

DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE
THE CASE OF FEMALE WORSHIP READERS IN WELS MULTICULTURAL CHURCH
SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT

““I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive. 24 No one should seek their own good, but the good of others” (1 Corinthians 10:23-24).

Thanks to advances in technology, transportation, new political settings, etc. the world is getting smaller and smaller. For the family of Christian believers, this is a source of opportunity and joy, but also it does bring along a variety of challenges, as we get together as a Christian family around God’s Word and sacraments.

One of these challenges is to offer to God proper and pleasing worship, and also be enriching and beneficial to all. This concise essay will explore the case of female readers in worship services in a multicultural setting.

The first question we must contemplate is if this practice violates any God-given principles, or if is a matter of adiaphora (pertaining to Christian freedom), neither forbidden nor prescribed in the Bible. To answer this question and others relevant to our case study, it’s necessary to review the Biblical principles involved, along with the influence that the culture may have in their application.

Once we are able to respond our first interrogation, The second question is of a great importance, namely, even if this is a matter of adiaphora, is this practice wise and edifying? Under what circumstances?

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1. Introduction

We have heard that “we live in a melting pot.” The truth is that this is no longer just a fancy expression, but a reality that reflects the demographical growth that our country is experiencing or as some will describe, “suffering.” It’s becoming an everyday part of everyone’s personal experience, out of which diverse and often contradicting feelings and opinions are stirred up. For some, as they decide which kind of food to try on a given week, there could never be too much cultural diversity. Variety is good. But as the economy gets tight, as conflicts around the world escalate, then sometimes, it doesn’t seem to be a good idea to have “too many” foreign cultures anymore. Diversity is no longer so good.

The “melting pot” is no longer just the country or the city where we live. It’s getting closer and closer to home, to one of the places we care about the most – our church, our worship service, the place of our vertical and horizontal communion, where the Christian family gathers together to hear the good news of salvation.

Although the Church is certainly described and confessed as “the communion of saints,” the reality that we are *simul justus et peccator*, on many occasions does not make our integration easy or enjoyable. On one hand, as Christians called to be all things to all people, in order to save as many as we can, and commissioned to make disciples of all nations, we strive to proclaim the good news of salvation and envision all creatures, everything that has breath, praising the LORD with us. Indeed, we rejoice as people from all corners of the world confess and praise Christ with us as their Savior.

But, on the other hand, this blessing does bring also a new set of challenges. A form of worship that may be considered appropriate by one particular culture, may be seen as detrimental by another (I will provide some examples of this below). How do we deal with these situations in an evangelical way, namely, faithful to God’s Word, and also beneficial for God’s people? As our churches become more diverse in religious and cultural background, the particular issue we are going to explore in a brief way during this essay is becoming an increasing point of tension in our congregations, namely:

How appropriate is to have women lesson readers in the worship service? In a multicultural setting? In any setting?

As good Lutherans who strive to follow God’s Word, we believe that God’s truths (principles) transcend all cultures and time. Therefore, we need and want to answer these

questions in the light of the whole counsel of God. Is this practice a violation of any Christian principle, and therefore sinful? Or does its proper practice depend on the cultural setting?

This essay neither pretends to provide an answer to all possible questions and scenarios, nor to expand on every application of the doctrines involved. Yet we plan to review the most important principles pertaining to this issue, and to the best of our abilities, with prayer and trepidation, evaluate their proper application in a multicultural setting.

Finally, we will also review an actual case between two multicultural congregations, which may help shed some light on how to deal with similar situations. May our gracious Lord, give us the wisdom, love, and faithfulness to deal with these important matters according to his will.

2. The Distinction Between Doctrine and Application

“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

In a postmodern world where everything is relative, subjective and uncertain, the necessity to define what constitutes doctrine is increasingly important. Without a good foundation, the entire house will inevitably collapse; therefore it is vital to define the bases and/or the authoritative sources, to determine what is God’s will in this matter.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Although it seems obvious (at least for many Lutherans), the Bible, the entire counsel of God is the only source of truth and therefore doctrine, the sola scriptura principle we proclaim in our confessions. But what is a proper definition of doctrine? Even a modest effort to adequately describe the meaning of the term will take more ink than what this essay allows. I recommend to anyone interested on a more exhaustive exposition of this topic, to read the section “What Is Doctrine According To Scripture And The Lutheran Confessions?”¹

This is in no way an attempt to trivialize the importance of the issue, for just as is properly stated in the essay mentioned above, an improper understanding of the term may have

¹Rev. Harold, Wicke. *What Is “Doctrine” According To Scripture And The Lutheran Confessions?* (Our Great Heritage Vol. I, Milwaukee: NPH, 2003) 66-87.

catastrophic consequences. God's revealed will is not optional. We are bound to the teachings (διδασκαλία) of the Scriptures (Rom. 16:17). Therefore, the proper understanding of God's precepts is fundamental. Professor Harold Wicke does a great job of summarizing the definition of doctrine as follow:

Doctrine includes everything in Holy Writ, for Holy Writ is God's Word—all of it in every particular profitable for doctrine. Our doctrinal statements are summaries of that which Scripture states on the points in question. These may be fundamental or non-fundamental—both are binding inasmuch as they are God's Word. Scripture doctrine never changes; doctrinal statements have changed. They are valid only if they accurately reflect Scripture. Which doctrinal statements are to be included in our public confessions is determined chiefly by two points: the necessity of confessing the saving truths of Scripture, and the necessity of defending God's Word against the attacks of reason, and unreasonable men, also Satan himself. However, doctrine is not restricted to that which is laid down in the Confessions. Whatever Scripture states is that which we may and must teach. Paul writes: "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning (διδασκαλία), that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). And of this Word Jeremiah, speaking for God, says: "He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully" (Jer. 23:28). Not to forget Peter, who says: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (I Pet. 4:11).²

In line with what is expressed above, and for the sake of practicality, I will equate doctrine with the principles or revealed divine truths expressed in the Bible, which we are called to believe, teach, confess and practice as members of the Christian church at all times, in other words, what God prescribed to us in the Bible.

In order to help us with the proper understanding of God's divine will, we will also cite, quote and/or refer to the body of the Lutheran Confessions (Augsburg Confession, Formula of Concord, Luther's Catechism, etc.) since those clearly articulate vital articles of the Christian faith and are in total agreement with God's Word. I assume that the reader is in agreement with the previous affirmation, and therefore no attempt to prove it beyond what is necessary for our topic will be made.

The second definition that is necessary pertains to the proper application of the doctrine to people's life. This we call: "the application". As was stated previously, God's revealed truths go beyond a mere intellectual exercise or sum of knowledge. They are intended to have a direct impact on mankind, on our will and behavior. Every Christian is called to make them his own

² Rev. Harold, Wicke. What Is "Doctrine" According To Scripture And The Lutheran Confessions? Vol. 57: Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. 1998 (electronic edition.)(96–97). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House.

and live accordingly, for the benefit of the individual, the group of believers under a common confession (visible church), and the *Una Sancta* (invisible church). The proper differentiation between doctrine and practice is vital for the correct analysis of our case in study. Although on many occasions the practice of any particular doctrine is the same in all cultures at all times, this is not always the case.

