

The Ordination of Women: The Witness of Holy Scripture

The ordination of women to the presbyteral and episcopal ministries of the Christian Church was inaugurated under the aegis of “provisionality” and indeed has yet to find anything near universal acceptance. Nevertheless, meaningfully discussing the issue, without bias or passion, involved as it seems to the modern mind with matters such as equity and justice, is becoming increasingly difficult.

Often, the proponents of the novelty, when the debate turns to epistemology – especially Holy Scripture – argue that an appeal on either side of the question to a passage of the Bible is quite beside the point. But this is exactly the point. Accepting that the Christian Faith is a revealed religion; accepting that the preponderance of this revelation is found in the written pages of Holy Scripture, and that God Himself is the author of this revelation (II Tim. 3:16-17); and accepting that this revelation is coherent, non-contradicting and, as it has been faithfully preserved, authoritative, leads inevitably to the conclusion that what the Bible has to say about gender, gender roles, and the ordering of families, societies and the church is of the greatest importance.

What is the witness of Holy Scripture as it relates to the ordination of women to the presbyteral and episcopal offices of the Church? A comprehensive examination of the Bible on this subject can be meaningfully arranged accordingly: 1) the relationship of the sexes in the Creation narrative of the Torah; 2) the ministerial roles of women in the first covenant community of Israel; 3) the precedents of Jesus in the Gospels; and 4) the teaching of St. Paul.

As we examine the creation, relationship and ordering of the sexes in the Creation account in Genesis (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:7, 15-25), we immediately discover an ontological parity between the female and the male. The male is created first, and consequently becomes a type or representative of the race. This representation, however, does not imply superiority. Next, the woman is created – drawn physically from the man, but both beings receive their *ruach*, the breath of life, in equal measure from God. We find no hierarchical relationship of one sex over the other in the narrative; indeed, both male and female are described equally as being created “in the image of God.” The woman derives her name from man (literally in Hebrew she was called a ‘female man,’ “because she was taken from man,” Gen. 2:23b), and was created to be an equal complement to man (“a helper as a counterpart,” Gen. 2:18). Despite their ontological equality, however, the Creation account does not assume or reveal an *interchangeability* of the sexes. Both male and female are of the same essence, of equal dignity, but differ in role from each other. Indeed, it isn’t until after the Fall that a linear hierarchy appears – “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” – and this is established by God as a consequence of the woman’s disobedience (Gen. 3:16b).

The remainder of the Hebrew canon of Scripture (especially Leviticus, the historical books and the prophets) presents a consistent and divinely ordered view of the role of women in the religious and political life of Israel throughout her history—from the patriarchal period through the post-exilic return to the land. Both women and men were considered equal members of the covenant community, though the male, as representative of the race, alone received the

sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:9-14). Both enjoyed covenant privileges for obedience (Deut. 28:1-14) and suffered the covenant consequences for disobedience (Deut. 28:15-68). Both were welcomed into worship, and both had related but separate ritual and purity requirements for access to common and divine assemblies (Leviticus 15). Moreover, in the functional life of the nation women served as prophetesses (Hulda in II Kings 22:14-20), judges (Deborah in Judges 4:4-24), and writers of Scripture (Miriam in Exodus 15:20-21; the mother of King Lemuel in Proverbs 31), all seemingly with complete parity with men.

This equality of access did not extend, however, to the offices of priest or Levite. As the word of the Lord to Moses makes clear in both Exodus and Leviticus, the requirements for admission to these two ministerial offices were stringent and specific. The priesthood was given by God “as a gift of service” (Num. 18:7) and was made vocationally responsible for three primary tasks. The first was mediatory and intercessory: The priest represented God to the people and pronounced His forgiveness and blessing to them; he also represented the people before God and prayed for them. The second was functional: The priest alone was authorized to offer the appointed sacrifices. The third was didactic: When not in service at the tabernacle or temple, the priest was to go amongst the people and teach them the Law. Admission to the priesthood required a male descendant of Aaron without disease or bodily defect, it involved total separation from the obligations of war and farming, and it demanded conformity to ritual, vestment and purity standards set out by God.

The Levite differed from the priest in that he need only be descended from Levi (and not Aaron specifically). His vocational obligations involved assisting the priest at the sacrifices and caring for the tent of meeting and worship precincts. The Scriptures make clear that the requirement that both priests and Levites be male was not incidental or culturally conditioned. Every other pagan religion in the Fertile Crescent, excluding Israel, had priestesses and temple prostitutes, and even as unfaithful to Yahweh as the descendants Abraham became, their continual violations of the first and second commandments never once included introducing women into the priestly or levitical offices of ministry.

At the moment we are introduced to the ministry of Jesus Christ we are immediately confronted with the reality that He is male. Moreover, this gender distinction is not of minor importance. Jesus of Nazareth, from at least His baptism by John in the Jordan River until His crucifixion, made the claim that He was the very Son of God incarnate. His miracles testified to this claim (John 3:2); His teaching likewise substantiated this claim (Matt. 7:28-29); and even His adversaries were aware of this claim (John 10:33). His incarnation was volitional and voluntary (Phil. 2:5b-8), and His maleness was intentional. Further, as the Gospels and the inscripturated apostolic writings make clear, Christ being a man had and has profound redemptive ramifications. First, as a man, Jesus, Emmanuel, “God with us,” represented God (who revealed Himself exclusively in masculine terms to the old covenant people) to us (John 14:9; Heb. 1:3). Second, as a man, Jesus becomes the head of a new race – the elect and redeemed – and is the instrumental cause of their salvation, so that, as St. Paul writes, as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all the redeemed be made alive (Rom. 6:12-19). And third, as a male, Jesus qualifies for His sacrificial, mediating double role as both priest and victim, offerer and offering (Heb. 10:5-14).

