

The Role of Women in the Church of Jesus Christ

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In considering the role of women in the church, it seems to me that the issue is a threefold one.

First, how to use the Scriptures – and especially St. Paul’s statements about women in the public work of the church – in understanding the place of women in the church. Second, what are the “orders of creation” which ostensibly underlie Paul’s reasoning behind his statements? And third, what is the church in terms of the one central ministry and the variety of ministries?

Let us consider them point by point. It seems very natural to consider the issue of how to use the Scriptures in determining the place of women in the public work by merely asking, “What do the Holy Scriptures say?” As innocent as that question sounds, it can arise from two quite different perspectives.

From one perspective the questioner is asking: “What is it that the Bible says we can or cannot do? Woman’s suffrage, yes or no? Ordain women to the pastoral office, yes or no?”

Such a questioner has a legislative expectation of the Bible. He expects it to inform him of God’s will, but he expects that to be legislative – that is, informing him what God allows and what God prohibits.

The Lutheran Reformation, however, emphasized an alternative expectation. Instead of a legislative expectation, “What does God want us to do,” the questioner asks, “What does God want to do TO US?” That minor shift of words makes a big difference in emphasis.

And when we look to Scripture for the answer to this question (What does God want to do to us?) we find one unanimous answer coming from the entire New Testament. And that is: “God wants you to live His new creation through the work and ministration of His Son Jesus Christ.”

This way of understanding the message is quite different from the expectation of the answer given out of a legislative handbook.

This leads us to the second issue: namely, the “orders of creation” as related to the question of the role of women in the church. St. Paul in his epistles speaks a number of times to the issue in several *ad hoc* responses to specific congregational situations.

Several of his comments seem to point to an order of creation – e.g., Adam was created first, and Eve was created second – which relegates women to a subordinate position by the cosmic order of things. Thus, it appears to be a disruption of that God-created order when a woman assumes any role of public leadership which would appear to put her in a position superior to men, even if this be in the church of Jesus Christ.

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Luther talked frequently about the orders of creation. But in his mind these orders did not assume the appearance of boxes arranged like an organizational chart with one end being interior and graduating to superiority on the other end.

Instead, his central emphasis was: “How is God *now* ordering creation as people are put in specific and concrete relationships to one another? And how, within the context of these relationships, are they each called to be God’s agents and spokesmen for the specific care of others?”

For Luther, the created orders themselves are historical and malleable. They can undergo change as times and history change. The important question again is: “How is God ordering creation *now*?”

The *constant* element in these changing orders, as Luther sees it, is that God’s ongoing work of creation continues. And it continues in, with, and under any order or any change of a previous order.

So once more, the prime question is not “What will God allow or what will God not allow me to do?” But rather, the prime question is: “What is God doing to me and to my world now, and how do I respond to this action of God now?”

Luther notes two things happening in the orders of creation – God is keeping creation going and he is criticizing the sinners who live in the created orders. The novelty about Jesus, as Luther came to see it, was that in Him God forgave the very sinners He had been criticizing – criticizing very properly, very *orderly*. Here is the point where the work of Christ clashes with the *order* of creation.

Hopefully it is clear now that we cannot find a satisfactory answer by looking to Scripture as a legislative handbook which will give a clear-cut answer as to where and when and how women are to serve, specifically in the church. Scripture does not do this.

Nor do we find an answer by recognizing an order of creation which arranges people in boxes that cannot be rearranged, some being greater and others being lesser than one another. This, too, is unsatisfactory. This leads to the third point.

The novelty of the church, which is a *new* structure in human existence, is precisely that it connects people with Jesus Christ.

The Lord of the church conflicted with God’s own critical incriminating judgment of sinners when He forgave them instead of condemning them. This is the work of the church which is carried on by Christians today.

No one can dispute that the “ministry of reconciliation” which transform sinners in being the church is commended to all who are members of Christ’s body – whether male or female, Greek or Jew, slave or free.

So it must also be kept clearly in focus that, although the New Testament is replete with inferences of a wide variety of ministries, there is finally only one thing that is being *administered*. And that is God's reconciling action in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, if every member of the church of Jesus Christ has the mandate of this ministry of reconciling people to the action of Jesus Christ for them, and are "ordered" to carry this out, the question changes. With this kind of thinking, the question can only be: "to what sort of ministry may women in any given historical situation be 'order-ed' or, finally, ordained?"

The issue then is: "to which of the varieties of ministries may women be ordained?" The Gospel itself makes no prohibition. Instead it urges churchmen to use the gifts (the people) that God has given to be His church.

But how can this "urging" be put into practice? When churchmen ask how the Gospel is to be practiced in any given age, they must take into consideration the specific shape of that age or, as stated in Luther's perspective, the unique shape of God's ordering activity at this time in its psychological, sociological, political, economic, and other dimensions.

This is the important issue. Therefore, practices may differ in different segments of the church.

But the questions of practice are resolved for the church by listening to the Gospel (not the legislation) of the New Testament and doing so in the light of the contemporary church's own God-given responsibilities and effectiveness.