

ANTICIPATING GOD'S NEW COMMUNITY: THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR WOMEN IN MINISTRY

STANLEY J. GRENZ*

Although most mainline Protestant denominations have settled the question of women in ministry, in many evangelical groups the discussion is far from over. Denominations as diverse as the Mennonite Brethren¹ and the Christian Reformed Church have recently found themselves embroiled in what perhaps has become the most divisive debate they have faced in decades. The battle is being fought in denominational periodicals² and on convention floors. Through it all, the people of God—whether laity, pastors or academic theologians—are becoming increasingly polarized.

Some Christians (many of whom prefer the designation “complementarians”) conclude from their reading of the Bible that the Spirit neither calls women to, nor bestows the necessary gifts on women for, certain aspects of ministry. Other believers (“egalitarians”) find in Scripture indication that the Spirit may call both men and women to any responsibility in the Church.

Generally, discussions of the issue focus on a select number of isolated Biblical texts (1 Tim 2:12 versus Gal 3:28, for example). To date, however, the exegetical debate seems to have led to an impasse: Credible Biblical scholars come down on opposite sides of the discussion, for there is no consensus on the meaning of the individual texts in question.³ In the face of this apparent impasse, is there a way to move forward?

Of course the ongoing attempt to gain clarity on the Biblical texts must not be abandoned. But there is another dimension of the question that is rarely given its full due: theology. The central evangelical theological commitments we share are crucial for this discussion, for they suggest that women and men ought to be full partners at every level of Church life, including within the ordained ministry.

* Stanley Grenz is professor of theology and ethics at Carey/Regent College, 5920 Iona Drive, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1J6.

¹ See, for example, the discussion in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* 31/22 (November 20, 1992) 4–14.

² These discussions have been waged even among the publications of groups on the periphery of evangelicalism, such as the Church of the Brethren (see N. P. Frantz and D. L. Silver, “Women in Leadership: A Theological Perspective,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 30 [Winter 1985] 37–40) and the Seventh-day Adventists (e.g. W. Eva, “Should Our Church Ordain Women? Yes,” and B. E. Seton, “Should Our Church Ordain Women? No,” *Ministry* [March 1985] 14–22).

³ Hence two Regent College Biblical scholars, G. Fee and B. Waltke, recently debated the question in the college publication, *Crux*.

I. WOMAN AND THE NATURE OF GOD

At the heart of the Christian faith is the Biblical conception of God. As Christians, therefore, we look first to our understanding of the nature of God for guidance in questions about Christian life and practice, including the role of women in the Church.

1. *Gender and God.* Some complementarians advocate limiting the pastoral office to men because they believe the Bible indicates that God is more like the male than the female. Because an ordained minister stands in the place of God—or represents God to the congregation—these complementarians conclude that a woman cannot properly fulfill the pastoral office.⁴ Proponents of this argument often claim that this view is confirmed by the incarnation—by the incontestable fact that Jesus was a man, not a woman.

The move from male imagery to a male God, however, is ill-founded, for it goes beyond the intent of the authors of Scripture.⁵ In fact one significant point of difference between OT faith and the religions of other ancient Near Eastern peoples was the Hebrew desacralizing of sexuality. In the Biblical writings Yahweh is not a male deity who has a goddess at his side but is the sole God.⁶ Nor does the Creator need to infuse the earth with fertility each spring by means of some type of divine sexual activity, for Yahweh granted fertility to the earth when he made it.⁷

But does not the designation “Father” mean God is male? And what about the apparent maleness of the second person of the Trinity—God the Son? Many theologians agree that we ought to avoid understanding “Father” as designating God as a male deity. Rather, the word is simply the best image available for conveying a dimension of the divine reality that God wants us to understand. In a similar manner “Son” is also a metaphor. The early Church fathers perceived the metaphorical nature of these designations, for they explained that “Father” refers to God as creator and author of all things and “Son” asserts that the second person is like the first and from the first rather than “from” nothing.⁸

⁴ C. S. Lewis, “Priestesses in the Church?,” *God in the Dock* (ed. W. Hooper; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 236.

⁵ P. Tribble, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” *JAAR* 41 (1973) 31. Conclusions similar to Tribble’s are often cited by evangelical feminists. See for example M. J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) 21.

⁶ The significance of the Hebrew assertion of the celibacy of God in contrast to the outlook of the surrounding religions is put forth by J. Blenkinsopp, *Sexuality and the Christian Tradition* (Dayton: Pflaum, 1969) 24–27. See also T. Frymer-Kensky, “Law and Philosophy: The Case of Sex in the Bible,” *Semeia* 45 (1989) 90–91. Nevertheless the situation may not have been so simple, as is argued by M. S. Smith, “God Male and Female in the Old Testament: Yahweh and His ‘Asherah,’” *TS* 48 (1987) 333–340.

