

The Bible and the Ordination of Women: A Bibliographical Essay

by Sakae Kubo

This essay does not deal with the broad subject of women's role in the church but concentrates specifically on the Bible's position concerning the ordination of women. Even on that narrower topic there seems to be no clear-cut directive in the Bible. Even if there were, one would still have to ask if the Bible's advice on ordination of women were intended as an eternal principal or if Scripture was recording a policy conditioned by time and situation.

The discussion in this essay centers on 1) general theological arguments, 2) conduct of women in worship and 3) principles of interpretation. Within each topic, I will note the work of scholars who believe the Bible opposes ordination of women and those who are certain the Bible allows it.

But, first, I want to recommend the best book and the best article giving a fair, balanced introduction to the general topic of ordination of women. Both are by Lutherans.

Raymond Tiemeyer's book *The Ordination of Women* (Augsburg Publishing House, 1970) condenses research done through the Division of Theological Studies of the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. After giving the arguments for both

sides, it concludes that Scripture is inconclusive concerning the ordination of women. John Reumann, in his article "What in Scripture Speaks to the Ordination of Women?" (*Concordia Theological Monthly* 44 [1973]: 5-30), also treats both sides fairly even though he clearly favors ordination of women.

First, the opponents to ordination. They come from the entire spectrum of Christendom. Two short articles in the World Council of Churches publication, *Concerning the Ordination of Women* (World Council of Churches, Department of Faith and Order and Department on Cooperation of Men and Women in Church, Family and Society, 1964), present the Greek Orthodox Church's reasons for opposing the ordination of women. The first Orthodox writer, Nicolae Chitescu, presents three different reasons to support his position: 1) Jesus did not include any women among the twelve or the seventy; 2) The Apostles themselves did not appoint women as heads of Christian communities; 3) Women cannot carry on priestly duties during their impure period (p. 58). The Rev. Archimandrite Georges Khodre supports his position by citing the fact that the bishop is a representative of Christ and the church is the bride of Christ. The bishop fulfills the functions of Christ, the Bridegroom, towards the Church. "It is therefore normal," Khodre writes on page 63, "that the charisma of representing Christ in

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relation to the church (the Bride) should be borne by a man.”

An Anglican attack on the ordination of women comes from E. L. Mascall in a letter to the editor of *Theology* (57 [1954]: 428-429). “There is the further fact to be taken into account that the Word (as is congruous with his personal name as the Son [not the daughter] of the Father) became man as a male individual, and in that male humanity he performs forever that priestly work of which the work of the ordained priest in the Church is a communication and participation. It would seem to be this fact, . . . which is the basis of the masculinity of the historic priesthood.”

A thorough examination of all the arguments that Catholic dogmatists have brought forth against the ordination of women, appears in Haye van der Meer’s *Women Priests in the Catholic Church? A Theological-Historical Investigation* (Temple University Press, 1973).

Some Lutherans also oppose ordination of women. Peter Brunner’s little pamphlet, *The Ministry and the Ministry of Women* (Concordia Publishing House, 1971), opposes women’s ordination since it goes counter to the order of creation and what he calls the *kephale*-structure (the order of subordination) established by it. In creation woman was taken “from” and was made “for the sake of” man. The fall modified the structure so that women were oppressed beyond the proper bounds but Christ redeems this structure to what it was before sin. He has a difficult time in justifying his opposition to women’s ordination inasmuch as he feels that women’s role as lawyers, judges, legislators and cabinet members does not oppose this *kephale*-structure. Anna Paulsen points out this weakness in Brunner’s paper, the weakness of his exegesis of Genesis 2 and 3, and also the fact that he completely neglects Genesis 1 in his discussion (*Lutheran World* 7 [1960-61]: 231-232).

Among those supporting ordination of women, André Dumas gives the best theological arguments (“Biblical Anthropology and the Participation of Women in the Ministry of the Church,” *Concerning the Ordination of Women*, pp. 12-40). He first establishes the fact that the Trinity transcends any sexual differentiation even though God is known as Father and Jesus

Christ was male. The term “Father” is an expression of “Yahweh’s infinite love for His chosen people, expressed in terms of a patriarchal society” (p. 23). And Jesus Christ is usually spoken of as *anthropos* (mankind) rather than as *aner* (male person).

The second point is that according to Genesis 1 and 2, man and woman have “joint authority.” They together are made in the image of God. Genesis 2 calls woman a helper (*‘ezer*), which is used 16 times in the Old Testament of a superior who “assists” us. In five cases, it has no hierarchical use. “If the word *‘ezer* is to be inter-

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preted as ‘as assistant of inferior status,’ this would contradict its constant use in the Old Testament. Thus Genesis 2 seems to confirm Genesis 1, although it was written much later. The Old Testament, therefore, does not describe two orders of creation but a single order formulated twice for different purposes.”

According to Dumas, “The Epistles of Paul, on the other hand, are based on conventions which were indispensable to the Church’s testimony, but which do not interpret an ‘order of creation’ (as was wrongly assumed by the church for a long time, owing to incorrect exegesis)” (p. 30).

