



# **THE SPRINGFIELDER**

March 1970  
Volume 33, Number 4

# Some Thoughts on The Role of Women in The Church

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A SUBSTANTIAL SEGMENT of current exegetical opinion has moved to a different position in interpreting the directives of the apostle Paul in I Cor. 14:34-5, and I Tim. 2:11-12, forbidding women to teach or even speak in the public worship (and other) assemblies of the church. Furthermore it seems that as writers have considered the question of equal rights for men and women in the church and the ordination of women to the full office of the public ministry, they have forgotten that women are forbidden to exercise dominion over men in the course of congregational activity. A rather extensive survey, *The Office of Woman in the Church*,<sup>1</sup> will provide you with a helpful overview of various modern viewpoints and of significant theological literature through 1954. Since there will be many formal considerations of the ordination of women in the near future, you will have no little opportunity to further familiarize yourself with present thinking as well.

Most Lutheran Churches in Europe and Scandinavia, and various Reformed bodies on the Continent, have formally instituted the woman's pastorate, thus giving expression in practice to new theological opinions concerning women's roles in the church. The same is true of a number of denominational groups in the United States and Canada. No Lutheran body in the United States has allowed women to serve as pastors or congregations or has approved an ordination of women for some kind of modified ministerial service. It appears that this situation may change.

The ordination of women was the subject of serious study at Wartburg Seminary as representatives of the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. met.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the 1970 conventions of the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America will probably be asked to deal with the question of the ordination of women. A recent study by Luther Seminary's faculty asserted that "We can see no valid reason why women candidates for ordination who meet the standards normally required for admission to the ministry should not be recommended for ordination."<sup>3</sup> The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod approved women's suffrage in the congregations of the synod, and their election to boards and commissions of the church. However, it also warned that women must neither serve as pastors of churches nor exercise authority over men in the course of congregational life and activity.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of the life of congregations, it goes without saying that parish pastors and people alike are well aware of the great blessing to the congregation which the consecrated labors of women members represent. Ladies assist with Sunday School teaching,

participate in the youth, evangelism, and visitation programs of the church, busily promote a variety of organizational activities, and serve on boards and committees of the local congregations. Many women serve with great distinction and are a true credit to the work of the Church.

Many avenues of service in the home, the local congregation, and the larger programs of the church are indeed open to Christian women. The patterns for this service can be demonstrated quite adequately from the New Testament. Women like Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis have done hard work for the local congregation (Rom. 16:6, 12). Eudoias and Syntyche have done their utmost along with Paul for the promotion of the Gospel (Phil. 4:2-33). Dorcas demonstrates how a woman provided physical aid for the poor and the widows in a congregation (Acts 9:36, 39). Widows performed many works of mercy (I Tim. 5:9-10). Women, like Lydia in Philippi, (Acts 16:14-15), Priscilla in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3), and perhaps the mother of Rufus (Rom. 16:13), provided the apostle Paul with gracious hospitality. Priscilla and her husband Aquilla provide a worshipping unit of the Roman congregation (Rom. 16:3, 5). Priscilla gave private instruction in New Testament Gospel truths to Apollos (Acts 18:26). Timothy's grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice are examples for Christian mothers everywhere as they reared Timothy as a Christian (II Tim. 1:5). Older women have the duty to teach the younger women domestic virtues (Titus 2:3-5), and the list could be expanded to include even more.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to traditional functions of women in the New Testament, the office of deaconess is mentioned in connection with Phebe. (Rom. 16:1, and again at I Tim. 3:11.) The office of deaconess probably came into being as an outgrowth of the office of the deacon, and operated as an adjunct to it. (Cf. Acts 6:1-6 and other passages). It should be mentioned in this connection that opportunities to follow a full-time service career in the church are similarly provided for women today. They can choose to be deaconesses, Christian Day School Teachers, and parish workers.

