

# The Role, Wisdom, Value and Dangers of Congregational Open Forum Meetings

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The veins bulging in his neck signaled that my words had hit a nerve. And how slow I was to notice her face was furled. Too late I caught on that this engaged man and woman, sitting in my office for pre-marriage counseling, were upset. You know why. I was covering Scripture's teaching on the roles of man and woman.

The Lord was my helper. He helped me identify the cause of their anger. I took the time to explain that "headship" and "submission" are defined in Jesus Christ. The healing balm of the Spirit began to heal the blisters caused by my less-than-careful counseling.

Is there anyone among us who hasn't seen the Scriptural roles of man and woman bring on some simmering? Can you relate to either my fumbled teaching, or the couples' wrestling to understand? The struggle to know and live out God's will is, of course, not limited to the territory bounded by the kitchen, living room and bed room. There is of course that vast ecclesiastical land that surrounds the sacristy, sanctuary and social hour.

- A lifelong WELS couple was transferring to our congregation. In leading them through a pre-membership interview I read: "What is the biggest criticism you have of the church?" The wife answered in a gentle, actually timid way. "I really do believe in the WELS' teaching about the differences of men and women," she said. "But I've often wondered if the ideas and concerns of women are important to the church." There sat a wondering WELS woman.
- Her husband had no interest in church. But he let her do "her own thing" which was to join our church by profession of faith. She was now living in a new town, working with teachings new to her ears, and in need of a friend at her new house of worship. I didn't feel comfortable saying: "Please feel free to involve yourself in all our church activities, and if you have any suggestions for our congregation, please call me or one of our

Elders.” I didn’t feel comfortable with offering only a token of Christian concern to this married daughter of the King, who was single in her faith.

- “Do you mean that I’m supposed to let my jackass husband make all the decisions?” Her question spilled the beans on how her marriage was going. But at least she was honest—if not blunt—about her lack of trust in what the pastor was teaching about a husband’s headship. I also began to get a feel for her possible reaction to the explanation about to be discussed, that only men vote at our voters meetings. There sat a searching soul, mistrusting of men.
- In a church meeting comprised of men and women, an executive secretary politely raised her hand. When called on, she asked the chairman if she could ask a question of the trustees. The chairman invited her to step to the microphone. In a controlled, pleasant voice she asked, “Is there any trustee who does not agree with this decision?” A long pause passed with some heads silently motioning “no.” “Then how come,” she continued, “one of you trustees told me before this meeting started, that you don’t agree?” The room erupted in chatter as she returned to her seat. There walked a believer, whose impact on the assembly demonstrated her gifts as a professional communicator.

The men and women of a WELS congregation, like all Christians, must learn and relearn God’s will and then strive to live in that will. In this ecclesiastical territory there too can be furled faces and necks with bulging veins. The Apostle knew this. He wrote: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2-3).

Because congregational open forum meetings are comprised of sinner-saints still growing in sanctified living, we may witness missteps. Thus, some Christians may see more disadvantages than advantages when judging how valuable these meetings are to the church. Conversely, some may welcome these meetings, pointing to benefits that over-ride the dangers.

This paper was assigned to explore the role, wisdom, value and dangers of congregational open forum meetings (hereafter termed open forums). The people of our Synod have been truly blessed with a number of study pamphlets and Bible studies that thoroughly distill the Scriptural teachings of the headship principle. Even though we may be familiar with Scripture’s teachings because of these many studies, let us assure ourselves that we are indeed on the same page of truth and terminology.

### **A Review of the Principle: Headship and Submission**

The Lord built into the paradigm of creation three truths on which the man-woman relationship is founded. “Lutheran writers have often referred to the relationship of man and woman as an ‘order of creation...’ It means that man’s responsibility for leadership is a principle that God established at creation before the fall.”<sup>1</sup> These three truths of Genesis 2 are repeated by St. Paul

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<sup>1</sup> John F Brug, *A Bible Study on Man and Woman in God’s World-- Student’s Manual* (NPH, Milwaukee, 1992), p. 10.

in the New Testament to demonstrate that the order of creation applies to all people throughout time.

- Man was created **first** (Genesis 2:7,22).  
“For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Timothy 2:13).
- Woman was created **for man** (Genesis 2:18).  
“Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (1Corinthians 11:9).
- Woman was created **from man** (Gen 2:22).  
“For man did not come from woman, but woman from man” (1 Corinthians 11:8).

What do we mean that these three truths belong to the order of creation?