He believes that the reason for excluding women from the priesthood in the Old Testament are no longer valid in the New Testament. Although he finds no convincing answer for the fact that Christ did not call women to the apostleship, he points out that Paul did not cite this as a reason for excluding women. Rather, Paul gave as reasons “the need for the young Church to safeguard the honour of marriage, the building up of the Church by teaching submission to the Apostle’s words, as the women within it did” (p. 35).

If “conventional” considerations helped determine Paul’s view on allowing women into the ministry, we must examine the question on the same level today if we would be faithful to

his intentions. Dumas lists four reasons which he feels make it suitable in our situation to allow women into the ministry: 1) Honour and respect for *married women* no longer means that they must wear veils, keep silent, and be in subjection to their husband; 2) Neither anthropologically, nor biologically, can *the nature of women* any longer be described merely by the adjective "weak"; 3) *The education of women* is the tremendous new phenomenon which makes the independence of women entirely different from the time of Paul. When a woman is trained in theology, especially, she becomes edifying (no longer disturbing) in a Church; 4) Paul's *exegesis of Genesis 2* was "conventional," tuned to the intellectual convictions of those to whom he was writing, just as the scriptural typology of the author of Hebrews was suited to them.

Margaret Thrall, in "The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood," (*Theology* [1954]: 330-335), sees dominion and priesthood closely linked together in Scripture. Dominion according to Genesis 1 was granted to man and woman but through sin "this dominion was perverted and partly lost, and the female half of mankind, no longer exercising dominion, lost altogether the accompanying priestly function" (p. 334). Through the work of Christ equal dominion is restored to the woman and with this the priestly function. Another argument she uses is based on the prophetic and priestly role of Christ. "If then the ministry of the Church is an inseparable combination of the prophetic and priestly functions, and if women have in time past been called to exercise one of these functions, there seems to be very little reason why they should not be allowed to exercise both, especially as the objection to their exercise of the priestly function is not valid in the life of the New Israel" (p. 335).

In *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood* (SCM Press, 1958), Miss Thrall deals at length with the differences between Genesis 1 and 2 regarding the relationship of man and woman. In Genesis 1 she finds that man and woman are made in the image of God in the fullest and most complete sense of the term. They are such from the very beginning. But in Genesis 2 Adam is described as in the image of God in an undeveloped, rudimentary state, and the woman exists in the image only by virtue of

her connection with and dependence upon man. The first chapter of Genesis describes the will of the Creator, but the second indicates that there will be a phase of imperfection, a process of development. This latter was interrupted by sin (Genesis 3). But through redemption the prior condition of Genesis again becomes possible. Now *no* human intermediary is necessary between woman and God. Thus, there is no theological reason for not ordaining women as priests.

While the Gospels present Jesus' attitude to women (which is favorable), they do not have passages which deal directly with the ordination of women. The significant New Testament discussion of this question are three passages in Paul's writings—1 Corinthians 11; 1 Corinthians 14; and 1 Timothy 2. Those opposed to ordination are adamant that these passages particularly prohibit ordination of women—they allow women to give private instruction, but forbid public proclamation. According to Georg Gunter Blum, women may serve as deaconesses. ("The Office of Woman in the New Testament," *Churchman* 85 [1971]: 175-189.) They are not, however, "allowed the office of preaching (and that would naturally include administration of the sacraments), whether in a free, charismatic or a specific, official form. This is not a matter of accidental, temporary character, due to the position of women in the classical world of primitive Christianity; it is a deliberate decision. As it rests on the highest authority possible in the Church, i. e., Apostolic authority, this decision must be equally valid and binding for the Church of the present day" (p. 185).

Those interested in the best book-length argument opposing ordination of women (based on these Pauline passages) should read Fritz Zerbst's *The Office of Woman in the Church* (Concordia Publishing House, 1955).

Biblical Scholars who favor the ordination of women, use different approaches to arrive at their position. Robin Scroggs ("Paul and the Eschatological Woman," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40 [1972]: 283-303), eliminates the Pastorals as non-Pauline, and 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 as a gloss. Thus, 1 Timothy 2: 11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36

can be left out of consideration at least as coming from the hand of Paul. In Galatians 3:27, 28, where Paul discusses women, he shows their equality with men. As in Colossians 3:9-11 and 1 Corinthians 12:12, 13, Galatians 3:27, 28, is placed in a baptism context showing that Christians recognized baptism as having a

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societal-leveling quality. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul goes out of his way to demonstrate the equality of women in all the situations described. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11, simply demands a distinction in dress, and the head covering is, in fact, a way of protecting the new freedom of women in the eschatological community!

Elaine Pagels, answering Scroggs (“Paul and Women: A Response to Recent Discussion,” *Journal of The American Academy of Religion* 42 [1974]: 538-549), disagrees with his view that Paul is “a certain and consistent spokesman for the liberation and equality of women.” She feels that although Paul has a vision of human liberation, he is not able to sustain that vision without ambivalence. Nevertheless, she argues, our situation today is very different from Paul’s. Certain conditions that Paul thought could be realized only eschatologically, we must realize now.

