
The Gospel Demands Equality *Now*

by James J. Londis

I walked into the pastor's study of Sligo Church a few minutes before the 11:00 worship service. Our conference president was there, along with the ministerial director. I was scheduled to preach an ordination sermon for one of our associates, the first such sermon in my ministry. Since most ordinations are conducted during camp meeting, and such a service had never before been held during a regular worship hour at Sligo, a number of Sligo people who seldom attended camp meeting—especially the young—had never witnessed this service.

When I checked the bulletin, I discovered that our female associate pastor had been scheduled to participate in the service. She had served the church longer than had the candidate and had more seminary credits to her name.

"Are you going to be okay through all this?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, I'll be fine. No problem."

She wasn't fine and there was a problem. While she maintained her composure on the platform, the injustice of the scene stabbed administrators, pastors, and church members alike. Even if unintentional, it amounted to a public snub, a denial of her calling, a symbolizing of her second-class citizenship in the body of Christ. Those who had never seen the drama or heard the charge of an ordination service to the ministry were stunned. Several commented: "I felt terrible for her. It is *so unfair!*"

James J. Londis is the founding director of the Washington Institute for Contemporary Issues, and formerly the senior pastor of the Sligo Church.

I agree with them. Many others do not. They believe that this situation is the will of God and the very best possible arrangement in this world of brokenness and sin. I believe there is a better way. Freeing women to serve society and the church as equals to men will liberate all of us.

Let me share some reasons why.

Sharing Power Strengthens Female-Male Intimacy

Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen referred to my wife's generation as the "lost" one. Between her mother's generation, which knew that a woman's role in the world was defined largely by the home, and her daughter's, which believes that only partly or not at all, my wife Dolores and her peers are not sure of where they fit.¹ She began as a woman of her mother's generation; she is now a woman of our daughter's generation. That transformation has, at times, been excruciating for women like her. It has also distressed men because it involves a new definition and distribution of power² in gender relationships.

Dolores graduated as valedictorian of her high school class—four years of straight "A's." Her freshman year in college she continued that straight "A" tradition. But during her second year in college something started happening. Dolores heard that her roommate Carol was dropping out of school to get married. One after another of the brightest women were announcing engagements

as the weeks succeeded each other. She survived through her sophomore year, but that was it. I proposed and we were married August 16, 1959.

While I finished my senior year, she worked full-time as a physician's receptionist. We lived in the married student apartments with half a dozen other couples who had done the same thing. In *every* case, the women were working and their men were studying.

The pattern never varied: the wife (and later mother) would facilitate the dreams of the husband and children she loved. It was anybody's guess when her own dreams would take their turn. Only later would we realize how much this hurt. Twenty years into our marriage, Dolores let me know that during the first year of our life together, as she drove to work by the college campus she often fought back tears. There she had been, sailing through college on the winds of excellence; then she was stuck in secretarial jobs. Everybody did it. That was the way it was.

She earned her degree a decade later, not—in my case—taking a complete load while her spouse worked, but taking a half-load while also working 30 hours a week and mothering two small children. When it was time for me to earn my Master's degree, again I took a full course load and worked part-time. When, years later, she earned *her* Master's, she worked full-time and took classes occasionally.

Finally, when I earned my Ph.D, she was still caring for our children and working full-time. Now, almost more than anything else, she would like to study for her own doctorate. For a variety of reasons, we simply cannot afford it. What is important to realize is this: as Dolores' identity changed from the traditional generation that preceded hers to the more liberated one that followed (and never forget, the one that followed on her shoulders), she lost at least 15 years.

I did not cause this situation, but I have benefited from it. In a sense, of course, because we are a couple, what profited me profited her. But in a more profound sense, what profited me penalized her, for she too is an individual in her own right. Given her history, which is a microcosm of the history of women in my lifetime, I am not surprised she is passionate about women's issues or

eager to see my daughter make of herself what she will without losing 15 years in the process.

This should not be taken to mean that she was unhappy. Her years as a mother were intensely rewarding and provided her a sense of power and meaning I will never achieve. In many ways she misses them. But those years changed her mind and what she deferred during that time she would now like to have—a terminal degree in psychology so she could practice her deep love of counseling young people.