Perhaps the best way to describe the distinction between doctrine and its proper practice is through a couple of simple examples. These do not intended to be exhaustive, but to serve as an illustration:

Marriage:

“That’s why a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife. The two of them will become one. 25The man and his wife were both naked. They didn’t feel any shame” (Genesis 2:24–25).

It is worth mentioning that normally doctrines are not drawn from one single verse. The doctrines outlined below are in agreement with the rest of the Scripture.

Principle/Doctrine 1:

- Marriage is intended to be between one man and one woman

Proper application:

Positiva: Marriage is to be contracted by a heterosexual couple.

Negativa: Homosexual or polygamous marriage is against God’s will and therefore not to be allowed, see also 1 Cor. 6:9-11.

An over-application (not supported by the Scriptures) would be:

- A general conclusion that all men and woman are to get married, as is stated by the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 7:8.

In this case the principle and application are almost identical.

The example illustrated above, in general terms, does not present major difficulties as the proper doctrinal practice does not change with the culture and/or time. Regardless of cultural assessment or practice, the heterosexual and monogamist character of marriage is prescribed by God for all humanity of all times. In other instances, as we will explore in the sections ahead, the application of God’s unchanging doctrines could vary or be affected by culture.

3. The Difficulty Of Assessing A Proper Application Of A Doctrine

As it has been stated before, the starting point for this discussion is the axiom or common conclusion that God's doctrines/ principles are universal and timeless in their application. In other words, they have the same meaning for all, and are to be applied to all people of all times. Having considered and validated the preceding premise, one may be tempted to conclude that therefore the application also must be the same for all. Well, not necessarily, as we will see in the following example. The doctrines deal with attitudes of the heart which can't be fully appreciated through the externals:

“Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. 4 Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight” (1 Peter 3:3-4).

This is a good example of a Biblical doctrine which could be applied in different ways to people's lives. The first thing to do is to differentiate the doctrine being taught and the practice being suggested or displayed.

The doctrine stated is that a wife's beauty (although it does apply to all people) should not consist in external things, but on the contrary is to be of a spiritual quality. The apostle's main point here refers to emphasis, namely, he is warning about giving more importance to the outward elements of a person than the internal ones, those which are fruits of the Spirit. Paul is neither condemning nor forbidding the use of fine cloth, jewelry, etc. in itself, but warns against vanity and/or neglecting our spiritual gifts.

A proper application of this principle would be to encourage a person not to try to call others' attention to himself or herself by the externals, such as clothes, makeup, jewelry, vehicles, etc., or to prioritize those over the development of his or her internal beauty. Forbidding indiscriminately the use of external adornments would constitute a misapplication of the Biblical principle and a legalistic practice.

The same is expressed regarding the principle or teaching in these verses by Professor Armin Panning in his exegetical study of this passage:

Peter warns against the natural inclination to become engrossed in personal appearance and attire. It is entirely possible, however, that the problem does not lie completely with the wife's vanity. It is just as possible that she is trying to please her husband who, especially if he is not a believer, might well expect of her the ostentation

that characterizes so much of what the world does. Peter is not objecting to any specific fashions or styles, nor is he condemning a wife to perpetual dowdiness. The point is rather one of attitude. She is not to make her appeal on outward and external considerations. Her adornment is not to be ἔξωθεν, but rather ὁ κρυπτός τῆς καρδίας ἄνθρωπος, “the hidden person of the heart.” Again, continuing in the second person is preferable: “Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.”

A wife’s true adornment lies not in what she does to make herself attractive, but in a sense, what she doesn’t do. Peter says that, ideally, she is to distinguish herself with a “gentle and quiet spirit.”³

What the apostle mentioned regarding these elements (jewelry, etc.) is just the symptom or manifestation of a deeper spiritual problem (which is addressed by the principle). Although the wearing of expensive jewelry and/or elaborate hairstyles may be an indication of the problem, to establish a rule or generalization like the one mentioned above constitutes an illegitimate representation of God’s will. Treating the symptoms does not address the real problem, and therefore sooner or later this will manifest itself in different ways, and the person’s spiritual wellbeing will continue to be at stake.

The same problem can be manifested in a different way (among many other possibilities), like “fitness obsession.” Although we are encouraged to provide the best care possible to our bodies in recognition that they belong to God (1 Cor. 6: 19-20), giving more importance to our physical care over our spiritual life would fit the sin described in the principle. The person would be giving priority to physical appearance or athletic performance over spiritual health, which determines our relation and status with God. An improper application would be to forbid the pursuing of a high fitness level.

4. How Culture Affects The Application Of Doctrine

Another wrinkle or difficulty as we try to attach a proper practice to a particular doctrine is related to the influence of the culture on the application. Since we live in a multicultural world which is tainted by sin, there is not always a standard application of the doctrine. This can also be illustrated by the following passage:

³ Armin J. Panning. *Exegesis of 1 Peter 3:1-7*. Vol. 78: Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. 1998 (electronic edition).(267). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House..

“Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. 5 And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved” (1 Corinthians 11:4-5).

At first glance, it seems to be quite clear that God requires and teaches the doctrine that it would be a sin for a man to pray and worship with the head covered (like wearing a hat or cap). Likewise, it would be a sin for a woman to pray or worship with her head uncovered (not wearing a hat or headscarf). Based on today’s practices, we may be tempted to quickly disqualify these options, but this is to be resisted. It is only through a careful exegetical study of the Scriptures that this could be determined.

To shed some light in this matter, let’s review a summary of Professor David Kuske’s exegetical study.

11:4 κατὰ κεφαλῆς ἔχων = “if he has (something) down from his head.” ..We need not spend a lot of time trying to settle whether Paul is referring to a veil, some other covering, or the wearing of long hair since this does not affect our understanding of the main point of these verses. It is the significance of the custom for the relationship of the sexes rather than the custom itself which is most important in this context. κατασχύνει τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ = “dishonors his ‘head.’ ” The verb κατασχύνω means to dishonor, disgrace, put to shame, disappoint or humiliate. The present tense indicates that the action is a continuous one as long as the action of the participle continues (ἔχων). The meaning of the verb in this context is determined primarily by its object κεφαλὴν.

How does every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered shame or dishonor Christ? Since covering the head was a custom which expressed submission to the opposite sex. Thus to suggest by veiling himself that woman was his “head” whose leading and guiding he would follow would be a denial of Christ who was his own God-given head. He would not be following the will of his head, Christ, and so dishonors him.⁴

The doctrine expressed in both verses is reciprocal. Men are to assume their God-given role as the head of women, and likewise, women are to assume their God-given role as followers. In the sections ahead, we will expand on the Biblical meaning of being a “head” and “helper.” But, meanwhile, we can assert that in this particular case the application is for men not to cover their head during the worship service since in this particular culture at this particular time this would be an indication of submission to the opposite sex, and consequently a rejection of their God-given role.

⁴ . David, Kuske. *Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:3–16*. Vol. 78: *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. 1998 (electronic edition.)(89). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House.

