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# Theological Observer

## FEMINISM IN THE CHURCH: THE ISSUE OF OUR DAY

From time to time an issue arises which is truly of fundamental importance, that is, raises questions the answers to which present not only different but mutually exclusive understandings of reality. Feminism is such an issue, and the questions it is raising and the answers it is giving concern the very heart of a Christian understanding of reality. The Eastern Orthodox theologian, Thomas Hopko, has struck the right note of urgency and significance (*Women and the Priesthood*, p. 190):

The question of women and the priesthood is but one important instance of what I see to be the most critical issue of our time: the issue of the meaning and purpose of the fact that human nature exists in two substantial forms: male and female. This is a new issue for Christians; it has not been treated fully or properly in the past. But it cannot be avoided today. How we respond to it, I believe, clearly demonstrates what we believe about everything: God and man, Christ and the Church, life and death. It is, in a manner of speaking, our particular issue for controversy: our gnosticism or Arianism, our Origenism or iconoclasm. It is the issue of our time, the issue that inevitably comes to every age and generation.

Hopko reminds us of a couple of things which must be remembered if confessional, orthodox Christian thinkers are going to address feminism with the requisite vigor and accuracy. (1.) Hopko likens the importance of the present situation to that of gnosticism and Arianism. That is, feminism is raising questions which touch *essential* Christian understandings. This point is worth repeating because it is necessary for orthodox theology correctly and clearly to isolate and to define the nodal points of Christian doctrine affected by the rise of feminism. Issues such as the ordination of women (and, to a lesser degree, that of women suffrage) are not in themselves the essential issues being raised. They are symptoms of underlying dislocations in the way (primarily Western) Christians have come to think about certain Christian doctrines. We are not talking primarily about issues of practice but about issues of substance which are reflected in practice.

(2.) Secondly, the issues raised by feminism are new. It will not suffice merely to appeal to Bible passages or to accuse people of breaches of public doctrine. As Hopko rightly says, orthodox thinkers will have to break new ground and explicate new ramifications of "old" doctrines if the issues raised by feminism are to be addressed with success. The rapid, almost uncontested, acceptance of feminist presuppositions and arguments in the church is evidence of how utterly unprepared the church was (and still is) to offer a coherent *conceptual* alternative to feminist claims. Churches and theologians (especially Protestant ones) which have not simply capitulated are often reduced to a biblicistic proof-texting of traditional postures. It is important to understand that the issues raised by the heightened self-consciousness of women in our society and churches will be a long-term problem. We must address the questions

with a seriousness of purpose and with a tenacity and clarity of thought which frankly has not been required in the church for a long time. For there is one new factor in this debate which distinguishes it from any controversy since perhaps the early Middle Ages; the predominant formative presuppositions and values of our culture and society are *against* traditional and confessional Christian patterns of thought and practice and are *in favor of* the feminist claims. In this new battle we will be struggling against major cultural and societal forces. What this will mean in practice is that often even self-consciously conservative Christians—even those absolutely opposed, for example, to the ordination of women—will nevertheless harbor presuppositions gleaned from their democratic, egalitarian surroundings which leave them in fact *conceptually* impotent to answer feminist assertions. For example, it is not uncommon within Missourian circles to hear strong words against women's ordination and suffrage by persons whose views concerning church and ministry express precisely those democratic, egalitarian presuppositions upon which the feminist cause bases its claims. This *new* issue may very well demand that we rethink and reassess some of *our own* most cherished ideas.

What, then, are some of the central issues raised by feminism and to which the church has yet to give cogent response? What are some of those conceptual areas in which the church must reassert a clear Christian vision of human life as life under God and the good Creator and Redeemer? The more I read and think about present feminism in the church, the more I realize that in terms of its position vis-a-vis its environment, the church of today has more in common with the church of the second century than it has with the church of the sixteenth century. In the second century the church had especially to work out the ramifications of its belief in God as the Creator of the world. The most important consequence of belief in God the Creator was the necessity of believing that the Creator was also the Redeemer and that the creation in its *fleshly nature* was the object of God's creative and redemptive work. That is, belief in God as the Creator of the flesh implied the incarnation (enfleshment) of God's eternal and creative Word as Redeemer and the resurrection of the flesh as the goal of God's redemptive purposes. Thus, the doctrines of creation, incarnation, and resurrection gave expression to a vision of human existence that asserted that human life *in the flesh* was meaningful and bore within it ultimate reality. Therefore, what one did in the flesh and the configurations of fleshly existence were not matters of indifference. Rather, it was precisely through the contours of fleshly existence that God revealed Himself and His final purposes. Hence, it was through the history of Israel (its bondage, its exiles, its exodus, its kings and prophets, its temple, etc.) that God revealed His judgment and His grace, the foretastes of the final condemnation of sinful flesh and the final resurrection to life of holy flesh. God, the Creator of the world, was so ordering Israel's (fleshly) history that His creative will (to make man after His own image and likeness) was being fulfilled through His redemptive work. Ultimately in the incarnation of the Word through whom all things were made (John 1:3) God the Word did bring into being that one "true man" in whom mankind's fleshly life indeed perfectly revealed God and His final will. The configurations of Jesus' life, therefore, were the perfect revelation of what it means to live according to God's will, that is, to live in such a way as to participate in the restoration of human life. Finally, as the community of the baptized the church lives *in its fleshly dimensions* as the image of redeemed humanity. That is, the church

