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A Congregational Meeting with Luke

by Stuart L. Love

I am grateful for the invitation to address your congregational meeting on the topic of Women and Christian Ministry. Your hospitality reminds me of the time Martha received Jesus into her home (10:38-42) or of Lydia's hospitality to Paul and Silas after their deliverance from prison (Acts 16:15, 40). I commend your desire to know more about my view of women and Christian ministry. You are like the Bereans who "received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

I did pay particular and positive attention to the topic of women in my gospel,¹ but not as an isolated theme. My special attention to gender was a part of the larger theme of "the poor"—the multitudes in my social world who had been rejected by the religious elite and labeled as "sinners." God does reverse the poverty and powerlessness of the human condition, and women—like the Samaritans and Gentiles, the crippled, the lame, the blind, the deaf, and the sexually mutilated—are persons often excluded from full participation in the fellowship of God's people. It is impossible to do justice to this topic in a few words; for this reason I will confine my comments to (1) three women in the infancy stories, (2) women who extended hospitality to Jesus and (3) a number of women who fulfilled distinctive roles as disciples as they followed Jesus out of Galilee.

Women in the Infancy Stories: Elizabeth, Mary and Anna

I suspect many of you read the birth stories of John and Jesus only at Christmas. The first two

chapters of my gospel contain major themes and basic understandings which are carried forward in both Luke and Acts. My attention will focus on Elizabeth, Mary and Anna.

But first, have you noticed that it is as important *where* something takes place and *who* is present as to *what* is said and done in my writings? Let me illustrate. When Mary and Elizabeth are alone in Zechariah's house (1:40), Mary makes a hymnic speech which spans ten verses (1:46-55) and contains many of my leading themes. As a result, my readers know what Mary *thinks* (a matter seldom considered of women in the writings of my social world). But in other more public settings and/or locations where men are present, I carefully conceal the content of Mary's thoughts. For example, when the shepherds come to Mary and Joseph at the birth of Jesus (2:1-20), I depict Mary as *quietly* turning over in her heart these singular events—that is, she silently seeks understanding concerning what she sees and hears. Or, do you recall the temple scene when Simeon pronounces a blessing over the child and addresses Mary (2:25-35)? Even though I portray Mary as a personification of the people of Israel (Israel will be divided; a sword will cut through Mary's very life), she remains silent.² Finally, when Mary and Joseph find their twelve-year-old son in the temple, Mary addresses Jesus about her anxiety, but the reader is told, "His mother kept all these things in her heart" (2:51; see 1:29).

Here is my point: When women were alone in private settings, such as the instance with Mary and Elizabeth, it was socially acceptable to allow my

readers to hear and read what these godly women prophesied and spoke. But in settings more public or where men were present in my social world, respectable women were to remain quiet or silent.³ Let me illustrate this in another way. In the prophecy from Joel, I quote that in the last days “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17). But when, where and with whom do women prophesy in Luke and Acts? In the privacy of her husband’s house, Elizabeth, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” prophesies with a loud voice to Mary. You read (or hear) every word she utters. But in the case of Anna, even though I deliberately designate this aged widow as a “prophetess” (2:36)–(the only time this word is used in the New Testament), and even though she speaks “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem,” my readers never hear what she actually says. With Simeon, Anna’s counterpart, you hear everything. With Anna, you hear nothing (2:37). Her message is muted. Why is this so? Anna prophesies in the temple, a public location with gender-segregated space (the Court of Women and the Court of Men).⁴ Such public gender-specific spatial realities were quite universal in Greco-Roman society. From a slightly later period, I have heard of a wonderful example from Pliny the Younger. In a letter to Calpurnia Hispulla, Pliny extols his wife for her private interest in his public presentations. At one point Pliny describes his wife as being concealed behind a curtain. Pliny states, “When at any time I recite works, she sits close at hand, concealed behind a curtain, and greedily overhears my praises.”⁵