The application for women follows the same pattern. Women are to cover their head during worship, since in this particular culture at this particular time this would be an indication of recognition of the authority of the masculine gender. The contrary would consequently be a rejection of their God-given role. An improper application would be to classify as sinful any man who covers his head during worship, and any woman who worships without covering her head.

To appreciate this in a more contemporary scenario, let's consider the case of worship dress code. I think we all could agree that in most cases it's improper for a woman to attend worship topless. That in general would be sinful, but it would be perfectly correct in some indigenous settings, where this dress code is considered normal. The same point is made by Professor August Pieper regarding this passage:

He is not concerned about the observance of a national custom for its own sake, but in so far as it gives expression to something that is universally moral. If the outward custom is different among another people, then this custom takes its place as an outward procedure in the precept, while the actual meaning always remains that which is the abstract moral sense. The outward action and form is never in itself a moral precept. A fashion for woman which is wholly inoffensive in New Orleans in high summer may be outrightly unchaste in winter in St. Paul. The behavior of a youth which one takes for granted can become the subject of disciplinary procedure in a Lutheran pastor. What is chaste, decent and proper in one country may be unchaste, indecent and improper in another.⁵

This is an excellent case that illustrates the importance of distinguishing between the doctrine or principle, and its application or practice, as those may be directly affected by the culture. It is important to keep in mind that this is not the same as concluding that it is the culture's perception which determines the application of the doctrine. Let me explain what I mean by an illustration: Sexual intimacy outside of marriage, polygamy and other practices (just to mention some) are against God's given principles, no matter how acceptable or normal this could seem to be by any particular culture at any particular time. This is what makes it so important to determine the principle involved as those are to remain unchanged.

5. Main Biblical Principles And Arguments

We are now getting closer to home. It's time to evaluate if there is any biblical principle that would exclude us from practicing the particular case in our study, namely, is there any

⁵ August, Pieper. Are There Legal Regulations In The New Testament?. Vol. 86: Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. 1998 (electronic edition.) (54). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House.

teaching in the bible that would make illegitimate the practice of having female readers during the worship service?

Role of Man and Woman

This is one of the most controversial topics in our churches, caused for most part by the influence of our society, which finds here a fertile ground for rebelling against God's will. I will attempt to summarize a very comprehensive study on this topic made by Professor Gurgel and Kathie Wendland.

Let's begin by stating the most fundamental principle, about which there should be little disagreement:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28

- We are equal creation in God's image.

Contrary to what any person or culture may think, for God there is no one gender more important than the other. We are all equal in his eyes. This is the best way to begin our discussion, as today's society portrays God's doctrine of the role of men and women as unloving and unfair towards the daughters of Eve. In this regard it is important to get some skeletons out of the closet. Nothing has done more for the equality and protection of women than God's doctrine of the roles of men of women. (See also Gen 1: 26-27, 5:1-3). We are called to see the feminine sex as a precious blessing from God, so important that he did not spare his own Son to save them.

- Unfortunately equals in rebellion and sin.

It is written, "No one is right with God, no one at all. 11 No one understands. No one trusts in God. 12 All of them have turned away. They have all become worthless. No one does anything good, no one at all." Romans 3:10-12 (Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Ecclesiastes 7:20) Men and woman share the liability of having disobeyed God's will freely and independently (See also Gen 3:1-7, Rom 3:19-20, 23). Let's never forget that this is the reason why we have difficulties understanding and following God's will. It is not a lack of clarity, nor a multicultural issue. Our rebellion changed the perfect harmony between us and God, and among ourselves as well. With Adam and Eve's sin all humanity lost God's image, the holiness in which we were

created, the perfect harmony in spirit, will and actions we had with him. Since then our sinful nature will resist with all its strength the will of God.

- Fortunately equally forgiven.

“We are made right with God by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. That happens to all who believe. It is no different for the Jews than for anyone else” (Romans 3:22).

Without God’s grace, offered in the same measure to both sexes, there would be no hope. But fear not. Where there was sin now grace overflows (Rom 5:8-9), and we now share the same status of holiness through faith. (See also John 3:16, Gal 3:26-4:7). It is by this grace offered through Christ that we are now a new creature that strives to follow him and is able to say “speak Lord, your servant is listening,” and “your will be done” in all our areas of our lives.

- Mutually called as Royal Priests of God

“Now obey me completely. Keep my covenant. If you do, then out of all of the nations you will be my special treasure. The whole earth is mine. 6But you will be a kingdom of priests to serve me. You will be my holy nation.’ That is what you must tell the Israelites” (Exodus 19:5–6).

God has bestowed on believers the privilege to bear witness to his plan of salvation (Acts 20:28, Rev.7:9-14). This is the good news that we can’t just keep to ourselves. God wants all people to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth. Men and women are both invited to partake in the great commission. This is to be distinguished from God’s will regarding the office of public ministry, as we will deliberate below, since this is one of the main principles that we have to consider for our particular case study.

- Yet with different gifts and calls.

Brothers and sisters, I want you to know about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. 2You know that at one time you were unbelievers. You were somehow drawn away to worship statues of gods that couldn’t even speak. 3So I tell you that no one who is speaking with the help of God’s Spirit says, “May Jesus be cursed.” And without the help of the Holy Spirit no one can say, “Jesus is Lord.” 4There are different kinds of gifts. But they are all given by the same Spirit. 5There are different ways to serve. But they all come from the same Lord. 6There are different ways to work. But the same God makes it possible for all of us to have all those different things. 1 Corinthians 12:1–6

The image portrayed is similar to a perfect ecosystem, a singular living system composed of many different parts working together harmoniously. Believers interact with each other, doing different functions, but with a single purpose and motivation - to praise and serve our

Savior, who ransomed us from the hands of the devil. Any of the players can claim to be more important, but all are essential (Rom 12:3-8).

This is evident in the life of many congregations where their members, men and women, serve God in different roles - as evangelists, Sunday school teachers, treasurers, maintenance men, etc. without violation of God's given principles.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that God in his wisdom, for his glory and our benefit, has established certain roles or functions according to our human genders, as can be observed in the following section.

- Calls that reflects our God given roles

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” (Genesis 2:15)

“The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18).

In this particular point, it is crucial to understand what God does mean with the definition of head and helper. For this, it is profitable to quote a section of the exegetical essay Selections From A Genesis Commentary by Carl Lawrenz:

The Lord God first formed the man, *hā'ādhām*, the human male. God placed him into the Garden of Eden, put him in charge of it to work it and take care of it. God directly instructed him with reference to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. By all these actions God marked him for human headship, for the leadership role.⁶

An argument has being raised regarding the validity or applicability of those roles after the fall. Some will say that since this was God's will when sin was not present, therefore those roles are no longer applicable to the following generations:

“How do you expect me to submit to my husband when he is not even a Christian? That was when man when men had the perfect image of God, not now!”

Those are common expressions that we hear in our counseling and BIC sessions. In this regard, you do not have to look far to see that the same principle is presented through all of the OT and further confirmed in the NT by the apostles. It was God's pleasing will to assign to men

⁶ Carl, Lawrenz. *Selections From a Genesis Commentaries. Vol. 78: Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. 1998 (electronic edition.) (280). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House.

the role of leadership over women. This is a great responsibility which requires a spirit of service and sacrifice as exemplified by Jesus, the head of the church in Ephesians 5:22-27. It also, though, grants authority, as is presented in the following verse:

“Now I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ. The head of the woman is the man. And the head of Christ is God” (1 Corinthians 11:3).

