



## Where Are We Going? The Threefold Ministry and the Ordination of Women

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The phrase “ordained ministry” relates to three Greek words that are among the most slippery in the ecclesiological vocabulary: *diakonia*, *presbyteroi*, and *episkope*. They are found in several forms and with many meanings in the early church. Today they make up the definition of what is referred to as the threefold ministry in the converging ecumenical texts on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.<sup>1</sup> These words were variously defined during the period of Christian origins, and scholars, East and West, still disagree about the relationship of these designations to the exercise of authority in the early church. Some are more biased toward a hierarchy of roles, going from bishop to priest to deacon. Others move more toward a collegial model of these roles with functional differences. Some see church order and discipline as the reason for the roles; others see the Eucharist as their center of meaning.<sup>2</sup>

If, indeed, our ancient past is obscure and elusive, is there much hope that all of the churches can agree on something called a threefold pattern of ministry today? This is the noble aim of the Ministry text of the converging statements developed by the churches through the channel of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. The document itself says, “Although there is no single New Testament pattern...nevertheless the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means of achieving it.”<sup>3</sup>

### I. DISUNITY OVER THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

It is instructive to look at some of the problematics of the threefold

<sup>1</sup>*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), hereafter cited as *BEM*.

<sup>2</sup>For some idea of the spread of interpretations and practices, see *Episkope and Episcopate in the Ecumenical Movement*, Faith and Order Paper 102 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>*BEM*, 24, par. 22.

ministry by viewing it through the lens of the diverse positions of the churches on the ordination of women. Some churches such as the Methodists and the Lutherans say that women can serve in all these areas of ministry—deacon, priest and bishop. In the United States, the Methodists have consecrated a woman as a bishop, so they already live what they have affirmed in theory by ordaining women to clergy positions. Of the Lutheran churches worldwide, the place where there has been a concerted effort to consecrate a woman to the *episkope* is in the Church of Sweden; to

date that has not materialized. In the United States we have some women working as assistants to bishops. This may be one of the training grounds. It does happen, how frequently I do not know, that a bishop is succeeded by an assistant.

Other churches, such as those in the Anglican Communion, may or may not ordain women as priests (presbyters), but will ordain them to one or two different forms of the diaconate. One form is that of an order of women dedicated as deaconesses, who serve the church in ministries of healing, hospitality, prayer, and social service. The other form of ordination to the diaconate is often referred to as the first rung on the ladder to the priesthood. The Church of England has passed the proper legislation to open up this second form of the diaconate for women, yet it continues to oppose the ordaining of women as priests. By way of contrast, the Anglican Church of New Zealand practices both forms of ordination to the diaconate. Anglican women in New Zealand are allowed to be ordained to the priesthood; as yet, no candidate has come forth for the position of bishop.

As is well known, neither the Orthodox nor the Roman Catholic churches ordain women to the offices of deacon, priest or bishop. In each of these traditions, the ancient role of the ordained woman deacon has been abandoned over time and replaced by orders of nuns. Curious as it may seem, the Orthodox church ordained women to the diaconate until the twelfth century, more than half of its life as a church.<sup>4</sup> It is not exactly clear what all of the dimensions of their ministries were; still existing documents show that they exercised sacramental roles and, at least in remote areas, if not consecrating the elements, were in charge of their distribution in the absence of a priest or bishop. Similar practice, though women are not ordained to this office, has been reported today by Roman Catholic sisters working in crowded or remote areas of Latin America.

The situation is different again with Roman Catholics where the twofold ministry is the common pattern: priests and bishops. In the October, 1976 Declaration on the "Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial

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<sup>4</sup>For two different perspectives on the nature of the ancient diaconate, see Max Thurian, *Priesthood and Ministry: Ecumenical Research* (London: Mowbray, 1970, 1983) 126ff., and Michael A. Fahey's chapter on "Eastern Orthodoxy and the Ordination of Women," *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, ed. Leonard and Arlene Swidler (New York: Paulist Press, 1977) 107ff. Fahey writes (110): "...what has been determined by scholars, although sometimes not widely known even among the Orthodox, is that from the third and fourth century on women were ordained as deaconesses by the imposition of hands (*cheirotomia*) and that this ordination clearly had a sacramental character. This liturgical practice lasted in Byzantium up to the twelfth century and in Syria up to the fifteenth century. We are indeed fortunate today to have excellent documentation on this material, though much of it has not yet been properly disseminated and assimilated even by theologians."

