

Women and the WELS

Connecting Church Practice With Scriptural Teaching

Mention the Wisconsin Synod to a friend and the response might be, “Oh, that’s the church that doesn’t let women vote.” Ask a member of the WELS to explain the church’s position and the response is likely to be, “It’s complicated.” It must be. The WELS doctrinal statements on the subject, formulated at a time of growing radical feminism in America, are 36 in number. Have these statements adequately expressed the Bible’s teaching on the subject? God’s people can best answer that question by restudying God’s Word.

A reason for such restudy is that the WELS doctrinal statements can be a bit challenging to understand and apply. The second statement says: ***God established distinct male and female responsibilities for the man and woman. . . . These responsibilities involved headship for man and submission for woman.*** Statement #20 adds: ***Christians also accept the biblical role relationship principle for their life and work in the world.*** Should Christian women refuse to accept a role in business or the civic arena that places them in a position to which men report, a position that will require them to direct, discipline, and dismiss males?

The 34th statement reads: ***We reject the opinion that every woman is always subject to every man. Other scriptural role relationship principles and the injunction, “We must obey God rather than men” (Ac 5:29), also govern our actions.*** No such “other scriptural role relationship principles” are offered here, and there are no clear applications of this principle to women’s roles in the business world. *When* a woman is to be subject to a man outside marriage and the church is left unclear, binding the consciences of godly women in uncertainty. If a woman voting in the church violates this universal headship principle, how does voting in a civil election not violate the principle?

Statement #22 attempts to resolve this issue when it says: ***Because the unregenerate world is not motivated by the Gospel or guided by God’s will, we as Christians will not try to force God’s will upon the world.*** While the world may make it difficult for Christians to live out God’s will, Christians are not exempt from the will of God because the world rejects it. For example, Christian women will not abort babies even though the world makes that legal. Again, *how* are Christian women to apply the WELS doctrinal statements in their business, civic, and social relationships?

There are two distinct, though related, issues here. The first is the basis for understanding women’s roles and relationships with men. The second is how to apply what St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy to what women can and cannot do in the life and worship of the church. There are several essays and Bible class materials that defend and explain the WELS position as defined by the officially adopted statements (which are available on the WELS website). What follows here addresses the issue from a different biblical viewpoint. As always, we seek to understand what Scripture teaches and listen to one another in love.

The Underlying Basis for Man/Woman Relationships

The term “order of creation” has been the basis for the WELS doctrinal position. WELS essays have described this order of creation as “moral law.” The WELS doctrinal statements use the term “commands of God” in describing how this order of creation governs the roles and relationships of men and women in the world as well as in marriage and the church. The term “order of creation,” as a dogmatic principle, is apparently without much history. Use of the term in WELS essays seems to originate in the mid-20th century. An essay by Edward H. Schroeder, a professor of systematic and historic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, contends that the term “order of creation” is not Lutheran but Reformed in origin and is not a biblical concept. He traces the term to an Austrian theologian named Fritz Zerbst early in the 20th century. Martin Luther did not teach such an “order of creation.” Rather, he described the way God ordered society with three “estates” – marriage, church, and government.

That provides a different organizing principle or basis for the roles and relationships of men and women, namely marriage. The Bible does not define roles for women in the world, only in marriage and the church. It is in marriage that the Bible uses the words “head” and “submit.” We can understand what St. Paul taught about a woman’s role in the church in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 and in 1 Timothy 2 as reflecting and reinforcing God’s will for marriage and the family, which the apostle defined clearly in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3. Even a casual look at what American culture has done to marriage and the family will underscore God’s concern.

What does Scripture teach about the roles and relationships of men and women?

Genesis 1:26-31, Genesis 2:18-25, and Genesis 3:16-20

Genesis 1 describes the creation of mankind, male and female, in God’s image. God blesses them and directs them to be fruitful and increase in number, which God designed to occur within marriage. To both the male and female he gave the authority to rule over the rest of God’s creation.

Genesis 2 describes the creation of the first male, the first female, and the intended relationship of the two in God’s institution of marriage. Verse 24 tells us that God’s specific reason for creating Eve was to provide a suitable helper and complement for Adam in the marriage relationship. In verse 24 the *therefore* (ESV) to God’s creation of the first male and female was to establish marriage as the foundational relationship for the human race.

Note that the Hebrew word translated in verse 20 as *helper* (עֲזָרָה) is most commonly used in the Old Testament to refer to God (16 times). In addition, there are three other occurrences where עֲזָרָה refers to male leaders who are described as assisting other leaders. The meaning of the Hebrew word translated “helper” contains no thought of either inferiority or submissiveness.

