



Twenty-Five Years Ago – Twenty-Five Years From Now: The Ministry of Women

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I. INTRODUCTION

I WAS PRESENT AT THE FORMER LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA'S CELEBRATION of the tenth anniversary of women's ordination, held in Rochester, Minnesota. Two vivid memories of that event have remained with me. After driving through the night from Chicago, a friend and I arrived groggily at the conference to be confronted in one of the opening sessions with a woman complaining loudly about how difficult it was for her to find clergy shirts with darts. Later, all the participants were herded outside for a group picture. Just as the photographer was about to start snapping, a pastor two rows behind me exhorted us in her best Mae West voice, "Alright girls, time to flex your theology for the camera." I draw two conclusions from these memories. Trivial as the lament about darts seemed at the time, it was a way of saying that for us women pastors something was not fitting right. Yet at the same time women have developed real theological muscle that the church needs to put to use if the whole body of Christ is to be balanced and mature.

I am not a social scientist; I have not done extensive field research, collecting questionnaire data, tabulating results, and doing statistical analysis. My reflections are based largely on my experience here as a teacher, my conversations with

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students and colleagues in broader ecumenical circles, and a wide assortment of reading in matters feminist – scholarly and popular, churchly and non-churchly.

In the last six months I have spent many early morning hours immersed in this literature, reading with almost guilty relish while my most intimate partner in the venture of womanhood and ministry sleeps in her crib. And more and more often, as it came time for Mom to leave her coffee and books, I went to my daughter's side with rising expectations. Book One of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is entitled "The Knowledge of God and That of Ourselves Are Connected."¹ In it Calvin goes on to explore at length the interrelationship, beginning with two sections asserting that "Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God"² and "Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self."³ Because of the presence of women in the public leadership of the church, because of their increasing role in proclamation, theologizing, teaching, spiritual nurture, and administration, because of their undeniable diversity, Lucy will know God and herself in ways unimaginable to me when I was growing up.

Twenty-five years have made a difference, even if for some of us it feels like movement at the crawl of a glacier rather than the speed of light. All of us benefit. Men and women alike get to think and pray and confess against a richer context of human experience, a more probing set of questions and challenges, a frequently unsettling witness to the presence of divine grace. I have read with that "Aha!" feeling the work of Deborah Tannen.⁴ Here is a new slant on humanity's tower of Babel experience: men and women, biologically one human species, but when it comes to communicating they might as well be from different planets.

Something is healing now as we struggle together in public offices to fulfill a common calling. Something is healing for us, and I dare say for God as well. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). So much is said in that one little pronoun "he." Yet women too are created in the image of God; our persons and experience are also disclosing of divine reality. The failure to take this truth seriously is as dishonoring to God as it is harmful to women and men. For that reason the theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson entitles her reformulation of trinitarian theology *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*.⁵ Johnson concludes:

Exclusive, literal, patriarchal speech about God has a twofold negative effect. It fails both human beings and divine mystery. In stereotyping and then banning female reality as suitable metaphor for God, such speech justifies the dominance of men while denigrating the human dignity of women. Simultaneously this

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1:35.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 37.

⁴Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: William Morrow, 1990).

⁵Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

discourse so reduces divine mystery to the single, reified metaphor of the ruling man that the symbol itself loses its religious significance and ability to point to ultimate truth. It becomes, in a word, an idol. These two effects are inseparable, for damage to the *imago Dei* in the creature inevitably shortchanges knowledge of the Creator in whose image she is made. Inauthentic ways of treating other human beings go hand-in-glove with falsifications of the idea of God.⁶

In the hope that I can contribute to the doing of a little justice, the advancing of some reconciliation, and the grounding of genuine celebration, I want to proceed to comment on two main areas: “What do you mean, no darts in my clergy shirt?!” or women’s anger; and women’s agency (“When you’ve got that kind of theological muscle, sister, flaunt it!”).

II. WOMEN’S ANGER

Rita Nakashima Brock cites a comment made by Mary Potter Engel to the effect that the twentieth century has witnessed the greatest reformation of the church and the greatest challenge to its self-identity since the sixteenth century. Both theologians attribute these winds of change in good measure to the feminist movement. Rita Brock states:

Those who suffer have proclaimed their own basis for faith, a basis that rejects passive piety. Sacrificing the present to future goals is no longer the hallmark of authentic Christian faith. This new reformation is asking whether the church can be a redemptive, transforming power in the twenty-first century if it cannot heal and liberate the brokenhearted now.⁷

This got me thinking about parallels between the first and second reformations.