⁷ P. J. Scalise, “Women in Ministry: Reclaiming Our Old Testament Heritage,” *RevExp* 83/1 (Winter 1986) 8.

⁸ M. Boucher, “Ecumenical Documents: Authority-in-Community,” *Midstream* 21/3 (July 1982) 409.

Yet the conclusion that God is beyond the sexual distinctions of male and female does not mean that there is no significance to the use of sexual metaphors to speak about God. In emphasizing masculine images the ancient Hebrews set their understanding of God apart from that of the surrounding nations. Rather than talking about a mother goddess who brings forth creation as a child emerges from the womb, the OT writers taught that God created an external universe by fiat⁹ (hence the theological idea of *creatio ex nihilo*). At the same time, God is not far away and aloof. Not only is God the transcendent one who, like a monarch, exercises sovereign power. He is also immanent in the universe as one who nurtures. The Biblical authors portray the nurturing, compassionate God in largely feminine images (e.g. Gen 1:2b; Deut 32:11; Isa 49:13; 66:7–15; Matt 23:37).

The use of sexual metaphors means that God is not merely beyond gender distinctions. Rather, God's relationship to creation takes on both masculine and feminine characteristics. Thereby God forms the foundation for the distinctively male and female dimensions of human existence. As a result we gain a true perception of the divine nature only by viewing humankind as both male and female.

This has important ramifications for the Church. It suggests that only a partnership of male and female in the Church's ministry facilitates us in understanding and portraying what God is like.¹⁰

2. *Christ's subordination and the subordination of women.* But how should women and men serve together in the Church? Complementarians claim that God intends that men lead and that women follow male leadership. Many of these thinkers appeal to the subordinate relationship of the Son (and the Holy Spirit) to the Father,¹¹ thereby building from a linear or asymmetrical model of the triune, from which they draw a linear model of human relationships. Just as authority flows from the Father to the Son (and finally to the Holy Spirit), so also the male has authority over the female.

This argument, however, draws more from Christ's example than is warranted. It erroneously claims that Jesus' voluntary and personal subordination provides the basis for the necessary and permanent submission of one group to another. More importantly it overlooks the deeper dynamic of mutual dependence within the Trinity. Jesus did submit himself to the one he called "Abba," of course, and in so doing he revealed that the Son is in some sense subordinate to the Father within the eternal Trinity. Yet this is only part of the story. The Father is also dependent on the Son. In sending the Son into the world, the Father entrusted his own reign—indeed, his

⁹ See for example E. Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods': A Discussion of Feminist Language for God," *Speaking the Christian God* (ed. A. F. Kimel, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 1–16.

¹⁰ A. B. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1985) 122.

¹¹ S. M. Hutchens, "God, Gender, and the Pastoral Office," *Touchstone* 15/4 (Fall 1992) 15.

own deity—to the Son (e.g. Luke 10:22).¹² Likewise the Father is dependent on the Son for his title as “Father.” As Athanasius pointed out,¹³ without the Son the Father is not the Father of the Son. Hence the subordination of the Son to the Father must be balanced with the subordination of the Father to the Son.

Because the Father and the Son are mutually dependent, a symmetrical trinitarian model presents a better picture of God.¹⁴ Consequently we cannot hold up the example of Christ’s subordination to the Father as definitive for the male-female relationship. Rather, in our thinking about God the subordination of the Son to the Father must always be balanced with the dependency of the Father on the Son. The application of such a symmetrical model of the Trinity leads to an emphasis on mutual dependence and the interdependency of male and female in human relationships (e.g. 1 Cor 11:11–12).

Applying this principle to the Church means that rather than barring women from leadership roles, the dynamic at work within the triune God encourages mutuality at all levels in the life of Christ’s community. In fact ecclesiastical structures that focus on a hierarchy or chain of command that places men over women (or women over men, for that matter) simply cannot offer an adequate picture of the triune God. Rather, the conception of God as triune is best symbolized through structures that foster the cooperation of women and men in all dimensions of church life.

II. WOMAN AND CREATION

Complementarians claim that God ordained a fundamental order in the Church, an order that subordinates woman to man. This subordination in function, they argue, does not arise only from the Son’s subordination to the Father but is also built into creation.¹⁵ At creation God endowed men with the role of leadership and designed women to be subordinate to male leadership.¹⁶ Egalitarians readily acknowledge that in the present age the male-female relationship often assumes a hierarchical form. But they assert that rather than reflecting God’s original intent in creation, such regulations are the result of the fall. Which position is correct?

¹² W. Pannenberg is an important contemporary proponent of this idea. For a summary statement of his position see S. J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (New York: Oxford, 1990) 50.

¹³ Athanasius *Contra Arian* 3.6.

