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# **WOMAN**

## **IN THE MINISTRY**

### **OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH**

*J. Robert Jacobson*

As Lutherans we confess that the Word of God in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is normative for the faith and life of the Church. Furthermore, we acknowledge and subscribe the Lutheran Confessions as a correct interpretation of the Scriptures. This means that a Lutheran approach to an issue such as the role of women in the ministry of the contemporary Church will strive before all else to confront the truth as revealed in Holy Scripture and to live in submission to it.

We may consider other factors only at those points where Scripture itself compels us to do so, not sooner; not until we are possessed by the revealed truth which alone is able to assess accurately the significance of such factors. For, "all dogmatic statements must be derived from God's revelation in His Word" says Dr. Schlink, summarizing a recurrent theme of the Lutheran Confessions. "It will, therefore, not do to base dogmatic sentences wholly or even in part, on the impressions of nature or of history round about us, or on ideas of reason or intimations of the emotions. On the contrary, all this manifold material must be subject to the Word of Scripture. Nor can the witness of God in the works of creation serve as a source of knowledge for dogmatics, but only the revelation of God in His Word. Hence the task of

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This paper was written by the author in the context of the work of the Theological Committee, JCILR. While it bears the marks of the other members of the committees as well, it is largely the work of Pastor Jacobson and hence bears his name. Other committee members were L. Gilbertson and W. Ritter.

dogmatics consists in ever anew distinguishing between God's revelation and human religion, God's Word and man's own words." <sup>1</sup>

Thus, in formulating a doctrine of the Church, we have the right to examine extra-biblical factors only at those points where the biblical Word itself equips and compels us to do so. This explains why this treatment of the ministry in the Church deals primarily with biblical and theological factors, though there are many other factors that relate to the subject. But we shall only discover *how* they relate and what they mean if we are attentive to the Word of Scripture above all else.

## OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS

The Genesis account of Creation clearly states (1:27) that the nature of man (*ad'ham*) created in the image of God is male (*ish*) and female (*ish'shah*). Yet, throughout the Old Testament woman is portrayed as subordinated to man because she is living under the curse pronounced upon her (Genesis 3:16) for her major role in the Fall. The Mosaic Law sought to administer justice to male and female evenhandedly <sup>2</sup> and to take account of extenuating circumstances so that women in their weaker social position could not be unfairly treated. <sup>3</sup> Nevertheless in many ways they were regarded as the property of their men, whether fathers, husbands or brothers. <sup>4</sup> Since circumcision, the rite of initiation into God's covenant people, was confined to the males of Israel, <sup>5</sup> women were considered members of Israel only through their men. <sup>6</sup> "The assembly of Israel" consisted only of adult males, <sup>7</sup> and women had their own court in the temple, one step further removed from the Holy of Holies than the Court of Israel. They occupied a separate area in the synagogue. Husbands, addressed their wives as "My Child" and wives addressed their husbands as "My Master." <sup>8</sup>

Though woman is subordinated to man almost everywhere in the Old Testament, her capacity as a spiritual being is never in doubt. She is present

1. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 27.
2. Exodus 21:26 ff.
3. Deuteronomy 22:13-21, 25-27.
4. Exodus 22:16, Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Exodus 20:17; Ruth 4:10, *et multa alia*. Harold Floreen in "The Biblical View of Sex," presented to the Division of Theological Studies, Lutheran Council in Canada, in November, 1969, cautions that "it has often unjustly been argued that the Hebrew woman was the property of the husband" (p. 11). But he concurs that "officially, before the law, the wife had little more than the status of a minor." (p. 21).
5. Genesis 17:9-14, 22-27; Exodus 4:24-26; Leviticus 12:3; Joshua 5:2-7; Judges 14:3.
6. Thus, when they married foreign men they ceased to be reckoned as Jews, although Jewish men who married foreign women remained Jews (cf. Nehemiah 13:23-27, Extra 9 and 10).
7. Joshua 8:35, Exodus 19:15. Note that the Ten Commandments are addressed specifically to men: Exodus 20:17.
8. For further illustrations see Eva Zabolai -- Czekme; "Woman and Total Sociality," *Cooperation at the Church District Level* (Geneva, 1973), pp. 46-57.

