

## **Article: THE READING OF LESSONS IN CHURCH BY WOMEN**

The practice of having some lessons in churches read by women is a common practice across numerous Christian denominations today. In some places, it happens only in youth services and special services but not in regular services. In some places, it does not occur, and in other places, men and women read lessons indiscriminately. Allowing women to read an Old Testament Lesson or an Epistle, but not a Gospel is another practice that seems to lack any real principle.

There is also the practice of allowing women to vote in congregational meetings (women's suffrage). Debates over this have been had in Lutheran Churches over the years, where it has been debated whether meetings are 'church' or sharply distinct from worship services. It has been argued whether the casting of a vote by a woman or wife necessarily meant a wrongful exercise of authority over the man or the husband. And so on.

One of the principles of Scripture for good order is that a "woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent" (1 Tim. 2:11-12). God's Word traces this principle back to Adam's creation before Eve and Eve's deception in the fall (verses 13-14).

The relationship of women to men is the point at issue. Teaching children is not excluded at all. For example, Lois and Eunice taught Timothy. At schools, the most important principle to bear in mind is that the teachers function with the children in the place of the parents.

Another basic principle is the distinction between what is permitted in the home and what is permitted in public church services. This distinction could be made quite clearly in the New Testament times, even when church- services were held in private homes. The Scriptures say: "As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home: for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (1 Cor. 14:33-35).

So the question to ask is: Is it home, or church?

Sometimes, it has been argued that it is not really silence that is the issue here, but the submission of the women to the men. Not so. A woman's speaking in the church is what violates proper submission to her 'head.' (Compare the use of the word 'head' in 1 Cor. 11:3: "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God").

Some see it as a real difficulty that if silence is taken absolutely, then women cannot join even in the singing of hymns, confessing the creed, or praying the Lord's Prayer.

The context in 1 Cor. 14 is helpful, however. There are two previous references to silence in verses 27-30. If a person was going to speak in a tongue when there was no interpreter, he was to be silent. If a person was giving a prophetic revelation and a revelation came to someone else who was sitting down, the first was to be silent. What is involved is a person's speaking alone in a leading way before the congregation.

These principles are not just a matter of custom for St. Paul's Day or matters about which people today can please themselves. St. Paul insists that what he is writing is the Lord's command (1 Cor. 14:37), and it was the practice in all the congregations (v.33). It will not do to dismiss this command by saying that it is not connected with the Gospel.

It follows that while women do and should participate in unison singing and speaking in worship services, individual leading speaking roles in public worship services are not permitted. Home is the place for inquiring and questioning (v.35).

It is sometimes argued that there is a difference between reading and speaking. One who speaks is one who chooses his own words, but a reader simply keeps to the text before him. However, which is the more general term? And which is more important, the divinely-inspired words of Scripture themselves or the instruction and admonition that are based on them? There is no difference in principle between reading God's Word as a lesson and reading a sermon. If there are grey areas, the decision ought to go in the direction of God's command.

The real point is attitude. Do people care about the Lord's command or not? If the Lord says, "Women should remain silent," it is not permissible to come up with a direct contra: "She does not have to remain silent: she may read lessons, even if that is an individual leading role that involves speaking before the whole church." God says one thing: men, like a calf on a chain, get as far away from the central point of it as they can!

If there are widows and women whose husbands are not Christians, this should not be a reason for ignoring the Lord's command. It places an additional burden on people like pastors and elders to make doubly sure that they are cared for properly.

The principles described here are borne out by the universal practice of the church. In the early church, lectors were regarded as a minor clerical order. At Rome, the arch-deacon read the Gospel. Certainly, there were deaconesses in the early church, but there is no indication that even a deaconess read lessons in public worship services. They had an important role to perform in the baptism of women, but even in the baptistery the presbyter or the bishop behind a screen took the spoken part of the baptismal service, including the creed in question-form.

When women read lessons, disobedience looms large.