Consider the case of Philip’s four daughters. Prophecy they do (Acts 21:9), but when Agabus comes down from Judea, it is his prophecy you read as I describe a social situation in which a number of men are present (Acts 21:10-12). Several have commented that I never mention women preaching the gospel. This is so. But what was the gender makeup of the audiences in public, missionary settings in Acts? Read the accounts carefully (Acts 2:14-36; 13:16-43; 17:22-34 as examples). Women may have been present, but the majority in attendance were men, and the speeches were sprinkled with gender-specific references to men.⁶ In contrast, Paul went to a group of women who had come together at the riverside in Philippi (Acts 16:13). That was a bold action on his part. Can you see how radically different my social world was from yours? You need to know how different our lives were so that you can avoid reading the Bible through eyes conditioned by your ways and expectations, and, so that you can meaningfully contextualize the gospel message to your social setting.

Now, let me say a few words about this amazing triad of “righteous” women: Elizabeth,

Mary and Anna. All three came from lowly stations. Elizabeth was the wife of a priest, but her home was the “hill country” of Judea. She was not married to one of the elite urban priests of Jerusalem, and, despite the odds attached to her age and barren condition, she became pregnant according to the angel’s prophecy (1:24). Elizabeth’s prophetic outburst underscored Mary’s honored role: chosen by God to give birth to the Son of the Most High, the mother of a child greater even than John (1:39-45).

Mary, unlike Zechariah, held no official position. She was a woman slave (*doulè*) (1:38, 48). Her lowliness was more than an attribute of personality; it was her objective reality. Her social location was among the poor, the “meek” of her society. So, when she spoke of God’s doing “great things for me” (and by implication for Israel), she understood what it was to be without power. She knew the arrogant were opposite the “lowly” (Prov 3:34; Jas 4:6). Accordingly, she rejoiced in the power and mercy of God. She was the first believer of the “gospel” (1:45), something which cannot be said of Zechariah (1:20). As a betrothed virgin, Mary probably was about twelve to fourteen years old. What a contrast “the mother of my Lord” was to the aged Elizabeth and Anna.

And—Anna—how old was she? Was she a widow for eighty-four years (2:27)? If so, she may have been over a hundred years old. But more important was her status as a devoted widow. She never left the temple grounds but worshipped night and day with fastings and prayers (2:37). Anna is my paradigm for Christian widows who served the early churches with their devoted lives.

How I would like to show you other matters in the infancy stories, such as how I pair men and women—Zechariah and Elizabeth, Zechariah and Mary, Simeon and Anna! I can’t for now, but I encourage you to read, teach and preach these stories afresh, perhaps with new insight. You don’t need to wait until Christmas!

Women and the Theme of Hospitality

Have you considered my treatment of women and the theme of hospitality (table fellowship)? I know that scholars for some time have recognized the relationship of hospitality and God’s fellowship of outcasts; that is, his concern for justice in the treatment of the poor, maimed, lame and blind (Luke 14:13, 21). One scholar has rightly observed that by eating with outcasts Jesus provided an “acted parable” of the Kingdom.⁷ But my treatment of women also underscores God’s concern for outcasts—a key theme of his reign. Read again the stories of particular women such as Elizabeth (ch 1), Mary (chs 1-2), Anna (2:36-38), the widow of Nain (7:11-17), the women who followed Jesus out of Galilee (8:2-3;

23:55; 24:10; Acts 1:12-14), the woman healed in the synagogue on the Sabbath (13:16), and the poor widow who gave up all (20:45-21:4). All of these vignettes help bind my narrative together by highlighting the humble position of women, their socio-religious marginality, their crucial place in the story

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of God's salvation, and their inclusion (pairing) alongside men. But let us take an additional step. There is a direct linkage between women and meals in the stories of Simon's banquet (7:36-50) and Martha's hospitality to Jesus (10:38-42). The first story is of an uninvited outcast woman at a male-centered banquet in the home of a Pharisee. The second two women who receive (not reject) Jesus at a private meal in their home as Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem.

