

# Bible Study: Role of Women

The Theses on the Role of Women in the Church note that the Scriptures have much to say on the relationship between male and female in the household and the church. The purpose of this study is to see how the Bible deals with this relationship, and how the roles of men and women differ in their activities as the people of God. It is meant to lead you through a study of the issues presented in the Theses.

## Thesis 1

1. What does it mean to say that Scripture is the "source and norm" of our theology?
2. It is obvious that Scripture is being "interpreted" differently by those who differ on the issues of male and female. It is clear that there can be right interpretations and wrong interpretations. What guidelines are there to ensure that we interpret the Scriptures correctly? How do the passages related to inspiration cited in the document give us assurance that the Scriptures are the word of God? How does the importance of the apostolic witness play into this? See John 17:20. What does 2 Peter 1:20-21 say to those who say, "Disagreement on these issues does not really matter, since it is all just a matter of interpretation?"
3. It is true that some words of Scripture are directed at people in a particular cultural context. See, for example, 1 Peter 3:3 in its reference to "braided hair and gold jewelry." Is there a way of determining what is culturally determined and what is not? Even in this culturally related passage, is there anything in the context that is meant to be universally applicable to the Christian life?
4. One of the difficult issues, then, is determining which passages are culturally determined and which ones are not. The document by the Missouri Synod CTCR, in the context of the discussion on the custom of head covering for women, touch upon this question, noting that the practice was a custom which reflected the principle of subordination. The cultural custom of the day gave evidence that the distinction between male and female was understood. The document states, "Even in earliest times this practice was not universally followed by Christian congregations, and in modern Western society head covering or veiling is generally devoid of the significance attached to it in Paul's time. In fact, it has commonly been understood from the very beginning that these passages of Scripture which pertain to custom are not binding and that the principle involved can be manifested in various ways."<sup>(1)</sup> But the principle expressed by the custom remains.

## Thesis 2

As we look at the question of the orders which God set up in creation, we need to remember that, since all Scripture is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16-17), that the New Testament interpretations of the Old Testament passage are God's word to us as much as the Old Testament words. Keeping that in mind, we move to the material from Scripture.

1. Let us look first at the creation account, how in the beginning God made humanity male and female. See Gen. 1:27-28 and 2:18-25. What is the key point in the words of Genesis 1? How does the account in Genesis 2 elaborate on this?

2. In discussing the relationship between Christ and His Church, the imagery often used is that of a Bridegroom to His Bride. See, for example Matt. 25:1-13; Is. 62:5; Rev. 19:7-8; Rev. 21:9; the husband a wife imagery is presented clearly in Eph. 5:25-32, where marriage is shown to be a type (foreshadowing) of the relationship between Christ and His Church. How might, or should, that be reflected in the Church's worship?

### **Thesis 3**

1. Saint Paul, an apostle of our Lord, discusses the question of creation as he looks at the relationship of male and female in the home and in the church. 1 Corinthians 7 discusses practical issues concerning marriage. This passage is sometimes used to indicate that Paul was anti-marriage. What would give that impression? What is Paul's major concern? See 1 Cor. 7:29-35.
2. Eph. 5:21-33 is part of the so-called "Table of Duties," and is an elaboration of Col. 3:18-19. St. Peter says much the same thing in 1 Peter 3:1-7. What distinction in roles is made between husband and wife? What model are they following? What bothers many people today about these passages? What about these passages indicate that there is nothing here to fear? Much has been made in reference to these passages of the wife's duty. What is the husband's duty?
3. In 1 Cor. 11:3-16 and 14:26-40 Paul talks about male and female distinctions as they stand before God. What is the situation in 1 Corinthians 11? What is the context in 1 Corinthians 14? Today we do not require that women cover their heads when praying or speaking with word of God to others. What is there in 1 Corinthians 11 to indicate that this act may be cultural? What is the theological principle clearly stated here that the act was meant to illustrate? What is the activity mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14? Keep in mind that the word "church" here indicates the public assembly. What reasons does Paul give for women keeping silence? Note also that the word "submission" in 1 Cor. 14:34 has the same root as "submit" in Eph. 5:22. Note also that this submission is according to the "law." Is this submission, then, cultural or divinely mandated? In view of the many instance recorded in Scripture of women speaking the Gospel to men (beginning with the day of the resurrection!), how is this "silence" to be understood? Is it absolute (no women ever speaking the Gospel in the presence of men), or is it more narrowly circumscribed?

### **Thesis 4**

In Gal. 3:26-29 Paul tells us that in Christ there is no longer a distinction between male and female? Look at the general context of this passage. What specifically is he talking about? How is this different from the context of those passages which refer to distinction between roles of husband and wife, between male and female? Look at Eph. 2:10 and Eph. 4:22-24 and see how they speak about each human being who has been incorporated into Christ.

### **Thesis 5**

1. The Scriptures speak about the people of God as a "royal priesthood," called upon to make "spiritual sacrifices." See 1 Peter 2:4-10 for a description of the significance of being such a priesthood. Note the source of the priesthood and the result of it.

2. Note the other passages listed under thesis 5 which describe the types of sacrifices the members of the priesthood offer. Is there any difference here between the activity of male and female?

