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# THE ROLE OF WOMEN

  

## IN THE CHURCH

*Ernest G. Goos*

The role of women in the church needs to be viewed from the perspective of the perfect freedom under the Gospel of which Jesus says, "When the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." In the context of this freedom Paul writes, "There is neither Jew, nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

### *IN THE MINISTRY OF JESUS*

In the ministry of Jesus we note no difference in his treatment of men or women. Jesus is as free to spend a part of his day with a Samaritan woman as he is to spend a good part of a night with the Pharisee Nikodemus. He heals the servant of a nobleman and the daughter of a Syrophoenician woman. He recalls back to life Jairus' daughter and gives the widow of Nain her son out of death.

He is equally free in accepting the service of women. The service of a woman who washes his feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair and anoints them with oil is more acceptable to him than the dinner of the plutocrat Simon, who failed to provide Jesus with the ordinary courtesies of a welcome guest.

He praises Mary who has spent a costly ointment to anoint him for burial and reproves the miserly criticism of Judas who would have had her sell the costly ointment and enrich his treasury. He calls Zachaeus down from the tree because he would enter his home with salvation; but he also makes the home

of Martha and Mary a retreat for himself on his final journey to Jerusalem. For a crowd of women who follow him to his crucifixion he has a word of warning; the small number of women who remain at the cross to the bitter end, while his disciples had fled in fear, he rewards by appearing to them first after his resurrection and making them his messengers to carry the good news to his disciples.

Jesus is significantly free of any preference or prejudice in accepting the service, friendship and fellowship of all who would follow him, without regard to social standing, nationality, or sexual difference. "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:48, 50).

But, did he not choose only men to be his apostles? In response, one needs to observe that the choice of twelve men as his disciples was perfectly natural. The ministry to which they were called was one of which he could say, "foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Moreover, in a society in which women under law and by tradition, were subordinated to men, it was impossible to conceive of a mixed company of closest followers, as one might find in a group today. If the male image can be stressed, it can only mean that men are to lead, not that women should not be equal in service.

Women were among the 120 gathered in the upper room to plan the future ministry and to select a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:4). Women were certainly among the company at Pentecost who received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17-18). Three thousand souls, not exclusively men, were added to the group of believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41). The Christian Church at Philippi owed its beginning to women (Acts 16:14, 15, 40).

## IN THE EARLY CHURCH

In the first Christian Church women not only sewed clothes for the poor but opened their homes for a congregation's worship or an apostle's accommodation. We read of a woman, Priscilla, instructing even an evangelist (Acts 18:26). In Romans 16:1 Paul commends Phoebe, a sister and a deaconess, to the believers in Rome. They are to accord her every consideration as a fellow-worker and help her with whatever assistance she may request. Though her responsibilities and privileges are not further delineated, Paul acknowledges her as a helper in his missionary endeavours. Widows, like Anna (Luke 2:36-38), served in bringing the Gospel to others and were accorded special honour (1 Timothy 5). There were also prophetesses and some of them prophesied in the worshipping congregation (1 Corinthians 11:5).

In the course of time, specific offices for women were initiated. As deaconesses they conducted prayer meetings, supervised the women's side in the worship services, gave pre-baptism instruction, and visited the sick and the poor in the community. The high proportion of women among the martyrs

shows that the enemies of the Christian Church and of Christianity regarded Christian women as significant promoters of the faith.

Soon after the church was founded, it had to guard against sectarian movements which undermined Christian doctrine and brought disgrace upon the Christian way of life among the Gentiles. One such movement had a woman as the leader (Revelation 2:19-23). Is it out of perception of this danger that Paul wrote Timothy, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men," whereas in Galatians 3:28 he had asserted, "There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus"? There can be no question that the Christian attitude toward women was a great improvement over the prevailing attitude in the Greco-Roman world, or even among the Jews.

But the early Christians were not revolutionaries, ready to destroy current patterns of living. Paul encouraged slaves to be obedient to their masters as servants of Christ; their service was to be done with good will as to the Lord, not to men. He also admonished masters to treat their servants as brethren, knowing that they too had a master in heaven. Similarly, he advised wives to submit themselves to their husbands. He also advised husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it. In every way relations of Christians with one another and with non-Christians were to be exemplary and thereby serve powerfully to win others for Christ.