The passage is very clear in several aspects:

- It’s not conditional. This passage does not indicate (nor does any other part of the Bible) that this is true only or when either men or women meet certain criteria, such as intellectual knowledge, strength, etc.
- The verb used is in present tense (in the original Greek). God wants this to be a continuous reality for all Christians.

In a nutshell, God has given the role of headship to man. It is a role of leadership and authority over woman, to be exercised in a Christian loving way.

In the two verses that address the relationship between head and helper in Gen 2:15,18; we find a twofold message. God addresses woman in an explicit way and defines the role that He has blessed them with as “a helper suitable for man.” Regarding this, Prof. Lawrenz comments:

The woman whom God determined to make for man was to be an *'ēzer keneghdō*, one like man, one corresponding to him physically, mentally, and spiritually, a fitting, suitable counterpart. Still in her relation to the man the woman would be a helper already by virtue of her creation, even before she would become his wife. Some have maintained that being a helper does not in itself imply a subordinate position. This is correct, for in Holy Scripture God himself urges us to turn above all to him as our helper (Ps 46:1; He 13:6). In exercising his headship over his wife in self-sacrificing love the man, too, is to be a helper to her. It is quite a different matter, however, when we are told that God specifically *made* woman to be a helper for man. Being made a helper for the man can only be understood as being made for a role subordinate to that of the man. Being subordinate should, however, not be equated with being of lesser quality, value or importance.⁷

As was referred to before, the argument has been made that these roles were given in the realms of Eden’s garden, functional and proper in a perfect world without sin, but no longer

⁷ Carl, Lawrenz. *Selections From a Genesis Commentaries Vol. 78: Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. 1998 (electronic edition.) (280). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House.

binding, as the reality of sin makes this principle not generally applicable. Although this argument may sound “reasonable,” it should be noted that, as previously stated, the same principle is repeated several times in the rest of the Scriptures long after the fall.

But, what does this principle have to do with our case in point? A simple answer would be this: Authority. The answer to the following question will in part determine the fate to our dilemma:

Does a woman exercise authority over men by being the designated reader during the worship service?

For many, this represents a silly question that should not be the source of much disturbance, but those who belong to this group might be surprised to find out just how much controversy surrounds this question. Some would not hesitate to say, “Of course not!” Others would say “Yes, of course.” What is interesting is that both may be right or conversely, wrong, depending on the circumstances. Let’s shed some light on this point through the lamp that protects/guides our feet and shows us God’s path by exploring the following passage:

34women should remain silent in the meetings. They are not allowed to speak. They must follow the lead of those who are in authority, as the Law says. 35If they have a question about something, they should ask their own husbands at home. It is shameful for women to speak in church meetings. 1 Corinthians 14:34–35

This passage is a great help, as it has direct implications on the application of the doctrine of the role of men and women as well as on the office of the public ministry. The key aspects that need to be identified/differentiated again are, what are the principles and how are they to be applied? Is the principle that women can’t speak at church meetings? Is this the application of a specific doctrine? Which one? Are we to apply it in the same way? Why?

As we did before, the temptation to provide a quick answer based on today’s practice must be avoided, as there are church “traditions” that have being sustained by some church bodies through several centuries, that are clearly against God’s principles. Masses for the dead is just one example. Here, however, the apostle emphasizes the proper use of the roles: women are to follow those in a position of leadership in the church, namely men. In this passage the word used

for questioning is ἐπερωτάω. It may suggest a challenging attitude, commonly used in court examinations where people are confronted. This also may indicate that the apostle was dealing with more than innocent questions, and therefore complete silence was required. Does this mean that women could not participate vocally in the church in any way? Is the indication in this passage to remain in complete silence the principle being taught, or is it an application of the leadership principle to the particular case of the Corinthian congregation (which does not necessarily mean that it does not apply to us today)?

To answer this question, it is important to notice that Paul himself encourages women to teach and speak in other portions of Scripture (Tit 2:3,4; 1 Co 11:5,13). Therefore it is safe to say that the apostle is showing an example, perhaps very common, of the application of the doctrine of leadership roles between men and women (1 Tim. 2:11-12).

In our desire to preserve the integrity of God's given message, a deeper devotional and careful exegetical study, along with prayer and meditation must be done. Let's review the study done by Professor August Pieper.

The state of affairs is the same with respect to 1 Corinthians 14:34ff and 1 Timothy 2:11ff. Paul does not want to establish the legal or evangelical external regulation that the woman is to be silent in the assembly. In the passage just discussed he is actually assuming that she steps forth in the assembly and publicly prays and prophesies; only she is not to do this with a denial of her modest reserve and her subordination to the man by prophesying with an uncovered head. In 1 Corinthians 14 we have the precise antithesis in "but must be in submission as the Law says." Where therefore the "being in submission" is not denied by the public speaking, praying and prophesying of the woman, there it is neither immoral nor obstructive for the gospel.

Also in 1 Timothy 2:11ff he does not want to say anything else. "The woman is not to teach publicly when she thereby becomes a lord over the man." It is against this that also the whole argumentation in this passage is directed. Where therefore dominion over the man and modest reserve do not come into consideration, as for example in school, or in an assembly of women, or in an assembly of men or a mixed assembly in which there is a lack of men with gifts making them apt to teach and able to pray and prophesy, and a woman has received both—as a special gift has received the ability to pray and prophesy publicly or has received instructions from God—there she not only may, as in 1 Corinthians 11, but according to Joel 2:28f; Acts 2:17f; 21:9; 1 Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 4:16 she must pray, prophesy, teach, always, of course, observing modest reserve.⁸

⁸ .August Pieper, *Are There Legal Regulations In The New Testament? Vol. 86: Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. 1998 (electronic edition.) (54). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House. Translated by

An equivalent application of this doctrine in our churches is the practice of having male members be the ones who make up the different church committees and perform different functions at the church, since those are seen as positions of authority. Traditionally (although this has been changing) one of these positions is that of treasurer, since use to be customary that the treasurer has voting authority on the primary governing body of the congregation, which is a role of authority. But this application could not be appropriated in places where this position does not have attached such responsibility.

Therefore what can we conclude to this point? Is it improper for a God-pleasing woman to participate as a reader during a worship service? Are we there yet?

No. Although the doctrine of the role of men and woman is at the heart of this issue, before we can provide a God-pleasing assessment, another biblical doctrine merits our attention.

The Office of Public Ministry

28“Keep watch over yourselves. Keep watch over all the believers. The Holy Spirit has made you leaders over them. Be shepherds of God’s church. He bought it with his own blood. Acts 20:28

Extensive arguments have been provided to show that the reading of the Bible lessons during public worship belongs to the public ministry, and therefore suitable for those eligible for this task. In other words, those men, who among other qualifications, are called to exercise leadership and authority over the flock, just as the Scriptures requires:

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 1 Timothy 3:1–3

Professor Emeritus Carl J. Lawrenz from the *Theologische Quartalschrift*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (July 1916), pp 157–182.

