

The role of woman today: a theology of relationship--man

to woman

I have been asked to give consideration to a theology of relationship--man to woman with a view to the issue of the position of woman in the Church and her possible ordination to the ministry. Although these two aspects can only be artificially separated, I am planning here, for the sake of clarity and discussion, to deal essentially with the theology of relationship--man to woman on the basis of the biblical evidence and its implications.

The question whether or not the subordinate role given to woman in specific instances in the Bible says anything about the inherent nature of woman is being discussed theologically at the present time in a growing number of Christian Churches. The intense interest raised by the question is easily explained: The discussion is taking place at a time when, in many countries, woman has obtained or is obtaining equal participation side by side with man in the different sectors of life. This applies not only to work but also to the organization and direction of society. There is also an emotional factor: Although the discussion takes place in the Church where everything is a grace and not a right, granted by our Lord, the contention that it might be theologically justified for woman to exercise the same function as man is bound to give rise to emotional reactions, to create frustration in some people, and fear in others. The very fact that the discussion is taking place among us, and that no decision by far has yet been reached, creates this atmosphere.

We all suffer from it, and we should all wish it to take place on the objective level of what is God's will, not on the subjective level of human desires or fears. But the old example of the discussions between Jewish and Gentile Christians shows us that theological reflection involves personal reactions. "The right hand of fellowship" extended by James, Cephas and John to Paul and Barnabas, when the latter went to the Gentiles and the former to the circumcised (Gal. 2:9), did not put an end to the conflicts which continued through the history of the early Church, but the Christians still wished and managed to remain in fellowship.

These factors as important as they may be are still external to the real discussion concerning the biblical view of the matter. The evidence of the biblical view--along with that of E. G. White--should carry universal conviction. I therefore propose without further delay that we first try to classify the scriptural facts which are certain, without unduly commenting on what they say or do not say since this has been eloquently done already, and then endeavor to undertake a correct consideration of this evidence and come up with a theology of the woman's position in the church of God.

The Church, the royal priesthood and women

The Church, declares the NT, stands under the commission of her Lord to preach the Gospel to all peoples and to administer the sacraments that He has instituted. This command takes two forms. In the first place, the commission of the Lord is addressed to each member of the church. The second way in which the church fulfills her divine commission is by calling individual members who are capable, and entrusting to them the task of proclaiming the Gospel and administering the sacraments through ordination by prayer and the laying on of hands.

In Jesus Christ Christians become "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God;" in Him "the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom we are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:19-22).

How is this structure to be built up for God, through the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ, and what is the place occupied by women in that structure, according to the NT? The category I just mentioned has often been referred to as the royal priesthood of all believers. This royal priesthood applies without distinction to ALL members of the Church, to ALL the members of the new people who live by the mercy of God. It is to this priesthood that the statements in 1 Pet. 2:9 applies (derived from Ex. 19:5-6): "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." This priesthood concerns the mediation of God's Word and His covenant to the whole world. In Exodus as in 1 Peter it is a priesthood which announces the fulfilment of liberation. This priestly mediation, accomplished by Jesus Christ is continued by the whole people of Christ. Baptism is the sign of this involvement of all Christians, without distinction. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13).

This royal priesthood, you noticed, is signified by baptism in the death of Jesus Christ. From the very outset baptism was administered to both sexes, and baptism implied being requested to share and preach the Gospel of Christ to the world. Administered to both sexes. Examples quoted in the gospels indicate that women, in just the same way as men, not only received and recognized grace, but bore witness of it and proclaimed it (See the woman of Samaria

(Jn. 4:27); the Canaanite woman whose faith Jesus said was 'great' (Mt. 15:28); Mary and her precious ointment (Mt. 26:13); the Galilean women who accompanied Jesus to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea; those women who came and told the disciples of the empty tomb and the resurrection. In just the same way as men, they received and recognized grace, bore witness of it and proclaimed it. As co-heirs, women were also co-announcers of the good news. That is why the apostle Peter, on the day of Pentecost, quotes the prophet Joel, emphasizing that prophecy has nothing to do with sex: "It shall come to pass afterward, that I shall pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my Spirit" (Joel 2:28-32). This possibility for everyone to evangelize, on the basis of the royal priesthood of all believers, is confirmed, I think, by the closing salutation to the epistle to the Romans (Rom. 16:1-16) which mentions 18 men and 8 women among the leaders of the church in Rome, without any distinction of title except in the case of Phoebe. The list of examples could be enlarged by recalling Priscilla who, with her husband Aquila, "expounded the way of God" to Apollos (Acts 18:26).