“It does not refer to the chronological order of creation, but to the fact that the right relationship of man and woman was an arrangement established by God at creation. It is not merely the fact that woman was made after man which is significant (1 Timothy 2:13), but that she was made *for* man and *from* man, as Paul clearly says in 1 Corinthians 11:8.”<sup>2</sup>

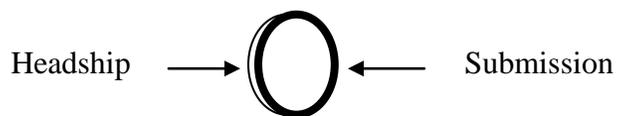
Notice how Paul invokes the order of creation to uphold the universality of man’s headship.

Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God... For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; <sup>9</sup>neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. (1 Corinthians 11:3,8,9,10)

God’s unchanging will for men and women is the timeless principle of man’s headship:

Man is the head of woman; woman is to be in submission.

“These two principles of headship and submission are the basic principles governing the role relationships of men and women. They are really one principle viewed from two perspectives.”<sup>3</sup>



Christ himself offers the supreme example of headship. “Biblical headship is responsibility and leadership which is exercised in service, sacrifice and love and which is carried out with humility.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise we have in Christ the defining example of submission. “To be in submission means to be obedient to some authority or to defer to the leadership of another.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> John F Brug, *Application of Principles: Application of the Scriptural Principles concerning the service of Women in the church*, (Nebraska District, June 11-12, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2

Christ was in submission to his Father's will when he came and followed the plan which the Father laid out for him."<sup>5</sup>

This one principle-- man is the head of woman; woman is to be in submission-- is an absolute rule in every sense. Everything else concerning the relationship of man and woman is application. Yet even in the realm of making local applications from this world-wide, timeless principle, Scripture graciously provides help by offering what are called "primary applications."

A. The woman must be silent in the Church

1 Corinthians 14 <sup>33</sup>For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, <sup>34</sup>women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. <sup>35</sup>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 Timothy 2 <sup>11</sup>A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.

B. A woman must not teach, that is, have authority over a man.

1 Timothy 2 <sup>12</sup>I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.

"We must be careful not to confuse the basic principle which Scripture sets forth with the [primary] applications which it makes of that principle... Because... [these] commands... are broad, comprehensive applications of the principle by an inspired writer, we cannot lightly pass them by. We must study them carefully as general applications of the principle which guide us in making specific, narrowly focused applications."<sup>6</sup>

Concerning Scripture's primary application of a woman not teaching or having authority over a man, Brug writes: "These two commands complement and explain each other."<sup>7</sup> The *or* in "to teach *or* to have authority" is an exegetical (explanatory) construction expressing a unit concept. Paul states the application of the principle: "...that the woman is not to have authority over the man... From that starting point we need to examine present-day forms and functions of service that involve authority over a man and that have been developed in Christian freedom. We need to evaluate the specific requirement, responsibilities and functions of each of these forms of ministry. We then need to apply the general principles so women are not required in any of those forms of service to act in ways that overstep this principle."<sup>8</sup>

Scripture's primary application of a woman being silent in the church is also concerned with the exercise of authority. "Such silence is not a blanket rule, as though he were forbidding women even to speak in a worship setting. Paul simply asks the women to be silent when it comes to teaching that exercises authority over the assembly of believers."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3

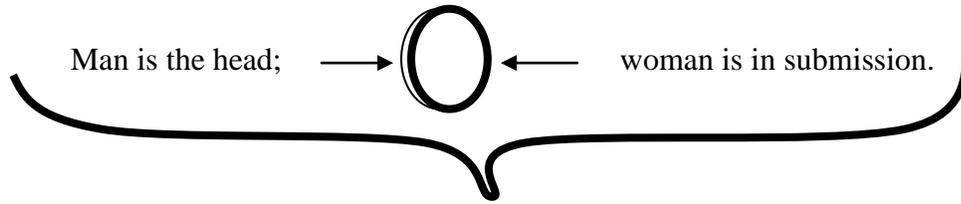
<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>8</sup> *Man and Woman in God's World, An Expanded Study* (NPH, Milwaukee, 1987), p. 26

<sup>9</sup> *Man and Woman in God's World [shorter study]* (NPH, Milwaukee, 1985), p. 16.

We can summarize the principle and primary applications as follows.

THE PRINCIPLE



SCRIPTURE'S PRIMARY APPLICATIONS

- A. The woman must be silent in the Church
- B. A woman must not teach, that is, have authority over a man.

From the principle and primary applications, we learn that God desires only men to exercise authority over men. To have authority is to have the ability to bind the will of others.<sup>10</sup> Yes, this is a broad definition, but that's because we cannot define "authority" in a way that allows one definition to be applicable to all people in all situations. "Christians who believe in the goodness of God's moral commands do not seek to stretch the outer limits of God's law. We should not be looking for loopholes in God's law or for pretexts to evade the intent of God's law."<sup>11</sup> So if, without any of this stretching or looking for loopholes, the concern of exercising authority over a man is truly not an issue, then women are not only free to serve the Lord, it is the Lord's will that women press into service the gifts the Holy Spirit has provided them.