when the Torah is read aloud or a festival is celebrated (Ezra 8:2, Deuteronomy 31:9-13, Samuel 1:1-5). She is capable of making efficacious prayer in her own right (1 Samuel 1:10-20). She is instrumental in preparing for God's mighty act of redeeming His people from their bondage in Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

Luther drew attention to Deborah who "ruled over men, land and people" (Judges 4 and 5), the wise woman of Abel (II Samuel 20), and prophetess Huldah (II Kings 22) and Sarah herself (Genesis 21) "who directed her husband and Lord, Abraham, to cast out Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, and God commanded Abraham to obey her."<sup>10</sup>

In at least two significant and rather different passages, the Old Testament holds up a vision of a transformed relationship between man and woman. Whatever may be the obscurities associated with the interpretation of the Song of Solomon, this much is clear: The emphasis throughout is on the complementarity and the reciprocity of the relationship between Solomon and the Shulammite. There is no hint of concern for child-bearing or sin or of subordination in their relationship. There is something strikingly pre-fall or post-redemption about the Garden of their love.

Likewise, in the vision of the prophet Joel (2:28-29), which Peter sees fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17 ff), man and woman share fully the gifts of God's Spirit without distinctions of sex, age or social status. This is seen as the direct result of the outpouring of His Spirit on all flesh for the purpose of enabling "all who call upon the name of the Lord to be delivered." (2:32)

In summary we may say that the Old Testament establishes the spiritual dignity of both male and female created in the image of God. It takes seriously the curse resulting in woman's subordination to man. It never loses sight of the spiritual capacity of woman and does not hesitate to draw attention to women whom God enables to rise above the curse. Finally, it invites us to contemplate a mighty act of God which will supersede and invalidate the curse once and for all.

## **THE WITNESS OF JESUS CHRIST**

The Gospel records cite numerous examples of the way in which Jesus' attitude toward woman offended and instructed those who were accustomed to what was thought to be self-evident and proper at that time. Of course He conducted His ministry within the limits of what was possible in the Jewish society of His time: the Twelve were all men and the official witnesses to the resurrection all had to be male (1 Corinthians 15:5ff, cf. Mark 16:7). But He insisted on treating women as children of God in their own right.

He accepted both their company in His travelling band and their financial support (Luke 8:1-3). When He engaged the Samaritan woman in an open

9. Note the prominent roles of the Hebrew mid-wives; of Moses' mother and sister and later his wife, of the Egyptian princess (Exodus 1-4).

10. "Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers" (1532). Luther's point is that, whatever else may be unclear about how these women obtained the right to rule, they did so under proper authorization.

conversation in a public place, his disciples “marveled that He was talking with a woman” (John 4:27) because a woman was not supposed to speak even to her own husband in the street.<sup>11</sup> By welcoming the love offering of the “woman of the city, who was a sinner” (Luke 7:37) Jesus horrified his host (7:39) and scandalized the other invited guests (7:49).

He commended Mary for breaking the role expected of her by her sister in order to assume a position at His feet normally reserved only for male disciples (Luke 10:38-42, cf. Acts 22:3). To the woman who anointed His body at Bethany, He offered high praise for being much more spiritually perceptive than His own disciples (Mark 14:3-9).

In answer to the question of the Sadducees about the whole levirate marriage principle (Deuteronomy 25:5ff). He left the crowds astonished (Matthew 22:33), and the Sadducees speechless (22:34) by pointing them forward to the new order “in the resurrection” which invalidated the very premise of their question: If those who rise from the dead “neither marry (men) nor are given in marriage (women), but are like angels in heaven,” then one can no longer ask “Whose will she be?” nor assume that some man will “have her as wife” (Mark 12:23-25). Thus it was surely with design that our resurrected Lord appeared first of all to the women, even though their testimony was unacceptable as an official witness to their own age.