Priesthood," the Roman Catholic magisterium expressed its feelings in no uncertain terms that it disapproved of women's ordination to the priesthood. This included reaffirming the prohibition of women in the liturgical diaconate, which men can do whether or not they want to go the next step and become priests. The Roman Catholic hierarchy made clear its position, but not without major opposition from many of its seminaries in the United States, Canada and Western Europe. Though opposition in the seminaries has been quieted, a strong movement among Roman Catholic lay women and sisters who openly oppose the position of the magisterium continues. Some of these groups have developed liturgical rites of their own and have liturgical celebrations

at which women preside. They are not celebrations of the Eucharist, but rather more of a formalized, ritualized *agape*. “Woman Church Speaks,” a conference of about 1500 Roman Catholic women, held such a celebration in Chicago in the Fall of 1983. Innovative movements among Roman Catholic women will continue to press with their own authority and spirituality against a policy of the Vatican which they consider to be both theologically unsound and unjust.

In yet another direction, the Southern Baptists claim to have no threefold ministry at all. They claim their basis of authority, not in hierarchy, but in charismatic gifts and calling. With authority vested in the local congregation some Southern Baptist churches began ordaining women in the 1970s. Enrollments of women in theological seminaries increased rapidly. However, what looked like a blue ribbon trip for women was dramatically interrupted at the 1984 Southern Baptist Convention by passage of a motion expressing disapproval of the ordaining of women as Southern Baptist ministers on the “headship” principle, i.e., that women should not rule over congregations in which men are present. Though in principle the church has no hierarchy, in this case it invoked an hierarchical principle.

## II. DOES THE “THREEFOLD MINISTRY” HELP?

If the issue of women’s ordination heightens the confusion over the interpretation of the threefold ministry, what about the reverse? Does the concept of threefold ministry bring any clarity and direction to the ordination of women debate? To work at this question one has to examine closely section II, “The Church and the Ordained Ministry” in the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document. There are four sub-points: A) “The Ordained Ministry”; B) “Ordained Ministry and Authority”; C) “Ordained Ministry and Priesthood”; and D) “The Ministry of Men and Women in the Church.”<sup>5</sup>

Under sub-point A are three critical issues: 1) The unique role of the Twelve; 2) The reciprocal relationship between the ordained ministry and the community; and 3) The representative nature of the pastor/priest/ordained clergy. Regarding the first point, the document states that: “There is therefore a difference between the apostles and the ordained ministers whose ministries are founded on theirs.”<sup>6</sup> Regarding the second point it says: “...the community needs ordained ministers...the ordained ministry has no existence apart from

<sup>5</sup>*BEM*, 21-24.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 21, par. 10.

the community.”<sup>7</sup> To the third point it states: “In the celebration of the eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the Church. It is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it. In most churches this presidency is signified and represented by an ordained minister.”<sup>8</sup>

These key paragraphs (numbers 8-14) can be read in more than one way (which is in keeping with a convergence document where the goal is what can be said together). In that care has been taken in this document to use inclusive language, nothing of what has been said would automatically exclude women, nor would it automatically set up a priestly hierarchy. In fact, it could be read to uphold ordained ministry as the royal priesthood of all peoples where women and men of many talents and callings would all work out their vocations, based on the unique memory of the Twelve and the unique invitation of Christ to participate in the Eucharistic Body of which the Risen Christ is the center.