Because I was not careful enough to scripturally define terms before discussing the roles of man and woman, I had surfaced the veins in the neck of that engaged man, and furled the face of his fiancée. But by throwing my teaching into reverse, and clearly defining the scriptural definitions for headship and submission, the Spirit lifted them up in an excitedly different way. The twice-divorced husband-to-be, delighted me when he said: "If I had known these teachings earlier in life, this may not be my third marriage." And the twice-divorced wife-to-be followed with similar sentiments. Not only had the Spirit of truth equipped this couple for journeying into the territory bounded by the kitchen, living room and bed room, this couple was also being equipped for the impending sod busting that would soon come with church membership. Just around the bend of time, they would be homesteading in that ecclesiastical topography, and beginning to participate in the church's open forums.

**What is an Open Forum?**

Let's define an open forum before proceeding. Can we agree that an open forum is a meeting in which men and women gather to ask questions and express their opinions about matters of interest to a congregation, and that any voting that binds the will of men is purposely absent from it? Therefore an open forum is a meeting of men and women to collect concerns and input for consideration at the voters meeting where the business of the church will be decided.

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<sup>10</sup> "To exercise authority" is a Greek word in 1 Timothy 2:12 that has been thoroughly demonstrated to mean "to dominate, to lord it over." Cf. "AUTHENTEIN – A Word Study" by Armin J. Panning, *WLQ*, July 1981, p. 191

<sup>11</sup> Brug, *Man and Woman Bible Study (Students Manual)*, p. 26.

### **The Role of Open Forums in the Congregation**

According to the above definition, it's not difficult to understand why WELS congregations are implementing open forums. "Congregations can take many steps to insure that the voices of all the congregation are heard. In Christian decision-making which aims at best to meet the needs of all the members of the congregation, including the minority, gathering and assessing the needs and desires of the members should be done prior to the decision-making. The responsible governing body should make decisions on the basis of an informed concern of all the members of the congregation, not merely on the basis of personal preference."<sup>12</sup>

Open forums can provide a woman the ability to share her concerns or ideas with a group of women and men, without fearing that she is stepping out of her role of submission. Information can be offered and clarified within a wider segment of the congregation in an expedient and efficient manner that promotes interest in the work of the church. And because there is no voting that binds the will of men, open forums don't tempt a woman who may be less informed or struggling with Scripture, to cast a vote by raising her hand or marking a ballot.

Offering such meetings can be beneficial for a woman who otherwise might wonder if her opinions are valuable. Remember the WELS woman who answered my pre-membership survey question by saying, "I really do believe in the WELS' teaching about the differences of men and women; but I've often wondered if the ideas and concerns of women are important to the church." Her former WELS church didn't offer open forums. She was pleased and interested to hear about this form of ministry, through which she could serve her Lord and her fellow believers.

⇒ **Open Forums provide an opportunity for women to serve the Lord in their submissive role as they share their ideas with the men.**

Open forums also provide opportunities for men to serve the Lord. "Naturally, if the congregation is considering matters which women understand better than men, the men will find ways of seeking out the opinion of the women before making a decision. Not to do that would be foolish."<sup>13</sup>

Open forums are especially useful for helping men (especially the men of the voters assembly) to hear the women and then carry their opinions on their hearts as they make decisions to the glory of God and for the good of his congregation. Such meetings can provide the opportunity for men to demonstrate the sacrificial spirit and humble leadership of biblical headship as they gather to collect the concerns of their sisters in Christ.

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ...then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> Wilbert G Gawrisch, *The Place of Women in the Life and Work of the Church* (WLQ Vol 166, 1979), p. 42.

very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing... (Philippians 2:1-7)

The headship principle means man is the servant-leader whom God holds responsible for the welfare of those he leads. We don't need to guess to whom God is first and foremost speaking when he through Paul commands: "Consider others better than yourselves."

Remember the woman joining the church by profession of faith, whose husband showed no interest in the church? She was a married daughter of the King, who was single in her faith. I didn't feel comfortable with offering only a token of Christian concern in the invitation: "Please feel free to involve yourself in all our church activities, and if you have any suggestions for our congregation, please call me or one of our Elders."

What do you think such a woman hears with such an invitation? What response would strike your heart if you sat in her place? Could it be that such married daughters of the King who are single in their faith would tend to respond in their private thoughts: "That's very kind of you, Pastor. Perhaps I would feel comfortable giving you a call, since I know you somewhat. But I also know how busy you are, and I don't want to bother you with my small ideas."