A banquet at Simon the Pharisee's house (7:36-50)

First, let me clarify a couple of points. Simon's meal should not be seen in isolation. It is one of several banquet meals that takes place in the homes of Levi (5:29-39) and two other Pharisees (11:37-52; 14:1-26). I encourage you to read these stories again. As you do, notice that the meal settings in the houses of Pharisees are male-centered and male-dominated with the exception of the woman at Simon's house (7:36-50). In contrast, consider those in attendance at Levi's banquet. Is it possible that those labeled as "sinners" might include women even though they are not specifically mentioned? Now let me make an often overlooked comparison. The woman at Simon's house parallels Levi and Zacchaeus (19:1-10). She, too, renders hospitality to Jesus, not by hosting, preparing, or eating a meal, but by washing his feet and anointing his head (7:44-46). All three of these "sinners" are censured by Jesus' critics (5:32; 7:39; 19:7).

The identity of the woman at Simon's meal has been much debated.⁸ Four matters stand out. First, she is a forgiven "sinner." In this respect she is like Zacchaeus. The scene features her great love and her great forgiveness. Second, she is a "woman of the city." The phrase could simply mean she was "in the town." But I believe more is at stake. What if her "home" was located among "the streets and lanes of the city" (14:21)? If so, then her social station may have been among those who lived and worked within walled-off and/or sequestered areas that housed an assortment of outcasts including prostitutes. The phrase "woman of the city" could then connote a morally negative notion such as "a public woman."⁹ At any rate, she was a social pariah.

Third, she is uninvited. This is significant since meals of this kind were largely male affairs. True, some elite Roman wives attended dinner parties in my time, but this "sinner" is not a Roman matron. Roman hosts often invited courtesans (high-class prostitutes) to such affairs to entertain their male guests with conversation as well as "sexual sport" (like the banquet of Herod Antipas in Mark 6:17-29).¹⁰ But this woman is not such a person. She's not a talker. Throughout the scene she remains silent. Besides, Simon, as a respected Pharisee, would not have invited a courtesan to entertain at a meal given in "honor" of an alleged prophet. The obvious is important. She is uninvited. She "crashes" the banquet and situates herself at the feet of Jesus. She has learned that Jesus "was at table in the Pharisee's house" (7:37). Perhaps she is from among the crowds (8:43-48; 11:27), one of the uninvited who would pass in and out during the festivities of such meals because the door of the dining room was left open. At any rate, her uninvited status reinforces her outcast station.

Finally, the woman, in Simon's eyes, violates established social boundaries. This is Simon's space and Simon's meal. To use the categories of one of your respected anthropologists, Mary Douglas, the woman pollutes the Pharisee's ordered, undefiled, dirt-free place and time.¹¹ All of this heightens my emphasis upon the reversal brought about by the Kingdom of God through Jesus. Simon's boundaries are not Jesus' boundaries. For Jesus, table fellowship is bounded by Kingdom space. And for Jesus, the only time that matters is the Christian fellowship meal. True, there are Kingdom boundaries such as repentance, love and faith. The woman qualifies. So, by allowing the woman to touch him, Jesus receives and reciprocates the woman's hospitality (see 15:2; 19:6) and simultaneously challenges Simon's world view. A religiously driven social crisis has taken place: a polluted public woman has trespassed a male-centered meal in a Pharisee's unpolluted house. To

Simon she is a social deviant, an outcast, probably a prostitute; but to Jesus, she is a model disciple (7:38, 44, 47, 50). Like Mary, the woman “rejoices in God my Savior” for the Lord has done “great things” for her. She knows firsthand that the Lord exalts “those of low degree” and scatters “the proud in the imagination of their hearts” (1:47-53).