¹⁴ For an attempt to overcome the asymmetry of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity cf. R. W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God according to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 142–144.

¹⁵ R. L. Saucy, “The Negative Case Against the Ordination of Women,” *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology: Papers from the Thirtieth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society* (ed. K. S. Kantzer and S. N. Gundry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 279–280.

¹⁶ For an example of this position receiving official sanction in a Church body see S. H. Nafzger, “The Doctrinal Position of the LCMS on the Service of Women in the Church,” *Concordia Journal* 18/2 (April 1992) 125–129.

1. *The human essence.* This question often revolves around another—namely, whether there is an essential distinction between male and female. Complementarians assume such a distinction and argue from essential differences to differing gender roles. Above all, they claim, the God-given gender distinction operates in the realm of leadership. Manhood and womanhood dictate that the male lead and the female follow.¹⁷ Although they see marriage as the primary context in which these differing roles are to be operative, complementarians claim that the dynamic of leadership and submission has its counterpart in the Church as well.¹⁸ If correct, this observation provides a seemingly conclusive argument against women church leaders.¹⁹

Some egalitarians counter the complementarian position by denying that there is any essential distinction between male and female (androgyny). Although this claim provides a much-needed counterpoint to the excesses that sometimes arise from the complementarian view, it is a flawed theory. By asserting that true, androgynous humanness lies beyond our actual embodied existence as male and female,²⁰ this theory overlooks the important distinctions that exist between the sexes.²¹ Men and women are different, and they view the world differently.²²

Rather than barring women from leadership positions in the Church, as complementarians claim, the reality of gender differences suggests that women and men ought to serve together at all levels of Church life. These differences mean that men and women bring differing skills to the task of Christian ministry. No congregation can genuinely expect to complete the mandate given by the Lord if its structures allow only the male voice to be heard. Important to the ongoing ministry of the people of God are the wisdom and insights of male and female, which are born out of experiences

¹⁷ J. Piper, "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined according to the Bible," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (ed. J. Piper and W. Grudem; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991) 36, 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 53.

¹⁹ J. I. Packer, "Let's Stop Making Women Presbyters," *Christianity Today* (February 11, 1991) 20.

²⁰ This difficulty has been noted even by proponents of the concept of androgyny. Some have moved beyond the older goal of establishing a single ideal for everyone (termed "monoandrogynism") to advocating a variety of options ("polyandrogynism"). See J. Trebilcot, "Two Forms of Androgynism," *Femininity, Masculinity, and Androgyny* (ed. M. Vetterling-Braggin; Totowa: Rowman and Allanheld, 1982) 161–169. Others, such as M. A. Warren, look to the day when the concept of androgyny will "become obsolete" and "we will be comfortable with our natural human differences" ("Is Androgyny the Answer to Sexual Stereotyping?" [*ibid.* 184–185]). A critique of the two types of androgyny is presented in J. B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 98–99.

²¹ Psychologists J. T. Spence and R. L. Helmreich note that gender roles are present in some form in all societies, even though their exact forms vary. *Masculinity and Femininity* (Austin: University of Texas, 1978) 4–5.

²² Cf. e.g. recent studies of feminist scholars, such as N. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* (ed. J. Trebilcot; Towana: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983); C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1982).

filtered through quite different approaches to life. In short, only as women work alongside men at all levels of Church life can the people of God benefit fully from the divinely-created distinctions between male and female.

2. *Male and female and the image of God.* The discussion of gender roles often masks an underlying assumption concerning the creation of humankind in the divine image. On the basis of texts such as 1 Cor 11:7, complementarians often assume that in the final analysis men more completely reflect the divine image than do women.²³ For the background to this claim they turn to the narrative of the creation of the female from the male (Genesis 2). According to complementarians the account provides clear indication that woman's subordination to man is God's design for creation,²⁴ because woman was created after man, woman was created from man, woman was named by man, and woman was created for man.²⁵ This subordination suggests that the male is the original bearer of the *imago Dei*.

Egalitarians, however, declare that these arguments miss the obvious point of the narrative. Rather than being created as his assistant, the woman saves the man from his loneliness.²⁶ Consequently the male-female hierarchy, like existence in an adverse environment, is a consequence of human sin and not a condition of human life. For God's purpose in creation, egalitarians turn instead to the creation account in Genesis 1 (vv. 26–28). This text indicates that male and female share equally the *imago Dei*. When God created humankind in the divine image, what God made was "male and female," and the Creator then gave identical responsibilities to both.²⁷

Despite their differing conclusions, egalitarians and complementarians often share the same basic understanding of the *imago Dei*—namely, that it is a possession of individual humans. But this understanding is not completely accurate. As the doctrine of the Trinity indicates, throughout all eternity God is the fellowship of the trinitarian persons. At creation the triune God designed humankind to mirror the unity-in-diversity and mutuality that characterizes the eternal divine reality. Consequently neither the male as such nor the isolated human—whether male or female—is the image of God. Rather than being an individual possession, the *imago Dei* is a corporate or social reality. It refers to humans in relationship or humans in "community."²⁸ And like the fellowship of the trinitarian persons, human fellowship entails mutuality.