Paul's admonitions to women

But if it is true that women shared with men in the royal priesthood of the Spiritual Israel, is it also true that they shared in the ministry within the Church of the NT? The facts force us to say that the answer is in the first place negative. Among the twelve apostles who were called there were no women, nor apparently among the 70 disciples. No names of women were proposed when lots were drawn to replace Judas, although their presence among the early disciples in the upper room is explicitly mentioned (Acts 1:14), and although

they surely fulfilled the sole condition referred to: to "have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us" (v. 21, 22).

We are familiar by now with the well-known NT passages which not only make no reference to the participation of women in the ministry of the church, but actually forbid it, where that ministry is public (1 Cor. 11:2-16). The passage refers to worship within the Christian community, with prayer, prophecy and the celebration of the Lord's Supper (v. 17-34). The aim of Paul's recommendation is to maintain the "traditions" delivered to them (v.2); a recommendation in which Paul recalls his own practice and that of the churches of God (v.16). Paul's request is plain: that women, when they pray or prophecy in the congregation do cover their heads, as a token that by exercising these spiritual gifts they are not dishonoring their state as married women (v.4-10). In the verses that follow he stresses the fact that in the Lord man and wife are and remain inter-dependent and equal (v.11-12). But he nevertheless does not want married women to bring disgrace upon the Christian marriage through their behaviour in church (v.13-15, 16).

A few chapters further, (1 Cor. 14), Paul refers to worship open to people who were not members of the Christian community. He mentions "outsiders" and "unbelievers" specifically (vv.16, 22-23). At these gatherings, says Paul, the teaching given is to be comprehensible rather than in form of "speaking in tongues." He insists that the prophets should put their own thoughts in order, so as to convince outsiders with their intelligent words. And in these gatherings, again because outsiders were present, Paul asks the women to be silent and to wait till they returned home before asking questions of their husbands (v.34-36). I don't think Paul wanted to stifle spiritual gifts; he wanted them

to carry a good testimony to the unbelievers.

There is a third passage (1 Tim. 2:11-15) in which Paul strengthens Timothy in his mission to Ephesus, where he seems to have been confronted by Jewish Christian Gnostics. These Gnostics exalted spiritual discourse and disparaged marriage. As in 1 Cor. 14 Paul asks the Christian women to listen in silence (v.11-12) and not to teach. As in 1 Cor. 11, he exhorts them to persevere in the dignity of marriage, envisaged here mainly as the dignity of motherhood (v.15).

In all three passages Paul's argument is based on the OT references to the creation story and the fall. In each case the discussion seems concerned with the implications of these passages for Christian worship, in accordance with the nature of the gathering and its environment.

Any theological reasons?

Women share in the universal priesthood of the people of God and in the evangelism of the world. They do not seem to share in the ministry of the Church. They were not included among the apostles, not in the recommendations to the churches regarding their internal organization. The question now is: are there any possible theological reasons for this attitude?

It is of course clear to each one of us that there is no theological objection, according to the Scriptures, to women exercising the ministry of prophecy. Already in the OT, prophecy seems to have been a public ministry in which women exercised a pre-eminent role. There was Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Moses (Ex. 15:20); Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, a prophetess and judge in Israel (Judg. 4:4). There was Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum (2 Kings 22:14). Despite their widely differing functions and the great differences between the times at which they lived (the exodus, the judges, the kings) they all bear the same title of "prophetess." It might also be of interest to men-

tion that, from what I understand, Sarah, Abigail, Hannah and Esther are also called "prophetesses" in the Talmud.

The ministry of prophetess is also mentioned in the NT. Thus Acts 21:9 refers to the four daughters of Philip the evangelist. The text says that these four virgins "prophesied," as if it were some sort of a ministry.

There is another form of ministry also exercised by women in the Early Church: the ministry of "deaconess." I wish one of us would do an in depth research on the ministry of these deaconesses in the Eastern Church during the first centuries. We know that Paul commends "our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchrae" (Rom. 16:1). The title of "deacon" or "deaconess" is used 22 times by Paul. He applies it to himself, to Tychicus, to Epaphras, to Timothy and to Apollos. It was a ministerial vocation with the same status it seems as the other ministries within the Christian church. The term may be translated either by the word "deaconess" or by the word "minister" but it is quite incorrect to translate it as "servant" solely in the case of Phoebe. Besides, Paul recommends not that she be "assisted," but that she be "helped in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper (prostasis) of many and of myself as well" (v.2).

We know little about the actual situation of these deaconesses. But we do know enough to be sure that there were women in the Church who had responsibility for special ministries and that Paul especially greets and commends them to the other members of the Church, as if this did not constitute any contradiction with "the customs of the churches of Christ," of which he sternly reminded the Corinthians.