In Matthew 19, Jesus quoted Genesis 1 as well as Genesis 2 in answer to the Pharisees’ question about whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus understood that Genesis 1 was speaking about Adam and Eve as husband and wife, not simply as male and female. (In the

Large Catechism, on the Sixth Commandment, #208-209, Luther wrote: "Therefore God has also most richly blessed this estate [of marriage] above all others, and, in addition, has bestowed on it and wrapped up in it everything in the world. . . . Both the ecclesiastical and civil estates must humble themselves and all be found in this estate [of marriage].")

Genesis 3 describes how the perfect relationship between God and mankind was broken and how the perfect head/helper relationship between Adam and Eve was also broken. Genesis 3 also describes the resulting consequences to both relationships. In the case of Eve, the consequences of sin are described in terms of the negative impact on marriage and family life. There are no consequences identified, as a result of the Fall, to generic male and female relationships. Martin Luther's commentary on these verses makes the subjection of women to men a consequence of the fall into sin, not an "order of creation" (Luther's Works, 1958, vol 1, 203).

The head/helper teaching, as God designed it for marriage, is the foundational biblical teaching that guides man and woman relationships. It is on this marriage relationship that applications in the church are based. While some argue that an "order of creation" is implicit or implied in Genesis 1 and 2, doctrine should be based on explicit teaching and not implicit assumption. 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.

1 Corinthians 11:1-16

First Corinthians 11 describes how the head/helper teaching applies in a worship setting within the Corinthian culture. The Greek words *ἀνὴρ* and *γυνή* can mean either husband and wife or man and woman. The immediate context of a verse and how Scripture uses these words elsewhere are keys to understanding the Holy Spirit's words.

Verse 3 is central to understanding this section. Is this verse speaking about all men and women generically or about husbands and wives particularly? A recent synodical committee appointed to study translations narrowed their work to three: the NIV 2011, the ESV, and the Holman Christian Standard Bible. The ESV translates verse 3: "*I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.*" (Other translations such as the RSV and GW follow suit.) The Holman translation reads: "*the man is the head of the woman*" and suggests in a footnote an alternate translation: "*the husband is the head of the wife.*" The NIV translates: "*the head of the woman is man*" and in a footnote offers the alternate translation "*the head of the wife is her husband.*" So, does this verse imply an "order of creation" that makes men the head of women universally, or does this verse reinforce the biblical teaching that the husband is the head of his wife?

There are two reasons to prefer the latter:

1. How the Bible uses the word "head" is instructive. Virtually all English Bible translations translate Ephesians 5:23 as *husbands and wives*, not *men and women*. If *ἀνὴρ* and *γυνή* are translated as *husbands and wives* in Ephesians 5:23, why not here? There are no other passages in Scripture that describe men in general as the "head" of women.

2. The apostle uses the word “every” to universalize the headship of Christ, but he drops the adjective “every” when talking about the headship of a man/husband relative to a woman/wife, suggesting that the head of a woman is a specific man, namely her husband. Even when the translation is “man” and “woman,” the context indicates that the headship principle is in reference to marriage and the family. What verse 3 does **not** say is that *the head of every woman is man*.

It is easy to understand how, in verse 5, a woman with her head uncovered would dishonor her husband/head. It is more difficult to understand St. Paul’s words if a woman prophesying with her head uncovered is said to be dishonoring the male gender. Similarly in verse 7, that a woman is the glory of her husband is easy to understand. That a woman is the glory of men in general seems more difficult. The interpretive principle of “one simple sense” would suggest that the apostle has in mind the relationship of marriage when answering the Corinthians’ question regarding head covering.

Verses 8-12 are speaking of men and women by gender. That the apostle would mix husband/wife with man/woman is not surprising. He mixes the figurative and literal sense of the word “head” also in these verses. Verses 11-12 seem to say that we are not to make too much of the fact that Eve came from Adam and was created for Adam.

Note that in verse 5 a woman is not prohibited from praying or prophesying, only that she not do it with her head uncovered. The fact that both men and women are prophesying in worship is consistent with Joel 2:2-32 and Acts 2:17-21.

Note also that in verse 13, St. Paul invites the Christians in Corinth to determine for themselves what their practice should be regarding the propriety of a woman praying with her head uncovered. He is not insisting on a universal application of the headship principle with regard to head covering. Then, in verse 16, St. Paul states that, in regard to head coverings, “*we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.*” St. Paul seems to be saying that the Corinthians need to make a culturally informed application regarding the matter of head coverings, but that they also understand that in some other churches there was *no such* practice of a woman wearing a head covering in deference to her husband. The custom in Jerusalem, for example, was that men covered their heads in deference to God when in worship.

