrote their essay. Nor is this response a repudiation of the fact that these two men have been a blessing to our church body.

Hermeneutical Weaknesses

1. The fundamental thesis of the essay is stated on page 2: “[The] organizing principle or basis for the roles and relationships of men and women [is] marriage.” While the essay speaks of distinct man and woman roles in the church, the essayists contend that the church roles should only be understood as extensions of what God intended for the marriage relationship. In an effort to raise marriage to the position of magisterial role relationship, it is stated on page 2: “It is in marriage that the Bible uses the words ‘head’ and ‘submit.’” Biblical evidence, however, demonstrates that this statement cannot be supported. The context of 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, as well as 1 Timothy 2, is clearly the assembling of Christian women and men for worship. In this church context, not marriage, the apostle is inspired to use the word “head” (κεφαλή, 1 Cor 11:3,5) in reference to the Christian man and the words “submit” (ὑποτάσσω, 1 Cor 14:34) and “submission” (ὑποταγή, 1 Tim 2:11) in reference to Christian women. To say, then, that the Bible only uses the words “head” and “submit” in the context of Christian marriage is simply not accurate.

2. The essayists deny that God created Adam and Eve and the interdependence between them in a way that goes beyond marriage. Adam and Eve are never seen as mankind or church, only as marriage. “Do the first three chapters of Genesis clearly establish a moral law called the ‘order

of creation' governing male/female relationships apart from marriage? The evidence seems weak" (page 3). However, that the Genesis creation account establishes an order for man/woman relationships beyond marriage is confirmed by Paul's writings in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. He draws upon the creation account in 1 Corinthians 11:8,9; 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:13,14 to show that the way God ordered the creation of human beings has a decided impact on the way Christian human beings conduct themselves in relationships beyond marriage. In other words, God's New Testament revelation illumines and interprets the full teaching in his Genesis account. When we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, we see how God's original ordering of mankind does, in fact, govern male/female relationships apart from marriage.

3. A number of times (pages 4,5,6), in order to support their claim that God's creative order for human beings only had to do with marriage, the essayists argue for understanding *ἀνὴρ* as "husband" and *γυνή* as "wife" in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 and 1 Timothy 2. Certainly, in context, those Greek words may be understood as "husband" and "wife" (rather than "man" and "woman," their first meanings), as is the case in Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3. However, the essayists do not appeal to context to read these words as "husband" and "wife." Instead, they seem to appeal to the fact that *ἀνὴρ* and *γυνή* mean "husband" and "wife" in other parts of the Bible. It is intimated, therefore, that *ἀνὴρ* and *γυνή* could mean "husband" and "wife" every time they occur in the New Testament. Interpreting the original Greek by means of what is known in the study of hermeneutics as an "illegitimate totality transfer" – the false assumption that what a Greek word means in one place it always means in every place – leads to an improper understanding in that it fails to take into account the all important matter of context in determining the meaning of the Greek New Testament.

4. Failure to recognize a specific context also surfaces in the essayists' use of terms like "in general" (page 4) and "generically" (pages 5,6). Scriptural terms like "head" and "submission" are said never to be used in reference to men and women "in general," but only to husbands and wives. Such an assertion fails to recognize that the context of passages like 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 and 1 Timothy 2, places in the Bible where the terms "head" and "submission" are used, is neither generic nor marriage. The context of these passages is the gathering of Christian women and men *as the church*, a context to which Paul applies the universal principle God wove into his creation of male and female. Therefore, in context, Paul is not telling every generic man to be every generic woman's head, nor is he telling every generic woman to submit to every generic man. And to characterize WELS doctrinal statements as understanding those Scriptures "generically" is an inaccurate caricature. Our doctrinal statements understand those Scriptures as Paul's applying a universal head and helper principle to specific situations within the life of the church.

5. When Paul's words to men and women in the church are said not to be a clear application of God's order of creation, but instead a reflection of God's institution of marriage, the message to unmarried women and men in the church is unclear. If each *ἀνὴρ* and *γυνή* in the aforementioned passages, where the context is clearly church life, is to be understood as "husband" and "wife," one wonders what Christian men who are not husbands and Christian women who are not wives are to take away. If, for instance, Paul's reasoning in 1 Corinthians 11 is to compare "every man" (verse 3) with "every wife" (verse 5), what is the Christian woman who is not a wife left with? Indeed, why would the apostle speak only of wives to the Corinthian

congregation as it worships when it surely also included virgins of marriageable age and widows? The context of the three New Testament passages in question is clearly the gathering of all the believers (female and male, unmarried and married). To limit Paul's creation-based principles to the establishment of marriage is forced, awkward, and blind to the context.