The biblical evidence: a summary

The biblical evidence, therefore, seems to be threefold:

- (1) The royal priesthood, or the mediation of grace, applies to all baptized Christians without distinction.
- (2) However, the regular ministries which shaped the early Church were occupied by men. Women were not called to be members of the group of apostles either by Jesus or by the community in Jerusalem. Paul was afraid that it might bring dishonor upon married women if they prayed and prophesied unveiled in the closed community of believers. He also instructed them not to speak in the public meetings which were open to non-believers. ?
- (3) Nevertheless, women occupied various ministries in the churches in apostolic times: especially as prophetesses and deaconesses.

How shall we interpret this evidence, and more particularly their implications with regard to the problem we are facing today?

An interpretation of the biblical evidence

Not a few theologians, like Peter Brunner (The Ministry and the Ministry of Women, Concordia Publishing House, 1971) consider that the significant basis for the apostolic command is the reference to the "subordination" that is demanded of the woman. This subordination is demanded by the Law and is based expressly on the will of God. Paul, talking about the Law is regarded as referring to such passages as Gen. 3:16, where God says to the woman after the fall: "the man shall rule over you." This concept of subordination is seen by Paul in an even larger concept: it is based on the Law, and therefore, on the biblical narrative of creation as well as of the fall. In other terms, the man-woman

relationship is here regarded as one that has been established from the origin of all things. It may run through various modalities, but it always retains its God-given ontological structure until the final transformation in the resurrection from the dead.

In this interpretation, the story of the creation of woman in Genesis 2 is regarded as dealing with a theological not a sociological relationship. It expresses a very actual fundamental relationship between the sexes. And what is the actual relationship between man and woman according to this fundamental order? The structure of the relationship can be defined by the two prepositional phrases "from" and "for the sake of" (1 Cor. 11:8-9). The relationship cannot be understood as a polar relationship in which the roles are interchangeable. The position of each, I mean of man and woman, in its created existence differs from that of the other for all time. Their positions cannot be interchanged. The original creaturely "from" and "for the sake of" relates to the woman; the reverse is not possible! To be sure, in the sequence of birth the man does come from woman (1 Cor. 11:11), but this fact of life is not able to cancel out the order that was given in the creation and is in every respect prior to the succession of the generations. According to her created basis the woman comes from the man and according to his created basis he is the "head" of the woman. In Gen. 1 there is no mention whatsoever of the subordination of the woman to the man. But in the second chapter which provides us with additional important details about the origins of mankind, there are several indications that Eve is to be subject to the authority of Adam: she is to be a help to him, implying that Adam is to take the initiative. Eve is created "from" Adam who gives her a name. The first Adam proved himself to be the "head" in that sin and death entered into the world through him.

This ^(HEAD)kephale-structure of the relationship between man and woman stands within a larger chain, or if you like it better the structure goes far beyond the relationship between man and woman. Even the relationship of Christ to God, the relationship of the church to Christ are determined by this fundamental principle of being set within and subject to an order that was instituted by God from the beginning. 1 Cor. 11:2-16 and Eph.5:22-33 show the wider context in which the subordination of the woman is placed. This basic structure is the kephale-structure: the man is the head of the woman, Christ is the head of the man, God is the head of Christ. The "head" is that which determines, that which leads.

The relationship between man and woman stands within this chain. Redemption hasn't modified this structure at all. In no way has Christ cancelled out the kephale-structure given in the creation. On the contrary! In Christ this structure is seen again in its original sense, and no longer in the context of the fall of mankind. It is released from the hardness that entered at the fall, and it receives a content that came into the world through Christ's reconciling death on the cross: LOVE. The relationship between man and woman does retain its original kephale-structure while the same relationship is now compared to the relationship between Christ and His Church. Not a polar relationship between the latter two, but a relationship of subordination of the body to the head. For sure, what the subordination of the woman to the man really means within the kephale-structure is made clear by the subordination of the Church to Christ--man should love the woman just as Christ has loved the Church--but the kephale-structure remains. The woman remains subject to the man as the Church is subject to Christ, and precisely for this reason. The implications of this theological principle for the ministry of women are too obvious to need any development.

3T.484

The contextual line of interpretation

Another line of argument develops an interpretation more sensitive to the context of the NT passages we have read and discussed here. It begins with the fact that Paul's remarks--with the possible exception of 1 Tim. 2:11-15--are limited to the case of married women in relation to their own husbands. The issue is therefore the family order, and not an order applying to the status of the sexes or to social situations in general. It is obvious that the OT forms the background of 1 Cor. 11 & ~~14~~ as well as of 1 Tim. 2. Paul regards it as indicating the conventions of marriage. He is anxious to maintain these conventions at Corinth and in all the Christian churches, so that the Church as a whole should not fall into disrepute because marriage had been dishonored.

