

Is it Proper for a Woman to Sing the Lord's Prayer or the Benediction, Read the Lessons, or Play the Organ in the Church Service Under the Direction of the Pastor?

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On Friday, September 17, it was reported on the Minneapolis radio station WCCO that the prominent ERA advocate and spokeswoman, Sonia Johnson, had very recently remarked that the ERA "has just gone to bed awhile. It will soon be a part of the Constitution." Whether or not her prognostication (perhaps a more fitting term would be "prognosis") will be fulfilled, only time will tell. Nevertheless, regardless of whether the ERA ever becomes a part of the Constitution, its message has been indicative of the spirit of the times in today's society and has been providing much fuel for a fire that has effected adversely many denominations of the Christian Church.

That man and woman are inherently equal, not counting some physical differences of course, that their highest purposes and areas or spheres of activity in this world are completely interchangeable may be what human reason concludes, but God's Word says something altogether different on this subject. The insidious "religion" of Secular Humanism also has contributed its predictable share to the attitudes which currently are being espoused by many women and men.

Natural man of course insists on determining for himself what he is going to do with his life. Natural man, as we see demonstrated in Secular Humanism, of course insists that he has the right to decide for himself, independent of the revealed will of God, what profession or purpose for living he will pursue so that he can experience a life in which he has achieved his own sense of fulfillment. So, it is not surprising to see that both many women and men want to see their roles and lifestyles reciprocated or interchanged because unenlightened human reason says that that is their right and also a natural preference for many who are dissatisfied with the "traditional" roles of man and woman. The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. That's what Eve thought, and that's what people still think as a natural result of Eve's rebellion against God.

What can the church do to combat these attitudes which are no longer the secret longings and goals of the natural heart but are clamorously manifesting themselves publicly? In dealing with society and the secular humanist the church is at an impasse for, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). The criterion of the church for recognizing the role of man and woman is God's Word, and the criterion of the world is unenlightened human reason. Thus, it is futile to try to persuade the world with God's answers regarding the role of man and woman until one is converted to Christ and therefore is willing to be guided by Scripture.

We ourselves, as pastors, and our own members of our congregations are also certainly not immune to these worldly attitudes affecting the God-ordained role of man and woman. Yet we have a common solution for working out the difficulties in this area which is in harmony with the will of God. That solution is God's Word itself. As Christians, we pastors and our members confess with the Psalmist: "I reach out my hands for your commandments, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees" (Ps 119:48). Yet, at the same time, this does not mean that all the answers to the questions which confront us will therefore be simple to determine and apply. God has not given to us a black and white application to each and every situation which we encounter in our daily life. (Isn't that evident in the various cases of casuistry that are brought up at our pastoral conferences?) Nevertheless, God has given to us many unchangeable principles to follow and upon a careful study of these principles in their original context it is possible to make the correct, God-pleasing applications in the Christian's contemporary setting.

A word of caution may be in order at this point. Since our own Wisconsin Synod is spending much time involving many people and exerting much effort in reaching a consensus regarding the Scriptural role of man

and woman, let us be patient with one another in this area and especially with our members who are being bombarded with many logical but erroneous arguments and influences from the world. What may appear to be clear to us may require much patient and loving instruction on our part before others are led to the same conviction.

One of the practical areas in which much concern has been expressed in our circles deals with the role of woman in our church services. It will not be demonstrated in this paper that God's Word clearly teaches that women are not to exercise authority over men in the sphere of the church (e.g., 1 Tm 2:11-14). That principle, I assume, is understood and accepted by all of us since many of last year's Quarterly articles treated this subject exegetically and since the main thrust of our Synod's Committee on the Role of Man and Woman according to Holy Scriptures has been the establishing of principles involved in this area. What we shall try to achieve is a proper application of the Scriptural principles we commonly accept.