Jesus’ attitude toward woman was as revolutionary as His attitudes toward God, the Law and the Sabbath; perhaps even more so, since the Church has found it easier to adjust to His attitudes toward God, the Law and the Sabbath than to His attitude toward women.<sup>12</sup>

## THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

We cannot ignore the fact that the practice of the New Testament Church consisted of a mixture of the old and the new in varying proportions. On the one hand there was a profound respect for many of the patterns of the past; on the other hand, there was an awareness of an entirely new shape of things because of the work of Jesus Christ.

The old and the new interplay almost everywhere in the New Testament. Prophetesses were not uncommon (Acts 21:9, 1 Corinthians 11:5), yet their ministry was generally conducted in circumstances that acknowledged their subordination to men (1 Corinthians 11:16). Normally, women were not permitted to ask questions (1 Corinthians 14:34-35) or even to speak in the assembly at all (1 Timothy 2:11-12).

The Christian home was marked by a new dynamic of mutual subjection “out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21), but this expressed itself in the subjection of the wife to the husband “as to the Lord” even as the husband was called upon to love and give himself up for his wife, as Christ does for the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). Peter thought of woman as “the weaker sex” even in a Christian marriage, but he enjoined husbands to treat their wives

11. Cf. Zabolai -- Czekme, p. 47.

12. Eva Zabolai -- Czekme, p. 51.

considerately and with honour since they are both "joint-heirs of the grace of life." (1 Peter 3:7)

In his letter to the Romans (16:1-2) Paul sent especially warm greetings to the deaconess Phoebe, acknowledging that he had benefited much from her influence over him.<sup>13</sup> To the Corinthians who were using what they regarded as their Christian freedom to foster spiritual snobbishness, factiousness, disorder in worship and disregard for the word of the cross, Paul tended to stress the old, the tried and true, the orderly. But to the Galatians who were in danger of yielding to a rigid legalism Paul expressed his boldest vision of the new.

We may expect the word of truth for the Church today also to lie somewhere within this tension between the old and the new, the "order of creation" and the "order of salvation." Each time the Church prays the prayer which the Lord has given His people, He is equipping us to live within this tension: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Let us look first at Paul's vision of the new and its effect on the Church at various stages of its life.<sup>14</sup>

## THE KEY

The key passage expressing Paul's vision of the new is Galatians 3:25-29. "But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female (literally 'there is not male *and* female,' in studied imitation of Genesis 1:27); for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

The Mosaic Law had its place before faith came: it was the "custodian" of God's people during their spiritual childhood, says Paul. But now in Christ Jesus we enter into our full inheritance as heirs (cf. 4:1-7). Through baptism we have put on Christ and become Abraham's offspring. This means that certain distinctions of status enshrined in the Law which came 430 years after Abraham (3:17) no longer apply to his offspring, who like him are children of promise (3:14, 4:28) through the redemption wrought by Christ (3:13, 4:4 f). These specifically are Jew and Greek (i.e. circumcised and uncircumcised -- 5:6), slave and free, male and female. These distinctions served God's purposes usefully for a time under the Law, but now in Christ they simply are no more.

The first of these distinctions in status -- Jew-Greek -- is central to Paul's specific concern with the Galatians. He openly acknowledges that the Church in the first two decades of its existence is still struggling to realize in its

13. Joseph A. Burgess, *Can Women Serve in the Ordained Ministry?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1973), p. 14, points out that "the word 'helper' in this verse is the noun form of the verb translated 'be over,' 'rule' in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 and 1 Timothy 5:17."

14. We are indebted for much of the following to Dr. Krister Stendahl's monograph, *The Bible and the Role of Women* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 28-37.

day-by-day life the meaning of the fact that this distinction no longer exists, despite the clear decision of the Jerusalem Council to that effect (2:1-10).

He chronicles the agonies of the early Christians as they sought the Lord's will in this matter (2:11-21). He insists that the integrity of the Gospel itself is at stake (2:21, 5:4). Failure to press for the embodiment of the Jew-Greek oneness in the life of the Church constitutes transgression (2:18), nullification of the grace of God (2:21), betrayal of the cross of Christ (6:12-15, cf. Acts 11:17). For Paul in the letter to the Galatians, the lines are clearly drawn.