### **Thesis 6**

Under this thesis are a number of passages which detail the priestly service given by women in the Scriptures. Look at the following passages and describe the service offered here: Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3, 24:1-11; Acts 9:36, 18:24-26; Rom. 16:1-13; Phil. 4:2-3, Col. 4:15; 1 Tim. 3:11; 5:3-16. Note also Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:5, which specifically speak of women prophesying, and Acts 18:24-26, which includes private instruction in the word of God. What implications do each of these have for us today?

### **Thesis 7**

1. Here we get into issues concerning the public ministry. John 20:21-33; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 4:11-13; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4 all make reference to the office of public ministry as an office distinct from the royal priesthood. Look at each of these passages, and note how these passages refer to the office as one of 1) oversight of, and 2) service to the people of God. Note the imagery of shepherd as he shepherds the flock, and of an office that exists to build up the body. Its tasks, then, are different from that of the priesthood. Note John 20 and the (re)appointment of Peter to the office, and what he is charged to do.
2. Here we must note that there is no record in the New Testament of a woman who held the office which is variously described as elder, apostle, overseer, pastor. The only one of these words which might be used in reference to a woman is the word "apostle" in reference to Junias in Rom. 16:7, referring to her and to Andronicus as "outstanding among the apostles," which may designate her by the word. But here either the word is used in a wider sense than it is when referring to Paul and the Twelve, or it refers to the fact that they were held in high esteem by the apostles. Note the description of the holder of the office of overseer in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9, and how it exclusively refers to men.
3. 1 Tim. 3:8-9, 12-13 refer to deacons. Note also 1 Tim. 3:11, which refers to deaconesses (not, as some versions translate, the wives of deacons). It is clear, then, that women served in special offices of service which were distinct from that of overseer. Can we speak here of an office of "spiritual motherhood"?

### **Thesis 8**

1. Note 1 Tim. 2:11-15, which excludes women from public teaching, just before Paul goes on to describe qualifications for the office of overseer. What reasons are given? If we are saved by grace (which of course we are), what does Paul mean when he says that women will be "saved through childbearing?" Note that the passage may be translated "saved through the bearing of the child," a reference to the birth of Christ. However the passage is translated, it does not mean that it is the act of childbearing that saves! Refer back also to 1 Cor. 14:26-40.

2. Note also that those who are designated apostles and overseers are uniquely called to represent Christ to the priesthood of believers. They are Bridegroom to the Bride. The Church in turn represents Christ to the world. The Church is Christ's body ( 1 Cor. 12:27), His presence in the world.
3. The issue of "authority" is key to understanding the nature of the public office, and distinguishing it from running the other affairs of the congregation. What authority does Christ give the church in Matt. 16:18-19? In Matt. 18:15-18? In Matt. 28:20? In John 20:21-23? Look at the following passages, and note how the office of public ministry (overseer) relates to the question of authority: 1 Tim. 1:3; 3:5; 4:11-13; 5:7, 21; 6:2, 17.

### **Thesis 9**

1. Thesis 9 deals with areas of "adiaphora," that is, things which Scripture neither commands nor forbids. In this area, Christian freedom allows congregations to determine to structure themselves and relate themselves to other congregations. Note the discussion in the CTCR document, and the history of the voters assembly in our tradition. It is on the basis of the fact that the voters assembly is not a Biblically mandated organization that the Missouri Synod and Lutheran Church-Canada leave it up to congregations to determine the qualifications for voting.
2. Discuss the question of elders and congregational chairmanship from the following perspective: even though these offices arise out of Christian freedom, to what extent do they serve the public proclamation of the word? Do they, in your congregation's constitution, serve in some capacity as supervisors of the pastoral office and also as assistants to the pastor in carrying out his duties? What implications does that have for the role of women in these offices, in view of the apostolic qualifications and strictures placed on the office in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 and 3? How should the office of "elder" (as a lay office) function in the congregation?

### **Thesis 10**

The question of gifts and abilities is important, since God gives them with a view to their being used. Look at the following passages, all of which speak about the obligations (and privileges!) of being a member of the royal priesthood, and discuss how they apply to you in your own homes and congregation: Prov. 31:10-31; Acts 2:17-18; Rom. 12:1-8; 1 Cor. 3:5-9; 7:17; 10:31; 12:1-31; Gal. 6:10; Col. 3:17; 1 Peter 4:8-11. How are the exhortations of Paul and Peter in particular to be understood in reference to the question of women serving in the office of public ministry?

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this study, we have seen two key points:

1. God has designated His people to be a royal priesthood, and has given them gifts to enable them to offer up their spiritual sacrifices to Him in gratitude for His blessings and in response to His love. All of God's people have been gifted. All people are called and privileged to use their whole beings in such service to God.

2. For the sake of the public proclamation of the Gospel, God has created a special office distinct from the priesthood: the office of public ministry. This office serves the priesthood by the public proclamation of the word and administration of the sacraments, and publicly exercises to and for the priesthood the rights God gives the priesthood, namely the authority to forgive sins. This office, in view of the order of creation, and in view of the relationship of Christ and His Church, is to be held only by qualified males.

When both of these points are properly set forth, in accordance with the Word of God, the Church renders God-pleasing service to her Lord.

God grant that this study be edifying and strengthening to His people.