Women also may have, or can cultivate, and can employ the Spirit-given aptitude which the New Testament calls prophesying, that is, exercising the gift to speak the Gospel and present the doctrinal teachings of the Scriptures, generally, to others. All preachers and teachers of the Word as well as Christian lay persons who are able to impart Biblical truth privately, can exercise the gift of prophecy in this general or broad sense. Paul told the Corinthians to strive for the gift of prophecy (I Cor. 14:1). Peter spoke of this gift (Acts 2:16-18), and the four daughters of Philip the evangelist were said to possess and exercise this same gift (Acts 21:9).<sup>6</sup>

We have not examined all of the instances of women in the New Testament, but it is readily apparent that there is a wide range of service activities open to Christian women. However, nowhere

does the New Testament invite women to occupy the pastoral office or state that women were engaged in teaching and preaching in the public assembly of the people of God. In fact, there are particular passages which specifically deny this right to women.

A question now presents itself. Do the passages that specifically forbid women to occupy the pastoral office still apply to Christian congregations today, or were these passages only intended for the primitive church to counteract the existing cultural and sociological conditions? Ought women be able to occupy the pastoral office in our time? Consider with me the passages that deal with this problem.

#### I Corinthians 14:34-35

As in all the assemblies of the saints, let the women keep silence in the assemblies; for it is not permitted them to speak; on the contrary, let them be in subjection, as also the Law says. And if there is anything they desire to learn let them ask their own husbands (or, menfolk) at home; for it is shameful for a woman to speak in an assembly.

The opening phrase of verse 34 suggests that the practice in all of the Christian congregations of Paul's day is that the women are to keep silence in church assemblies. The context of this passage makes clear that the *ekklesiai* referred to are the assemblies of Christians gathered for congregational worship. Paul directs the Corinthian women not to speak on their own in the public church assembly. They are not even allowed to ask a question! They are to maintain a strict silence at these gatherings, and to do this as a deliberate expression of subjection to the men present.

With the clause *kathos kai ho nomos legei*, Paul indicates that the regulation and practice of women maintaining silence in the assemblies of the saints, and thus subjecting themselves to the men, has its ultimate source in the Law, which is here the Old Testament.

#### I Timothy 2:11-14

The best commentary on the thinking of the apostle at this point in the discussion is I Tim. 2:11-14. A literal translation reads:

Let a woman learn in silence, in all subjection. Now I permit no woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man, but to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not beguiled, but the woman having been completely beguiled became a transgressor.

Paul, in the wider context of Chapter 2, gives instruction concerning conduct at public worship, or perhaps some other church setting, the verses do not precisely specify, and again require the subjection of women to men in terms of keeping silent at assemblies. The teaching or preaching or engaging in any other activity involving the exercise of authority over men in the congregational meet-

ings is prohibited. The reason for this prohibition comes in the form of certain facts from Genesis 2 and 3. The first of these facts is that Adam was created before Eve. According to the Creator's intent, this priority in creation bestowed on Adam a dignity and headship which was not shared by Eve who was created later and second. (Cf. I Cor. 11:3, 8-9).

The order of creation established the hardship of man and the subjection of woman to man for the entire race. Furthermore, details of the first parents' fall into sin demonstrate the importance of Christians' keeping in mind the divinely fixed relationship of man's superordination and woman's subordination. Eve failed to remember this relationship after she was beguiled by Satan and had fallen into transgression. Disregarding her concreated subjection to Adam, she took leadership into her own hands and urged her husband to violate the commandment of the Lord. This is also what Adam failed to do. In full realization of what he was about and for forsaking his position of leadership, he obeyed Eve and ate of the forbidden fruit.