It seems clear that Paul wanted to protect the young churches against two forms of calumny: that of sedition against the political authorities, and that of destroying family life, as amply evidenced by history. For these reasons he insists on subjection to the established authorities (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1-12; etc.) and lays such stress on correct sexual behaviour and on the subjection of wives in meetings. It is my view that these views have been misinterpreted by being applied too much to the Church where as they were really for married couples (1 Cor. 5:1-5; 6:18; 7:1-40; 11:1-16; 14:35; Eph. 5:22-31; 6:1-9; 1 Tim. 2:11-15; 4:1-3; Titus 2:4-5). This line of argument seems to me convincing, for it takes scrupulous account of the context. It explains in particular why Paul can speak of husband and wife sharing authority as equals in the private sphere (1 Cor. 7 which recognises the authority of the wife exactly like that of the husband on the sexual, personal and missionary level, v.4 and v.14), whereas he insists on the wife being subjected to her husband in a hierarchical order when

it is a question of marriage in the setting of the Church and of society (1 Cor. 11:14; 1 Tim. 2 and also Eph. 5).

Man and woman, in the family and in the Church

It is true that in the family man is the head of the woman. In the Church, however, which is a body of which Christ is the sole head, it is different. "In Christ," declares the same Paul in a well-known passage, "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" (Gal 3:26-28). Here, says Paul, the OT revelation since man's fall has been transcended in Christ at three points: (a) the boundary line between Jews and Greeks has been abolished. (b) the boundary line between slave and free is overcome. (c) and another division is overcome, that between male and female, Paul pointing directly back to Genesis 1:27 and in the direction of man as the image of God, beyond the division between male and female.

This also is a theological statement. The statement tells us what happens in Christ through baptism. In Christ the dichotomy which exists is overcome, a new unity is created, and this unity is not only discerned by the eye of faith but it manifests itself--or rather Paul expects it to manifest itself--in the social dimensions of the Church (Gal. 2:11-14).

How come, shall one say, that Paul did not implement his view more explicitly in his writings to the Early Church? Isn't his position hard to assess on this particular point? The NT is equally hard to assess as a witness to how Paul thought of Christ and slavery. There can be no doubt that the NT shows no urgency in the matter of emancipation of slaves.

Historically speaking, however, the phrase "neither slave nor free" in Gal. 3:28 has been a tremendous force in the painfully slow abolition of slavery.

In other terms the first of the three pairs "neither Jew nor Greek" has clearly been implemented in the actual life and structure of the NT Church. When it comes to the second pair "neither slave nor free" there are slight and indecisive signs of the implications involved. What about the third pair, the one we are here particularly concerned with in this Council? It is my contention that all three of these pairs have the same potential for implementation in the life and structure of the Church, and that we can hardly dispose of the third by confining it to the realm of the attitude of the heart, apart from the social structure and life of the Church. All three are intended to be realized in the life of the Church. Paul's statement regarding subordination in 1 Cor. 11 and 14 is best understood as an incidental reference to the truth expressed more fully in Gal. 3:28. 1 Cor. 11 and 14 provides a glimpse of this revelation, but one that needs special emphasis in the circumstances at Corinth, as we have indicated. No wonder that in 1 Cor. 12:13 (and in Col. 3:11) we encounter the first two elements (Jew/Greek, slave/free) of our triad, while the third (male/female) is conspicuous by its absence. This seems understandable when we consider the concrete situation in Corinth.

By way of conclusion

In summary: according to the NT the Church exists in order--through its proclamation of the Word and through its behaviour as a community--to announce the good news of God's mercy in Jesus Christ. It was for this

reason that the apostolic Church was on its guard, among other things, against the regular participation of women in the ministry. Its reasons were not based, I think, on the nature (male or female) of the three persons of the Godhead, nor on the nature of the order of creation-fall, nor on the essence of the ministry instituted by Christ. The founders of the Christian Church were probably afraid that women might take off their veils, express an opinion in public, or exercise authority; all and each of which would have caused confusion in the Church and destroy its peace as well as its efficiency among the Gentiles. That which is "proper" or "fitting" is so often underlined by the apostle, precisely in this very context (1 Cor. 11:13; Eph. 5:3; 1 Tim. 2:10), that the motives of the apostle seem perfectly clear.

It seems to me that it is our task, today, to ask ourselves the question whether or not it is "proper," "fitting" today (to use Paul's own vocabulary) for Christian testimony to be given in this way? Is it "fitting" with regard to men and women in their mutual relations, in the assembled Church, and in the face of the world watching the Church? Paul's answer to the same question took due account of the incompatibility of the Christian ministry with the position, nature, culture and exegetical interpretation of womanhood at that time. Today we must examine the question on the same level, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And I believe that the Spirit, who guided the apostles and the Early Church, can and will also guide us, according to the Lord's promise.

* * * * *

Raoul Dederen
Andrews University
September, 1973