Most women were content to serve their families in their homes. Those who wished to serve beyond their homes served as deaconesses, looking after sick and poor, and helping in instruction of children. Later, in the middle of the sixth century, when asceticism brought "religious" men to congregate in monasteries, leading women organized convents.

## IN THE MODERN ERA

In his day, Luther released nuns from their vows of celibacy; one of them became his wife. Yet that did not change the status of women in church or in society in general. A greater change was brought about by the revival of the diaconate, first in Germany, then also in England, France and the Netherlands. Concurrent with this development in the church in the nineteenth century was the industrial revolution with its influence on the change in women's status.

The industrial revolution brought women into the labour force. In 1848, Queen's College for Women was founded in England which provided women with the benefits of a higher education. By the end of the century, Congregationalists and Baptists admitted women to their ministry.

In the twentieth century, women have been freely admitted to universities and other institutions of higher learning. More and more young women have prepared themselves to serve society as teachers, university instructors, doctors, lawyers, and journalists. Among them have been many Lutherans. There are no professions today where women have not become prominent. Even the clergy roll of many church bodies, including several Lutheran bodies,



have been opened to women.

Lutheran Churches in North America have sent theologically trained women to serve in missions abroad for some time. In a majority of Lutheran congregations women have long enjoyed the vote in congregational meetings. They have been accepted as delegates to church conventions and serve on boards of the church. Some are leaders in Lutheran welfare and social agencies. Yet it is only recently that there has been acceptance of the ordination of women in Lutheran circles.

The question arose first on the continent of Europe. In 1915, when women received electoral rights to Parliament in Denmark, they claimed the right also to be admitted to the clergy roll. The Bishop of Seeland stated that in principle there was nothing to restrict the admittance of women to the ministry. But would congregations want a woman as pastor? When asked for their opinion, a great majority of the church councils voted against having a woman pastor.

In 1924, the question was asked again by theologically trained women. They insisted that there should be legal authority for the appointment of a woman pastor for the prison for women. Most of the bishops did not approve. Thus, in 1928, theologian Ruth Vermehren, with permission from the prison authorities began an unpaid ministry among women prisoners. Her work was greatly appreciated. In 1938, she was employed as assistant to the prison chaplain. But when she requested ordination so she could administer Holy Communion and Baptism, she was refused on the ground that this was only a theoretical case since no congregation had requested a woman pastor.

In 1946, a rural congregation unanimously agreed to call a theologically trained woman as their pastor. Two bishops agreed, one voiced his opposition, others voiced doubts. In a bill passed by parliament in June, 1947, women were given the right to apply for any clerical office. The prison authorities applied to have Ruth Vermehren ordained as pastor at the women's prison. Shortly thereafter a pastor, with the agreement of his church council, applied for a woman assistant pastor. As a result, on April 28, 1948, the ordination of three women took place. By 1966, there were 22 women pastors in Denmark.

Similar things happened in Germany. During World War II many communities were left without pastors. Female theological candidates were ordained to take charge of a number of parishes. In 1947, when more male pastors were available again, women pastors were restricted more to chaplaincies in inner mission institutions, to lectureships in training centres and to roles as directors of youth and women's work. In East Germany congregations in great numbers would not give up their women pastors. Today women pastors enjoy full privileges in ministry, whether as assistants, in special ministries, or as parish pastors.

On this continent the 1970 convention of the Lutheran Church in America heard a presentation of a position paper which stated, "There is nothing in the exercise of the ordained ministry as a functional office which would exclude woman because of her sex." There upon the LCA adopted a motion which urged its members to encourage qualified women to seek and fulfil calls into the ordained ministry. The church also called upon its members vigorously

and creatively to provide a facilitating climate and supportive structures for the process. Subsequently, a number of theologically trained women have received calls to special service or to the parish ministry.

The American Lutheran Church has also approved the ordination of qualified women.

In Canada, the first Lutheran woman theologian candidate, Pamela McGee, was called by the congregation at Morrisburg, Ontario, and received ordination in 1976. Women pastors are also serving congregations in Winnipeg, Manitoba and in Markinch, Saskatchewan.

In a day when women serve in every profession and are accepted in society as leaders in jurisprudence, medicine, politics, and many other fields is the Holy Spirit revealing a potential to us in the church that so far has been hidden?



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