Her working to put me through school made me powerful and her powerless (trained to do

There she had been, sailing through college on the winds of excellence; then she was stuck in secretarial jobs. Everybody did it. That was the way it was.

what we want to do) in certain ways, while my working and her raising the children made her powerful and me powerless (that is, sensitive to what is really happening in their young lives) in other ways. Now she wants the power I have and I would like another life to experience the power she had with our children. I need the freedom to play her traditional role and she the freedom to play mine; for if women cannot break into the power of the corporate suites, men cannot stay at home and know the power of being caring fathers. If women do not know how to be assertive in the business world, men do not know how to be sensitive in the personal world. If women are denied leadership "over" men in the church, men never experience the blessings of supporting women in church leadership.

My college teaching career began in an all-male department administered by an all-male administration (with the exception of the women's dormitory dean). Looking back on that time, I must confess that I would probably have felt uneasy if it had been otherwise. I was not used to women being "in charge" of anything outside the home or the college English and home economics departments. My attitude then, I now realize, was laughable. It was also tragic, for the

freeing of women from their stereotypical roles and their subservience to men is the only way to build a deep friendship and intimacy between the genders. That is why a marriage in which the powerless spouse wants more power is not necessarily a poor one. It may be a sign that the false closeness required by a dominance/submission relationship is being replaced by an authentic intimacy based on equality. I say “false closeness” because any relationship in which one partner is excessively dependent on the other does not allow that person to grow in ways that contribute to intimacy. The traditional woman, for example, whose husband earns and controls all the finances, the woman who has to ask him for everything she needs or wants, cannot come to him as an equal, a center of power in her own right. As a consequence, he cannot feel that she—able to take care of herself and *not needing* him—*chooses* to love him. The power such freedom

Can there be any doubt that to feel unequal is to feel disenfranchised, alienated, and angry, unable to claim full membership in the body of Christ?

gives leads to equality, honesty, and openness, the indispensable requirements for intimacy.

In the case of sharing power with women in the life of the church, the same principle applies. We cannot be the true “body of Christ” if one group, for whatever reasons, is denied power. Whatever practices or attitudes diminish the power of one group while enhancing the power of another group must disappear. Even the *perception* of inequality is devastating, a perception that has to exist as long as women, lacking ordination, cannot and do not sit in the chairs of church leadership at the conference, union, and General Conference levels. A church family, like any family, can only be as strong as its weakest member. To the extent we strengthen the least powerful and make them equal, to that extent the unity of the church is truly impregnable.

Church Unity Requires Equality

This is one reason why the issue of equality is so important to the church. Church unity—the passionate goal of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians—is impossible without it. To read the Bible as if its ideal male-female relationship is other than full equality, honesty, and openness, most especially in the pastoral leadership of the church, is to misunderstand Christ’s prayer for the church in John 17: “I pray that they might be one even as we are one.” When the ideal is painted as a hierarchy of authority from God to the male to the female to the children, an ideal love between the levels is impossible. Even if the superior “loves”³ the inferior, we are back to all the problems of domination/subordination, which produce feelings of inferiority.

Denied political, economic, and social power because they are allegedly “too emotional” or “unstable” or “not tough enough,” women internalize those very qualities and operate with an inferiority complex. For millennia, women have supported the achievements of men, occupying support staff roles and low-level jobs so males were free to function as leaders. Men sit on top of a pyramid of labor provided by women, who also prepare the home, care for the children, and cook the family meals.⁴ In small groups I have conducted, some women are moved to silent tears when they realize what has been happening. Can there be any doubt that to feel unequal is to feel disenfranchised, alienated, and angry, unable to claim full membership in the body of Christ?

It should be pointed out, however, that in some relationships, power imbalances are for socially good purposes, such as raising children or instructing students. Here, the aim of the superior is to raise the inferior to equality. It is a relationship of service, the greater power being a tool in the effort to end the inequality. One can hardly call it domination, for the purpose of the relationship is to liberate and strengthen the weaker member. In a service relationship, the powerholder assumes

that the intrinsic worth of the less powerful is *identical* to one's own. This is not easy, for the mere fact that one is temporarily superior tempts one to think he or she is permanently superior.

