

# **QUESTION**

## ***SHOULD WOMEN BE ORDAINED?***

### **INTRODUCTION**

In every major ecclesiastical tradition-Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant-it is recognized that there is an office of ministry and that ordination is the way in which one is inducted into that office. One is set apart for and enters upon the Christian ministry by way of ordination. However one may conceive of ordination-and there is differing theological viewpoints-there is a consensus that ordination is (*ordinarily*) necessary if one is to function as a minister in Christ's Church with the authority of one divinely called to the task. Ordination constitutes, among other things, the Church's confirmation of this divine call; and thus it certifies, as it were, one's right to serve as a minister of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the centuries of Church history there has been little serious discussion of woman's ordination to the office of Christian ministry; the debate is a contemporary one and of course '*very wide*'. Nevertheless, my own conclusion on this issue is that the woman, as the man's equal, should be ordained and share with man in all aspects of the Church's life and mission. Specifically, this means that she should have full access to the privileges and responsibilities of the Christian ministry. This has also been the conclusion of the '*vast majority of Free Churches and some evangelical*' in the various societies in the recent years. Although, numerous objections have been brought against this position (*mainly from the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox*). However, while expatiating on the reasons that seem to me to be most persuasive in supporting my conclusion, I would try to mention in brief, some of the

questions raised by the opponents.

### **ARGUMENT FOR THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN**

The present situation concerning the ordination of women and their leadership roles in the Church is one of inconsistency and confusion. Under the guise of '*biblical viewpoint*,' myths are being perpetrated by the Church which encourage congregations to deny to women the honour and dignity of their being. These myths encompass both sociological and theological issues. There is, for example, the concept that sexuality is in some way evil, and that female sexuality is more debased than that of the male. Speaking to this point, *Peter Selby* says that '*the link of pastoral gifts to the sex of a person or sexuality in general is a sophisticated form of palmistry. The theory says in effect that you can tell that a person is predisposed to caring, if not by the lines on their hands then at least by the evidence of the missing Y-chromosome. Like the theory that the fittest survive in the market-place, this myth of origins simply and conveniently says that things are the way they are because that is how they have to be*'.

Another myth, which basically influences these issues, is that concerning the essential nature of God. It is argued that the masculinity of God entails a male order of ministry in the Church. That is, the Scripture uses predominantly masculine language in speaking of God. Furthermore, this God who reveals Himself in Scripture as a Father, sent His Son to redeem humankind from their sins. This Son, in turn, became incarnate in the man Jesus of Nazareth. And this man, Jesus, appointed the original apostles to speak in His name, all of whom were men. Nevertheless, we must not fail to affirm at the outset that the creation narrative in Genesis 1:27 views men and women as equally created in the image of God. Therefore, men

and women have equal value to God, and should be seen by us as having absolutely equal value as persons and equal value to the Church. Moreover, Scripture assures men and women of equal access to all the blessings of salvation (Acts 2:17-18; Gal. 3:28). This is remarkably affirmed in the high dignity and respect, which Jesus accorded to women in his earthly ministry.

Again, to those that argue that for Jesus to have appointed only men as apostles commit the Church to male leadership for all time, this I have to say. It depends on what we think Jesus was doing. Was He structuring a Church, firm and fixed in order for the ages to come? It is more probable that following His vocation as Messiah to re-form Israel as the people of God for service to the nations He was appointing twelve apostles as a re-formed patriarchal band of brothers to be the foundation of the messianic community. How that community should develop in its order and ministry after His death and resurrection He left to the guidance of His Spirit. And what undreamt-of developments and flexibility Pentecost unleashed! - a multiplicity of ministries, prophets (*some of them women*), evangelists, pastors, teachers and deacons (*some women*), elders, overseers, and extra apostles. The prophecy of Joel used by Peter to account for the new thing at Pentecost joins men and women together in the new ministry - *'Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message...Yes, even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit...and they will proclaim my message'* (Acts 2:17-18).

We must not ignore some other biblical evidence that could be used in support of women ordination, as many of its opponents would do. For example, Deborah was raised up by God to rule His people. A married woman, yet the one to whom all Israel came for judgment (Judges 4:5), she summoned Barak and gave him orders from God, the carrying out of which led to

God's victory (4:23). Though not so prominent as Deborah, the prophetess Huldah in 2Kings 22 gives instructions as God's mouthpiece to the king, to the high priest, and to court officials. Women like Phebe, Priscilla and Lydia in the New Testament (Acts 18:26) clearly had leadership qualities and in the fluid state of Church order in those early days may reasonably be regarded as exercising leadership in local situations. Even some opponents of women's ordination have acknowledged the possibility that they were leaders of house Churches, the first kind of Christian assemblies in many places (Acts 16:14-15).