The Scriptures clearly presents some of the most important requisites for anyone who aspire to serve in the office of Public Ministry. Regarding the eligibility of women for this office, here, in consistency with the rest of the Scriptures, the principle that the office of the public ministry, in general, is to be reserved for men is well expressed. The only possible exceptions are where the principle of authority/submission is not being violated, as Luther's stated: "If only women were present and no men, as in nunneries, then one of the women might be authorized to preach" (LW 30:55).

The same is echoed by Prof. Leyrer:

There would be nothing unscriptural¹ about a woman serving as a pastor or chaplain in an all women situation, such as a woman's crisis center or penitentiary⁹.

Therefore, if the reading of the Scriptures belongs solely to the office of the public ministry, then that would invalidate, in most cases (as referred to in the exceptions), the participation of women in this function.

But others have presented another rationale, stating that the reading of the lessons does not belong exclusively to the pastoral office, but rather to the universal priesthood of all believers, and is therefore a shared responsibility. As we consider this, it is profitable to review what the functions of both the universal priesthood and the office of public ministry are. We examine the following reference on this point by Robert Kolb:

Although the Scriptures do not prescribe what functions must or may be exercised by those who hold the "office of the public ministry," this calling or office is responsible for the public representation and action of the church in the dispensing of the means of grace. Throughout its history the church has attached other duties and responsibilities to its public ministers. These have included various tasks of service and administration within the congregation of Christ's people. Churches may indeed add and subtract such responsibilities. The public ministry itself, however, must hold responsibility for public teaching and preaching and administration of the sacraments.

This calling is described as one of shepherding (Acts 20:28), following the example of the Lord himself, who cares for his people like a shepherd, ready to sacrifice his life for his sheep, always striving to bring them together into his fold (John 10:7-18; 1 Peter 2:25). Peter also calls Jesus a "Guardian" or "Overseer" of his people; this word is *episkopos* in Greek (1 Peter 2:25). It is often translated *bishop*. Ancient groups used the term for leaders who indeed did oversee the activities of their followers. Particularly in the framework of biblical thought, the obligations of an overseer embraced functions of guarding and protecting, of serving in general. God exercises his dominion by serving; his dominion is performed "under" his

⁹ Daniel P. Leyrer, *Women In The Church: Drawing The Line Between Truth And Tradition* [WELS/ELS Pastor - Teacher Conference, Cannon Beach, Oregon, October 10, 1991] Available at: <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/LeyrerWomen.pdf>

people as he lifts them up. Thus, the public servants of his Word “oversee” by protecting and serving.¹⁰

I think it is not difficult to agree with the author about the statements made, but it’s not possible to state under those arguments that the reading of the lessons is an activity unique to the public ministry (which the author neither states).

Most will base their claims on the following passage:

¹³ Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. 1 Timothy 4:13

These are fitting instructions and encouragements for Timothy and anyone in the public ministry, but this passage does not establish exclusivity of the public reading of Scripture. In this regard, nowhere in Scriptures do we find a clear statement that attaches this activity **solely** to the pastoral office. It is for this reason that in most congregations it is customary that male members of the congregation read the Scriptures in the worship service, as this is rightly understood as being a function of the universal priesthood of believers, just as the following verse states:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:9

God confers to us, the royal priesthood of all believers, and the privilege of sharing the good news of salvation with all people. On the day of Pentecost, all of God’s people were gathered together (very likely in worship), when the Holy Spirit came to them, and all began to speak in different languages. The apostle Peter does not leave any doubt about what was taking place, when he explains the astonishing events to the people who were witnessing:

¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ “ ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. Acts 2:16–18

Both men and women, servants of God, proclaimed his Word publicly (although not in a public ministry function) without violating any other principle.

¹⁰ Kolb, R. (2000). *The Christian faith: A Lutheran exposition* (electronic ed.) (279–280). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

This specific issue was discussed among the members of the Missouri Synod as they also wrestle with this issue. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in its 1985 Report, “Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice," addressed this issue:

The CTCR's answer to the question, however, did not give a definite yes or no:

The reading of the Scriptures belongs to the priesthood of all believers, men and women....

Moreover, there is no ceremonial law in the New Testament regarding the reading of Scripture in the context of public worship. Nor is there explicit apostolic prohibition of such reading by women. Nevertheless, it is the opinion of the CTCR that the reading of the Scriptures is most properly the function of the pastoral office and should therefore not ordinarily be delegated to a lay person, woman or man.¹¹

In their declaration, we note that although they encourage keeping the reading of the Scriptures as a function of the pastor, this is nevertheless not exclusive.

The premise that women can't serve in the public ministry deserves some extra consideration and clarification. Professor Pieper's direct approach to this highly controversial topic will be beneficial for our discussion:

The public praying, prophesying, teaching of the woman is not in itself immoral or unevangelical (naturally, much less that which is done in private).¹²

Although some will fervently oppose, we must mention that women can and should be encouraged to serve in the public ministry in the different functions that do not violate the principle of the role of men and women such as in the office of deaconess, school teacher, or the like.

Some had based their objection on a less Scriptural basis, namely that women are not in the same measure as man skilled in instructing; adept at ruling, punishing, and battling; as prudent, as interested in bare principle, as consistent, as unyielding or as truly pedagogical. In this regard, I can't think of a single Bible passage that indicates that God has not given to women the same intellectual capacity or pedagogical abilities as men. In fact, these days, more than 50%

¹¹ Fienen, Daniel. Atla0000902912-Lay Readers in public worship (400)

¹² August, Pieper. *Are There Legal Regulations In The New Testament? Vol. 86: Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. 1998 (electronic edition.) (54–55). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House.

of the PHD degrees are being obtained by women¹³. God has blessed us with many women in our churches who work for the benefit of God's kingdom and are gifted in many areas, gifted as pleased the Holy Spirit, in areas such as teaching, counseling, and the like. What makes it not suitable for a woman to be a pastor is the violation of the head-helper principle that God has instructed not any intellectual ability or lack thereof.

Now, let's keep moving in the direction of our subject by exploring other commonly expressed objections to women readers:

- No specific examples found in the bible.

In the light of the accounts described on the day of Pentecost, as this is the fulfillment of the prophecy of the prophet Joel (Jl 2:28-32), this argument is certainly debatable, as the gathering of God's people could be considered an act of public worship, and the act of prophesying, an out loud expression of God's Word (Acts 2:11, 18) by men and women. If we use this argument as the sole and determinant factor, the same could be said against the participation of woman in the Lord's Supper, as there is no specific example (although it is implied) of women participating in this sacrament.