Exegetical Weaknesses

1. The essayists refer to Paul's mention of women being submissive in 1 Corinthians 14:34 as a "parallel" to statements on submission in Ephesians 5:22-24, Colossians 3:18, and 1 Peter 3:1 (page 5). Since the context of the Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Peter passages is clearly marriage, it is natural to understand *γυνή* as "wife" in those passages. The essayists argue that *γυνή* should also be understood as "wife" in 1 Corinthians 14:34, since it is a parallel reference to the other passages. Exegetically there is no parallel, however. First, Paul takes great pains to establish the context of 1 Corinthians 14:34 as the church, not the home. Note his references to *ἐκκλησία* in verses 33 through 35. The most natural meaning of *γυνή* in a non-home context is "woman," not "wife." Paul is not speaking of a willing submission that takes place in the home in 1 Corinthians 14:34. He is speaking of a willing submission that takes place as Christians gather together as a church. Second, the linguistic markers that force us to take *γυνή* as "wife" in Ephesians 5:22-24, Colossians 3:18, and 1 Peter 3:1 find no parallel expression in 1 Corinthians 14:34. There is no *τοῖς [ἰδίοις] ἀνδρασιν* to be found in 1 Corinthians 14:34, as there is in the other passages (and even in 1 Corinthians 14:35), by which we would be forced to understand Paul's reference to *γυνή* as "wife." In the essay the absence of these linguistic markers in 1 Corinthians 14:34 is ignored in an effort to have all man/woman role relationships be seen through the prism of marriage rather than the order of creation.

2. Another questionable exegesis in connection with 1 Corinthians 14:34 may be found in the essay's treatment of Paul's phrase "the law" (page 5). While it is true that Paul uses the Greek word *νόμος* to refer to many different things in his writings (e.g. The Ten Commandments; ceremonial law; governing principle; the Pentateuch; Old Testament Scriptures), his meaning for the word in any particular circumstance must be determined by the context. Earlier in 1 Corinthians 14 (verse 21) Paul used *νόμος* to introduce a passage from Isaiah. In the same way, he refers to the Old Testament Scriptures as *νόμος* in 14:34. Paul connects the willing submission of Christian women in church settings to God's revelation in the Old Testament. In 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2 Paul does the same thing. He explains his instructions on headship and submission in the church by clearly alluding to what the Old Testament Scriptures (*νόμος*) say. He finds his basis for man and woman roles in church in the way God ordered things at creation. Once again in an effort to distance man and woman roles in church from God's creation of male and female human beings, the essayists interpret Paul's use of *νόμος* in 1 Corinthians 14:34 by means of "marriage law" references in Matthew 19:3 and Romans 7:2. There is no need to impose these remote thoughts on what should be a clear way of referring to the Old Testament Scriptures, in keeping with Paul's line of thought and use of *νόμος* in 1 Corinthians 14. What is more, the essayists offer the English word "lawful" in Matthew 19:3 to explain Paul's use of *νόμος* in 1 Corinthians 14:34 even though the Greek word rendered "lawful" in Matthew 19:3 (*ἔξεστιν*) does not stem from the *νόμος* root.

3. Marriage, rather than the order of creation, is said to be the basis for Paul's instructions to women and men as they worship in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 (page 6). Once again the essay fails to recognize the absence of any linguistic markers that would cause us to understand ἀνὴρ as "husband" (1 Tim 2:8, 12) and γυναῖκα as "wife" (1 Tim 2:9-12, 14). Once again a parallel is drawn to a section of Scripture which clearly addresses husbands and wives (1 Peter 3:1-7) even though the Greek words ἀνὴρ and γυναῖκα are not being used in parallel ways. That Paul's point in bringing up Adam and Eve is God's creation plan for Christian men and women as they worship can be clearly seen by the adverb/verb/adverb combination in 1 Timothy 2:13 – πρῶτος ἐπλάσθη εἶτα. Paul is telling us that the way God ordered the creation of man and woman in the beginning impacts the way Christian men and women serve in his church today. "For Adam *was formed first, then Eve*" does not speak to their marriage; it speaks to their creation. And while the essay holds out the possibility that the "they" of 1 Timothy 2:15b is a husband and a wife, that third plural subject had already been identified as Christian women in verses 9-12.

4. The essay's discussion of ἀυθεντεῖν in 1 Timothy 2:12 (page 8) is misleading. There is no question that there is disagreement over the meaning of this *hapax legomenon*. However, just because some lexicons include definitions that lean negative (e.g. "to domineer"), there is nothing in the patristic evidence to suggest that we must understand ἀυθεντεῖν as an action that communicates "an attitude of superiority, a dictatorial stance," as the essayists state. Armin Panning's study of the word is quoted as evidence that what Paul is prohibiting of Christian women is a sinful attitude of superiority and self-serving bossiness. Upon closer examination, however, Panning's findings painted a more neutral picture of ἀυθεντεῖν: "thrusting oneself forward, asserting oneself." While these actions certainly *could* be done with an attitude of superiority and a dictatorial stance, they do not have to be. To have or use authority is not a negative act in and of itself. Christians have a legitimate challenge in a church body like ours agreeing on what the authoritative acts in the church prohibited of Christian women are according to 1 Timothy 2:12. To artificially turn a neutral term into a negative one is not the way to meet that challenge.

Dr. Becker and Dr. Kelm have raised several important questions in their essay about the way WELS Christians live scriptural truth. Their call to a re-examination of our applications is completely appropriate, and a blessing. Nevertheless, in their essay they have denied that the scriptural doctrine known as the "order of creation" has any place in the discussion of woman and man's interdependence. The hermeneutical and exegetical principles used to base what the Bible says about man/woman role relationships on marriage, rather than the order of creation, are often faulty. May the Lord of the Church lead WELS to apply Scripture's doctrines faithfully and clearly, to the glory of God and the blessing of God's people.