What Paul endeavors to show in the I Corinthians 14 and I Timothy 2 passages, is that God wants the fact of women's divinely arranged subjection to men, a condition founded on the order of creation, to find an expression in the worshipping assemblies of his people. Women will keep silent, not speaking or asking questions, not teaching or preaching, in the assemblies of the people of God. In the learning experience at worship, it is proper for women to participate. They have the right to seek clarification on matters that they do not understand. They can ask their husbands or other men such as fathers, brothers, or sons about issues. However, they are to do their inquiring at home. Any arrangement other than that of women being silent at worship is not at all permissible as far as the Lord and the Lord's apostle are concerned. It is shameful before God, and consequently before the people of God, for a woman to speak in an assembly of the saints.

Nothing in the texts we have examined suggests that the Pauline prohibition concerning the teaching, preaching, and speaking of women in church services is dictated exclusively by circumstances of the contemporary cultural or sociological situation with which first century Christendom, or certain local congregations, had to contend. The texts offer no justification for an assumption that the apostle was issuing instructions which were to be observed in the primitive church only, which later generations of Christians might ignore.

We conclude that Paul is setting up regulations which he expects the church to follow throughout the entire New Testament period. His appeal is to fundamental facts recorded in Genesis, facts which permanently affect the human race and the relationship of the sexes. These facts are also not altered by the Gospel or the order of redemption<sup>7</sup> (compare Gal. 3:28).

Our Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, will demonstrate fidelity to the Word and obedience to the will of God if it will resist all present-day ecclesiastical pressures to open the full pastoral office to women of the church. The synod will do well at the same time, however, to render every encouragement that women members actively participate in the many areas of church work which they can promote under the Lord's blessing with eminent effectiveness and success.

### FOOTNOTES

1. Fritz Zerbst, *The Office of Woman in the Church: A Study in Practical Theology*, translated from the German by Albert G. Merckens (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955).
2. As reported in an article titled "Ordination of Women Aired by Lutherans" which appeared in the October 5, 1969, issue of the *Lutheran Witness Reporter*.
3. *Ibid.* What is not clear in the report of the Dubuque conference and the Luther faculty opinion is whether the advocates of woman's ordination are ready also to approve women's serving as pastors of congregations with mixed (male and female) membership. Exactly what kind of ordination is being recommended?
4. That there is Biblical warranty for the granting of this suffrage to women is by no means agreed upon by many members of the synod.
5. Further suggestions as to women's opportunities for service in the church may be obtained from a study of the New Testament evangelists' reports of the various kinds of ministrations women rendered Jesus Christ.
6. Acts 21:9 speaks of these daughters, as "prophesying" (the Greek has the participle *propheteuousai*). This is best taken to mean that these women were employing the charisma of prophesying in the general, 1 Corinthians 14 sense. Possessors of this spiritual gift are to be distinguished from persons to whom the New Testament assigns the technical designation of "prophet." Such prophets are presented as men of minor importance (as with the Old Testament prophets, who were far more prominent in the church—some of them towering figures), Christian teachers to whom the Holy Spirit at times made special direct communications and revelations, but of secondary import. Of these, Agabus is representative. (cf. Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11)  
The aged Anna who is spoken of in Luke 2:36-38 is designated a "prophetess." The probable interpretation, again, is that she had the valuable charisma later described in 1 Corinthians 14 and was able to present the Word and will of God for the edification of fellow Jews. Luke reports in verse 38 that, after having seen the infant Christ, she engaged in the general prophetic activity of speaking about Him to all those in Jerusalem who were looking for God's redemption. An evil, self-styled prophetess named Jezebel is mentioned in Rev. 2:20.
7. Cf. Zerbst, p. 35: "It is misleading also when some commentators detect in the positions assigned to man and woman an indication of different degrees of personal worth, and when they point by way of contrast to Gal. 3:28 as representing a more generous and truly Christian conception of man-woman relationships. But Gal. 3:28 does not treat of the positions assigned to man and woman in creation; it treats of the life in Christ. . . . According to Gal. 3:28 man is not raised above woman, even as 1 Cor. 11:11, 12 expressly intimates. However, the equality of man and woman in the kingdom of Christ does not annul, either in marriage or in church regulations, the difference established in creation between the sexes."