God's Word is the alpha and omega of all arguments, and it is appropriate to look for instances where the reading of the Scriptures by women has been exemplified in the Scriptures. That would certainly be helpful for our discussion, but as we do so, it is necessary to keep in mind some of the examples we had previously addressed. It is not enough to find specific biblical examples or applications that may support or reject the studied practice. We have to prove also that the same principles involved would have the same application in our specific environment. Relevant to this discussion are the way that the doctrines were applied in 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 and 14:34-35. In the first case, according to their culture, it was appropriate to request that men uncover their head during worship, while woman were to cover theirs. This was a clear sign of roles. The second example follows the same pattern. The call to remain silent is not absolute. It does not refer to the quantity of the act (how much to speak), but to its quality or character (with what attitude it is done or carried out). They both consider the culture and the

¹³USA Today, 9/14/2010. Available at http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2010-09-15-womenphd14_st_N.htm, accessed 03/12/2013

motivation (the latter of which will be addressed later). Women can praise God and participate, but properly.

The ones who advocate the “silence” argument present the following rationale:

“If God does not indicate this clearly, then He must not want us to do it.”

Again, the example of women participating in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, where there is no explicit indication, should show the inadequacy of this argument.

- The “Tradition” argument

There are many reasons to be proud of our Lutheran roots and traditions, and we’d do well to preserve them. Many of our traditional worship practices have existed for many generations, for a better reason than just the sake of tradition. They teach, proclaim, and praise God in ways that are beneficial for the believer. At the same time, we have been the target of both sides in this matter. At the time of the reformation, Lutherans were accused of disregarding many of the ancient worship practices of the church. Our response in the Augsburg Confession provides a great witness of the way we regard our traditions:

Our people have been unjustly accused of having abolished the Mass. But it is obvious, without boasting, that the Mass is celebrated among us with greater devotion and earnestness than among our opponents. The people are instructed more regularly and with the greatest diligence concerning the holy sacrament, to what purpose it was instituted, and how it is to be used, namely, as a comfort to terrified consciences. In this way, the people are drawn to Communion and to the Mass. At the same time, they are also instructed about other, false teaching concerning the sacrament. Moreover, no noticeable changes have been made in the public celebration of the Mass, except that in certain places German hymns are sung alongside the Latin responses for the instruction and exercise of the people.¹⁴ (FC Art. XXIV)

Those traditions also connect us with our previous brothers and sisters in Christ, who lived many years before us. How delightful it is to think that the words of the *Birkat Kohanim*, the Aaronic blessing, have been used from the days of Moses to our days, connecting us to them through the Word and traditions.

But traditions are not intended to be dictatorial; they are not to take away with the Christian freedom that our Savior has gained for us. The only way that these traditions could continue as such, is precisely and only through our exercise of our Christian freedom. It is only

¹⁴ Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord: The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (68). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

when God's people follow them not because they have to, but because they want to, that the traditions will properly serve the community of believers.

Along the same line, as cultures change and the devil attacks the Church, some of the traditions have to change or be suspended. The Augustana (Augsburg Confession) in the article XXVIII shows us a great example of this:

The apostles directed that one should abstain from blood and from what is strangled. But who observes this now? Yet those who do not observe it commit no sin. For the apostles themselves did not want to burden consciences with such bondage, but prohibited such eating for a time to avoid offense. For in this ordinance one must pay attention to the chief part of Christian doctrine which is not abolished by this decree.¹⁵

Traditions are to serve God and his people and not vice versa. They are not to become a burden or obstacle for the proclamation of the Gospel. Another aspect of the tradition argument that is necessary to point out, is that even though this controversial practice (women readers) may have not been regularly present in our churches in "form," it *has* been present "in essence." Let me be more specific. It is not a foreign practice in our churches to have female solo singers (an equivalent/form of a Word reader) during worship services. In this regard, in a worship class at the seminary (WLS), the question about the difference between having a female singing a Psalm and one reading a lesson arose. The answer was quite simple, "two or three steps in most cases" (from the piano to the lectern). Both, if done appropriately, are proclaiming God's Word using God's given gifts for the sake of the kingdom and are pleasing to him.

- To send the right message.

There's no question that our practices have to reflect our principles and beliefs, and the way we worship can be a great aid to drive home some important aspects of our faith. The worship ritual in itself, however, is not the most adequate or even most appropriate forum to teach some of the key elements of our faith to the communion of saints. That, rather, belongs to Bible classes and the pulpit. The proper balance is required. The following passage exemplifies the importance of the use of the proper channel for education:

¹⁵ Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord: The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (100). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

[Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately (Acts 18:26).

We should not assume that the people are getting the right message just by observing a ritual, with which they may not even be acquainted. The contrary may happen in cultures where women are seen as “inferior” to men, the practice of solo men readers will be widely embraced, but this could serve to support their cultural bias. Personal instruction is required, in the previous passage it is worth noting that Priscilla and Aquila complemented Apollos’ instruction outside of the worship service, in a more personal and appropriate environment, they take him to their home, where more extensive instruction can be better accomplished. Therefore, if we want to send the “right message,” the worship service may not be the most effective way to instruct people about a complex subject (as the proper application of the principle may be challenging).

6. The Verdict

As it was pointed out during the introduction of this essay, not all the arguments and counterarguments would be examined. This is out of the scope of this work. We have, however, explored the most relevant, along with the key doctrines involved in our case. Therefore, at this point, we are able to reach, with a certain level of confidence, some conclusions about our initial dilemma.

The issue of women readers during a worship service, under the right circumstances (where the principle of head/helper is not violated), falls under the *adiaphora* category, namely among the things that are neither forbidden nor required by God. Therefore, it is subject to the discretion of the Church and relates to our Christian freedom. This was treated during our previous discussion of the argument of traditions, as we are not bound to them. In this regard, article X provides a good guideline for their proper application:

1. To settle this dispute, we unanimously believe, teach, and confess that ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word, but have been established only for good order and decorum, are in and of themselves neither worship ordained by God nor a part of such worship. “In vain do they worship me” with human precepts (Matt. 15[:9*]).

2. We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the authority to alter such ceremonies according to its own situation, as may be most useful and edifying for the community of God.

3. Of course, all frivolity and offense must be avoided, and special consideration must be given particularly to those who are weak in faith.¹⁶

The assertion that this in itself is *adiaphora* is in no case to be taken as an unconditional approval for its practice. First it has to be determined if this does or does not violate the principle head/helper in the specific cultural context, and among other things, it has to be done following God's guidelines for the exercise of our Christian freedom, which we will now explore in detail.

- Christian Freedom

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Galatians 5:1 (NIV84)

The freedom that Jesus won for us is a genuine treasure for believers: freedom from sin and freedom from the accusations of the law and its requirements. It was freely given to us for our enjoyment and appreciation. It's a freedom that we can't give away by imposing or letting others impose on us specific formats of worship (the "way we do things," the "safe way", the "traditional way"). It is no coincidence that in the New Testament there are so few indications of the way that the worship services were carried out. This is a matter of Christian freedom. Believers get together around the Word and sacraments and without violating any principle, decide the best way to praise our gracious Lord.

In his comprehensive essay, "Our Christian Liberty And Its Proper Use", Professor Edmund Reim points out that the freedom of the Christian consists of the following: 1. Conscious freedom from all guilt and condemnation; 2. Deliverance from the yoke of the law; 3. Freedom from all ceremonial restrictions; 4. Freedom from all human ordinances.