Yet he responds differently to the same issue in different circumstances! At Lystra (Acts 16:3) "because of the Jews that were in those places" Paul had Timothy circumcised even though the Jerusalem Council itself had just permitted him to forego circumcising Titus (Galatians 2:3, Acts 15:5ff). In Jerusalem he once again submitted to Jewish customs which he regarded as superseded in Christ (Acts 21:17-26, cf. Romans 14:13ff) for the express purpose of giving the impression that the Jew-Greek distinction still meant something to him (in contrast to Philippians 3:2-9!). To the Galatians, the Romans (3:30-4:12), the Colossians (2:11-13) and the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:18-19) he pressed the matter because of their critical role in the mission to the Gentiles. But at Lystra and in Jerusalem he eased off.

The two determining factors for him in deciding whether to press the matter or to ease off are identified by Scripture as the context (Acts 16:3) within which the Church seeks to carry out its mission and the attitude (Acts 21:20f) of the Church's members themselves.

The second distinction of status, enshrined in the Law, which Paul designates as dissolved in Christ, is the slave-free. This is instructive for us in a rather different way. Nowhere is Paul adamant that every trace of this distinction be erased at once from a congregation's life. Instead, he admonishes slave-owners to render slaves the same service that slaves render them, since "He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him" (Ephesians 6:5-9, cf. Colossians 3:22-4:1). Similarly, Paul all but commands Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother and freed man in Christ (Philemon 9, 12, 15-16). So the power of the new status conferred on free and slave alike is decidedly at work in the life of the New Testament Church. Yet, no one pushed for the abolition of slavery in the New Testament Church.

There were several reasons why Paul did not urge the abolition of slavery immediately within the Church, though he proclaimed its abolition in Christ. In the first place, he believed that the New Testament Church was living in the last generation of this age; for that specific reason the slaves and the unmarried were exhorted to "remain in whatever state each was called" (1 Corinthians 7:17-31). Since "the form of this world is passing away" and "the appointed time has grown very short," Christians could be expected to make quite tolerable arrangements on a temporary basis within "the form of this world."

It was not really asking too much to expect them to witness from within their current situation just a little longer in view of our Lord's imminent return. Unlike the Jew-Greek distinction, the universal proclamation of the Gospel did

not depend on the immediate dissolution of the slave-free distinction in the Church. Given this understanding of the Church's context for mission, Paul's advice to masters and slaves was about as radical as it could get.

In later years, when the Church found itself called to live as God's people down through the centuries and was able to wield a significant influence in changing the fabric of society, it rightly reassessed its responsibility to see that God's will should "be done on earth, as it is in heaven" (cf. Luke 19:11-27) in this matter.

The work of liberating the oppressed through the power of the Gospel goes on, and few indeed are those who call for a return to slavery because it was practised within the First Century Church. The work of Christ as proclaimed in Galatians 3:28 is the power of God to "proclaim release to the captives . . . and to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18), whoever they may be.

## THE DISTINCTION OF MALE-FEMALE

The third distinction of status upheld by the Law but superseded by Christ is male-female. The fact that Paul cites Genesis 1:27 here <sup>15</sup> demonstrates that the scope of Christ's transforming power is not limited only to that subordination which may be traced back to the Fall and the curse of Genesis 3:16 (cf. 1 Timothy 2:14). It also extends to whatever subordination may be traced right back to the original act of creation itself as described in Genesis 1:27 (cf. 1 Timothy 2:13). Baptism into Christ obliterates any ranking of women below men and provides for entrance into full spiritual maturity in God's family irrespective of sex.

Paul clearly expresses a truth here which we have already noted at work in the ministry of Jesus. Our Lord's attitude toward women was determined not by what they had been in the past, but by what they would become "in the resurrection" and were already becoming in Him. In the matter of the status of women in the Church, Jesus and Paul call us to engage in a constant confrontation between things as they are (the order of creation) and things as they are becoming in Christ (the order of salvation).

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Paul himself gives us some important clues about how to conduct this confrontation. The church at Corinth was in danger of disintegrating into rival sects concentrating on private religious experiences and despising the word of the cross. Many were dissipating the energies derived from their Christian freedom in various forms of spiritual narcissism (3:1-3) rather than using them "for the common good" (12:7) in the service of Christ and His mission.

