

**The Service of Women in the Church
in Light of the Order of Creation**

A Paper Submitted to the Free Conference
Association of Confessing Evangelical Lutheran Congregations

March 1, 2011

Rev. Robert W. Wentzel, Pastor
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Walton, Nebraska

Introduction

This paper is essentially a commentary on the work already begun in the document “Service of Women in the Church (Order of Creation)¹. Our goal is to achieve clarity and consensus concerning what the Word of God teaches us concerning our life together as men and women redeemed from sin and given new life as the children of God. Thus, not only must we consider the service of women in the church, but also the service of men and the service of those called to be pastors in the church. All are part of the royal priesthood of believers. (1 Peter 2: 9-10) All are one in Christ, both male and female. (Galatians 3: 28) Yet, within the priesthood of believers, we have a variety of gifts and a variety of callings. (1 Corinthians 12) Discerning the essence of these callings involves a careful study of the Order of Creation. In the time allotted, we can only make a beginning. We can, however, determine some foundational theses to guide our thinking on this matter, and we can explore some resources to aid us in our deliberations. The chief resource, of course, is Holy Scripture itself, “the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged.”²

Our problem is that we, as a Synod, have often been reluctant to appeal to the Order of Creation as an authoritative guide for our life in the church, much less as our guide in home and in society. A simple working definition is needed here³. The “Order of Creation” is the biblical teaching⁴ that “in the beginning” our Triune God created all things and placed all things in order, and when this creation was accomplished, He pronounced that “It was very good.” (Genesis 1: 31) A place for everything, and everything in its place, including man and woman. Other ways of speaking of the Order of Creation may include calling it “Natural Law” or simply the will of

¹ www.ancelc.net

² Formula of Concord, Rule and Norm 3

³ The official Synodical definition: "This refers to the particular position which, by the will of God, any created object occupies in relation to others. God has given to that which has been created a certain definite order which, because it was created by Him, is the expression of His immutable will. These relationships belong to the structure of created existence." *Women in the Church Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice*, Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, LC—MS, 1985, page 21

⁴ The ACELC document, “Service of Women” cites 8 scriptural texts as the witness of Scripture. These verses do not exhaust the wealth of witnesses found throughout Scripture.

God for His creation, or even simply the plan of God for His creation. Essential to our understanding is believing (and therefore teaching and confessing) that God's will for His creation is intrinsically good and gracious. Conform to the order, and blessings abound. Rebel against the order, and you sin; you will suffer the consequences of sinning, both temporally and, if the sin is not repented of and absolved, eternally. The consequences of this rebellion are seen in the realities of our fallen world. Christ's work of redemption includes not only the future restoration of all creation to its original order, but the present reality that such restoration is taking place even now in us as the Holy Spirit, who once hovered over the chaos of the initial creation, now works in the Church which He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies. In other words, we are being put back in order. Sanctification itself can be seen as Christian men and women—those redeemed and reconciled to God in Christ—being taught the joy of simply being what they are created to be.

The proper place to begin our study of the Order of Creation, then, is with the first three chapters of Genesis—the first creation account, which encompasses the creation of all things in heaven and on earth (Genesis 1); the second creation account, which focuses on the creation of man and woman (Genesis 2); and the account of Adam and Eve's rebellion against God's Order of Creation (Genesis 3). A solid understanding of these chapters will provide the frame of reference for understanding the service of men, women, and even pastors in the church today. In the time allotted, we will not be able to do much more than outline the foundations of a biblical theology of the Order of Creation, and point to its usefulness in understanding the current controversies concerning the service of women (and men!) in the Church.