Now let's add a new dimension to this situation. What if the church has a program that arranges for one of the Elders or councilmen (along with one's spouse) to make an appointment for a New Member Interview—a visit to welcome a new member and to establish a connection between a new member and the church government? Our church is blessed to have leaders who believe in the importance of such visits, especially for helping those new members who are women single in their faith. Part of the visit is to repeat the pastor's invitation for the new member—especially those women who are single in the faith—to participate at the open forums.

Could not such New Member Visits be used to reflect the servant-leader spirit the Lord desires?

Be very careful, then, how you live--not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is...Speak to one another... make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:15-17,19-21)

I am blessed with a congregation that wants to do more than offer women that token invitation to share ideas with the pastor or an elder, and to do more than invite women to attend open forums. As a result, to women single in her faith, I can say something like: "The Lord taught us through Paul that each member is important to the body of the church. You are important to our church. We'd like to know your concerns or ideas for enhancing our ministry. So before every voters meeting a council member will call you to see if you have any thoughts you'd like to share. He will be happy to represent them at our open forums and at the voters meetings. That councilman will also remind you about the open forums. Please join those meetings. But even if you don't feel like sharing your ideas there, that councilman will represent your ideas to the group in an anonymous way. And the members of council and other men will be at these open forums to collect the opinions of everyone, especially the women, to carry them on their hearts when making decisions at the voters meetings."

If the congregation is a mountains' watershed, the open forum can be made a collecting reservoir for pooling the opinions of the women that stream in from different parts of the watershed. Opportunities for channeling attendance and ideas into the open forum can be through the Pastor's processing of new members into the church, through a New Member Visitation program, through quarterly phone calls to women single in the faith (for collecting ideas for sharing at open forums) and through regularly published invitations to gravitate women toward the open forum. In fact, my congregation invites women to visit voters meetings (to gain firsthand knowledge of the business conducted there by the men).

Emphasizing the open forum by constructing channels of ministry to feed it may prompt someone to ask if this is giving too much emphasis on woman sharing their opinions. Someone may legitimately ask: "But doesn't Paul command in 1 Corinthians 14, 'Women should remain silent in the churches; they are not allowed to speak... 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?'" Yes, Scripture says this. As already noted, it is one of the primary applications of the roles of man and woman which Scripture graciously supplies. As such, it's an application (not a principle) that today we carefully study to measure how it helps us apply the headship-submission principle to the specific situations in our congregations today. At this point a word of caution about our handling of this primary application is good to hear.

It is perhaps the truth most difficult to apply, because of questions about the exact context and scope of the silence enjoined... The topics under discussion in these chapters are delivering a public message in the church and reading the public prayer of the church... [Also] it is clear that the command of silence does not forbid all public prayer and praising of God by women since many passages of the New Testament refer to such activities by women. In 1 Corinthians 14 the "not allowed to speak" is explained by "must be in submission." It is speaking and questioning which violate the principle of submission which are forbidden."<sup>14</sup>

Back in 1961 *The Quarterly* published an article that underscores the need to gather women's opinions.

[God] does not want woman to assert her will in opposition to the will of man, nor does he want a woman's vote on a question of church affairs to make itself felt in contradiction to that of her husband... If a congregational meeting is considering things that the women understand better than the men, it would be foolish if the women were not asked for their advice. It is not the final aim of the Apostle to assure the men of certain rights, to place limitations upon the women... [Emphasis added]

In a number of voters meetings, I've heard a man remind the assembly of an opinion shared at an open forum. The fact that the shared idea may have originated from a woman is of no consequence to Christians who are captivated by Christ to empty themselves of their self-absorbed views, and to seek the opinions of all the congregation. The personality of an opinion is of no consequence when decision making is done first to glorify the Lord, and secondly, for welfare of the congregation. In the spirit of Jesus, won't all opinions be treated with respect and

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<sup>14</sup> Brug, *Application Of Principles*, p. 4

equally plum-lined by Scriptures' truths? Yes, even if those opinions are as errant as the ones Nicodemus offered to Jesus in their nighttime meeting (John 3).