Martin Luther committed himself to a system that was supposed to bring him the assurance, the consoled conscience for which he longed. The institutions of the medieval church, its piety, and the monastic life betrayed him. They did so not just inadvertently but deliberately and systematically. This dutiful son of the church became one of its victims; he was rendered broken-hearted and captive to his sense of despair and worthlessness. And then he got angry – angry at being misled, angry at having his peace of heart sacrificed for the sake of the papal old-boy network, angry at the injury done to thousands of unsuspecting believers like himself. This anger gave him purpose and energy for a lifetime. It did much to free him from the bondage to self he so deplored. The neighbor’s need required an authoritative word of grace in the midst of a terrifying crisis of authority in the church, and he responded. It was not enough for Luther to experience consolation in the privacy of his own study. The freedom he struggled to find, and discovered with such clarity, was for public consumption.

Moreover, the conflict left him permanently hostile and suspicious. In December 1539, approximately six years before his death, Luther wrote:

I cannot endure people’s continuing efforts to embellish and excuse the papacy.

⁶Ibid., 36.

⁷Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) xi.

I, for one, can't take enough revenge on it, for the harm it has inflicted is too great. One can't reproach and revile the pope enough. Only have no mercy on him. For he has shown every cruelty, including physical abuse, in his dealings with us. For he executed emperors as scoundrels and villains. Still, that could be tolerated, but that he wasted my youth so miserably and moreover, has tortured and tormented my conscience so that still today I often know no peace – that is too much.⁸

A sense of betrayal at the heart of the church, an enduring crisis of authority, a seemingly permanent vulnerability and loss of trust: such has been the experience of many women. They keep bending and twisting to make the relationship tolerable. Surely, they tell themselves, the scriptures do not really mean the things they say that are dismissive and even demeaning of women. Yet, even if one could charitably dismiss such passages as archaisms, they seem to have a long afterlife in the traditions and ethos of Christianity.

In some ways the rehabilitative efforts of scholars like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza serve to intensify the crisis. If you have to work all that hard to retrieve the apostolic credentials of early Christian women, even the most loyal of female church members have to question the validity of the *sola scriptura* principle that liberated Luther and his followers in their day. A teacher of mine once pointed out that much of organized religion has been about control. One sees in the scriptural witness that the societies of the people of God, under both covenants, were concerned, as are all societies, to safeguard their survival. The regulation of property and bloodlines is part of the process; the control of women's sexuality (and men's, for that matter) becomes a critical means to those ends. But they are not making a convincing case as eternal moral truths anymore.

Many women have found themselves alienated from the place they thought was their rightful home. Their sense of injury has often been compounded by the fact that when they try to speak out, they do not get a hearing. Theological dislocation is a particularly unpleasant form of cognitive dissonance. For a long time the community's keepers of the doctrinal treasury formed a kind of guild. Now other folks are getting their hands on the account books, too, and they enter the credits and debits differently. The result of these conflicts is twofold. One encounters resentment on the part of those whom women have challenged and a tendency to dismiss such women as "damaged" and untrustworthy. And women are outraged as they realize that a lot of voices in ecclesiastical high places can no longer speak the word of the Lord for them.

This is not the experience of every woman. It has not been the last straw for those of us gathered in this church. But respecting the Lutheran confessions' "preferential option for the troubled conscience," we need to try to understand those who can no longer be here, those who have sought refuge outside or who have been driven there. We must take our fair share of responsibility for this situation and for finding a way back.

Luther talked about *Anfechtung*, for him the onslaught of the terrors of the

⁸WA 47:590, lines 12-20. The translation is my own.

conscience, the dreadful realization of a church deforming its children. Yet for Luther this descent into darkness became the forecourt of paradise. It drove one to Christ and paved the way to the life of Christian freedom: perfectly free lord of all; perfectly bound servant of all.⁹ There we stand, my friends, discovering what lordship and servanthood will mean for us in this time and place. The experience of women with regard to both terms of that unique Christian equation is driving lots of folks beyond the boundaries of the old theological comfort zone. As women become more prominent in and responsible for the public ministry of the gospel, they are coming to know themselves not just as the objects of God's redemptive activity but as its agents.

III. THE EXPERIENCE OF AGENCY

In 1960 Valerie Saiving published a revolutionary article¹⁰ which explored the possibility that women experience sin and grace differently than do men and that their way of knowing is scarcely reflected in the regnant theological paradigms.

For the temptations of woman *as woman* are not the same as the temptations of man *as man*, and the specifically feminine forms of sin – “feminine” not because they are confined to women or because women are incapable of sinning in other ways but because they are outgrowths of the basic feminine character structure – have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as “pride” and “will-to-power.” They are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy, sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason – in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.¹¹

Grace, then, might be described in Virginia Woolf's words as building and inhabiting a room of one's own.