J. M. Ford (“Biblical Material Relevant to the Ordination of Women,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 10 [1973]: 669-694) sees 1 Corinthians 11 as emphasizing the essential complementarity of man and woman. He regards 1 Corinthians 14:33-34 as an interpolation, and in any case, concerned only with married women. The latter seems “to be Paul’s application of the Jewish etiquette whereby a wife could not address any man other than her husband outside her home.” She sees 1 Timothy 2:9-15 as prohibiting women’s exercising supreme authority in the

sense of “formulating doctrine” which was the task of the bishop. Thus this passage does not forbid women from ordination as priests but only as bishops. Another interesting argument is that the Christian priesthood of Jesus is according to the order of Melchizedek which is not based on one’s physical condition.

N. J. Hommes (“Let Women Be Silent in Church,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 3, 4 [1968-69]: 5-22) concludes that 1 Timothy 2 does not have anything to do with what we call our preaching service. What is being forbidden cannot be pulpit preaching since that kind of worship service simply did not exist in the New Testament. Therefore, this passage cannot be used as a veto against women in office.

Russell C. Prohl (*Woman in the Church: A Restudy of Woman’s Place in Building the Kingdom* [Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1957]), finds no obstacle to the ordination of women in the three key Pauline passages. They refer, he says, to Christian wives, who were advised not to assert themselves in public meetings to avoid the then current accusation that the church was destroying the family. “We have liberty, but it must be adjusted to the world in which we are living” (p. 58).

Perhaps, as with so many other topics, the most important task in studying the Bible and ordination of women is that of arriving at a principle for interpreting Scripture. The best work on this topic written from the standpoint of a self-conscious principle of interpretation is Krister Stendahl’s *The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics* (Fortress Press, 1966). This was originally published in Swedish in 1958 when the question of women’s ordination was raised in Sweden. Stendahl finds in the New Testament elements that point beyond the period in which they are enunciated. He refers, for example, to the full development of the doctrine of the Trinity, the full implication of the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection and the implications of 1 Corinthians 11:11-12 and Galatians 3:28. He says, “If the actual stage of implementation in the first century becomes the standard for what is authoritative, then those elements which point toward future implementation become neutralized and absorbed in a static ‘biblical view.’ This

is the pitfall of the 'realistic interpretation' and here its descriptive realism functions as an archaizing deep freeze" (p. 35). This is exactly what happened with respect to slavery, and yet those who argued for emancipation were more truly biblical than those who used "irrefutable biblical arguments" for their view. So, today it is not our problem "to harmonize the two tendencies into a perfect system. It is—as always in truly Christian theology—to discern where the accent should lie now, the accent in the eschatological drama which we call the history of the church and the world" (pp. 36-37).

Those who oppose ordination of women often do not spell out their principles of interpretation. They are inclined, however, to assume a literalistic view of Scripture. H. Cavallin ("Demythologizing the Liberal Illusion," in *Why Not? Priesthood and the Ministry of Women*, pp. 81-94) criticizes Stendahl's hermeneutics as liberal since "the leading feature of Liberal theology's reading of the biblical texts was its selectively critical principle, the presupposition of which was nothing else than the Liberal ideals themselves. That which agreed with them, or could be interpreted in accordance with them, was genuinely prophetic or a genuine word of Jesus. Everything else was primitive religion, postexilic Jewish legalism or Gemeindeftheologie" (p. 82). For Cavallin, Galatians 3:38 means that the woman in the New Covenant has full membership through baptism (no longer circumcision) like the Gentile and the bondman. Further, he says, "If, like Stendahl, one interpreted the admonition to men to love their wives as expressing a tendency towards equality between man and woman, one would also have to interpret Christ's love for his Church as implying the abrogation of the subordination of the Church to Christ. For the subordination of women to their husbands is parallel to the subordination of

the Church to her Lord, as the love of the men for their wives is compared to the love of Christ for his Church (Eph. 5:24d). From a modern point of view one would of course expect admonitions to mutual love between husband and wife. But as a matter of fact there are none in these texts" (pp. 86-87).

Finally, it may be helpful as we attempt to formulate a general method of understanding Scripture on this point, to look at the recommendation of G. W. H. Lampe, an Anglican scholar. He develops a principle of interpretation that differentiates within the church's tradition "two broadly distinguishable classes. Part of it consists of the accumulated deposit of doctrine, the result of the constant process of formulation and explanation by which the common mind of the Church has sought, consciously and deliberately, to interpret, and reinterpret for successive generations and different cultures the revelation embodied in Scripture. Part, on the other hand, is made up of customs, the ways in which the Church's life and work are organized, its worship ordered and its various rites conducted, all of which have developed almost imperceptibly, have come to be taken for granted, and have not usually been subjected to critical examination except at times of revolutionary change" ("Church Tradition and the Ordination of Women," *Expository Times* 76 [1964-65]: 123-125). He places the question of the ordination of women in the latter category of custom. Lampe sees a difference between the first category of doctrine which has clear and positive witness in Scripture, and the second category of custom for which Scripture gives no direct guidance. Lampe regards ordination of women as a matter of custom, not to be settled by Scripture.