Sub-section B has the loaded little phrase “set apart” but the definition is vague, moving back and forth to satisfy both those churches that are for and those against “set apart” ministries. To satisfy those against, there is the sentence, “Authority has the character of responsibility before God and is exercised with the cooperation of the whole community.”<sup>9</sup> To satisfy those who favor a highly visible “set apartness” there are the words, “to be consecrated.”<sup>10</sup>

The real intention of “set apartness” comes out not in B, but under the sub-point C. This paragraph says that the “Church as a whole can be described as a priesthood...Ordained ministers are related, as are all Christians, both to the priesthood of Christ, and to the priesthood of the Church.”<sup>11</sup> However, after this overarching phrase the qualifier begins:

But they may appropriately be called priests because they fulfill a particularly priestly service by strengthening and building up the royal and prophetic priesthood of the faithful through word and sacrament, their prayers of intercessions, and through their pastoral guidance in the community.<sup>12</sup>

In most Protestant churches today, lay people do all of the above with the exception of preaching and presiding over the Eucharistic celebration. In the case of Lutherans in the United States, there is in liturgical life a priestly quality—given this definition—that is more and more being shared between clergy and laity, between paid church staff and volunteer leaders. The role of the priest/pastor is itself in transition. Local pastors are in the exercise of their ministry often much more like *episkope*. They have an overseeing role; with the cooperation of the

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 21-22, par. 12.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 22, par. 14.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 22, par. 15.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 23, par. 17.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. For an excellent chapter on the ecumenical significance of this section for Roman Catholics, see Emmanuel Lanne, “Convergence on the Ordained Ministry,” in Max Thurian’s *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983) 119ff.

community, they orchestrate the organization of the parish, its work of service, outreach, pastoral care, growth, upbuilding and interfacing between the parish and the changing neighborhoods in which the congregation dwells. In many parishes today the pastor’s role requires complex management and organizational skills on a day-to-day basis. The overseeing role is growing, and finds its place along with the ministry of Word and Sacraments and pastoral work. Perhaps this is not unlike the administrative role of bishops in the fifth and sixth centuries, when they took over many of the duties previously handled by the civil authorities.

So it seems that we are back again to the elusiveness of the early church. The threefold ministry may not be so much three distinct roles for three different kinds of functions, as three dimensions of one ordained office. With this possible conceptual shift in mind, we move to sub-point D “The Ministry of Men and Women in the Church.”

Here the movement between positions, profoundly different, becomes more intense. One sentence, “Both women and men must discover together their contributions to the service of Christ in the Church,”<sup>13</sup> is followed by another that seems to say the opposite: “The Church must

discover the ministry which can be provided by women as well as that which can be provided by men.”<sup>14</sup> Inherent in the first phrase is a premise of equality and mutuality. Inherent in the second is the assumption that, on the basis of biology, the theological/ecclesial ministries of women and men will be a double track. Although many women today do argue that on the basis of women’s cultural experience and past history in the church, women ministers may take a different direction, beginning with contrasting perceptions of the nature of ministry and its priorities, few would hold that biology is the determining factor.

There are two main arguments against the ordination of women. The Orthodox use the argument of the “force of Tradition.” The argument goes, we have not done it, why should we change? The Roman Catholic Church uses the argument that the priest must be a biological resemblance of Jesus, for the priest is the representative of Christ at the Eucharist. The first argument awaits future scholarship to demonstrate that indeed women were not priests and why they were not, since they were ordained to the diaconate for centuries. The second argument has been criticized by almost all prominent Roman Catholic scholars as well as scholars in other churches. There is no theological precedent for such an argument. The Risen Christ of the Eucharist is the representative for the whole community, not only for that of male human beings. The reconciling and atoning Christ is the human one for all humanity (Galatians 3:27-28). Two primary factors lie behind these positions against the ordination of women: 1) the force of culture, and 2) male headship in the practice of the church. These two factors underlie the differences in the ministries of the churches, whether the issue is women’s ordination or some other issue of conflict.