We are going to focus on the last two, as those are directly related to our discussion. Professor Reim points to the spirit by which our Christian freedom is to be carried out:

It has been stated above that our Christian liberty has been given that it be used. Employing the widest sense of the term, this will mean that we not only insist on freedom of action in some specific matter, but that in the various situations which may arise we first of all know what is becoming to those who no longer are servants and slaves, but free children of God, and that then we conduct ourselves accordingly. These situations

¹⁶ Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord: The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (515). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

might be described in endless detail and classified under many different heads, but finally they fall into two great groups: matters on which God has spoken and which therefore are definitely decided, and others where by the absence of any positive statement on his part he has given us a choice of action and therewith opportunity to exercise our Christian tact and judgment.

It may seem strange to speak of freedom in connection to such things that God has definitely decided. But it should be remembered that the freedom of the Christian consist not in setting aside the will of God, nor in willful contradiction or rebellious opposition to it, but rather in a joyous, voluntary, and complete conforming to what he recognizes no merely as the sovereign and holy, but as the gracious and good will of God. It is entirely a matter of the new man, who needs not to be driven, but seeks only to be taught. “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10)¹⁷ ...

Unless we learn to approach these questions (*adiaphora*) and make our decisions as a free children of God, asking not how much is permitted us, but rather how we can best serve, honor and give glory to our gracious Lord, we shall be hopelessly at sea in these matters.¹⁸

This should make it clear once and for all in our Lutheran Church that in order to justify a given course of action it is not enough to show that the thing itself is an *adiaphoron*. That is rather the point at which our Christian judgment should go into action and prove itself sensitive and alert to the great issue of our Christian freedom, as well as deeply concerned over the possibility of causing spiritual offense even to a single soul.¹⁹

This is just one of the issues that the Apostle Paul was dealing with at Corinth:

23 “Everything is permissible”—but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible”—but not everything is constructive. 24 Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others. 1 Corinthians 10:23–24 (NIV84)

We are not to do things just because we can do it, nor for the sake of simply changing things.

Our motivation always has to be to serve God and his people.

The Apostle Paul was willing to get out of his comfort zone for the sake of the gospel, and used all the matters of *adiaphora* to aid his ministry:

19 Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became

¹⁷ Reim, Edmund. *Our Christian Liberty And Its Proper Use*. Our Great Heritage. (163,) NPH. 1991. Milwaukee

¹⁸ Reim, Edmund. *Our Christian Liberty And Its Proper Use*. Our Great Heritage. (164) NPH. 1991. Milwaukee

¹⁹ Reim, Edmund. *Our Christian Liberty And Its Proper Use*. Our Great Heritage. (165) NPH. 1991. Milwaukee

like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. 1
Corinthians 9:19-23

The proper motivation is essential for the proper exercise of our Christian freedom, and is perhaps the most difficult aspect to determine. That which is not always possible to assess by natural observation deserves special consideration:

- Looking at the Heart.

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself?

Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Isaiah 58:5 (NIV84)

The intentions of the person or the community who out carry the worship practice are crucial. More important than any outward form, what is taking place in the heart (which in most cases is not visible/perceivable by simple observance) is what will have the final word regarding God's attitude toward the practice. The Scriptures are full of examples of good things going bad. God praises Hezekiah for, among other things, breaking the bronze snake that Moses had made. Asaph under divine inspiration lays this out in the Psalm 50, as the People of Israel were performing the ordinances but not observing what they meant. God has high expectations for his people, for us (Christians). It is not enough to do the "right things", we are to do them for the right reason also.

If that happened with things that God established for the benefit of his people, then it does not require too much imagination to realize what can happen with those things not commanded nor forbidden in Scripture, if they are not carefully and fearfully examined and executed.

7. Current And Former WELS Practices

There is not an official pronouncement from our synod that restricts the participation of woman readers. Nevertheless, this practice is very limited, due to the predominant “culture” in our churches, which in most cases see this activity as one who exercises authority over men.

The practice is more common overseas and in mission fields where their local cultural setting along with the specific needs of the congregation allow it without violating any God given principle. This, in general, has not created any major inconvenience or offense to either group (mission fields and US traditional churches), as in most cases there exists a separation in space, language etc. But as our country becomes more diverse, and multiple services for multiple cultures are held in our churches, the boundaries have been reduced and the exposure to such practices is more common, creating the need for the proper sensitivity and adequate management.

8. An Actual Case Example

It is rightly said that a picture is worth more than a thousand words, and perhaps the best way to apply what we have been exploring is through an example of how this situation was managed by two churches in a close proximity.

In order to do have a better understanding of the situation, it is necessary to get acquainted with the Hispanic culture. In general terms (although it may vary in some regions), the Hispanic culture could be described as “machista”. Men occupy higher positions in governmental positions and industry, but the woman, and specifically the mother, is the center of the house and in most cases the one who holds the family together. In religious aspects, the woman is far more active in the spiritual education of the children and at the church. In addition to this, the Catholic Church, which is by far the largest denomination in Latin America, is characterized by a low level of formal participation of their members and scarce doctrinal training.

Pertaining to our case study, the woman’s participation in church activities (other than preaching and administration of the sacrament) is not uncommon nor is it a source for scandal neither seen in general as an authoritative position. In many evangelical circles the situation is similar. Therefore, the public reading of the Bible by a woman during a worship service in

general would not be considered an exercise of authority over men but rather a service requested and in some cases expected by the church.

Back to our case example, both congregations in study had multicultural services, one service in English and the other in Spanish. In addition, one of the churches has a group of Asians that worship together with the English one (this we will call congregation B). The Hispanic pastors of both congregations get together periodically to discuss the different challenges, share the blessings, and coordinate common activities. The congregations are in a close proximity, and their Hispanic members are, in general, acquainted with each other.

In one of the congregations, which we will call congregation A, the majority of the Hispanic members and souls, were woman. On the other hand, congregation B had a more gender balance among the Hispanic souls, having also a good participation of the lay people in the different church activities, including regular male readers during the worship services.

Unfortunately, a small group of men and women of church B, was having some difficulties understanding and/or accepting God's principle of the roles of men and woman (as we will see ahead). They looked at the public reading of Scripture during the worship service as a sign of "equality." "I think we have the same right as the men of the congregation" was the argument to request their participation as readers. An assessment was done by the pastor regarding their meaning of the "equality" of both genders, and a confusion regarding the roles was assessed based on the following elements:

- The small group of people (some men included) was making the request in the spirit of a demand.
- The argument indicated a lack of distinction between the equality of men and women in God's eyes and the different functions expected of them.
- They had previously expressed discontent because women do not vote in the voters meeting.

Although the rest of the congregation may have no problem, and very likely they would welcome the initiative for the reasons mentioned before, the initiative of women readers was not adopted, since this was not in the best interest of either the congregation or the group making the request.

Months later, the pastor of the congregation A asked about our opinion regarding the participation of women lay readers as a possible way to increase lay participation in the worship service. In my opinion, in the case of this congregation, the practice would be a good thing based on the following elements:

- It was not prompted by any request of the women of his congregation as a right and/or as a sign of equality. Therefore, there was no perceived issue regarding the confusion of roles.
- The women of this congregation had shown a humble/shy attitude. They would do it only if it was requested of them and would prefer that the men of the congregation take that role.
- The congregation would not see this as a sign of authority.