Objections to the Order of Creation

Before we continue, however, we should recognize that this line of inquiry will be challenged both by the "wisdom" of the world and by voices within the church. The consensus of those outside the church is that Genesis accounts are purely myth: at best representing the attempts of primitive humanity to understand the origin of the world and the exigencies of human existence; at worst giving illegitimate authority to male dominance and oppression. These views are often shared to greater or lesser degrees by those still within the Church. They,

too, may share the world's skepticism concerning the historical nature of Genesis, and decline to give much credence to any "Order of Creation" witnessed to by the texts. They may believe that any discussion of the service of both women and men in the church may be carried out without reference to the Order of Creation. Even if they concede that the record of Genesis *may* contain a God-breathed teaching of the Order of Creation, even in a symbolic or metaphorical form, they may dismiss that teaching as that which is superseded or surpassed by the Order of Redemption revealed in Christ in the New Testament.

In other words, that which was pronounced as "very good" by the Creator in Genesis is pronounced as "not as good as what we learn from Christ" or even "different from what we learn from Christ" in the New Testament, as if there were a contradiction between the witness of the Old and the New Testaments or, indeed, between the pronouncements of Christ Himself.⁵ Scripture is not read as a whole; Scripture is not seen as possessing an underlying unity; Scripture is not used to interpret itself. Nor is Scripture alone used as the final authority of Christian teaching. The fatal question of the serpent in the Garden, "Did God really say...." seems relatively innocuous compared to the questioning of those who don't really care if God said anything at all.

We believe, in contradistinction, that the teaching of the Order of Creation embodies the Word of God in the fullest sense: that all things were created from nothing by a Word from God and placed in order, that is, in a living, working relationship; that Jesus Christ Himself is the Word of God, begotten of His Father from eternity but also incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. He is the Word of God made flesh, who dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; God, the uncreated, becoming one with His creation, so that creation itself is redeemed from sin and restored to the fullness of order that creation possessed "in the beginning." The matter of humanity, of man and woman created by God to live before God, is contained within this Order of Creation. To attempt to understand our lives as Christian men and women in church, in home, and even in the unbelieving world around us apart from the Order of Creation will prove fruitless and even destructive as we seek to define ourselves from our creaturely perspective. If we wish to serve God as the One who created us; who redeemed us from sin, death, and the power of the

⁵ Christ was not averse to appealing to the Order of Creation, i.e., Matthew 19: 4-6.

devil; as the One who guides us into all holiness faith and hope—then we must serve Him according to His Word—the Word which establishes the Order of Creation.

Theses on the Order of Creation

As we are committed to using Scripture itself to understand the Order of Creation, we would do well to establish the basic teachings we find in the Genesis accounts. Following are ten theses derived by reading Scripture in a straightforward manner, trusting that the Lord desires us to understand these matters in a simple, yet profound way.⁶ We do well to disregard those who would claim that Scripture is too obscure concerning the Order of Creation or that these matters are too complicated for us to grasp. Above all, we must regard these matters as God’s own Word, and refrain from indulging any suspicion that the words we read are merely a fallible human attempt to explain the meaning of our existence. Like all of Scripture, these words are written that you may believe, and believing, have life, both now, and in eternity, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (John 20: 31) Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

Thesis I: All things created are created by the pre-existent Word of God.

Before engaging a study of the “beginning” of Genesis 1: 1, it is good to consider the Prologue to the Gospel according to St. John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” (John 1: 1-4) The Word, Jesus Christ, existed before the beginning of creation. With the Father and the Spirit, Christ is Creator of all things created. For our own convenience, we often ascribe the work of creation to the Father, as Luther did for the sake of teaching the Small Catechism, but with the Trinity, it’s all for one, and one for all. The pre-incarnate Christ was not only present at creation, but instrumental in Creation. We should not wonder at the willingness of Christ to redeem that which He created “in the beginning,”

⁶ The first 7 theses are derived principally from the first three chapters of Genesis; the remaining three, the New Testament.

Thesis II: The very process of creation is not simply making, but also ordering.