Saiving's analysis rings true not just for the experience of contemporary western women. One hears echoes in the distant past of early Christianity. In her book *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*,¹² Elaine Pagels reflects on the experience of early Christian martyrs and celibates for whom the essence of the gift of new life in Christ consisted of *autexousia*, a term she translates as “the power to constitute one's own being.”¹³ She concludes:

Christians regarded *freedom* as the primary message of Genesis 1-3 – freedom in its many forms, including free will, freedom from demonic powers, freedom from social and sexual obligations, freedom from tyrannical government and from fate; and self-mastery as the source of such freedom.¹⁴

⁹Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW31:344.

¹⁰Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979) 25-42.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 37.

¹²Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988).

¹³*Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, xxv.

I can hear your panic from here—the teacher is leading us into the poppy fields of “works righteousness”—but trust me a while longer. Let down your forensic defenses and put yourselves in the place of these long-dead brothers and sisters in the faith.

As Peter Brown has pointed out, in the world of late antiquity, bodies, especially those of women, were inexorably conscripted by society for the begetting of children.¹⁵ To interpret the lives of early Christian celibates in terms of what they had to give up, in terms of the diminishment of their full humanity, is to judge their experience by contemporary standards where the opportunities for constituting one’s own being, for good and ill, are more readily come by. What an extraordinary experience it must have been to lay claim to one’s reproductive capacities, to one’s deepest energies, and pursue a revolutionary exercise of self-determination in response to the gospel. Here they found a voice—to pray, to reflect, to witness to the God in whose bondage they experienced love and passion and freedom.

IV. THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

This realm of experience, a knowledge of the transforming presence of God felt along the heart, is the part of the gospel’s legacy that women have especially claimed as theirs. It has a long and honorable history, this tradition of infused contemplation. Yet it has also been the object of much discomfort and suspicion, never more so, I fear, than in the mainline protestantism of late-twentieth-century America. Our estrangement from the monastic tradition is largely responsible for that, for these communities were the places where this kind of knowing was most carefully cultivated. Our catastrophic experience with authority compounds the loss, for this aspect of discipleship requires expert guidance and discernment—the readiness to rely on the direction of others and the presumption of trustworthiness that makes the holy daring of obedience viable.

There are three things that such infused contemplation or mystical experience is not:

1. It is not part of the prideful works righteousness that Luther justly denounced in the degenerate religious life of his time.
2. It is not the special preserve of an elite but a gift of the Spirit to be treasured and respected by every Christian.
3. It is not a form of unreason but true knowledge, what I call an “experienced knowing of God.”

Roberta Bondi, in her exquisite book *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life*,¹⁶ describes her eye-opening encounter with the writings of the desert fathers:

What I read that day was an exhortation to those early monks not to criticize or judge one another, but rather, to treat one another with the gentleness of our

¹⁵Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University, 1988) 6.

¹⁶Roberta C. Bondi, *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

heavenly Father, who especially loves the ones the world despises, and who is always so much more willing than human beings to make allowances for sin, because God alone understands our circumstances, the depths of our temptations, and the extent of our sufferings.¹⁷

When my Lucy was just a newborn I would rise to feed her night after night. I would sit with her cradled in my arms in the shrouded darkness of her nursery, and I would cover her tiny face with tears. Weeping, weeping for the tormented man who was my husband, for the anger that engulfed him and was taking possession of me, for the violence that charged the atmosphere of our home; weeping for my fear and despair, drowning in shame. My conscience was troubled, but I hardly knew what to confess, how to begin to repent. I never felt lonelier, in part because even my theological categories were unable to keep watch with me sufficiently. And one night Jesus found me, persistent in his patient presence, filling that room with warmth. I did not feel safe enough to look up into his face, but I heard him saying, “You are too ashamed to look at me, but I am looking at you.” And that night I saw myself as seen through God’s eyes, as one beloved, Lucy’s mother, birthed into being with unimpaired vision by the mothering Christ.

“For those early Christian teachers,” writes Roberta Bondi,

to be rational meant to see the world as it really is, that is, to look on the world, and especially the people in it, with the clear eyes of God. But how does God see the world as it really is? Neither with the eyes of a strict judge whose first concern is for observance of the law, nor with the unemotional, impartial, analytical gaze of the hard scientist seeking abstract universal truth. God looks at the world through the eyes of *love*.¹⁸

You have to see it to believe it, and the ministry of women, in my judgment, is doing much to strengthen the eyes of the body of Christ. You know what that means – improved hand-eye coordination. So watch out world! ⊕

¹⁷Ibid., 31.

¹⁸Ibid., 77.