There are applications of the head/helper teaching that are neither universal nor essential. The culture and customs of a particular group of people, at a particular time and place, will help inform what the appropriate applications are of a scriptural teaching. Keep this in mind when the question of women voting in the church comes up later.

Whether to understand 1 Corinthians 11 as reflecting and reinforcing the headship principle in marriage or creating a universal headship of men over women in all walks of life seems, at the very least, an open question. To create a moral principle called the “order of creation” applying to male/female relationships in the business world on the basis of this verse would be biblically questionable.

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

This section of 1 Corinthians describes how the head/helper teaching was applied within the church in Corinth, whose worship had been tarnished by disorder—a disorder that involved the Lord’s Supper, speaking in tongues, and the abuse of the head/helper teaching. Understanding verses 34-35 is key to understanding this section. Are these verses concerned with men and women generically or with husbands and wives particularly? There are two reasons to prefer the latter:

1. The reference to women being subject or submissive in 1 Corinthians 14:34 is parallel to Ephesians 5:22-24, Colossians 3:18, and 1 Peter 3:1, where *ἀνὴρ* and *γυνή* are translated in each of these other passages as *husbands* and *wives*. Submission is something a wife does in relationship to her husband, not to men generically in Scripture. If *ἀνὴρ* and *γυνή* are understood as *husbands* and *wives* in Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, and 1 Peter 3, why not in 1 Corinthians 14?
2. In 1 Corinthians 14, St. Paul is addressing disorderly worship. It was disorderly, at least in part, because the head/helper teaching was not being properly applied (verse 34). St. Paul’s solution to the disorderly worship is found in the proper relationship between a husband and his wife (verse 35). The fact that St. Paul urges women to ask their husbands at home would seem to say that he has in mind the marriage relationship and family, not generic man/woman relationships, except as those relationships in the church reflect and reinforce God’s will for marriage.

In verse 34, the phrase “*as the law also says*” is difficult to understand. What law is St. Paul talking about? The word *law* has a wide range of meanings, from God’s moral and ceremonial law given through Moses to the first five books of the Old Testament. In the context of verse 35, “*law*” seems better understood as a reference to what the Scriptures teach about marriage—as Jesus speaks in response to what is *lawful* (Matthew 19) and as St. Paul describes as *law* in Romans 7:2—than that this is a vague reference to an “order of creation.”

Would St. Paul even have had to address the head/helper teaching had there not been abuse of it? We should keep in mind here the theological principle “that the abuse of something doesn’t negate its use.” In other words, the abuse of women interrupting their husbands and worship does not negate their speaking in normal settings. Again, 1 Corinthians 11, Joel 2, Acts 2, et al. teach us that both men and women were prophesying in the New Testament church.

1 Timothy 2:11-15

This section describes how the head/helper teaching applies in a worship setting. Understanding the relationship of verses 11-12 with the preceding verses (8-10) and with the following verses (13-15) is helpful in interpreting the apostle’s directives. While St. Paul is establishing role/relationship applications to men and women in worship, there are reasons to believe that it is marriage, not an “order of creation,” that is the basis for his teaching.

1. In verses 8-10, St. Paul uses the plural of ἀνὴρ (man/husband) and γυναῖκα (woman/wife). It is interesting to note the parallel between 1 Timothy 2:8-10 and 1 Peter 3:1-7. In both sections, men are encouraged in their prayer life and women are encouraged in terms of their dress and jewelry. In 1 Peter 3, the context is the relationship between husbands and wives. Is St. Paul also here thinking in terms of husbands and wives, since a woman's appearance in the church should not attract the attention of males who are not her husband?

Beginning with verse 11, St. Paul makes a shift from the plural to the singular. In verses 11-15, the audience is no longer men and women (or husbands and wives), but a man and a woman.

2. In verses 13-14, St. Paul restates the head/helper teaching from Genesis as God designed it for Adam and Eve. The most natural way of understanding these verses is that St. Paul is talking about the relationship of Adam and Eve as husband and wife. It is on the basis of this head/helper teaching that St. Paul makes the application in verses 11-12. Again, submission is something a wife does in relationship to her husband, not to males generically.

Martin Luther agrees with this understanding of verse 11 in his commentary on 1 Timothy. He wrote: "Here we properly take 'woman' to mean wife, as he reveals from his correlative phrase in verse 12 'to have authority over man,' that is, over her husband. As he calls the husband 'man,' so he calls the wife 'woman'" (Luther's Works, 1973, vol 28, 276).