We're talking about a lot of work, aren't we? To contact all the women who are without husband members of congregation is a burden for councilmen already struggling under the truism that only eight percent of the members do eighty percent of the church work. But as Christian men love because Jesus first loved them, so they will serve because Jesus first served them. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Each congregation will want to wrestle with its own local circumstances to determine how best to model Jesus' sacrificial headship. Maybe more than just the council are enlisted to reach out to the women single in faith. Perhaps other methods are developed to enlist the ideas of women. "Christian decision making aims at best (sic) meeting the need of all the members of the congregation, including the minority.... The congregation may use mechanisms such as questionnaires, family discussions, home visitations ... to obtain input about the needs and desires of all the members."<sup>15</sup> These ideas among others may be used as stand-alone methods to gather input, or may be used together to channel ideas into the reservoir of an open forum. This means an expenditure of time and energy. But may it not be among God's redeemed, that invoking the difficulties of one's local circumstances becomes a masquerade for the sinful flesh. As possessors of the promise that "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13), Christian men have unlimited energy to excel as servant-leaders.

⇒ **Open Forums provide an opportunity for men to serve the Lord in their headship role by seeking the input and concerns of women.**

The sinful nature was just mentioned. It's that wicked whisperer who on this side of the grave continues to reside in Christians and interferes with the fruitful activities of our Spirit-birtherd faith.

Christians... [undergo] a constant struggle against the old Adam. For the old Adam, as an intractable, refractory ass, is still a part of them, which much be coerced to the obedience of Christ, not only by the teaching, admonition, force and threatening of the law, but also oftentimes by the club of punishments and troubles, until the body of sin is entirely put off, and man is perfectly renewed in the resurrection."<sup>16</sup>

The intractable, refractory ass stubbornly rebels against all of God's will, including the roles of man and woman. So might not an open forum encourage the sinful side of woman to rear up, to exercise authority over men? One could shrug off this question with an answer like, "Open forums are safeguarded from women exercising authority over men because they're meetings limited only to gathering ideas and asking questions." But remember the executive secretary mentioned earlier? She only asked two questions. She began by asking: "Is there any trustee who does not agree with this decision?" When no trustee affirmed her question, she asked her second

<sup>15</sup> Brug, *A Bible Study on Man and Woman (Students Manual)*, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> "Of the Third Use of God's Law," *Thor. Decl. Of The Formula of Concord*, Triglotta, p. 969.

question. “Then how come one of you trustees told me before this meeting started, that you don’t agree?”

Although just questions, she launched some ICBM’s carrying explosive accusations. The impact of those questions upon the assembly not only demonstrated her gifts as a professional communicator, it demonstrated a breach of God’s will. Aside from the fact that she violated Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 18 (to first go privately to someone who has offended you), she exercised authority over men.

Was this redeemed daughter of the King sincere in her desire to help her congregation? In her eyes, yes. But being the executive secretary she was, we can assume without malice, that she employed the methods native to her work environment. She wanted to teach a lesson, and so took the trustees to school. “[When] Paul tells a woman to ‘remain silent the churches’ ... [he] asks the women to be silent when it comes to teaching that exercises authority over the assembly of believers. The women may have been speaking out of a sincere desire to learn and to grow in grace and in knowledge. But the apostle also directs this zeal so that it will show itself in the proper way.”<sup>17</sup> [emphasis added]

How did she step out of her God-assigned role by merely asking questions? Though outwardly she followed the “rules” of an open forum, her questions were engineered to control. To push a change of direction on the group. Her concern for truthfulness and the welfare of the church had other routes of action. She should have privately addressed the issue according to Matthew 18’s steps, just as the Lord would have expected a man to do the same.

If the men of the congregation are to carry out their headship in a God-pleasing way, they will make sure that they hear and consider the needs of all the members of the congregation. [But there comes a time when] the purpose is no longer to express personal preference or needs, but to establish policy for the congregation.... The purpose of debate is to sway opinion, to challenge and refute those who hold opposing views. A person cannot truly and freely participate in debate without challenging and contradicting the views of other parties in the debate. It is difficult to see how women can do this in harmony with Paul’s command in 1 Corinthians 14 that women are to be silent and not to ask questions in the meeting of the church. There Paul is applying the [headship] principle in a situation similar to the exchange of views which takes place in the decision-making processes in congregational meetings. Debate very often involves more challenge and assertion of authoritative viewpoints than the actual process of voting. Even questions asked during debate are often implied challenges to the views of others. Submission to headship...being silent and not asking questions are hardly compatible with free participation in debate. [Emphasis added]<sup>18</sup>

Attending an open forum may provide an opportunity a woman does not otherwise have in the church—a temptation-- to step out of her God-assigned role of submission. This is why Brug reminds Christians, “We should not be looking for loopholes in God’s law or for subterfuges to evade the intent of God’s law... and Christians do not want to provide

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<sup>17</sup> *Man and Woman in God’s Word [shorter study]*, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Brug, *A Bible Study on Man and Woman (Students Manual)*, p. 39-40.

each other with conscience-soothing excuses for conformity to the standards of the world.”<sup>19</sup>

⇒ **Open Forums can become occasions for women to overstep their God-assigned role of submission.**

Since there is the possibility a woman might exercise authority over men in an Open Forum, should a congregation refrain from such meetings? Christ’s love will invigorate congregations to weigh carefully Paul’s instruction to the early church about their issue of food sacrificed to idols. “If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall” (1 Corinthians 8:13).