In addition, Christ's itinerant teaching and healing ministry was not exercised in isolation but in concert with 12 disciples. These 12 disciples were exclusively Jewish men. It is frequently argued by proponents of women's ordination that this fact either was societally demanded of Jesus (meaning that He could not have chosen a woman disciple had He desired to) or that this ethnic apostolic monopoly by Jews must then forever exclude Gentiles from assuming ministerial offices of the church. Both contentions are wrongheaded, but for different reasons. As to the first claim, Jesus, while declaring that He had not come to destroy the Law or the prophets but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17), nevertheless exhibited a radical new relationship with women during His ministry. He ignored custom and spoke with women publicly (John 4:4-29). He forgave a woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). He allowed Himself to be touched by one woman who had "lived a sinful life" (Luke 7:37-50). Jesus did not regard the ritual impurity of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34). He touched a dead girl's body and brought her back to life (Mark 5:35-42). Women followed the Lord wherever He went (Luke 8:1-3) and even accompanied Him to the Cross (Luke 23:27). Finally, though women were not allowed to give evidence in a juridical matter in Jesus' day, women were the first to witness and bear testimony to His resurrection (Matt. 28:1-10). As to the second, the ethnicity of the disciples – and later the apostles – is unrelated to the Lord's gender requirements for inclusion in the Twelve; for, while the 12 disciples assume a quasi-patriarchal role in the new covenant mirroring that of the 12 sons of Jacob (and thus must be male), it was God's clear intention from the beginning of salvation history to include Gentiles in the covenant of redemption (II Chron. 6:32-33, Mal. 1:11, Rom. 1:16).

Because of his proclivity to systematize, some of the clearest teaching in Holy Scripture on men, women and ministry comes through the pen of the Apostle Paul. Like Jesus, Paul grounds his teaching on gender and roles in Creation (I Cor. 11: 3-12).

As Hauke points out,

The role of women in the Pauline communities is extremely significant. In many passages of his letters, the names of women occur who render assistance to the apostles even in the spreading of the Faith. His mention of the married couple Priscilla and Aquila makes evident the fact that the woman is always first, which indicates the outstanding degree of respect in which she was held.²

Additionally, Paul praises the women who labor with him in the Gospel, interacts with them in evangelism and church-planting, and won and baptized the first European convert to Christ – a noblewoman, Lydia – in Philippi (Acts 16:11-15). Furthermore, he teaches that men and women are justified equally before God by faith, are of equal dignity before God in salvation (Gal. 3:26-28), and equally, without distinction, receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12).

Nevertheless, the Apostle does not set apart women for apostolic or congregational oversight and ministry. He forbids the churches he started from doing so (I Tim. 2:11-12) and

² Hauke, Manfred. *Women in the Priesthood? A Systematic Analysis in the Light of the Order of Creation and Redemption*. Translated by David Kipp. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988.

assumes that this practice will continue and succeed him (I Tim. 2, II Tim. 2:2). Paul's reasons are threefold. The first is that man was created first and is the archetype and representative head of the human race, through whom and in whom God acts to save and bless it (I Cor. 11:3-16; I Tim. 2:13). Second, woman was deceived first, not man (I Tim. 2:14). And third, the institution of marriage and the ordering of the human family (of which man is the head) mirrors and reveals something of the mystery of the risen Christ's relationship to believers and the ordering of God's family, the Church (Eph. 5:22-33). Galatians 3:28 – "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" – is frequently cited as a biblical apologetic for the ordination of women. Exegetical gymnastics must abound to make this text contradict everything else St. Paul says on the issue, however, and nowhere in the passage – or indeed, in the entire Galatian letter – is a reversal of the order of Creation or the matter of ordination even alluded to.

Conclusion

The clear witness of Scripture is that God created man and woman ontologically equal, with equal worth, dignity, potential for obedience or disobedience, and access to covenantal mercies. God did not, however, make men and women interchangeable, but gave each sex differing roles in human society and the cosmic drama of redemption. What is more, because of the Fall from grace, He imposed differing consequences pertaining to the ordering and relationship of the sexes, and these will not be obviated until the Parousia and the final consummation of all things. Until then, we groan in anticipation of the redemption of our bodies and the reordering of creation.

Also, the Bible declares that there exist in human life hierarchal relationships which are divinely mandated (and ethically neutral) and give God glory, because this relationship of ontological equity but relational submission exists in the very godhead itself (Jesus said, "I and my Father are one," John 10:30; and "The Father is greater than I," John 14:28). Therefore, against the egalitarian argument, hierarchy is not inherently unjust.

The vocations of servant, steward and soul-winner are mandated for every regenerate believer. The offices of headship and teaching in the family and in God's family, the Church, are restricted to males. The teaching of Holy Scripture concerning the ordination of women to the ministerial offices of the Christian church is coherent, compelling and unambiguous. It is not surprising, therefore, that current arguments for the ordination of women rarely appeal to Scripture any longer, but rather to pragmatics, rights and misplaced concerns for justice.

The Rev. Quintin Morrow