Such immaturity cannot handle its freedom. Unlike the apostles (4:8-13, 9:19-27), it does not know how to find its fulfillment in the service of Christ.

15. *ouk eni arsen kai thelu*, technical terms for "male and female" elsewhere used in this phrase in the New Testament only in Mark 10:6 and Matthew 19:4, which are also citing Genesis 1:27. The character of this phrase as a quotation is obvious also from the way it interrupts the series *ouk oude*.



Therefore, Paul invokes the Law again in its capacity as “custodian,” and precisely those aspects of it (11:3, 7-9) which in Galatians 3:28 he declares to be superseded in Christ! Yet he never loses sight of what has happened “in the Lord” (11:11-12) and will be normative for the age to come in the order of salvation.

Furthermore, in pressing for restraint in the freedom permitted women in the worshipping assembly, Paul goes beyond the Law and those customs derivable from it (11:2-12) and appeals to the social customs of the time (11:13-15).<sup>16</sup> Thus Scripture again introduces into the confrontation between the word of the Gospel and the practices of the Church the element of social context -- an element which can play a manifestly different role at different times and places.

To be faithful to Christ (Matthew 18:15-20, 10:25-28, 23:1-11), to Paul (1 Corinthians 3:1-15, cf. Hebrews 5:11-6:3), to Luther (WA 18:62-125, 134-214) and to our Confessions (Ap. IV, 2f LC I, 91f, II, 38) we must measure the Church in every age, both in the First Century and in the Twentieth, by the Doctrine of the Gospel (*doctrina evangelii*).

But what of all the New Testament passages in which some sort of subordination structure is applied to male-female relations even among Christians? We do not need to occupy ourselves here with the detailed exegesis of all these texts because there is little disagreement among commentators on their meaning as they stand.<sup>17</sup> They apply both to the Christian home and to the Christian Church.

In 1 Timothy 2:11-15 we have “a conscious parallelism between subordination to men in the home grounded in the order of creation, and subordination in the congregation to the teachers.”<sup>18</sup> This same parallelism surfaces in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and throughout 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. Thus it cannot reasonably be argued that these texts favour retaining subordination structures in the home as a part of the order of creation and disposing of them in the Church as part of the order of salvation. It is not the literal understanding of the meaning of the texts that poses a problem for us, but the degree to which we see them as applicable to the Church today. The problem is inescapable because no one any longer applies all of them at face value.

The fact that most of them (1 Corinthians 7:16, Ephesians 5:21ff, Colossians 3:18-19, 1 Peter 3:1-7) are found in parallel with equally forceful passages dealing with the master-slave relationship (1 Corinthians 7:17-24, Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22-4:1, 1 Peter 2:18ff) lends them a further inescapable quality of tentativeness, especially in the light of Galatians 3:28 and Joel 2:28-29.

These factors compel us to address the question of whether these passages only reflect the state of the never-ending confrontation between the Doctrine of

16. Note that in 11:14 “nature” (*physis*) refers to what was regarded as “natural” within Corinthian society. If by “nature” the apostle had meant what we understand by “nature” it would have been an argument against the point he was making.

17. Excellent exegetical work is found in the 1956 *Proceedings of LC-MS*, II, E5, as well as in the 1969 LC-MS document, “Women Suffrage in the Church.” See also Stendahl, pp. 28-32; and Raymond Tiemeyer, *The Ordination of Women* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970).

18. Stendahl, p. 29.

the Gospel and the practices of the Church at a given point in time or whether they may be understood as forming a part of the Doctrine of the Gospel itself. Is this order of creation inflexible or is it as flexible under the impact of the order of salvation as the master-slave order has proved to be?

## GUIDELINES FOR RESPONSE

The New Testament itself provides us with fully adequate guidelines for responding satisfactorily to this question. Most of these guidelines have been identified above.

Paul's experience with the Church of his time in the struggle to embody the Jew-Greek oneness in the Church's life demonstrates clearly that factors of social pressure (Acts 16) and congregational attitude (Acts 21) can be sufficient reasons to prevent that embodiment or to restrain it. They can forestall the application of a clearly defined evangelical truth (Acts 15, Galatians 2) to the life of the Church in a given time and place, even when it is possible to apply it successfully elsewhere.