In a similar spirit, we will want to ask if the practice of holding open forums induces a weak sister to step out of her role of submission. Likewise we will ask whether weak believers—either brothers or sisters—are being offended by the practice of holding open forums, even though the women are properly submitting to the headship of man. Again Christ’s love will move a congregation to carefully apply Paul’s carefully balanced truths concerning idol meat in Romans 14:15-16.

“Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.”

“Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.”

Congregational members cannot be expected to have all reached the same level of sanctified living. While the strong in faith enjoy and maximize their freedom to God’s glory, those weak in faith may exhibit poor judgment. There may be a person, like that executive secretary, who steps out of her God-given role. Will it have been a weakness of faith? Then “we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up” (Romans 15:1-2). Will it have been a woman purposely militating against God’s will? Then “preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2). “As God restores his image in us, we grow in our ability to live in our God-assigned roles for Jesus’ sake” our Conference of Presidents reminds us.<sup>20</sup>

Consider how God was patient with our own Synodical body as we grew in scriptural understanding about the roles of man and woman. The following was circulating in our Synod in the early 1960’s.

Man is by nature better suited for ruling and teaching than woman. Therefore God wants the latter to be subject and keep silence and leave the ruling and public teaching to man... There have been some women who were able to rule, but in general that is not the case. When it comes to ruling, woman is too impulsive. She lets herself be controlled too much

<sup>19</sup> Brug, *Application of Principles*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles*, The COP’s Presentation directed by the 1989 Synod Convention, (NWL magazine, March 1, 1991), p. 90.

by her emotions. She lacks the necessary objectivity, realism, prudence, calmness; she cannot separate between persons and things. Even in the faculty of perception and competence to pass judgment she is not equal to man.<sup>21</sup> [emphasis added]

It is to be feared that... we shall entrust [woman] with the task of educating the young men in our high schools, even as we already often let them teach in the upper classes of our elementary schools, while it is established that only in rarest cases, if at all, can they educate older boys.<sup>22</sup> [emphasis added]

Is woman's inferiority a reason God assigned to woman the submissive role? Compare that discordant argument to the melodious truths gained over time through further growth. Today we teach that God does not assign the headship role based on man's abilities. Today we teach that God assigned the headship/submission roles as he in his wisdom willed, apart from man's supposed abilities or woman's supposed inabilities.

God assigned roles to man and woman at Creation... This is the only interpretation happily in harmony with Scriptural principles of hermeneutics. That there was a submissive role assigned by God to woman as a part of her created nature and a leadership role assigned to man before the Fall is required also by the beautiful picture St. Paul ascribes to the relationship of Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5.<sup>23</sup>

Any honest study of the submission principle includes neither the ideas of forced oppression or inferiority... The fact that woman's submission in the church may be compared to Christ's submission to the cross should end all aspersion cast on the biblical principle of submission. To submit oneself is not to be inferior. To submit oneself is not to be horribly unequal. To submit oneself is to follow God's plan.<sup>24</sup> [Emphasis added]

The Apostle Peter grew in faith and Christian living. The disciple to whom Jesus once said, "Get behind me Satan" (Matthew 16:23) was later used by the Lord to cheer us on: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). Insisting on right behavior to the point that lost is the passion "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith...and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 5:12-13) is a form of legalism. God's headship principle and primary applications are the only fence he wills to mark our boundaries. Let us be careful that we do not build a human fence around his will that denies women the opportunities to grow in faith and Christian living.

Some words written to guide the faculty at MLC are also applicable to our point at hand.

The sixth commandment urges us to keep our minds and hearts pure in sexual matters. Should we then forbid college students to go to R-rated movies or to rent such movies and

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<sup>21</sup> Prof. William Henkel, transl. by Max N Herrmann, *The Status of Woman in the Public Life of the Congregation*, (WLQ, Vol. 58, 1961), p. 220

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>23</sup> Rev. Wayne Mueller, *The Role of Women in The Church With Special Reference to Genesis 1-3* (Presented to the Metro South Pastoral Conference, September 15, 1980), p. 3-4. (Accessed at [www.wls.net/library/essays](http://www.wls.net/library/essays).)

