

## Feminism In The Church: The Issue Of Our Day

From time to time an issue arises which is truly of fundamental importance. Feminism is such an issue in this our day. The questions it raises and the answers it gives are at the very heart of a Christian understanding of reality.

An Eastern Orthodox theologian, Thomas Hopko, has struck the right note of urgency and significance:

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 consubstantial 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 God and man, Christ and the Church, life and death. ... It is the issue of our time *Women and the Priesthood*, 190).

Hopko reminds us of some things which must be remembered if confessional, orthodox Christian thinkers are going to address feminism with vigor and accuracy.

First, he states that the present situation is a major issue of our day. Feminism is raising questions which are *essential* Christian understandings. The point is worth repeating because orthodox theology needs correctly and clearly to isolate and define the basic 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. They are but symptoms of underlying dislocations in the way (primarily western) Christians have come to think about certain Christian doctrines. Put another way, we are not talking primarily about issues of practice but about issues of substance which are reflected in practice.

The rapid, almost uncontested, acceptance of feminist presuppositions and arguments in the Church is evidence of how unprepared the Church was (and still is) to offer a coherent *conceptual* answer to feminist claims. Churches and theologians who have not simply surrendered are often reduced to a biblicistic proof-texting of traditional positions.

It is important, therefore, 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 a clarity of thought which has frankly not been required in the Church for a long time. For there is a new factor in this debate which distinguishes it from any controversy since perhaps the early middle ages: the presuppositions and values of our day are *against* traditional and confessional Christian patterns of thought and practice and are *in favor* of the feminist claims. So, in this new battle we are struggling against major cultural and societal forces.

Often even conservative Christians who are opposed, say, to the ordination of women will nevertheless harbor presuppositions gleaned from their democratic and equality-oriented surroundings. For example, it is not uncommon within our Missouri circles to hear strong words against women’s ordination and suffrage by persons whose views concerning Church and ministry, alas, express precisely those same presuppositions upon which the feminist cause bases its claims. This *new* issue may very well require that we rethink and reassess some of our own most cherished ideas.

What then, are some of the central issues raised by feminism to which the Church has yet to give adequate response? What are some areas in which the Church must reassert a clear Christian vision of human life as life under God, the good Creator and Redeemer?

The more I read and think about present feminism in the Church, the more I realize that the Church of today has much in common with that of the second century when the Church needed especially to work out the ramifications of its belief in God as the Creator of the world. Belief in God the Creator, the Church found, meant believing that the Creator was also the Redeemer and that the creation in its *fleshly nature* was the object of both God’s creative as well as His redemptive work. That is, the belief in God as the Creator of the flesh implied the incarnation (enfleshment) of God’s Son as Redeemer and also the resurrection of the flesh as the goal of God’s redemptive purposes.

Thus, the doctrines of creation, incarnation, and resurrection all see human life *in the flesh* as meaningful. What a person does in his fleshly existence is not a matter of indifference. For example, it was through the history of Israel (its bondage, exiles, exodus, kings and prophets, 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.

Ultimately in the incarnation of Christ, through whom all things were made (John 1:3), God gave us the one “true man.” Jesus’ life was the perfect revelation of what it means to live according to God’s will 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. The Church in its concrete life reflects and must reflect the *creation* of God which in Christ, the Church’s Head, has been renewed and restored.

It is in these areas — creation, Jesus as the incarnated Word, and the Church as participation in the restored creation — 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 several ways in which these issues arise in feminism.

Thomas Hopko correctly identifies a critical question: why does human nature exist in two forms, male and female? This requires answer because it is not uncommon to

find the erroneous view that to be human is something other than to be male and female, that to be human does not imply that one is male or female, that being "human" is both prior to and above being "male human" or "female human." A person, so this line of argument goes, is human first and male or female second. In other words, maleness or femaleness are merely accidental qualities which do not define one's essential being as human person.

This same error is frequently applied also to the incarnation of Christ. One modern theologian, for example, argues that God's incarnation as a male is really theologically unimportant and took that form only because the strongly patriarchal society of Israel made it fitting for God to act in that way. But the idea that Jesus could have been incarnated as a female without any change of theological significance and that His incarnation as a male was merely a cultural accommodation on God's part violates God's actual created order and finally allows for no true understanding of the male-female differentiation within mankind. Furthermore, to assert that the contours of Jesus' earthly life are of no theological importance is to call into question the revelatory character of Jesus' earthly existence.

In contrast to much modern thinking, the early Christian Church was convinced that what Jesus said and did formed a purposeful pattern for the life of His Church. Not to see it this way would be to separate the life of those in Christ by faith from the concrete history of Jesus as given in the written gospels.

Very early, therefore, the Church took the position 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. His choice set the course for church life at all times and in all places. Thus, for a church father like Epiphanius (c. 380 A.D.) the very fact that never in the Old or New Testaments do we find a woman priest is sufficient to prove that women are not to be priests. This line of argument, sometimes belittled in our circles as "Roman Catholic," in fact has deep early Church roots and rests upon a close relationship between the life of Jesus and the continuing life of the Church.

Keeping within the space limitations of this article, I wish to note only briefly two further areas in which the Church must do both re-thinking and new thinking.

First, we must adopt a critical posture toward contemporary ideas of equality and "rights." When writers speak of "partnership of the sexes" as the Christian ideal and of women having the freedom and the right as persons to respond to God's call to the pastoral office just as men do, they are not speaking out of the Bible but on the cultural basis of the West's understanding of human self-rule and natural rights. The common claim is that women and men are really the same and therefore women are being oppressed when a particular avenue of service and authority is closed to them (namely, the pastoral ministry). This does not take seriously the actual sexual differentiation within mankind and refuses to believe that this differentiation has any meaning for our life as God's creatures also in the "new" creation.

Second, absolutely damaging in the present debate concerning the ordination of women is the purely functional understanding of the pastoral office so popular in Missouri 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 fact that the pastoral office has its basis both in the work and in the *person* of Christ. If, as said earlier, the specific character of Jesus' incarnation as male has theological significance, then the derivation of the pastoral office directly from the priesthood of all believers (which certainly includes women) will have to be re-evaluated in the light of the present issue.

It is not enough, quite frankly, to appeal in this matter to the prohibitions of St. Paul, not because they are not authoritative 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 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 basic character of the pastoral office. In the words of absolution the pastor says that by virtue of his office he forgives sins, that is, by virtue of the office he is in the place of Christ who is the Forgiver of all sins. What are the implications of these words for the doctrine of the ministry? Certainly popular talk of the pastor as facilitator, enabler, administrator, and the compiler of spiritual gifts does not answer this question.

Finally, the Church's last word in all of this cannot be simply a "No!" to women who seriously desire to consecrate themselves and their efforts to Christ. The Church must develop ministries and even offices in which they may excel. I am sure, for example, that on many occasions a woman's comfort and advice to another woman is much more helpful than 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 our cultural background. In such cases we must be honest enough to acknowledge it, lest the truly essential witness of the Church be brought to naught.

*Affirm*, March 1986, pp. 4-5  
Dr. William C. Weinrich  
Concordia Theological Seminary  
Fort Wayne, Indiana