We also note that “In the beginning...the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep.” (Genesis 1: 1-2) In other words, it wasn’t complete; it wasn’t in order; it wasn’t yet pronounced “good.” It was in a state of chaos. For the earth to be “without form and void” and for darkness to be “over the face of the deep” is a state of affairs that cannot abide. The remainder of chapter one shows God, by the power of His creative Word, bringing order out of disorder. Light and dark separated. Day and night established. Waters above separated from waters below. Dry land brought forth. Plants and trees sprout from the ground, ready to reproduce. The lights of the heavens are established, along with the seasons and days and years. Every living creature, in sea and in sky and on land, is commanded to multiply and fill the earth. Not haphazardly; not as some kind of divine experiment so that God could see what would happen, but according to plan. This recital of God’s creativity evokes in us a sense of awe and wonder as we sense the determination of our Triune God to create for us a world in which all things are properly and graciously ordered.

Thesis III: That which is created and placed in order is pronounced to be “very good” by the Creator.

That which was created “in the beginning” was declared to be very good by the Lord Himself. The concept of good means “useful, fitting, and healthy.” That which is good enhances life. That which is good brings joy and satisfaction. In Genesis, this is a divine judgment, not a human sentiment. We see that the culmination of creation is the making of mankind. “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” (Gen. 1: 27) Mankind is to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1: 28, 29) Mankind is to enjoy the use of every plant and tree. “And it was so.” (Gen. 1: 30b) All things complete. All things in proper order. Nothing left to do but pronounce it a job very well done, and to proclaim the Sabbath. (Genesis 2: 1-3) But there is more to say in Genesis about this creation. The subject of man and woman receives special attention.

Thesis IV: The creation of Adam and Eve completes creation in a special way.

As noted in the previous thesis, mankind is given a collective vocation—the calling to reproduce and have rule over the other creatures of the earth. In Genesis, chapter 2, we receive special insight into the details of this divine ordering. A special place is made for the man formed from the dust of the ground—a garden planted by God Himself in Eden. (Gen. 2: 8) This garden provides both employment for the man and provides his food—all part of the divine, gracious ordering of creation. (Gen. 2: 15-16) Even the making of other creatures—the beasts of the fields and the birds of heaven—are for the sake of this man, so that he should not be alone. (Gen. 2: 18-19) The Lord God brings these creatures to the man so that the man might give them names and participate in this conspicuous task of ordering creation. Here we find the man called *Adam* for the first time (Gen. 2: 20). All is good, but not quite *very* good, for the final bit of creation and ordering must be completed: the provision of a helper fit for Adam. Eve is made from the rib of Adam. She is brought *by the Lord God* to the man, and we have Woman and Man together, bone of bone, flesh of flesh, a unity which we call the order of marriage. (Gen. 2: 9) The pattern is set for the fruitfulness and multiplying that will fill the earth. All is in order—and the man and his wife are naked, and not ashamed. There is no need for guilt or even self-consciousness, for they are still conformed to the image of God, and all is right in the world.

**Thesis V: The “image of God” means Adam and Eve were
living within God’s will and order.**

What does it mean that man (both male and female!) is created in God’s image? While many answers have been given (sometimes very imaginatively!), we, as Lutherans, can appreciate the simple way in which the Lutheran confessions explain what this means: “They had God’s Law written into their hearts.”⁷ This law is not to be identified simplistically as an awareness of a moral or ethical code, but rather as an innate understanding of God’s will for them and an unquestioning acceptance of their place in the divine order. We remember that into Adam was breathed “the breath of life,” and this divine impartation is different from the life given to other creatures. We see that God communicated with the man and woman directly,

⁷ Formula of Concord, Epitome, VI 2

instructing them to work in the garden, directing them as to what plants and trees were safe for eating (and which tree— “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2: 16) —they must avoid!). We know that “in the beginning,” creation was still in perfect order and that harmony reigned—a blessed existence in which man and woman worked within their callings in perfect blessedness and contentment, Adam working and keeping the garden with Eve as his helper. Without the coming curse of sin, Adam and Eve knew no jealousy, no contention, no struggle for dominance. They were blessedly happy being exactly who the Lord God created them to be.

Thesis V: Adam and Eve receive different, yet complementary vocations.