Do you catch the importance of all of this? You take for granted that men and women gather around the Lord’s table. But that was not the prevailing way in my social world. What happened at Simon’s meal set the stage for the inclusion of women at early Christian meals. It completely changed the basis for extending hospitality, and it gave hospitality a whole new meaning. The incident validates the statement, “The Son of man has come eating and drinking; and you say, ‘Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (7:34; cf. 5:30; 15:1-2; 19:1-10).

Martha’s meal (10:38-42)

Now, let us look at a very different hospitality scene at Martha’s home. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. The theme of rejection and acceptance of Jesus, the prophet, stands out. Preceding this occasion, Jesus is rejected (shown no hospitality) by the Samaritans (9:52-56) and is confronted by a lawyer (10:25-37). Then, he is “received” (welcomed) into the house of Martha (10:38-42). This is an unusual incident. Two sisters (remember, I make no mention of Lazarus) host a male teacher, Jesus. Mary sits at the prophet’s feet (an acknowledgment of authority; see 7:38; 8:35, 41; 17:16; Acts 4:35, 37; 5:2; 22:3) and listens to his words.¹² Martha, overwhelmed by much serving, asks Jesus to intervene on her behalf. She wants Jesus to settle her domestic conflict with Mary. Jesus, as I show elsewhere (12:13), refuses to play such a role. Instead, he tells Martha she is “anxious and troubled,” that is, she has put herself in an uproar (*thorubazomai*). The “need for only one,” as Luke Johnson points out, refers to “the essential note of hospitality which is to pay attention to the guest; only that is necessary; the rest is optional.”¹³ In this case the guest is a prophet who brings God’s word. Johnson states, “Jesus’ response to Martha makes clear that the ‘one thing necessary’ for hospitality is attention to the guest . . . If the guest is a prophet, the appropriate reception is listening to God’s word!”¹⁴ I know this little story has evoked numerous explanations, but do not forget that Jesus is God’s prophet who brings God’s word (4:16-30). Fredrick Danker states, “Jesus has already dispensed the banquet of life, for Mary has been treated to his word (vs 39). And blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it (8:21).”¹⁵ Please remember

that hospitality in my social world took place under the authority of household leaders. Here, a household is led by a woman and her sister. In Acts, the church is gathered for prayer in the “house of Mary” (Acts 12:12). And don’t forget Lydia. She threw down the gauntlet to Paul after her baptism: “‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ And she prevailed upon us” (Acts 16:15). Paul and Silas kept that date (Acts 16:40).

Women Disciples out of Galilee

Finally, let me turn to an extraordinary group of women—those who followed Jesus out of Galilee. In a sense they parallel the Twelve because they too, alongside the Twelve, “were with” Jesus in his ministry (8:1-3), his death (23:49), his burial (23:55) and his resurrection (24:1-8). In addition they, along with the Eleven, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Jesus’ brothers (Acts 1:14), composed the first Christian community in the upper room. The “upper room” fellowship was originally made up of Galilean disciples who came with Jesus to Jerusalem. This community of faith was the nucleus of the primitive Christian community in Jerusalem.

Who were these women? In one sense I don’t know much about them. There were many in the group (8:3). One of their social features, often overlooked, is that all of them had been “healed of evil spirits and infirmities by Jesus” (8:2) which meant they were outcast women to some degree. This would be true even of Chuza, the wife of Herod’s administrator (8:3). But there is another reason I mention Chuza. I was especially interested in noting disciples whose wealth or social status was above the ordinary. This was a part of my purpose—to accredit the gospel in the eyes of status-conscious Hellenistic readers. The women’s social ostracism may explain why they as women were able to travel with Jesus: they were not bound by the social expectations of respected women, so that their social status was not largely restricted to the private world of the home. Ben Witherington has caught the radical unacceptableness of the women’s role:

It was not uncommon for women to support rabbis and their disciples out of their own money, property, or foodstuffs. But for her to leave home and travel with a rabbi was not only unheard of, it was scandalous. Even more scandalous was the fact that women, both respectable and not, were among Jesus’ traveling companions.¹⁶

A few other details should be noticed. Mary Magdalene should not be confused with the woman at Simon’s house. Mary and Joanna were the first to

be told of Jesus' resurrection (24:10, 22). I know nothing more of the woman named Susanna (8:3).