It was common consensus that this matter, due to the characteristics of the Hispanic culture and of that congregation, was a matter of *adiaphora*, and therefore pertaining to Christian freedom and personal judgment. Nevertheless, the pastor of the congregation B shared the incident that took place in his congregation regarding this issue.

The pastor of congregation A, taking in consideration the new information, concluded that perhaps this would not be a good idea, since it could cause confusion in the neighboring congregation, and could create a potentially adverse situation for the brothers and sisters of congregation B.

Several positive things are to be mention regarding the evangelical way that this was handled:

- Both pastors considered the cultural roots of their congregation in order to determine if any Biblical principle, mainly the role of genders, could be broken. Both reached the same conclusion: the action in itself was a matter of *adiaphora*.
- To determine that the participation of women readers was a matter of Christian freedom was not enough of an argument to carry it out.
- The pastor of the congregation B recognized that it was a faulty motivation by the group who was requesting the participation of both genders as

readers, and therefore it was no longer a matter of *adiaphora* for this specific congregation.

- Although in the case of congregation A, the option of female readers was a matter of *adiaphora* (as pointed above), the pastor of this congregation spoke to other pastors in the area before making any decision.
- The other pastor provided feedback and validated that the option pertained to Christian freedom and therefore at his discretion.
- The pastor of the congregation B, provided the information relative to this issue in his congregations.
- The group of pastors discussed the possible implications.
- The pastor of the congregation A, out of love for the brothers and sister of the cong. B, made use of his Christian freedom by voluntarily deferring the initiative

Another Experience:

On account of the recent Thanksgiving celebration, Congregation B, held a combined service for the English, Hispanic and Asian groups. The service included readings of the Gospel in the three languages. The English and Spanish reading were read by the pastors of the congregation, the reading in the Asian language was done by a young woman with good reading skills. The atmosphere was that of a celebration, not because a woman was reading, but because we were able to hear the gospel in three different languages. It was a thanksgiving celebration for the gift of the gospel for all nations.

It is possible that someone could have been uncomfortable with the scene. It is impossible to read with certainty what is taking place in each person's heart and mind, but since the congregation has devoted to reach this community through ESL, and other evangelistic activities, their understanding and appreciation of that culture has grown significantly, which has shown itself in their flexibility to adapt/ modify different aspects of the worship service (liturgy, music, bulletin) to accommodate their needs. The general joy for what was taking place was evident.

A final example:

During a recent visit to one of our congregations in Miami, my family and I attended a Christmas service. This ministry has a large elementary, middle and recently a high school as well. Part of the Christmas service included selected Bible readings which were done by students of the school, some of them young women. In this particular congregation, most of the members come from different religious backgrounds and cultures. The participation of the youth and children was very appropriate and reflected the fruits of the ministry at the school. It is very unlikely that someone could have seen this participation as an exercise of authority or inappropriate.

9. Conclusion

The most difficult decisions for a Christian are those which he/she is free to decide, namely the decisions belonging to our Christian freedom. The reality of being *simul justus et peccator* requires that we use special care and consideration before we set on any given course of action. It is important to be aware of susceptibilities of others cultures that may seem insignificant from one's perspective, in order to not create offense, and preserve the unity. As the apostle Paul said, not everything that is permissible is beneficial, not only to us but also the people surrounding us.

In our multicultural setting, this last point presents several challenges that are very complex and difficult to determine, in order to do a proper diagnosis and treatment. How much of the current secular line of thought is permeating the church? In other words is it just coincidental that this particular issue becomes more relevant when our society is pushing a feminist liberation agenda? This is something that is necessary to consider. On the other hand, it is important to keep an eye on the horizon, since the conditions and perceptions of the society change not only from one place to another but also in time. At the time of the apostle Paul, in the Corinthian congregation (this we know with certainty), woman worshiping without covering their hair was unacceptable. Somewhere along the line that perception changed and the practice changed accordingly.

The other difficulty is related to the assimilation process from one culture into the other. As was pointed before, the outward forms of the exercise of authority may vary from one culture to another, but as the cultures interact, and with time become "assimilated", how much of that

original identity/value remains? How do those interactions affect their original perception of a particular practice? There is no one general answer. The congregation has to evaluate these factors. It is for this reason that having good judgment on these matters is more an art than a science.

Aristotle made a great observation that can be applied to the way that the natural heart works. He said that there are many virtues and most of them are in the middle, between two opposite vices. In this case, we are neither to exercise our Christian freedom just for the sake of innovation, nor to reject changes just for the sake of tradition. It is heard that some pastors are conservationist and others are proclaimers. Those are good virtues, but they do not serve properly God's kingdom when one is exercised at the expense of the other. This is what produces in many cases what we call the pendulum effect in most arguments. For this reason, it is important to keep in mind that we are called to walk the narrow Christian/Lutheran middle way, and approach this and all issues with self-examination and always be guided by the whole counsel of God's wisdom.

But behold, let's not use the difficulties that the application of the doctrine in a different or multicultural settings may present as an excuse for not applying it at all, a doctrine without application is practically useless, and will constitute a neglect of God's Word. As is known in corporative circles, "the excess of analysis only creates paralysis". In my personal opinion, I prefer to fail by doing something, than not doing anything at all for fear to failure, at the end I trust that love (the one of our Savior) covers a multitude of sins.

As was said before, our case study is in itself a matter of *adiaphora*. But would it be wise and beneficial to apply it in all our multicultural settings? In my personal opinion, in most cases in our actual multicultural settings no, since it could offend other brothers and sisters in Christ around us, and because this could send a wrong message to others in a time when the social agenda of the Feminist movement is in full motion.

My previous opinion is in no way to be taken as a general recommendation. Each case is to be considered with great care and wrestled with the different scenarios to verify if God's principles are being violated and if it is for the benefit of the entire congregation. Establishing rigid criteria like "we don't do that", may avoid some conflicts, but it also may not serve God's

kingdom well. Instead each case is to be carefully considered. If this practice could result in a better proclamation of the Gospel and the enrichment of the members of the church, it should not be discarded, but should be implemented with tact, education and good communication.

In matters of Christian freedom it is always important to remember that one size does not fit all situations. As ministers of the gospel, it is very likely that we may find ourselves serving in a multicultural congregation during the life of our ministry. It will be normal, that we try to implement in the new places what had been successful or beneficial in our previous ministries. It is therefore of great importance to be aware of these susceptibilities and elements that may affect the application of God's doctrine in each case. I'm not suggesting starting from scratch every time. Experience (which is normally accompanied by wisdom), is of great value in this matter, but incorrect assumptions could be made as the result of it. Therefore, is important to evaluate all the different components of our practices, not only as we move to a new location but also in our current one as culture shifts perceptions with time.

Finally, but in no way less important, let's be confident that the Lord of the Church will preserve the bride to the last day. Let's approach these challenges with prayer, with reverence, with trepidation, and with confidence that God is in control. Even if we make mistakes, he will make all things work for the good of all who love him. His grace is sufficient. His blood has and will keep cleansing us from all sins.

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God
1 Corinthian 10:31

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