

Whose Church Is It? - Receiving Women Pastors

Edward H. Schroeder

[1976 ELIM Assembly (Abbreviated Text) August 19, 1976.]

"And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for equipping the saints to do their work of ministry which is building up the body of Christ." (Eph 4:11-12) That was last Sunday's word of God in the second lesson.

The question before the house is whether Seminex's first woman to be graduated with the M.Div. degree, Jan Otte Murphy, belongs on that gift list. Does Christ have her on his list as pastoral gift to us his church? And if so, how might we receive this gift despite our heavy tradition to the contrary?

You -will have noticed how I have shifted the focus for this hot-potato issue. Two shifts really. On" is a shift from the hypothetical to the particular person: from "women's" ordination to "Jan's" ordination. The second shift is in the grammatical subject of the question before the house. Instead of "Do we dare to ordain Jan?" the Ephesians text asks us to ponder first, "Does Christ dare to give Jan to his church as one of his pastors?"

How might we find out what Christ would dare to do? Answer: Read the New Testament. In the gospels we hear in text after text of all the risky things Jesus dared to do. And the most daring, riskiest of them all is his treatment of sinners--treating them as though God himself forgave them. Forgiveness can be so flattened out for us that we no longer see how contrary that was at first to the tradition. Of course God forgives, we think, that's his job!

Not so! says the Bible on nearly every page. Not so glibly. It was not merely the scribes and the Pharisees who were so hard on sinners in Jesus' day. It was--and is still--the Word of God himself that comes down hard. Remember what we once memorized in catechism class: "visiting the iniquities of the sinners to the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." It was not distorted legalist tradition that said, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." That came from the cosmos-manager himself.

When Christ dares to interfere by offering forgiveness to out-and-out sinners he is entangling himself in the web of death that God's own law inflicts on these sinners. He made that connection (forgiveness and his death) perfectly clear on Maundy Thursday evening (and every Lord's Supper we've celebrated since then): "My body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Or as the writer to the Hebrews puts it; "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins."

Jesus' daring ministry was risking much higher stakes than just flaunting that "old fox" Herod, or taunting the Temple establishment, or goading the Gallup pollsters. He dared to up the ante and trust that God approved of his befriending and forgiving sinners even though this entangled him with God's own death sentence for sinners. Talk about daring! He dared to trust that God could administer the death verdict on the Friend of Sinners and yet finally vindicate him.

The most incredible item in the Gospel of forgiveness is the forgiveness. The people playing the real long shots in the New Testament are the prodigals and the publicans with their "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Yet that is exactly what Jesus dares to do throughout the gospels and he invites us to dare to trust that God the Father concurs.

But what, you may ask" does all this have to do with the question before the house: "Would Christ dare to have Jan on his gift list?" If we can make the connection, that will up the ante on the question before the house to being itself an issue of the gospel. Ephesians 4 already implies the linkage between the gifts who are the people and the big gift of forgiveness which alone "equips the saints for doing the work of the ministry." Just how big is the gift of forgiveness? Big enough for a global clientele. There are no limits on the recipients, no restrictions whatsoever--all the world, every creature, all (of us) who labor and are heavy laden.

What about the mechanisms for making it happen beyond the time of the New Testament? Here too the New Testament accent is on the lavish. Read about that lavish outlay in the three chapters preceding Ephesians 4. Our Lutheran confessions also accent the manifold media for the ministry of forgiveness. "The Gospel...offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace; first, through the spoken word by which the forgiveness of sin...is preached to the whole world; second, through baptism; third, through the Holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally through the mutual conversation and consolation of fellow Christians. [This happens] 'wherever two or three are gathered together in my name...'" (310:IV).

The gathered Christian community, the church, is the locale where these multi-media mechanisms operate. And that leads us to the ticklish question of Jan's ordination. Would Christ dare to designate her as an administrator of these media of grace? That is a question of church order, church structure, we say. But in Christ's church questions of order and structure are questions about the "ordering" of the forgiveness of sins. In the Large Catechism Luther writes: "Everything in the Christian church is so ordered that we may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and the sacraments appointed to comfort and revive our consciences as long as we live." (417:54f)

Many of us memorized the parallel line in the Small Catechism, the third article: "...in which Christian church he (the Holy Spirit) daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers." In which Christian church? "Wherever two or three are gathered together in his name" on the receiving end of the multi-media of God's "surpassingly rich grace."

If Jan is on Christ's gift-list, then her gift will be congruent with that catechism sentence. If "daily and richly forgiving sinners" is Christ's will, could he have ordered half the human race out of the candidate roster? The only Gospel-grounded case against Jan's being on that list, now that she is on the scene with certified credentials, would have to show that her exercise of the public ministry contradicts Christ's will to have sinners "daily and richly forgiven." Of course it could happen that Jan might exercise the ministerial office contrary to the forgiveness of sins. But it would not be because she is the wrong gender. It would only happen if she proclaimed the wrong gospel. Of course that has been known to happen with ministers, alas. It is a wrong gospel, not the wrong gender, that removes one from Christ's gift-list of Ephesians 4—by definition.

And that brings us back to the big question. Whose church is it? Whose ministry of forgiveness is it? Obviously it's Christ's. What could the gender of the administering person add to or subtract from the winsome scandal of Christ forgiving sinners? As Melancthon says in the Apology: "Ministers do not represent their own persons, but the person of Christ. When they offer the Word of Christ or the Sacrament, they do so in Christ's place and stead." (173:28) Note well: the office of ministry re-presents Christ, but it is not the person of the minister who reminds us of Christ. It is rather the "offered Word or Sacrament" that re-presents Christ. The gender of the representer cannot make that Word or Sacrament more or less Christ-like. "The measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" is not his masculinity, but his mercy.

But if Christ has Jan and other women on his roster as pastoral gifts to his church now, why did he wait so long to make the move? I do not know. Could 2000 years of Christian tradition have been mistaken? That perplexes me too, and challenges my own convictions that that is so. But then why did he wait so long with the Gentiles before he pushed Cornelius as gift in front of Peter? Why was the "fulness of time" so long in coming, such a long wait till the Blessed Virgin Mary? Why was it not the time of Joseph, David, Isaiah, or the Maccabees? I don't know.

If some among us cannot see the connection between the big Gift-giver and Jan on his gift-list, can we trust the gift of forgiveness we do have and refrain from burdening the consciences of those who may call and order Jan to "daily and richly" administer the means of forgiveness to them? Fine. Take counsel from St. Paul: If Christ is proclaimed, we rejoice, even if the way it is done strikes us as non-kosher.

Can we who think we see the clear connection trust that Christ is still caring for his church and for us, even when some of our fellow-confessors don't or can't join us in what is clear as day to us? If so, fine; then we acknowledge that Christ is still the church's Lord.

But what if we are wrong? The risk element is never totally absent. Suppose that on judgment day, or even before, we get the message loud and clear: You were wrong in your conclusions favoring women pastors. What then? Confronted by God's judgment we know there is only one way to go: in the publican's daring words, "God be merciful to

me, a sinner—in Jesus’ name.” The big surprise from the Word of God is: "I tell you, that one went down to his house justified."

If Jan and the other women called to pastoral ministry are indeed Christ's gifts according to Ephesians 4, nothing we do to the contrary can change that. Remember the word of God from our brother Paul, the reluctant, feminist: “For the gifts and call of God are irrevocable." When he gives them, we have them.

“And his gifts are that some should be pastors...to equip his saints for their work of ministry.”