Follow these women in the larger context. In chapter seven I describe two messengers of John who came to Jesus asking, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (7:19). Jesus' answer reemphasized his prophetic mission (see Luke 4:16-30): the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them (7:22). The women from Galilee help fulfill Jesus' mission as do the woman at Simon's meal and a host of others Jesus healed. In them, the acceptable year of the Lord has come (4:19).

Who were these women? They were women who used their possessions to support Jesus and the Twelve (8:3). Like Zacchaeus, their lives were hospitable as they used their possessions to alleviate human suffering. Are they not like Barnabas, who sold a field and laid the money at the apostles' feet (Acts 5:36-37)? I have used the verb *diakoneô* to describe these women's ministry. It is the same word used in Acts 6:2 in the sense of "waiting at table" or "seeing to hospitality." Some have seen the women's service as deprecating and subordinate. But they were not campfire domestics. It is true, I distinguished these women from Jesus and the Twelve, but they fulfilled a distinctive role. All of them had "followed together" with Jesus and "stood at a distance" as they "saw these things" (23:49).

Who were these women? They were eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' ministry (8:1-3), death (23:49), burial (23:55) and resurrection (24:1-8). Remember that in the opening of my gospel I carefully spoke of my desire to "compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word . . ." (1:2). You need to see the role of these women as being far greater than simply preparing ointments for Jesus' body. Think of it. They were with Jesus day by day out of Galilee. They saw with their own eyes what happened at Jesus' death. They observed the tomb when they followed after Joseph of Arimathea as he buried Jesus. Two of them were the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection (24:10), and, as I already mentioned, they were part of the believing group that received the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). But we males are slow to believe, as Jesus himself once observed. Remember the women's report to the Twelve that Jesus was risen? I said, "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe" (24:11). "An idle tale"—that is, incredible. Their witness was received as so much nonsense (*lêros*). How condescending! One of your scholars has said

that the word forms the basis for your English word "delirious." It ridicules their testimony. Surely this smacks of male arrogance. But even the apostles had to grow in faith. They could not take hold of Jesus' word (9:45). It reminds me of the beginning of my gospel. Zechariah did not believe the words of Gabriel, and in his disbelief he was made silent. Mary believed, and out of the silent social world of women, she speaks to us all. God be praised that the women believed! It is true that Jesus' male disciples first proclaimed the death and resurrection of Jesus to the world in Acts; but it is also true that his women disciples were the first to receive the revelation and proclaim it to those who followed Jesus out of Galilee. The women from Galilee were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb. Dorothy Sayers summarizes the Jesus I portrayed:

They had never known a man like this Man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything "funny" about women's nature.¹⁷

I hope my thoughts are helpful. You have honored me by having me speak at your congregational meeting. Be loving to each other as you work through one of the most challenging issues of your time. But also, be courageous. Let the Spirit of God lead you. Do not be afraid to take little steps along the way. Do not be afraid to take some big steps as well. Pray for God's wisdom. Above all, remember that it was Jesus who brought good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. In him the year of the Lord's favor is present (Luke 4:16-19)! And in you the Spirit of Lord is pleased to dwell!

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Questions for Discussion Groups

1. How have public/private gender expectations changed from the time of Luke until now? Is our public world a silent world for women? Do public/private gender expectations influence our Sunday worship services?

2. In what ways does Luke's theme of hospitality go beyond preparing a meal and being a good dinner party host? Was Mary more hospitable than

Martha? If so, why? Do you agree that the woman at Simon's banquet was hospitable?