Is it proper for a woman to read the Lessons in the church service under the direction of the pastor? The phrase "under the direction of the pastor" may be somewhat misleading, for the authorization to teach publicly in the church does not come from the pastor. Article XIV, "Of Ecclesiastical Order" of the Augsburg Confession states: "Of Ecclesiastical Order they teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called." The authorization and validity of a man, such as one of the elders, the principal of the Christian day school or any other man who is willing and competent, assisting the pastor in administering the Lord's Supper does not lie under the direction of the pastor but in the male voting assembly of the congregation which calls such a man to assist the pastor. The Apostle Paul asks, "And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Rm 10:15). The public proclamation of God's Word and the administration of the Sacraments Jesus entrusted to his Church. Thus, it is the call of the congregation which gives one the right or authorization to proclaim God's Word publicly and administer the Sacraments; it is also the call from the congregation which assures us that we can recognize such service in the church as being truly valid.

Someone may now say, "Ah, but now you're talking about teaching publicly in the church where men are present. Of course a woman is not permitted to do this. All we want to know is if it is proper for a woman to read the Lessons." As mentioned above, the 14th Article of the Augsburg Confession speaks about publicly teaching in the church and administering the Sacraments. Public teaching in the church is not restricted to a formal classroom setting consisting of grade-school children where Christian women can teach and are also often the best qualified to teach. Public teaching in the church involves the whole panorama of proclaiming God's Word. Jesus gave to his church the commission to go and make disciples of all nations, "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19,20). Before his ascension our Savior told his church, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mk 16:15). Probably the greatest share of this teaching responsibility which the church has is carried out in the Sunday morning worship services, for that is where most of the people are reached most of the time.

The point which we wish to emphasize is that teaching God's Word means proclaiming his Word. Thus, teaching in the worship service is not restricted to the formal preaching of sermons from the pulpit. *κηρύσσω* means not only "to preach" but also "to proclaim, make known." Who can legitimately deny then that God's Word is not proclaimed or made known by the reading of the Old Testament Lesson, the Epistle and the Gospel? Who can legitimately deny that God's Word is not being taught publicly by the reading of these lessons? Thus, the one who reads these lessons in a public church service is publicly teaching God's Word to men, women, and children (under normal circumstances) and therefore should have a call from the congregation to render this service. Also the reader should be a male adult Christian who is one in faith with the congregation and who is competent and willing to read the lessons.

There are some other considerations here too which hopefully will help resolve this question of a woman reading the lessons in the church service.

Jesus said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Lu 11:28). A conclusion one can draw from these words is that one knows what he is to obey from hearing God's Word. So God teaches

us what he wants us to obey through our hearing his Word. Obedience has to be taught. The Hebrew verb שָׁמַע] is used in the same sense. This verb means heard, hearkened.” Thus, the idiom, שָׁמַע לְקוֹל or שָׁמַע לְקוֹלֵךְ means “he obeyed.” One learns obedience from words that are heard; that means that the heard words are performing the role of teaching. Recall also Jesus’ words. “He who has ears, let him hear” (Mt 11:15). In English we speak the same way when, for example, a mother says to her disobedient child, “Didn’t you hear what I said? You just don’t listen.” Therefore, reading the lessons publicly in a church service entails more than just an act of “reading.” It is a teaching method used to impart knowledge and to instill willing obedience to God’s will for our lives.

The sainted Luther D. Reed in his authoritative work, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, says that “from apostolic times the reading of carefully chosen lessons from Holy Scripture has been an important feature, and indeed the high point, of the first part of the Christian liturgy.”¹ He says that the lessons are “a guarantee of sound and complete teaching of fundamental Christian truth. Altogether they constitute a solid block of fundamental material about which the services of a particular day or season are constructed.”² Thus, when a person stands behind the lectern in our church services and reads the lessons for the day, he is performing formally a traditionally recognized didactic role.

In 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 St. Paul writes:

As in all the congregations of the saints, 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. Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?