In Genesis 2: 15, we saw that the Lord God “took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” We might miss the spiritual implications of these words unless we recognize that the Hebrew word translated as “put” actually comes from a root related to “rest,” i.e., when the people of Israel are to rest in the Promised Land (Psalm 95: 11). Contrary to our expectation, Adam is placed into the Garden to “rest” by *working* the Garden and *keeping* it. These “resting” words have overtones of spiritual service throughout the first five Old Testament Books. For Adam, his work is not toil but the opportunity to worship the Lord God by doing exactly what he was called to do within the Order. This he begins to do (see Thesis IV), but the goodness of the created order is not as good as it must necessarily be until Eve is provided as a helper (i.e., as a “helpmeet” in the King James Version).

Eve’s designation as “a helper fit” for the man is the source of much distress in our churches. The word “fit” is basically neutral by itself, as “fit” simply implies one who literally “fits” a need. The problem is that being a *helper* is seen as an inferior position. To be a *helper* is to be one relegated to a secondary position. To be a *helper* is somewhat demeaning. Yet our chosen English word⁸ doesn’t quite do full justice to the Hebrew referent. God Himself is described by the same word as the one who comes to the aid of His people in distress. In essence, the woman, as woman, provides help to the man in order that the will of God may be accomplished within the Order of Creation. Woman and man are created to work together as part of the plan. Two are better than one.

⁸ Almost every English translation has a variation of *help* or *helper* with the exception of the Contemporary English Translation (CEV) which translates the Hebrew as “partner.”

Together, man and woman are complete. Apart, they are lacking. Together, they can joyfully and contentedly and communally accomplish the blessed work which is not really work at all, at least not until the shattering of their blessedness by advent of sin.

Thesis VI: The Fall into sin is a rejection of God's will and order.

We have seen that the Lord God created all things, ordered all things, and that the culmination of such creating and ordering was the edenic estate of man and woman living in a state of blessed contentment and harmony. We all know what happened next—the diabolical monkey wrench thrown into the works; the diabolical words of the serpent challenging Eve (and Adam) to disbelieve the Word of God which had created all things and ordered all things for good. In essence, the temptations of Satan always challenge the goodness and truthfulness of what God has said and done. Part of God's gracious ordering of the life of Adam and Eve in the garden was the clear warning that they could not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Gen. 2: 17)

The serpent is indeed crafty. He asks a deceptively simple question, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3: 1) It sounds as if he simply wants confirmation, but it encourages Eve to think in ways that she should not. She ponders the actual wording of God's command and the variety of interpretations that could be made. She can indulge in a bit of creative exegesis, coming to her own understanding of the “real” meaning behind the clear Word of God. She ponders the possibilities for justifying going after the “good for food, delightful to the eye, and desirable for making her wise” fruit hanging before her very eyes, (Gen. 3: 6) and she makes the fatal judgment that she can re-order and re-make her reality to suit her desires. All that is required is an initial suspension of her original belief that God is good and will not lie. Perhaps the disbelief is not overt, but rather only a suspicion that God might be, through His Word, trying to keep her from some knowledge or pleasure she thinks she has a right to.

Adam, too, takes the fruit, generously shared by Eve, and eats. He, too, suspends his belief in God's gracious ordering of creation. He, too, has presumed to know better than the Word of God. Now they will discover that rejecting the will and order of their creator necessarily

subjects them to the cursedness that can lead to eternal death and damnation. Their eyes are opened; they know guilt and shame; they cover their nakedness and attempt to hide themselves from the presence of God. Yet the Lord seeks them out, and does not destroy, but engages them in conversation; the Word having words with those who rebelled against His Word. (Gen. 3: 7-13) It will be a conversation that leads to the uncovering of sin; to the confession of sin, and to the promise of a sovereign remedy—redemption accomplished by God Himself.

Thesis: VII: God proves to be good and gracious to His creation in spite of the Fall.