3. Why does Luke not emphasize women as preachers, elders and leaders of the church? Why does he include women who are household leaders?

4. If Luke came to your church (Bible class, discussion group), what might he say about women in ministry?

Notes

¹ Most of my thoughts focus on Luke rather than Acts. I have done this because it appears that you are more acquainted with Acts than you are with my gospel; and yet, Luke is a foundation and presupposition for what I wrote in Acts. I will also assume you are acquainted with the teaching ministry of Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:1-4, 24-28). I am grateful you have examples of men and women teaching together in your churches and lectureships. This certainly carries forward the spirit and intent of what I had in mind. My emphasis on paying "particular and positive attention" is quite different from the perspective of Jane Schaberg (Luke) and Gail R. O'Day (Acts) in **The Women's Bible Commentary**, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors (London: SPCK; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) who view both the Gospel of Luke and Acts as "extremely dangerous" texts, "perhaps the most dangerous in the Bible."

² Jesus criticizes a woman in the crowd who raises her voice (11:27-28). See Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View," **Journal of Biblical Literature** 109 (1990) 441-61.

³ One of your scholars has observed in Acts an explicit "contrast between 'what is public' and 'what is not,'" (John H. Elliott, **A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) 194; idem, "Temple Versus Household in Luke-Acts: A Contrast in Social Institutions" in **The Social World of Luke-Acts Models for Interpretation**, Jerome H. Neyrey, ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991] 211-40). The actions of the church are either "in the temple or at home" (Acts 2:46; 5:42) or "in public and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). See Stuart L. Love, "Women's Roles in Certain Second Testament Passages: A Macrosociological View," **Biblical Theological Bulletin**, XVII (1987) 54.

⁴ Even Simeon addresses Mary in the Temple grounds (*hieron*) (1:27), not the sanctuary (*naos*) accessible only to priests. Simeon would have met a woman only in the outer precincts (see Lev 12:6, "she shall bring to the priest at the door of the tent").

⁵ Pliny the Younger, **Epistles**. 4:19 (translated from the Loeb Classical Library, 1 [New York: The Macmillan Co., 1923]).

⁶ See as examples, "men of Judea" (2:14), "men of Israel" (2:22), "men of Israel" (13:16b), "brethren, sons of the family of Abraham" (13:26), "men of Athens" (17:22). Still, women were converted, such as Damaris (17:34).

⁷ Robert J. Karris, **Luke: Artist and Theologian**. Studies in Contemporary Biblical and Theological Problems (New York: Paulist, 1985) 58.

⁸ For the following see Stuart L. Love, "Women and Men at Hellenistic Symposia Meals in Luke," in Philip F. Esler, ed., **Modeling Early Christianity, Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in Its Context** (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 198-210.

⁹ Compare the woman to the Gerasene demoniac, "a man of the city" (8:27).

¹⁰ See Kathleen Corley, **Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition** (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

¹¹ See Mary Douglas, **Purity and Danger** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

¹² See Ben Witherington III, **Women in the Ministry of Jesus** (Cambridge et al: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 100-01. Witherington states, "Though we mentioned previously that women could attend synagogue, learn, and even be learned if their husbands or masters were rabbis, for a rabbi to come into a woman's house and teach her specifically is unheard of." (101).

¹³ Luke Timothy Johnson, **The Gospel of Luke**, Sacra Pagina Series, vol 3 (Collegeville, Minnesota: A Michael Glazier Book, The Liturgical Press, 1991) 174.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁵ Frederick W. Danker, **Jesus and the New Age According to St. Luke** (St. Louis, Missouri: Clayton Publishing House, 1972) 133.

¹⁶ Ben Witherinton III, "On the Road with Magdalena, Joana, and other disciples--Luke 8:1-3," **Zeitschrift fur die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft** 70 (1979) 244-45.

¹⁷ Dorothy Sayers, **Are Women Human?** (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971) 47.