

Some Concerns of Christian Women

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In introduction, two things need to be clearly stated. The first is that we are here discussing the concerns of women who call themselves Christian — who confess their utter sinfulness in God's sight, their justification by Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, and the gift of faith from the Holy Spirit, which enables them to confess their trust in Christ for salvation. We are not discussing a band of rabid revolutionaries bent on taking over the world. Such people would find much more fertile ground elsewhere than in the church.

The second necessary statement is that many Christian women are happy with their position in society and in the church. An Australian Anglican postulates the reason for this attitude. She writes that if a "thoughtful Christian woman" were engaged in conversation about her role in the church,

You would find, as the conversation proceeds, that her role is understood chiefly in terms of her limitations, what she is not allowed to do, rather than what special tasks she has. She will reveal, as the conversation probes the depths of her self-image, that she really believes that the difference women have from men is not just a difference, but a fault. Women at all times have to be careful of their femaleness. Their opinions are conditioned by it, and are not really worth as much as men's opinions. They are likely to become neurotic more easily than men, and in public places they have to be quieter for fear of showing their weaknesses.¹ They have no real talent for public life or for leadership. They have been created that way, it is God's will. Their femaleness is a cross that has to be borne. Obviously they are limited. Business organizations apparently have found that they are less responsible than men — why else would they be prevented from having their own accounts and incurring debts in their own name? Women are emotional thinkers, while men are cool, detached, objective And women are disloyal to one another too, whereas men act together in co-operation. They are really wiser to look to a man for guidance.

Anyone who has lived in a racially biased country will recognize the syndrome. Low social status leads to rationalization of that status by a low self-image. An externally imposed set of limitations is internalized, and accepted as "the nature of the beast." How else can frustration be tolerable unless it is thought to originate in some divine necessity, rather than in quite accidental and temporary factors?

True, the church does not say that women are inferior. It just says that they are different, that they have different functions. That their femininity makes them different from men in every way, not just sexually. Different mentally, vocationally, socially. That they have special feminine gifts to bring to God's service. These gifts are not those required for participation in public life, worldly responsibility, and leadership. So women must remain in the mentally, socially, and vocationally limited domestic sphere. So women are mentally, socially, and vocationally limited. So women are inferior.²

This theory cannot be just dismissed without serious consideration. Certainly, a recent statement by the wife of evangelist Billy Graham, including this sentence: "You name it, men are superior in all but two areas: women make the best wives and women make the best mothers!"³ shows the extent to which conditioning of some women's minds has taken place.

There are some women whose talents lie mainly in the domestic sphere, and the abilities required for the efficient running of a household are not to be regarded lightly. But there are many women to whom God has given other talents as well as, or instead of, the domestic ones. And these talents create problems for the Christian women possessing them. For some women the most difficult problem is reconciling her talents with what other members of a congregation expect of her in service to the church. While men may choose the activities in which they wish to be involved, women are *expected* to be active in two areas of the domestic sphere: cleaning of church buildings and arranging flowers, and providing food for church functions and for money-raising catering activities. It seems to many women that pastors emphasize that the main purpose of women's groups is Bible Study, but that pastors and other men still look upon these groups as the sources of non-budget finance for the church. This is not to say that other women do not exert pressure on uninterested

or untalented women also to do what is regarded as a fair share of such work, but this is probably because of the very narrow view of women's service which has been promulgated in the church.

The woman in the church is restricted somewhat in the exercise of any talents which are not seen as "feminine" abilities. If she has organizational and administrative abilities these may only be exercised over other women. If she teaches, she may instruct children and confirmation classes, lead Bible studies, and teach small groups of both men and women, but not a whole congregation, according to one writer,⁴ although others would restrict teaching by women to other women or children only.⁵ In this connection it becomes necessary to establish the age of "manhood," so that women do not inadvertently teach "men" when they think they are teaching "boys."

Basically, of course, the restrictions on women's activity in the church, are based on the Word of God, particularly the accounts of Creation and the Fall, and passages in some of Paul's epistles, which have been much quoted in recent times. Interpreting these is the responsibility of theologians. Women in more "liberal" churches than the Lutheran Church of Australia have had these sections rationalized for them into mere mirrors of attitudes at the times they were written, but for members of this church, there is no such easy way out of the dilemma of reconciling their positions in society and the church. Lutheran writers such as Zerbst⁶ and Brunner⁷ teach that the subordination of women to men is the result of Creation, not of the Fall, which means that it is not set aside by the Redemption, but rather purged of the harshness introduced by the Fall. If this is so, the rule of subordination must apply to all women, in regard to all men. However, Brunner writes:

In the Lutheran churches there is general agreement on the necessity to distinguish between that which transpires in the secular realm and that which transpires in the spiritual realm.⁸

This does not seem logical, and raises the question for a Christian woman as to whether she has any right to be in a position of authority over any man in *any* sphere of life. Since for the individual Christian there is surely no part of life divorced from God, the Christian woman is placed in a difficult position if opportunity arises for her to have authority over men.