Jesus came as a *servant* leader, as one who humbled and emptied himself (Philippians 2:5-11). In God's kingdom, the path to power is through weakness, the path to glory is through humility, the path to life is through death.

Is the creation about God's power *over* the world or God's empowering *of* the world? Does God create for the joy of wielding power or for the joy of seeing others wield power? God is looking for ways to empower us, to raise us up as high as we can possibly be raised in the divine image. It is the distribution of power that excites God, not its acquisition or centralization.

To the world, taking power gives the illusion of strength, while giving power appears weak. That is why the cross is such a powerful symbol. Empowering us has always meant that God becomes weak and vulnerable with us. That is why it is "foolishness" to the world (Romans 1:16, 17). Worldly notions of power are obliterated in the cross. Our neurotic attempts to acquire immortality through power, wealth, or status are shredded in the explosion of Christ's resurrection. What happens in our relationship with God is no different than what happens in our relationships with one another.

The litmus test of equality in Christ Jesus is this: How do the powerless feel? When women tell us they feel powerless in the church, men must not be arrogant enough to deny those feelings. When women who feel called to the ministry tell us that they must have ordination to function in ministry for the church, those of us who are already ordained cannot tell them they do not need it. We must not deny their feelings. People in power tend to deny the feelings of those without power, for to admit the legitimacy of their feelings means we must surrender some of our power. Yet, if we would be disciples of Jesus, surrendering some of our power to someone else is just the thing to do.

It is no accident that Jesus ministered so lovingly to the poor, the lepers, the prostitutes, the

publicans, the women, and the children. He identified with them in a way he never could identify with the powerful—even the religiously powerful. To the extent that those in power were not willing to empower these "little ones," to that extent they stood under God's judgment.

Never forget that in the final judgment, the basis for receiving Christ's ultimate benediction is based on what we have done for the weakest of the weak. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

The litmus test of equality in Christ Jesus is this: How do the powerless feel? When women tell us they feel powerless in the church, men must not be arrogant enough to deny those feelings.

In 1989 in the North American church, the "least of these my brethren" are Seventh-day Adventist women. Some—but not all—are being summoned by the Holy Spirit to occupy church offices of every kind, including the pastoral ministry. More than 100 years ago, a forward-looking group of Adventist pioneers recommended to the General Conference session that women be ordained to the gospel ministry. It came before the session, was referred back to the General Conference Committee, was never considered, and quietly disappeared. Then we were a North American church with relatively few members. Now we are a world church with more than five million members, many of whom do not believe we can all be in lockstep on an issue of this magnitude. The most helpful, unifying, and responsible thing that can happen is for the church to recognize that while this truly is a morally and theologically important issue, because it is so enmeshed with cultural attitudes (as were slavery and polygamy in biblical times), local fields should decide this issue for themselves. This question no ecclesiastical supreme court can resolve. It must be left, as it were, up to the states. Feeling compassion for

women is not enough. Like the prophets, those who care about justice must also feel God's anger, for—as the civil-rights movement taught us—“justice delayed is justice denied.”

Like the Hebrews of old, we have a momentous opportunity to go forward if we have the courage to do so. We must not let the church wander in the wilderness of inequality for another century. It is time to realize, at long last, that God is calling us into the promised land of equality.

We must cross the river now, believing that even as Jericho collapsed, the walls of injustice

will tumble down as men and women together blast the gospel trumpet. Perhaps then the prophecy of Joel will, at long last, be fulfilled:

I will pour out my Spirit on all people;
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit
in those days.

(Joel 2:28, 29, NIV)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Richard Cohen, “The Lost Generation,” *The Washington Post Magazine* (July 5, 1987), p. 3.

2. Because the term *power* has so many meanings (and I use most of them in my paper), which meaning is in force must be gleaned from the context in which the word appears. Power can mean the ability to do or act, the capability of accomplishing something, the sense that I am as free to do or be as other humans are; a great or marked ability to do or

act; might or force; the possession of control over others.

3. The word *loves* is in quotes because it is too easy to confuse “dominating the one I love” with “loving the one I dominate.” Neither is actually possible, but the latter makes clear what is *really* transpiring.

4. See Rosemary Reuther's *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), pp. 261-263 *passim* for an eloquent statement about this phenomenon.