It is no exaggeration to describe the Pauline passages about women and their ministry as confusing, especially if taken at face value from English versions. In 1 Corinthians 14:34,35 and 1 Timothy 2:8ff. all public ministry is apparently denied to women. But in chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians Paul acknowledges the right of women to pray and prophesy in the congregation. Apart from that, he describes himself, in his apostolic role, both as a male and as a female. For example, Paul reminds his Corinthian converts that though they have had many teachers in Christ, they have only one father "I", he says, *'became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel'* (1Cor. 4:15). But he also uses other figures.

In the first letter he ever sent to a group of converts, he reminds them that he became gentle among them like a *'nurse'* who cherishes her children (1Thess. 2:7). And some years later, when he writes to the Galatians, distressed at the news that had reached him, he uses very graphic female language of himself. Calling them his children, he wonders out loud if he had really brought them to birth, as had supposed when present with them. Could it be that he was deceived, that he was like a woman who had had false labour pains? *'My little children,'* he

writes, '*with regard to whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you*' (Gal.4: 19). The verb used describes the pangs of a woman caught in the throes of a difficult and painful birth.

It is of the greatest importance that a matter such as this, in which emotional and irrational reactions are only too easily aroused on either side, should be discussed upon a strictly theological plane. *F. F. Bruce*, one of the most eminent biblical commentators' writes '*in the synagogue service a woman could play no significant part.... In Christ she received equality of status with man: she might pray or prophesy at meetings of the Church, and her veil was a sign of this new authority*'. The veil had culturally-conditioned, and thus temporary, significance: the authority has permanent value. Another commentator on 1 Corinthians, *C.K. Barrett*, equally emphasizes a full part for women in Church worship from chapter 11. He too, contrary to the interpretation of verse 10 presented in the Good News Bible, affirms the authority of a woman to minister. But a great many people feel instinctively that there is something wrong about this possibility.

The result has been a tragic failure to recognize that God often gives women equal or greater *spiritual gifts* than men, a failure to encourage women to have full and free participation in the various ministries of the Church, and a failure to take full account of the wisdom that God has given to women with respect to important decisions in the life of the Church. In the consequences of Pentecost we must surely recognize a factor of greatest significance in interpreting New Testament guidelines on ministry, a factor that needs to be set alongside Jesus' choice of men only for the original apostolic band (*apparently expanded after Pentecost to include others*). It is that the Spirit has freely bestowed gifts of leadership teaching, preaching,

irrespective of gender. The Church must beware of denying the expression of those gifts.

Apart from that, the experience of the Church across the world poses severe questions against the strict men-only principle of leadership. And it is not just the existence of many hundreds of women priests and pastors and the growing acceptance of their ministry and leadership in their congregations on which that experience is based... The expansion of the Church over the 150 years owes an enormous debt to women with gifts of evangelism, teaching and pastoral ability, many of them single, who have crossed the seas to plant young Churches. Having planted them, they have been their leaders in early days. The gifts they used were from God and it would be folly to suppose He only gave them to women because there were not sufficient men willing to go. The women knew they were called of God and, often in face of man-imposed obstacles, obeyed. The leadership they exercised over the emerging Churches bore the marks of God's approval no less than that of their male colleagues.

This I have to say to those who argue that in our society of today, it is natural for man to exercise a leadership and protective role over women, especially as seen in the family. Whatever customs individual families may preserve, and however convinced some Christians may be that scripture teaches male headship in the family, it is quite unrealistic to argue out from the family to society at large. What about all the unmarried women in society? Under whose headship do they come? And in the complex society of today where men and women operate together at work, in civic affairs, in social groups, a man's role in his own family cannot simply be extended to those external areas of life. If he is a leader over other men and other men's wives, as well as single women, he is so by appointment on merit and ability, on hopes, not by

any headship-in-family principle. So given the right qualities, a woman should also be appointed as leader and of course be ordained as priest or pastor. As for a woman needing a man's protective role, the truth is that it is from male violence the protection is needed, but this has no relevance to the issue of leadership. The removal of every woman from positions of leadership would not remedy that problem a bit.

In the final analysis, I strongly believe that if the present controversy over the ordination of women can result in the eradication of some of these past abuses, then the Church as a whole will benefit greatly. It must be noted that, interpretation of scripture is a never-ending task for the Church. Each generation must enquire what the word of the Lord through scripture is for its own day, for each comes to scripture from within a context unique to itself. No other previous times have been like our own. True, there are constants in human history, those eternal truths, and those human needs that remain. But the development of human history in knowledge, in experience, in opportunities, as well as the pressures, problems and dangers, continually reshapes the scenario of life.

What the Free Churches and some Evangelical can say is that the ordination of women is no longer a question of making a daring experiment, but of doing what needs to be done. I believe that the skies will not fall if women are ordained in all other Churches. In fact, it is the priesthood itself which needs to be approached experimentally, and perhaps transformed out of all recognition; but that is another question, which the ordination of women does not in itself solve.