If this is true of their influence on the Jew-Greek oneness struggling to be embodied in the Church's life, it must be true *a fortiori* of their influence on the slave-free and the male-female onenesses! Yet we must note that Paul does not shrink from insisting on the Jew-Greek oneness in those congregations that were able to receive it. This is true not just in those that were able to receive it without conflict, but in those that were able to receive it at all. Where they were able to receive it at all, the integrity of the Gospel was at stake in their receiving it, not just potentially but actually (Galatians 2:11ff). The order of salvation in Christ strains the order of creation to the limits of the possible. And as those limits expand, the Church is called upon to realize in its life that much more of the order of salvation or else finds its integrity called into question. The slave-free issue is a vivid example of this process.<sup>19</sup>

The "orders of creation"<sup>20</sup> are not static, as in the watch-maker philosophy of Descartes. Rather, the Bible reveals a God who is actively and redemptively at work within His creation at all times, as our Confessions declare.<sup>21</sup>

Salvation history, culminating in the Exodus of Israel and the Glorification of Jesus Christ, is the result of God's gracious activity in rearranging His orders and making entirely new possibilities available to His people in covenant with Him. In doing this He may transform not only those arrangements by which

19. For other examples, see Burgess, p. 6. Of course, in times of apostasy the process can also work in reverse, as illustrated in SA, Part II and throughout Ap.

20. For an excellent summary of the history and the varied content of this term see Edward H. Schroeder, "The Orders of Creation — Some Reflections on the History and Place of the Term in Systematic Theology," *Concordia Theological Monthly* (Vol. XLIII, No. 3, March 1972), pp. 165-178.

21. LC II; SC II. Elert in *Morphologie des Luthertums*, Vol. II, pp. 49-67 (cited by Schroeder), points out that for Luther the most concrete and venerable orders of creation, such as states, economic life, mores and social stratification are "mutable and transient," "in the process of living evolution." The German term rendered into English as "orders of creation" is "Schoepfersordnungen," literally "the Creator's orderings," which preserves the essential element of the dynamic involvement of the Creator in the molding and fashioning of His order.

He has ordered human life after the Fall (Galatians 3:28a,b) but even those established before the Fall (Galatians 3:28c).

It is true that His people must live within the existing orders of creation, but not in such a way as to fail to respond to the new opportunities for redemptive living which He creates for them (Isaiah 28:9-22, Acts 13:38-41). In their common life His people must be prepared to embody as full an expression of the order of salvation as circumstances permit. We all rejoice that the order of creation described in the New Testament passages dealing with masters and slaves has in many places passed into quiet irrelevance due to the impact made on it by the order of salvation over the years. It seems very clear to us that the same thing is now in the process of happening to the male-female order of creation.

If this is so, then we must not seek to retain male-female subordination structures at all costs because they were normative in the New Testament Church any more than we seek to retain master-slave structures for that same reason. Our efforts to square the practice of the contemporary Church with that of the First Century Church will be limited to the one relevant question: Given our social contexts, our congregational attitudes and our understanding of the Church's mission in an era that has lasted not 50 years but 1950 years, how much of the order of salvation is it possible for us to realize in the Church's life now as compared with them?

This question leads us to ponder the fact that the First Century Church would certainly have been in violation of the order of creation if it had attempted at that time to embody more fully its male-female oneness in Christ in its life, whereas the Church in many situations today might well be in violation of the order of creation if it fails to embody that oneness more fully. Nor can we ignore the fact that the Church is often called upon to be an instrument of the Creator in transforming the order of creation, as in Acts 10 and 11 and 15. In 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 Paul shares his vision of the course of history moving from one order to the next and culminating in God's becoming "everything to everyone."