It is interesting to note that in reference to this section the Strack-Billerbeck *Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament* says that women were not on principle forbidden to speak in the synagogue services, but that for all practical purposes it was not allowed. A woman might be asked, as a mark of honor, to read one of the Scripture lessons, but modesty would require that she decline (S-B, 111, 467).³

St. Paul is not demanding total silence on the part of women in the church services in these verses of 1 Corinthians. Rather, he is speaking about some disorders in the Corinthian congregation’s worship services that involved women not complying with the legal principle that the woman is to be subject to the man according to the order of creation. Dr. Siegbert Becker says:

Whenever the speaking of a woman gives or seems to give evidence of a lack of awe and respect for the holy and immutable will of God in regard to human behavior, the sensibilities and consciences of God’s people are wounded. Such awe and respect for the will of God ought to be especially manifest ‘in church,’ when God’s people gather to hear his word and to sing his praises.⁴

A Christian congregation must also be considerate of the faith, sensibilities and consciences of their fellow Christians in other congregations. One congregation does not have the right to institute a new or different custom which reflects a departure from divinely ordained principles. A woman reading the lessons in a public church service where men are present would reflect such a departure from the legal principle that the woman is

¹ Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1947) , p. 289.

² Ibid., p. 291.

³ Siegbert W. Becker, “An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 78 (July, 1981), pp. 180, 181.

⁴ Ibid., p. 183

not to exercise authority over the man in the sphere of the church, A woman's reading the lessons would also be a violation of the law of love, the basic and highest fulfillment of God's moral law.

Is it proper for a woman to play the organ in a church service under the direction of the pastor, or more properly, with the authorization of the congregation? In answer to this it is helpful to hear Professor Gawrisch's remarks on this point. It would be a, sin

If, for example, she would take it upon herself to dictate to the pastor what hymns were to be sung, or would demand or seize for herself the leadership in the conduct of the service. There have undoubtedly been instances when the pastor has had to administer a rebuke and has had to make it clear that he is the one who is conducting and leading the service, having been called for this by the congregation. On the other hand, it is probably just because of this possibility that many of our congregations prefer to have a man serve as organist. In the event, however, that no man in the congregation has the ability to play the organ or that it is desired to give the regular male organist assistance and relief, a congregation certainly may enlist and gratefully employ the services of a woman organist. But a devout and consecrated Christian woman who is called upon to serve in this capacity will always be concerned about observing God-pleasing proprieties in rendering this service to her Lord and to her church. She will ever be mindful of her subordinate role. She will do what she can, employing the talents and the training which she has received, not in a domineering spirit, not seeking to lord it over the pastor and the congregation, but in a spirit of helpfulness, of meekness, and of humility.⁵

Much of the above quote also applies to a woman's singing the Lord's Prayer or the Benediction. We know that in the Old Testament women were urged to participate in the singing, praising and confessing of the congregation. For example, Ezra 2:65 tells us that there were 200 men and women singers who returned to Judah from Babylon. Many of the Psalms were probably sung antiphonally by the men and women's choirs in the temple. In the new testament the church at Ephesus likely had mixed congregational singing (Eph 5:14-20). If one wants to maintain that a woman soloist is leading the service during her singing, the same must also apply to an entire women's choir. Then this would mean that God was contradicting his own will by authorizing women to sing as they did in the Old Testament services. If we bear in mind that the organists, choir directors and soloists are not, in fact, leading the worship but are under the direction of the pastor and church council by the authorization of the congregation itself, as long as the pastor and church council have the final word on the choice of selections, there is no violation of God's order of creation.

A woman soloist, humbly mindful of her God-ordained position, who sings the Lord's Prayer or the Benediction helps to enhance the beauty and devotion of the worship service. This does not involve the same inherent and traditionally recognized connotation of formal teaching, as is the case with the reading of the lessons.

May we uphold the edifying traditions and customs of the past with which the Lord has blessed us and at the same time be very cautious about initiating new or different practices until we are certain that they are not a violation of God's order of creation.

⁵ Wilbert R. Gawrisch, "The Place of Women in the Life and Work of the Church," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 66 (January, 1969), p. 46.

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