<sup>24</sup> 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), p. 3. (Accessed at [www.wls.net/library/essays](http://www.wls.net/library/essays).)

play them on their VCR's in the dormitory? Which R-rated movies would we put on the blacklist, only some or all of them? If only some, what criteria would be used to establish those that are not proper...? The seventh commandment tells us not to take our neighbor's money. Should we then forbid students to play cards for small change? The eighth commandment tells us that God wants us to speak well of one another and take the words and actions of others in the kindest possible way. Should we then forbid students from spreading the constant scuttlebutt that makes the rounds fairly often during a year on a college campus such as this?

My point in mentioning these things is to put the matter ...into proper focus. All of the general principles set down in Scripture and all of our summaries of what Scripture says in regard to these principles (e.g. Luther's explanation of the commandments) do not provide easy, ready-made applications for the many specific situations that must be dealt with.... There are many situations that are borderline cases. Our application of scriptural principles in such situations requires that we make the best sanctified judgment we can in each instance. Everyone in synod will not necessarily agree with every judgment that is made... When people for whatever reason call our application of a biblical principle "unchristian," we should be ready to show them that the judgment we made was one that was carefully chosen to avoid giving people a license to sin while at the same time not unduly restricting Christian freedom.<sup>25</sup>

So what about open forums and the possibilities that they tempt women to step out of their submissive role? As we view that question, let us do so with the bloody cross and empty grave framing it. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love drives out fear..." (1 John 4:18). Christ's love has freed us so that the possibility of abuse will not be the rule of use.

If leaders will be calling women who are single in their faith to invite them to attend the open forum, then on a regular basis those men can be reminded of Jesus' definition of sacrificial, humble headship. If open forums will precede quarterly voters meeting, four times a year there can be a review of the Biblical roles of man and woman. These are opportunities for spiritual growth.

There are other growth opportunities. At the pastor's opening of an open forum, I've reviewed those portions of our constitution that speak of the God-assigned roles. And at our most recent open forum, we handed out a summary of the roles of man and woman which I read at the opening.

This writer feels that congregations that institute a system of holding congregational forums will be happily surprised. When our sisters in the faith are able to speak their hearts in such a venue, good things happen. We preach and teach the gospel among fellow Christians so that faith and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ may grow. Let us remember that it grows also within the hearts of our women. Therefore, their scripturally enlightened understanding of topics like stewardship, evangelism, worship, etc. will be of

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<sup>25</sup> David Kuske, *The God-given Roles of Man and Woman at MLC* (September 1995), p. 4. (Accessed at [www.wls.net/library/essays](http://www.wls.net/library/essays).)

value to our congregations. A congregational forum where they are able to share their understanding is an opportunity that, in your essayist's opinion, we should not pass up.<sup>26</sup>

⇒ **Open Forums can provide regular the opportunities for men and women to grow in understanding their God-given roles.**

I formally served a congregation that was in *status confessionis*<sup>27</sup> with our Synod. The church could not join our Synod until it had brought all its doctrines and practices into full fellowship with Scripture and our Synod; yet our Synod supplied pastors and teachers to aid the church in working through its doctrinal differences, to come into confessional fellowship with our Synod. One errant practice that needed to be addressed was woman suffrage. The church set a target date to decide its future, and began in-depth studies on the roles of man and woman to win a change in the church's confession, constitution and practices to uphold the Biblical roles. During this process, I began to ascertain that an underlying issue hampering the full acceptance of the Biblical roles was a lack of trust between members. The meetings were more "political" in nature than spiritual. In one corner was a small group of men, fighting for their ideas. In another corner was a small group of women fighting for their ideas. And in a third corner was perhaps a small group composed of men and women fighting for their ideas.

Remember the woman in the BIC class who blurted out in protest of man's headship: "Do you mean that I'm supposed to let my jackass husband make all the decisions?" She didn't trust her husband's leadership. Later, she grew in faith to learn that Scripture was not so much asking her to trust in her husband's abilities as much as it was asking her to trust in the Almighty's abilities to work through her husband—weaknesses and all-- to accomplish his will. She radically toned down about her husband being a dumb donkey. In fact, the more they both grew to trust the Lord to work his blessings through his God-assigned roles, the more they learned to trust each other in their respective roles. When they became members, they were prepared to trust that God was able to work through the decision making of imperfect men.

It's my experience that mistrust is a menace to God's ways, whether in a marriage or in a congregation. And I'm certainly not confident that every man in our congregation has so impeccably lived out his headship that no woman has had reason to doubt if he's making good decisions. Because open forums bring men and women together as a group to discuss issues, they can provide the platform for exercising the trust that is so crucial in living out the roles of man and woman. This in turn can help destigmatize the decision making of the church.