## THE WITNESS OF THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

The possibility of women serving in the ordained ministry of the Church was not envisioned by the writers of the Lutheran Confessions. Elsewhere, however, Luther declared that "women are priests, like all Christians," and "a woman can baptize and administer the word of life, by which sin is taken away, eternal death abolished, the prince of the world cast out . . ." <sup>22</sup> He even envisioned the hypothetical possibility of a woman's being ordained to the public ministry in the absence of a suitable man -- a situation from which the Holy Spirit would surely spare His Church! <sup>23</sup>

Although the Confessions themselves never treat the matter directly, they do have much to say about the ministry and the source of its authority: "Besides,

22. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Volume 10, pp. 23, 25.

23. WA 8, 497f.

the ministry of the New Testament is not bound to places and persons, as the Levitical priesthood is, but is spread abroad through the whole world and exists wherever God gives His gifts, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers. Nor is this ministry valid because of any individual's authority but because of the Word given by Christ."

The German version goes on to explain: "The person adds nothing to this Word and office commanded by Christ. No matter who it is who preaches and teaches the Word, if there are hearts that hear and adhere to it, something will happen to them according as they hear and believe. . ." <sup>24</sup> If the ministry is validated by the Word rather than by the person who preaches and teaches the Word, then the authority for ministry is not dependent upon any intrinsic characteristic of the minister, such as sex.

This fact is evident in both the Old and the New Testaments where women on occasion exercised functions of the public ministry (e.g. 1 Corinthians 11:5, Acts 18:26 and 21:9). Wherever their role is explicitly limited, the limitation is accounted for by their subordinate position in the order of creation. If that limitation is dissolved through baptism in to Christ and if the Church is in a position to realize this saving work of Christ in its life in this world, then all the pertinent biblical data are in and the Church may no longer disqualify women from serving in the ordained ministry on biblical or confessional grounds.

## THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

But is the Church actually in a position to realize the male-female oneness in its life today? Are there situations where to try to do so would be as self-defeating as if Paul had attempted to enact in Jerusalem the Jew-Greek oneness he called for in Galatia? Or, on the other hand, do we have Corinthian situations in which disrespect and immature spiritual enthusiasm prevail -- situations that still require the custodial use of the Law before a responsible Christian freedom can emerge? Possibly. It is not reasonable for the Church today to expect to be exempted from all the agony and ambiguity Paul faced. On the other hand, it is encouraging to consider the issue today from the standpoint of the criteria Paul used in his day to determine whether or not to press for more conformity to the order of salvation in the life of the Church.

The social context of the Church today favours the embodiment of the male-female oneness in its life. The attitude of Church people themselves is more receptive to the possibility than ever before. <sup>25</sup> Over half the world's Lutheran Churches ordain women today. The trend within our society -- what Paul calls "nature" in 1 Corinthians 11:14 -- teaches us that the status of women is moving so fast in the direction of equality that we are endangered now by its perilous caricature -- equality! This means that society's increasing receptiveness to male-female oneness is accompanied by a serious need, the

24. "Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope", Tappert, 324:26.

25. Tiemeyer, p. 41.

need to learn how to distinguish between a liberating equality and an enslaving equality. Here the Church is challenged to bear an incisive witness to the truth.

Equality and equality are indeed not the same thing. Equality denotes "sameness" and can undermine and pervert the search for equality which simply means the freedom to be fully and authentically oneself. Within the Body of Christ equality means the freedom to bring the fullness of who one is into the service of the Body and its ministry in the world. Equality can never involve a "usurping of authority"<sup>26</sup> or a denying of the proper role of another, whereas equality often does.

Equality means that each member, male or female, is free to bring to the Church's fullness precisely what he or she has received as a gift from Christ for the common good. The proper exercising of such gifts within the Church can have a corrective and redemptive influence even on those outside the Church who are carried away by the egalitarianism of our age. For in Christ we are freed to serve, freed to share our gifts and benefit from others', freed to live under the authority of the Word that judges and saves us. This male-female oneness is complementary, not co-extensive, yet perfectly free to overlap wherever it does. It may be that new shapes of ministry will emerge as the Church seeks to make optimum use of new configurations of gifts God places at its service through women called into the ministry of the Word and Sacraments.

26. For a superior study of the meaning of this expression found in 1 Timothy 2:12, see the 1956 LC-MS Proceedings, II E. 5.

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