3. Verse 15 adds a note about childbearing, which God designed to occur within marriage. Again, the context suggests that verses 13-15 have in mind the relationship God established for husband and wife as the basis for male and female relationships in the church. It should be noted that the NIV translates in verse 15 a verb form which is singular as though it were a plural. Such a translation implies that St. Paul is speaking about women generically. Yet, as the ESV translates, the verse literally says: "*Yet she will be saved (or kept safe/ delivered) through childbearing.*" It isn't until the final phrase in the verse that St. Paul reverts to a plural—"*if they continue in faith, love and holiness, with self-control*" (ESV). Does "they" generalize "she" or is "they" referring to a husband and wife continuing in faith, love, and holiness? The latter seems a simpler understanding.

In all of these sections of Scripture, the context is key, both the immediate context and the wider context of the Bible. From these Scripture passages, we conclude that the headship principle is based on marriage when it is applied to the relationship of men and women in the church. That there is a headship principle taught in Scripture is established by the passages cited previously. That this head/helper principle expresses God's will for marriage is clear. That St. Paul applies the headship principle governing marriage to men and women in the church, particularly in worship, seems also clear. The role relationship of men and women in the church, whether married or single, is to reflect and reinforce the role relationship of men and women in marriage.

Significantly, Scripture nowhere applies a so-called order of creation to society, the workplace, or civic life. Rather, the Bible consistently establishes headship in marriage and the family and bases the roles and relationship of men and women in the worship and life of the church on the headship principle God established for marriage. It goes beyond Scripture to suggest that another man is the “head” of your wife, simply because he is a man and she is a woman.

Proverbs 31 describes a woman who respects her husband as the head in her marriage and yet interacts in the business world without any implied deference to businessmen. If this example of roles and relationships is offered by Scripture in a culture that severely restricted a woman’s position in society, ought we in our culture suggest that a so-called order of creation limits how a woman functions in the business or political world?

Note that in verse 12, the word translated with the English phrase “to exercise authority” (KJV—“usurp authority”) is ἀϋθεντεῖν. This word only occurs once in the New Testament. Its basic meaning is “to control in a domineering manner.” The word is stronger than just an *exercise or position* of authority. It indicates an unwarranted presumption of authority that exhibits itself in a domineering way. Based on the headship principle God established for marriage, St. Paul directs that women neither teach men in the church from an attitude and position of authority nor presume to lord it over men in the church. The application of this teaching is the subject of the second issue in this study.

How to Apply the Apostle’s Teaching to a Woman’s Role in the Church

Several essays in WELS circles have attempted to parse legitimate roles for women in the church. Can they sing Scripture as a soloist in worship but not read Scripture to the congregation? Can women vote at a teachers’ conference or a parachurch agency’s convention but not in a congregational voters meeting? Can they serve on a committee but not a board? Can a woman teach men in a college setting as long as the subject matter is not theology? And how does that square with the synod’s doctrinal statement #31 that *rejects the opinion that in the church assemblies only matters pertaining to the Word of God are authoritative*? (The seeming contradiction, then, is that the prohibition of authoritative teaching applies only to subjects related to theology, while voting is an exercise of authority no matter the subject of the vote.) Applying 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is challenging, especially in the light of St. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11:5 about a woman praying and prophesying so long as she has a “sign of authority” on her head (a head covering).

The translation and understanding of the Greek word ἀϋθεντεῖν in 1 Timothy 2:12 is important, especially since the word “authority” in our day may mean earned respect and the right to lead rather than a position of power over others. *Authentein* carries the connotation of “domineering over someone” according to the Greek lexicon by Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich. The related noun, ἀϋθέντης, means “master” of a servant. Thayer’s Greek lexicon says that Greek usage of the verb in the first century meant “to exercise dominion over” and that the related noun meant “one who acts on his own authority” or “autocratic.” This is considerably stronger than simply “to have authority.” Louw and Nida, in their lexicon based on semantic domains, list as the definition “to control in a domineering manner.” (Each of these lexicons has been used at

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.) The word *authentēin*, therefore, implies more than a position in an organizational chart or the democratic process of decision-making by voting. This is an attitude of superiority, a dictatorial stance, an attempt to impose one's will on another person.

Martin Luther understood the Greek word ἀθεντεῖν in just this way. In his commentary on 1 Timothy 2:12 he wrote: "To have authority – that is, she ought not take over for herself the heritage which belongs to a man so that a man says to her: 'My Lord.' She wants her own wisdom to have priority, that whatever she has said should prevail and whatever the man says should not . . . that she should be right and have the last word, that in the church her word ought to appear wiser and more learned and thus of greater authority than that of her husband" (Luther's Works, 1973, vol 28, 277).