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<sup>26</sup> Leyrer, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> A temporary, anomalous relationship known as *status confessionis* was applied to this congregation because its pastors and leaders unmistakably revealed themselves as confessing brothers, and had severed its confessional affiliation with a heterodox Synod. But the church's constitution allowed an unbiblical practice (woman suffrage) that the pastor and leaders were seeking to correct through ongoing instruction in the Word. The congregation requested only WELS pastors and teachers to aid in this instruction process, and worked through the calling process of WELS to receive them. In time the constitution was changed and the congregation came into full fellowship with WELS.

I wonder if it is not the whole process of the voters' meetings that has raised concern, confusion and controversy. We have taken a stand as a church body against secret societies. Yet when the business before the voters' meeting is known only to those who are attending the meeting, the meeting itself takes on a secretive nature.

The work of the voters' assembly ought to be transparent. Everyone ought to know what is going on there, especially the women who do not have husbands attending. With the exception of occasional discipline matters concerning members or called workers, or the itemized details of a call list, all items on the agenda should be public knowledge. Advance information, opinion surveys and open forum meetings will be used to provide opportunities for thoughtful consideration by voters and opportunities for input by the women.<sup>28</sup>

⇒ **Open Forums provide opportunities for men to exercise their trust that God blesses the body through the input of the women members, and for women to exercise their trust that God blesses the body through the man's headship**

### Summary

Since holding an open forum is a narrowed application of the one headship/submission principle, each congregation will want to work through the dangers and values of offering them in their own, unique circumstances. Since congregations change over time, it is wise for congregations to continually re-apply the principle and primary applications to their individual setting, working to magnify its values and minimize its dangers. Because God has promised, we can be confident that he will bless his people when we preach and teach the principle loudly and clearly, and then wrestle to apply it to the local setting. "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

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<sup>28</sup> Pastor Dennis Broehm, *Creative Ways to Lovingly Invite and Receive the Input of women Members Without Violating the Headship Principle* (Manitowac Pastoral Conference, Sheboygan, WI, September 20, 1999), p. 6. (Accessed at [www.wls.net/library/essays](http://www.wls.net/library/essays).)

## Appendix

Samples of a bulletin announcement and a handout for meetings.

**Open Forum and Voters Meeting** All members and friends of the congregation are encouraged to attend the Congregational Open Forum during the Sunday Bible Class hour (9:20 AM). Receive status reports and review pending motions, including updates on the land and building program. Voting members desire to hear the reactions and opinions of all the congregation's men and women, to represent them into the decision making of the Voters Meeting. The Voters Meeting is at 7:00 PM Sunday evening. Non-voting members are invited to observe our visitor-friendly Voters Meetings.



### **Welcome to our Open Forum**

Men and women gather in an Open Forum, not to debate or argue, or to push their opinions on others, but to share ideas and information. God's will is for men to carry out their headship<sup>1</sup> responsibility in the sacrificial spirit of Jesus<sup>2</sup> the Church's head. Especially by listening to women and compassionately carrying their ideas<sup>3</sup> into the decision making process, men serve as Christ-like leaders. God's will for women, is that they participate in the same submissive spirit<sup>4</sup> as Jesus, who submitted himself<sup>5</sup> in life and death for our salvation. By offering opinions and suggestions, women serve this congregation in a most critical capacity: fulfilling the aim to gather and hear the needs and desires of all the members of the congregation.<sup>6</sup>

### **Welcome to our Voters Meeting**

At a Voters Meeting, views shared at Open Forums are weighed and debated. Ideas are tested and challenged. Opinions are promoted while others are refuted. This is the exercising of leadership and authority, which the Bible teaches is to be conducted in the spirit of Christ's loving service and self-sacrifice.<sup>7</sup> God's will is that selfish aims are crucified, so that all decisions are made for his glory and for the welfare the whole church. Since it's also God's will that men exercise authority over men<sup>8</sup>, those who participate are the Voting members of the congregation. Non-voting members, both men and women, are cordially invited to attend Voters meetings, to observe the decision making of the church. If visitors should have questions with the purpose to more adequately understand the content of the meeting, please bring your question to the attention of the chairman. We welcome such questions as an aid to enhancing clear communication.

**For further study** of the God-given roles for men and women, please help yourself to the booklet: Man and Woman in God's World.

<sup>1</sup> The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man. (1 Cor 11:3)

<sup>2</sup> The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life. (Mt 28:20)

<sup>3</sup> Love your neighbor as yourself. (Mat 22:39)

<sup>4</sup> A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. (1 Tim 2:11)

<sup>5</sup> When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. (1 Pet 2:23)

<sup>6</sup> Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. (Prov 15:22)

<sup>7</sup> Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. (1 Peter 1:22)

<sup>8</sup> I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. (1 Timothy 2:12)