We often dwell on the curses pronounced in the remainder of chapter three. We mourn for Adam and Eve, fallen from grace; we mourn for ourselves as their heirs. We are forcefully reminded of the curses against Adam and Eve every time a woman endures the pains of childbirth; every time her heart is cut to the quick by the disobedience and faithlessness of her children; every time her relationship to her husband/boyfriend/significant other degenerates into a struggle for dominance and control rather than the experience of harmony; every time a man rules over his wife/girlfriend/significant other in a selfish and self-serving way; every time a man is frustrated and thwarted by thorns and thistles, whether real or metaphorical; every time a bead of sweat falls from a man's overworked brow; every time any of us experience death, the fulfillment of God's judgment that the dust that sins shall return to dust. These lead us to mourn our sin deeply.

Yet, we should recognize that all these consequences of sin are the necessary consequence of rebelling against the Order of Creation. This is not the way things should be; nor is it the way things shall stay. In the midst of the curses is the promise of a Savior—an offspring who shall crush (and thus decisively destroy) the head of the serpent. (Gen. 3: 15) Mankind may be damaged, but the damage may, and will, be restored. The will of God will be done and the Order of Creation will be restored. He who was in the beginning with God, and who is God, Jesus Christ Himself, is even now preparing to return in glory, and creation will be recreated and set in order once more. And we, who are joined to Him by faith, are already practicing, however

imperfectly, for that day when order will be restored. The Order of Redemption does not supersede or replace the Order of Creation, but makes it holy once more.⁹

Thesis VIII: Christ has come (and will come) to redeem the Order of Creation.

In a sense, the redemption of Creation is a done deal. “It is finished!” was Christ’s proclamation from the cross. Sin, death, and devil are crushed underfoot. Order is re-established. Yet, we do not yet see the reality. It remains hidden for a time, yet we know that in Christ all things are made new. Not different in order. But order newly restored. We in these End Times are learning to be as Adam and Eve were before the Fall. The image of God is being restored. But we’re slow, dull, stubborn learners. One of the chief lessons to be learned is that the teaching of the Order of Creation frees us to be who we were created to be. Rather than restricting our self-claimed rights and freedoms of choice, the Order of Creation is the way of blessing and life.¹⁰ Christ has come to restore that order. Christ has come that you might have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10: 10)

We note that Christ came to fulfill the Law, and we perhaps have had too narrow an understanding of this accomplishment, as if Christ merely refrained from sinning against the Ten Commandments. (cf. Matthew 5: 17; Luke 24: 44) Christ’s work of redemption and re-creation is as all-encompassing as the first creation. He embodied fidelity to the Order of Creation He Himself created. He put none of it aside. He became part of the order. He became son and brother and teacher and friend. He preached the truth of creation and the order of man and woman in creation (i.e., Matthew 19: 4-5). He submitted Himself to His Father’s will in all things, becoming obedient even unto death, all to reclaim those who had rebelled against that will. He gifts us forgiveness. The slate is wiped clean. Amnesty declared. A fresh start assured. Each day we are privileged by our Baptisms to die to sin and the old ways and arise to live the new way of Christ. The Law may always accuse us as long as we are still in this world and cannot shake loose the sin that clings so closely (Hebrews 12: 1), but it does not *only* accuse. It

⁹ I’m indebted to Dr. Douglas Judsich for this insight: “Theses on Woman Suffrage in the Church,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 41: 3 (July 1977), 44

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 30: 15-20 can be seen as a plea for God’s people to simply live in the Order of Creation.

also reveals to us that the will of God, His Order of Creation, is good and gracious for those who are called to be His own.

Thesis IX: The Church embodies the Order of Creation

Thus, in the Church we take care (or ought to take care) to honor the doctrine of the Order of Creation. It ought be resurrected from obscurity. Contrary to popular opinion and practice, the Church does not exist to do its own thing, or any new thing. We do the things given us to do by the Lord of the Church. We are built on the foundation of the prophets and the apostles, with Christ Himself as the cornerstone. (Ephesians 2: 20-22) Christ's Word is then definitive to our practices, as are the writings of the apostles which we also confess to be Christ's Word. We ought get very concerned when we find the texts cited in the ACELC document so carelessly subjected to novel interpretations or dismissed as irrelevant to contemporary situations. We ought get very concerned when the consensus of the church catholic for thousands of years concerning the meaning of these texts is abandoned by those who feel personally slighted or demeaned by their supposed implications. We ought get very concerned when those who are brothers and sisters in Christ somehow see the very Scripture as the enemy to their agendas and treat Scripture with overt suspicion.