in its concrete life (including its liturgical structure) reflects and must reflect the *creation* of God which in the church's Head has been renewed and restored in which then in the body of the church finds its renewal and restoration in the ecclesial life of the faithful.

It is in these areas—creation, Jesus as the incarnate Word, and the church as participation in the restored creation, or simply stated, creation and new creation in Jesus the incarnate Word—that we find the greatest errors in feminist theology and at the same time the greatest confusion even within orthodox circles. Let us look at a couple of ways in which these issues arise within contemporary feminist literature. Thomas Hopko has correctly identified a critical question which requires an answer: why does human nature exist in two consubstantial forms, male and female? This question requires an answer because it is not uncommon to find the view that to be human is something other than to be male or female. To be human does not imply that one is male or female; the notion “human” is both prior and transcendent in relation to the notion “male human” or “female human.” One, so it goes, is human first and male or female second. In other words, “maleness” or “femaleness” are accidental qualities which do not define one’s essential being as a human person. We may note, for example, how this division between “personhood” and concrete human existence as male or female permeates a discussion by an evangelical scholar from Wheaton College (Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, p. 208):

The transforming power of the gospel needs to be applied to individual lives and to the way Christians relate among themselves. Fragmentation and divisions constitute massively successful weapons in Satan’s arsenal directed against the people of God. . . . From the moment of our birth, a fallen society presses us into compartments and niches that become our private prisons for life. The concept of sex roles is one of those bondages from which the gospel can set us free. Nowhere does the Scripture command us to develop our sex-role awareness as males or females. It calls us—both men and women—to acquire the mind of Christ and to be transformed in His image. Both men and women are called to develop their “inner man,” which means their basic personhood in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

Here in all clarity is the radical separation between “basic personhood” (“inner man”) and people as male or female persons. One’s “basic personhood” is transformed, not one as male person or as female person. The particularity and concreteness of human existence is here shorn of all relation to the gospel and its transforming power; that is, there is a fundamental separation between fleshly human existence (creation) and the redemption of the Gospel. This disjunction between the “real” self or person and one’s fleshly self (which certainly involves maleness or femaleness) is a modern version of that gnosticism which denied the identity of the Creator and of the Redeemer. Indeed, this author comes perilously close to identifying maleness and femaleness as part of that fragmentation and division which Satan uses to place us into bondage. In effect, then, this “evangelical” attempt to advocate egalitarian ideals in the church harbors a virtual denial of God as the good Creator and a disparagement of the fleshly existence of the mankind which was created as male and female (Gen. 1:27).

The same implicit docetism is frequently applied also to the incarnation of Christ. Paul Jewett, for example, argues that God's incarnation in the form of male humanity is theologically indifferent and took that form only because the strongly patriarchal society of Israel made it fitting for God to act in that way (*The Ordination of Women*, p. 55). Again, despite the subtleties of Jewett's argument, the concreteness of the incarnation of Christ, that is, His incarnation as male can only be theologically indifferent if maleness and femaleness are themselves devoid of theological meaning. The idea, then, that Jesus could have been incarnated as a female without any change of theological significance and that His incarnation as a male was exclusively a cultural accommodation on God's part contains within it a disparagement of the actual created order and finally allows for no positive theological understanding of the sexual differentiation within humankind! Furthermore, to assert that the concrete and specific contours of Jesus' earthly life are theologically indifferent is to call into question the revelatory character of Jesus' earthly existence, for that which is devoid of theological significance and is only an accommodation to fluctuating cultural patterns cannot be the perfect revelation of God's unchanging will and of the final restoration of "true man."

In contrast to a scholar like Jewett, the early church was convinced that if the eternal Word became flesh, then the earthly life of Jesus was in every way purposeful and revelatory. What Jesus said and what Jesus did, therefore, were paradigmatic for the life of His church. Not to see His life in this way was to separate the life of those incorporated into Christ from the concrete history of Jesus given us in the written gospels. Very early, therefore, the church argued that women could not be pastors because Jesus Himself had not allowed them to minister in this way. Jesus' apostolic band had been all male, and because this Jesus was the eternal Word incarnate, the revelation of true humanity, His behavior was determinative; it was typical for ecclesial life at all times and in all places. Thus, for a father like Epiphanius (c. 380 A.D.) the very fact that never in the Old or in the New Testament is a woman a priest is sufficient to prove that women are not to be priests; for it was in this history, recorded in the canonical prophetic and apostolic books, that God was revealing His will and His way. This line of argument, sometimes depreciated in our circles as "Roman Catholic," in fact has deep patristic roots and rests upon a theologically profound relationship between the life of Jesus and the continuing life of the church, Christ's body.