Is voting an "assumption of authority over" (let alone an "exercise of dominion over") another person? While one vote may cancel out the vote of someone who disagrees, no one vote overrules the vote of another person. The practice of forbidding the vote to women in WELS churches is based on the argument that the *result* of a vote is "authoritative." That begs the question. How is the vote of a woman an exercise of authority over a man, let alone from a controlling or domineering stance?

Is a woman reading Scripture in worship exercising domineering authority over a man? Is a woman serving on a board in the church exercising domineering authority over a man? The pastor of the congregation has the called position of teaching authority in matters of doctrine and practice. Men and women of the church are asked to submit to that authority (Heb 13:17). These are questions worth revisiting.

While the *descriptive* (what took place) in Scripture cannot be made *prescriptive* (what must take place), how the church of Acts applied the headship principle is instructive. When in Acts 1:14-26 the church chose a replacement for Judas, it is apparent that both men and women were involved in the process. A man must replace Judas, but the church made no distinction between men and women in the process of calling him. This appears to be the case also in chapter 6, when the seven ministry assistants were chosen and again in chapter 13 when the church in Antioch responded to the Holy Spirit's directive to send Paul and Barnabas as missionaries to the Gentiles. Philip's four daughters prophesied, according to Acts 21:9. St. Paul calls Phoebe a "deacon" in Romans 16:1. While Scripture doesn't create a "model constitution" for the early church, it does give women a vital role in the church's ministry.

What constitutes *authority over men* in the church? Prescriptively and descriptively, Scripture limits authoritative teaching (such as the role of a pastor) to men. Beyond that there is no clear direction for roles such as board membership or actions such as voting. These are judgments the church makes in applying biblical principles, judgments that may change with differences in cultural context, as 1 Corinthians 11 teaches. (Recall page 4.)

The synod's 35th statement says: ***We reject arbitrary applications of the principle of the role relationships which do not take into account that customs which reflect these relationships as well as conditions of life may change (1 Co 11:6,16).*** Customs and conditions of life certainly have changed in America. Women no longer sit on one side of the church and men on the other.

Women in America were granted the right to vote with the Constitution's Nineteenth Amendment that was ratified in the year 1920. Women hold CEO positions in global corporations. Refusing the vote to women in the church was a clear cultural application of the headship principle in 19th-century America. It is not so clear an application in the culture of the 21st century. For women to vote in an American church prior to 1920 would have been viewed as challenging the headship of a husband and order in the church. Not so today. May our current practice regarding women voting in the church be a judgment based on an American culture that no longer exists?

In the early 20th century, women wore hats to church, and a woman wearing pants at church would be viewed in somewhat the same way that a 1st-century woman in Corinth without a head covering was viewed. These were applications of the headship principle. Today that seems merely old-fashioned. In the 1960s a WELS pastor could state that dancing was sinful without fear of contradiction. Today Lutheran high schools sponsor dances. What changed? Culture changed, and how the church applies timeless truth to culture changed accordingly. We want to be sure that our applications of the Bible's headship principle are faithful to that principle and that they are not determined by cultural perspectives from a bygone era, going beyond what God's Word requires.

If refusing the vote and board membership to women is a *necessary* or *essential* application of the headship principle, we will resist any effort to compromise that principle no matter what contemporary culture says. However, if these are not necessary or essential applications, we may be forfeiting the gifts and wisdom that the Holy Spirit has entrusted to women in our ministry and creating unnecessary barriers to those outside the church who do not know the Savior. By *necessary* or *essential* is meant that all congregations *must* make this application in their practice of ministry. St. Paul's term "disputable matters" in Romans 14:1 argues that there are practices of biblical principles on which Christians in unity may disagree. Voting seems an application of the headship principle that is like head covering in Corinth, which may be different from one cultural setting to another, while the restriction of the pastoral office to men is an essential application of 1 Timothy 2.

In Summary

There are two different approaches to man/woman relationships. One views Scripture as establishing a universal "order of creation" that subjects women to men in every arena of society on the basis of their gender. The other views Scripture as establishing the headship of husband to wife in marriage and applies this headship principle to man and woman relationships in the church.

There are two different understandings of St. Paul's directive to women in 1 Timothy 2:12. One interprets the Greek verb ἀθροεῖν as prohibiting any position or action (such as voting) that could be understood as "authority." The other, more literally, prohibits domineering attitudes and actions of women seeking to impose their will on their husbands or other men in the church, as well as positions that would encourage such arrogant behavior.

We respectfully ask the elected leaders, pastors, teachers, and members of the WELS to reexamine the synod's position on women's roles and relationships with men by going back to Scripture anew.

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