Yet we must take care, as well, not to let our sinful inclinations (whether we are male or female or undetermined) make Scripture say any more or any less than what Scripture does say. We approach the interpretive task with fear and trembling, with prayer and with the help of the community of the Church the guide and advise us. We let the ancient church fathers and the more recent church fathers, especially those who wrote our Lutheran Confessions, enrich our study. We see how the people of God who came before us struggled with the same questions—whether successfully or with dubious results. But we always start with Christ and His Word, and we let the Order of Creation, which is truly foundational, inform our understanding of both doctrine and practice.

We especially take care to encourage all *appropriate*¹¹ service of all people in the Church as they respond to God's gifts of creation, redemption, and recreation by simply being the man or

¹¹ To be *appropriate* means to be in the proper place doing the proper thing at the proper time in the proper way. It means to be in the Order, doing the will of God.

woman they are called to be. In a way, it's that simple. In another way, it's terribly complicated as our mortal flesh and blood struggle against the temptations of the wily serpent. But if we can't discuss these things in the Church and confess to each other that we take the Order of Creation to be a blessing to be cherished and be used with joy—how shall we do so as we live in the world, serving our neighbor and disclosing this blessing of God's ordering to them?

Thesis X: Ultimately, the Order of Creation is not “Law” but Gospel.

We sometimes try to rank doctrines instead of speaking of *the* doctrine of Christ. We confess that all good and salutary *doctrines* are indispensable parts of *doctrine* as a whole. Thus it is with the Order of Creation. It fits with the other parts. You can't tear them apart without doing damage to the whole. We rightly say that justification by grace through faith in Christ is the heart of our doctrine. The Order of Creation gives the deep background of the story of salvation: creation; fall; redemption; restoration; all things put right once more. To teach and preach that the Order of Creation is a set of rules and boundaries which must be respected and obeyed only out of fear of the consequences is to see our Triune God as a tyrant and oppressor. Not so. That's Satan's role. If the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, sets us free, we are free indeed.

The scriptural words involved in the Order of Creation so often debated—submission, headship, authority—need not be seen as words of Law in a narrow sense, as things that must or must not be done upon threat of penalty, but rather as words of Gospel and grace and blessing. This paper is only a brief introduction to the matters considered in the ACELC document. My hope is that we would all return home to our congregations and study the matter of the service of women (and men!) in the church beginning with Genesis and continuing throughout Scripture all the way through Revelation. Make your pastors work with the Hebrew and Greek in a way that they can explain it to you. Most of us need the practice. It is a noble thing to search the Scripture, not as the Pharisees did (John 5: 39-40) but in order to find Christ, who is the heart of Scripture, and His Gospel, which is His gift to you. Seek, and you will find.

In conclusion, I hope you all are willing to help our church reclaim a reverent understanding of the Order of Creation, and let it guide our understandings of the New Testament texts which are debated in the discussions of women's suffrage and the ordination of women.

Perhaps we will be able to learn that both men and women are blessed when they are able to submit themselves to God's Word and live joyfully within the gracious ordering of the Triune God. Men do what they are given to do; women what they are given to do, without coveting the life of the other, but living for the sake of the other. Luther, of course, points us to this blessed way with the simple, yet profound, words of the Catechism:

“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness forever, just as He has risen from the dead, lives, and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.”

This is the Order of Creation and Redemption tied up in a bow. By pondering these things, we may learn what it looks like to live in righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, both men and women alike. Let's not be ashamed of teaching the Order of Creation. It's all grace; it's all gift; it's all *very* good. It's all from our Triune God.