

Perspectives



We Are Not Us Anymore

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, WHEN THE QUESTION OF ORDAINING WOMEN CAME before the legislative bodies of the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church, I was on the side of the angels. In a review of his book *The Ministry and the Ministry of Women*, I had publicly (and boldly, I thought, as a young parish pastor) disagreed with one of my brilliant and respected teachers, Peter Brunner, who had argued on the basis of Lutheran theology, perhaps as cautiously and carefully as possible, against the ordination of women.

Looking back, though, what I was probably saying at that time was, “Okay, I’m convinced by scripture and right reason” – and, no doubt, by experience, since my grandmother had been ordained by the Methodists decades earlier and since I had been served already by a woman pastor in the congregation where my son was baptized in Heidelberg – “okay, I’m convinced, you [women] can come join us [men] in ministry.”

Now, twenty-five years later, I realize that “we” are not “us” anymore. The result of that momentous decision was not (and, I see more clearly now, could not have been) that women merely joined us men in business as usual. Professor Higgins was right about one thing at least, “Let a woman in your life, and your sabbatical is through!”

We are not us anymore. The experiences and insights of women, as theologians and clergy and as lay participants in boards and other decision-making bodies, have made us rethink everything – theology, liturgy, history, administrative patterns, yes, even Bible and God. It has not been easy. In my opinion, *the* jarring event for new seminarians of this generation is not the confrontation with historical criticism, as it was in my day, but rather the confrontation with new liturgical language, especially God language – an event that is often equally as jarring for women as for men.

For those of us who have been around longer, the changes of the past twenty-five years have been difficult because they have brought with them a challenge of our “male privilege.” Most of us, no doubt, are willing to concede a long-time systemic and institutional privilege for white males, but – given the shipwrecks and near misses of our own lives – many of us have actually felt little personal privilege and have therefore found difficult an implied claim that the status of victim applies only to others. Sorting this all out has not been easy. It still is not.

Nevertheless, the change was necessary. I see more clearly now than then

that it is mandated not merely by changing social realities but by the gospel itself. Then, the question was almost always stated something like, “Can the Christian church ordain women?” Now, the question must be, “Given the gospel of Jesus Christ, how can we not?” Still, the effects of turning women loose in the church are challenging and serious. Christian philosopher and nuclear physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker pondered more than once the terrible question: Given the fact of the more or less direct line in the history of western science from Galileo to the bomb, might there not finally have been something right in the church’s attempt to suppress Galileo?

Will the ordination of women (or feminist concerns more broadly) lead to the “bomb,” i.e., the death of Christianity? It is clear that some kinds of feminism have, in fact, done that for some women. But, of course, so did the enlightenment for lots of men. Experience or theory or worldview, turned into ideology, has always found an enemy in the truth claims of the gospel. But, so far at least, experience or theory seeking understanding has, when both inquirer and church have been at their best, found the world of the gospel a freeing place to stand while pondering.

We are still pondering. Since we are not us anymore, who are we? Or, sometimes harder to deal with: Just who’s in charge here? It’ll take some figuring out. I would bid my women friends and colleagues welcome to the exercise, but, of course, that would assume that it is mine (or “ours”) to control. One thing that “we-are-not-us-anymore” makes clear is that, rightly understood, we never were. We were never merely us; we were God’s. Now, too, the church is God’s. In Christ, there is a new us—made up of people, male and female, created in the image of God, and people, male and female, newly birthed in the gospel. Staying within that framework we will be able to continue the rather hard work of figuring out what it means that in Christ there is neither male nor female, when in fact much of our experience and many of our insights are quite strikingly different. What’s the same? What’s the difference? It will probably take more than another twenty-five years to get that straight.

The Perspectives section of this issue includes the contributions of two colleagues, looking at things in somewhat different ways. In an address commissioned by the Luther Seminary faculty, *Jane E. Strohl* claims historical research, confessional insight, and personal experience as valid sources for women’s theological reflection. She does this by using all three to think clearly and poignantly about the role of women in ministry. *Gracia Grindal* takes a different tack, commenting on the political debate among women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—calling, in fact, for more of it. Readers will no doubt divide on their response to her views (as they will to other articles in this issue), but surely the discussion itself is in place.

In a kind of keynote article, *Jean Larson Hurd* examines the meaning of Luther’s theology of vocation for women, both historically and in the present. Though not uncritical, she finds in it a liberating energy that can empower the work of both ordained and lay women.

Sarah S. Henrich provides a remarkably succinct and insightful portrayal of the place of women in the New Testament. Her combination of historical and theological interests offers a reading that will insist upon a hearing and a response.

Lois Malcolm presents a straightforward description of the Lutheran tradition's key perspectives on the gospel, suggesting refreshing ways in which Lutheranism and Christian feminism can be mutually enriching. Hers is a welcome contribution to the literature on the relation (sometimes seen as incompatible) between feminism and Lutheranism.

Susanne Heine argues that just as Aristotle was mistaken in claiming a metaphysical distinction between women and men, so also was Freud in claiming a sharp psychoanalytical difference. Explaining gender and identity in other ways (using Karen Horney and Irene Fast) allows Heine to claim the cross as the salvation of women, as well as men, rather than another instrument of abuse.

Carol Swain Weir was a Presbyterian missionary in Syria/Lebanon for thirty-two years. Here, personal experience and historical reflection provide a fascinating insight into the changing role of women as Christian missionaries.

Mary Ylvisaker Nilsen suggests that renewal in human life in general and religious life in particular will be produced by cultivating our imaginations. Imagination, though requiring testing like all human endeavors, will lead us to new visions of truth and allow new voices, especially those of women, to participate in the conversation.

In the Resource section, *Christine M. Smith* reviews the homiletical and theological perspectives of women not in the mainstream—especially disabled, lesbian, and black—inviting readers to incorporate the experiences of such women into their own anthropology and theology and to take account of them in their own proclamation.

We include two responses, commissioned by a seminary women's group, to an earlier article in this journal in which Daphne Hampson presented a radical critique, from a feminist perspective, of Luther on the self. *Paul R. Sponheim* means to listen to Hampson's critique, and does. Still, he responds with other emphases from within Lutheranism that, he hopes (as do we), will not require a disjunction between constructive Lutheran and feminist thought. In a second response, *Frederick J. Gaiser*, working primarily from the human experience reported in the Psalter, challenges Hampson's implication that the selves of women and men are so fundamentally different that they finally require a different gospel.

Outside the theme of this issue, *Elette Gamble* and *Wilbur L. Holz* offer a pastoral and theological rationale and a rite for the anointing of a stillborn infant. Until the church adopts an official rite for this important occasion, some rite like this one will be a necessary part of the pastor's equipment.

How will the future of rural America be shaped, by social vision or market values? *C. Dean Freudenberger* and *Kent D. Olson* offer two perspectives in *Face to Face*.

Also outside the theme, yet appropriate to this issue in that an important part of the ministry of women is simply doing good theological and biblical work,

Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford suggests that the postexilic Hebrew scribes gave the Book of Psalms the structure of a story, thus providing meaning for the Israel of that chaotic period.

Finally, in *Texts in Context* *Kristine Carlson* returns to the issue of women in ministry, examining the story of the woman anointing Jesus in Mark 14 and other texts encouraging the ministry of women.

F.J.G.