Under this general question of authority and submission, other questions confront the woman who studies the matter seriously. On some occasions, if she puts her duty to submit before her understanding of doctrine and common sense, she may have to observe men in the church make wrong decisions. A study of attitudes and actions of Lutherans in the United States of America, showed that

on all dimensions reflecting beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviour that may be regarded as positive, Lutheran women consistently show slightly higher scores than do Lutheran men. In the area of religious practices women are more active in personal practice of piety and personal witnessing. They also have slightly more biblical knowledge. Men show a greater tendency actively to express their personal views on controversial issues to authorities in both church and society. As a whole, women make a stronger showing on measures both of belief and expression of faith. Yet men tend to communicate more actively than women, which may mean that the church is hearing most from the group less highly identified with its faith and life.⁹

The situation among Lutherans in Australia would probably not be very different.

Christian women must sometimes grapple with problems in regard to their marriages, if their husbands are unable or unwilling to use their authority wisely, particularly in spiritual matters. Single women also have problems, since in our present society they are expected to order their own lives, and not to need masculine help. As many single women are physically far removed from their families, the practical outworking of their submission proves most difficult. Mothers may find themselves at one stage receiving honour and obedience from growing sons, and soon afterwards being expected to be under submission to those sons now regarded as "men."

Being silent during worship services is seen by Paul as an important part of women's submission. Women are permitted to join in hymns, prayers, and the confession of faith, without being regarded as having transgressed the command to silence. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11, allows women the right to "prophesy." Brunner writes, in this connection:

Certainly Paul is forbidding women the right to that kind of preaching and teaching that depends on deliberate preparation, such as is characteristic of a sermon, in contrast to the spontaneous and inspired utterances of those who speak in tongues, of prophets, and of other charismatic personalities who depend on the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

Since such prophesying is not forbidden to women, it appears that here is a legitimate opportunity for Christian women to take part in worship when immediately inspired by the Holy Spirit. However, in churches with a liturgical service such prophesying is excluded from public worship, and thus women are effectively prevented from any part in a worship service!

Because of the restrictions on the exercise of women's talents within the churches, women's groups have in effect become sub-churches. Within these groups, women are able to worship, study, organize and administer affairs (be they only minor), to their own satisfaction. Men may, and sometimes do, criticize women for becoming so concerned about trifling "feminine" matters, ignoring the fact that they have confined women to these limited areas. Some moves are being made in the churches to combine women's, youth's, and men's groups (where these last actually exist), into family groups within the churches, but these moves are understandably being resisted by some women, who resent giving up the petty powers they possess at present, and who have no satisfactory outlet for their abilities within the organizational structure of the church. Where women do take some larger part in the life of churches, such as secretaries of congregations, or Sunday School superintendents, it seems to be because no man is willing to do so.

While separate women's activities continue in the churches, there seems to be a need for some female "pastors." This is not a plea for the "ordination" of women to the ministry. In purely female gatherings in the church it should not be necessary for a man, the pastor, or chaplain, to be present as theologian, or leader of worship. Surely, in these situations there is no question of women usurping authority over men, when there are only other women involved. It may be argued that a pastor is present not as a man, but as a minister, but being a pastor does not take away masculinity. While there are probably no Lutheran women theologians in Australia at present, that problem could be solved by training, and women could be examined for suitability as preachers, just as men are.

Finally, there is a need in the church, for a more "feminine" theology. Christ's work for our redemption consisted of actions and attitudes that are today seen as "feminine" attributes: His life of service, His submission to the will of God the Father, His humility, His sacrifice for us. The whole concept of "grace" is anathema to masculine pride. The continual temptation of man seems to be to substitute Law for Gospel, or to change Gospel into Law. We are told about "our part of the new covenant with God through Christ," as if there is something we can do, even if it is only believing, when of course it is the Holy Spirit who *gives* us faith. Some Christian mothers see this as a particular problem in the upbringing of their children. These mothers emphasize to their children the glories of God's undeserved love and forgiveness, and urge their children to thank God through their lives of service, only to hear fathers using the Law as a goad to acceptable behaviour. It is in this sense that the "masculine" theology needs to be "feminized." Then men will be freed from the need to use their authority in hurtful ways. They will instead see their authority as a licence to help the oppressed. Upon reflection, it seems that the problems of Christian women are as nothing when compared with those of Christian men.

NOTES

1. This attitude is re-inforced by such statements as the following, from a paper entitled "The Question of Women Delegates at Synodical Conventions" circulated at the General Pastors' Conference of the Lutheran Church of Australia, October 1975, by K.E. Marquart:
"At a recent synodical convention in America, at least one female delegate exploited her gender shamelessly, by sobbing theatrically into the microphone."
2. Barbara Thiering, *Created Second?* (Adelaide: Family Life movement of Australia, 1973), 76-77.
3. "Others Say," *Christianity Today*, June 6, 1975, 32.
4. Peter Brunner, *The Ministry and the Ministry of Women* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 36. Brunner on this page lists what he thinks women with "theological training" (he does not define that term) may do in the church without usurping authority from men. He includes, as well as the training of groups of members mentioned above, other acts which would probably not be acceptable in LCA circles, such as the dispensing of the cup at the Lord's Supper, and assisting in the training of deacons.
5. Fritz Zerbst, *The Office of Woman in the Church*, trans. Albert G. Merckens (St. Louis: Concordia), 122.
6. Zerbst-Merckens, 109.
7. Brunner, 23.
8. *Ibid.*, 32.
9. Merton P. Strommen, Milo L. Brekke, Ralph C. Underwager, Arthur L. Johnson, *A Study of Generations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 267-268.
10. Brunner, 22.