So, given this double reality, can the threefold ministry offer a way of shaping ministry that will move the churches closer to resolving their dis-

<sup>13</sup>BEM, 24, par. 18.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

agreements over the ordination of women? Hope that this might happen is very slim. I would argue that the threefold ministry is most likely to be interpreted as a step back for women because, in the churches that now ordain them, women will tend to be kept out of the *episkope* in order not to rustle ecumenical feathers. And in churches that do not ordain women, they may invent some form of diaconate that would be a position of lesser authority than that of ordained priests. This would mean that women would not only be subordinated in the structures of ministry because they are women, but also their position would be codified in a subordinate women’s office under male headship.

### III. REFRAMING THE QUESTIONS

Rather than trying to squeeze threefold ministry and ordination of women into one model where one does not fit the other, it seems more beneficial to separate them again into questions:

1. What is appropriate at this time in history for the ordained ministries of women and men in the churches?
2. What is a realizable means whereby ecumenical initiatives on ordained ministry can move forward?

To approach the first question, we must see it in the context of a wholistic ministry and

mission. If women and men are equal before God and in God's image and equal in Christ as ministers in a transformed and transforming community, then priority ecumenical effort should be given to overcoming the biases of the centuries which have taught the subordination of women and referred to women as "the weaker sex." Recent work by scholars of the early church such as Elizabeth A. Clark and Patricia and G. Ronald Wilson-Kastner have unearthed this past tradition, making it all the more vivid as it emerges from its recessed state.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, if we want the full gifts of women in the ministries of the churches, then we have to begin including as partners in the dialogue women who are working on women's history in the church and the new hermeneutics in theology and biblical studies, such as Phyllis Trible, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Rosemary Radford Ruether.<sup>16</sup> It is instructive to recall that the Gnostic and Apocryphal gospels understood and symbolized the equality of women by transforming them into men. A significant dimension of further work on the ministry of women and men in the church will have to come from women scholars and their perspectives on the ministry of women in the church.

As for question two, in addition to what has already been said above, one immediate step I would suggest is to delete from the Ministry text of the *BEM*

<sup>15</sup>Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church, Message of the Fathers of the Church* 13 (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983); Patricia Wilson-Kastner and G. Ronald Kastner, et al., *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of the Early Church* (New York: University Press of America, 1981).

<sup>16</sup>Among the works I had in mind here were the two volumes by Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) and *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Elisabeth S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); and Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983). In mentioning only these few authors and their works, I am keenly aware of how much more needs to be included. These are among the works necessary for beginning dialogue.

that statement which now reads, "The Churches must discover the ministry which can be provided by women as well as that which can be provided by men."<sup>17</sup> Second, I would suggest that the threefold ministry be re-conceptualized as three dimensions of one ministry, rather than three distinct trajectories. And third, rather than emphasizing in the text the polarities between those churches that do and do not ordain women, I would suggest that more affirmation be given to the fact that from the beginning there was a diversity of practice in the church. In fact, from the beginning there was great resistance to any agreement that would bring about a homogenized Christianity. If the church had been strictly uniform, we would probably not have three Gospels, so similar yet significantly different, and we certainly would not have a Gospel of John. The search in the early part of this century for a common source called "Q" (for the German *Quelle* meaning source) actually revealed the opposite of its original intention: commonality and diversity were the warp and woof of the structure and life of the early church. For those who see the word diversity in only negative terms, according to Webster's it can mean either disparate, distant, divergent, contrary, opposite, or it can mean discrete, contrasting, several, various, multifarious, multiform, etc. The first definition implies opposition; the second growth and outreach.

Finally, the development of the threefold ministry is an incredible achievement if one looks back over its more than twenty years of scholarly effort across the churches. But with that behind us we must now look forward. The community of Christ is always specific; that has been

the genius of its mission. The anamnesis of Christ is always threefold—present, future and past. Grateful for what has been accomplished, we must now look at ordained ministry in ecumenical perspective with the question: What is our present situation and where are we going?

<sup>17</sup>*BEM*, 24, par. 18.