We may briefly note two further areas in which the Church must elicit both new thought and some reassessment. (1.) We must adopt a critical posture toward contemporary ideas of equality and "rights." When a writer like Jewett speaks of "partnership of the sexes" as the Christian ideal, of woman as the equal of man, and of women having the freedom and the right as persons to respond to God's call to priesthood just as men do, he is not speaking out of the Bible but on the basis of the West's understanding of human autonomy and natural rights. The common claim that women are endowed with equal abilities, with equal intelligence, and the like and, therefore, are arbitrarily oppressed when a particular avenue of service and authority is closed to them (namely, the pastoral ministry) does not—again—take seriously the actual physical and fleshly differentiation within humankind. This differentiation within humankind implies a non-reciprocal relationship *within* an organic human unity. The creation story

of "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" does not allow for a definition of personhood based on the assertion of an autonomous free will and the development of inner potentialities.

(2.) Absolutely deleterious in the present debate concerning the ordination of women is the purely functional understanding of the pastoral office so popular in Missourian circles today. The idea that the ministry of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments is simply the public exercise of rights and duties given to all Christians fails to take seriously the Christological dimension of the office, which has its functional basis in the work of Christ but which has its "ontic" basis in the person of Christ. If we take seriously what we have said above, namely, that the specific character of Jesus' incarnation as male has theological significance, then the direct derivation of the pastoral office from the priesthood of *all* believers (which certainly includes women) will have to take on some precision. It is not, quite frankly, enough to appeal in this matter to the prohibitions of Paul—not because they are not determinative for us—for they are. However, we are in a struggle for the minds and hearts of Christian men and women, and these prohibitions must be placed into a theological context which makes them meaningful (not just abstract law) and which allows them to be seen as blessing and not as arbitrary suppression. It is necessary to begin thinking about the "ontic" character of the priestly office, and this in spite of Roman Catholic aberrations in the matter. In the words of absolution the minister says that by virtue of his office he forgives sins, that is, by virtue of the office he is *in loco Christi*, who is the forgiver of all sins. What are the implications of these words for the doctrine of the ministry?<sup>1</sup> Certainly popular talk of the pastor as enabler, administrator, and the compiler of inventories of spiritual gifts has no answer to this question.

The church's final word cannot be simply "No!" to women who seriously desire to consecrate themselves and their efforts to Christ. It is imperative that the church develop ministries and even offices in which women would excel. I am sure, for example, that on many occasions a woman's comfort and advice to another woman is much more helpful and pertinent than is the counseling of a male clergyman. Be that as it may, the energies of Christian women ought not be squandered by a too narrow interpretation of their proper role in the church. We, too, must be aware of what might be indeed merely cultural accretion, and in such cases we must be honest enough to acknowledge it, lest the truly essential witness of the church be brought to naught.

#### Endnotes

1. The disparagement of the sexual differentiation of humankind into male and female as having no theological significance lies at the base of much defense of homosexual behavior. If the true "person" is transcendent in regard to sexual differentiation, obviously the love between "persons" need have no regard to the accident of sexual differentiation. In this case, the love between two "persons" one of whom happens to be male and the other of whom happens to be female is no different from the love between two "persons" both of whom happen to be male or both of whom happen to be female.

2. When the "ontic" character of the pastoral office is considered, questions such as the validity of the ministry of a woman pastor immediately arise. Hermann Sasse noted that women cannot be priests; therefore, any "priestly" duties performed by a woman is by definition invalid. Now it has for a very long time been a confessional commonplace to note that the power of the Word always is attached to the Word itself and not to the person. This view is clearly expressed already in the third century when the question arose whether immoral or heretical bishops administered valid sacraments. Against the Donatists, it was asserted that the ethical or doctrinal failings of bishops did not hinder the validity or efficacy of the sacraments they administered, because essentially it was Christ's administration and His work has its own inherent validity and cannot be compromised by sinful men. However, it should be noted that in the present debate concerning women in the pastoral office, the question is not whether the sins of the pastor affect validity. Sinfulness is itself accidental and does not have its own substantial being. However, if we take seriously, as I think we should, the incarnation of Jesus, that is, if we think that the fact that Jesus was incarnate as a male is theologically significant, then perhaps we should answer differently when speaking about one who stands "in the stead of Christ," the true High Priest. The organic relationship between the person and work of Christ and Christ's sacramental working through the office of the ministry is the issue here.

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