²³ See R. Tucker, *Women in the Maze: Questions and Answers on Biblical Equality* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 36.

²⁴ Foh declares: "The principle of woman's subordination in the church is buttressed by biblical history from beginning to end." S. T. Foh, "Woman Preachers: Why Not?," *Fundamentalist Journal* (January 1985) 18.

²⁵ Evans, *Woman* 14.

²⁶ For an interesting example of an egalitarian exegesis of Genesis 2 see S. Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 7–17.

²⁷ Spencer, *Beyond*, chap. 1; Evans, *Woman*, chap. 1.

²⁸ For a development of the philosophical basis for the social understanding of personhood see A. I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1990).

This understanding of the divine image provides the foundation for the participation of men and women in all areas of Church life. Because the image of God comes forth as Christians share together in a fellowship of mutuality, we must welcome the contributions of both sexes at all levels of Church life.

III. WOMAN AND THE CHURCH

The complementarian and egalitarian proposals reflect differing understandings of the nature of God and of God's purposes in creation. But the central theological consideration that divides the two positions lies elsewhere: in ecclesiology. It is in the vision of who we are as the people of God that the case for the inclusion of women in ministry becomes most pronounced.

1. *The new creation and the Church.* Our discussion of woman in creation introduced the concept of community as the content of the *imago Dei*. God's intent is to establish a reconciled people who reflect to all creation the character of their Creator and Redeemer—that is, a people who are the *imago Dei*. Although complete participation in God's new community awaits the eschatological transformation, God intends that humans enjoy a foretaste of the eternal fellowship now. According to the NT the focus of this foretaste is to be the community of Christ, the Church.

God's goal forms the context for the Biblical understanding of the Church as a people who, to use Paul's phrase, are being transformed into the image of God in Christ (2 Cor 3:18). With the coming of the Savior a new era has dawned, one in which the effects of the fall no longer need to dominate human relationships. Our Lord calls us to mirror as far as possible in the midst of the brokenness of the present the glorious community of love that inheres in God's own character.

This vision forms the heart of the NT conception of the Church. The Biblical writers declare that in Christ the old ways of structuring interpersonal relationships have been superseded. Our Lord has inaugurated God's intention for humankind, and in so doing he has relativized the old distinctions between humans (e.g. Mark 10:42–45; Gal 3:28–29; Eph 2:15–16; Phlm 15–16). Consequently the Church is to be the community in which such differences do not constitute the foundation of personal identity and corporate activity. Because we are Christ's community we can no longer view each other simply according to the old distinctions.

Most complementarians agree with egalitarians that this principle applies to structures based on ethnic distinctions or economic standing.²⁹ Complementarians are not convinced, however, that it also applies to structures based on gender distinctions. Nevertheless the NT vision of the new creation looks to a day of complete reconciliation among people not only of every

²⁹ Hence J. Piper and W. Grudem, "An Overview of Central Concerns," *Recovering* 65.

nation and social standing but also of both genders. The task of the Church is to allow this vision to transform the present. Our corporate life ought to point toward the perfect fellowship of God with humankind that will characterize God's eschatological community, which is a fellowship of mutuality. Just as our Lord's teachings undermine racial and socio-economic discrimination, so also his followers can no longer acknowledge gender as a basis for assigning responsibilities within the fellowship. If we would be the foretaste of the community God is establishing, we must create structures that promote mutuality, which includes welcoming the contribution of both male and female in the Church.

The appeal to the eschatological vision does not set the new creation against the old. On the contrary, what God inaugurated in Christ's coming and will bring to consummation at our Lord's return entails the renewal and completion of what God placed within creation from the beginning. Consequently the call for full participation of men and women in the Church is in keeping with God's intention from the beginning as indicated in the creation narratives.

2. *The Church and the priesthood.* Some complementarians augment their vision of the Church as a hierarchy of men over women with a specific understanding of the ordained office. They oppose women in church leadership because they believe that church offices are fundamentally priestly in nature. Clergy comprise a priesthood, and women cannot serve as priests.³⁰ In this manner the ordained office becomes an example of the universal Biblical principle of male leadership.³¹

While the ancient Hebrew faith did involve a male priesthood, the complementarian position couches an erroneous understanding of the Church and its connection to Israel. The argument assumes that Israel's religious structure exemplifies a divinely-instituted pattern of order for God's people of all ages and that the Church's pastoral office parallels the OT priesthood. Egalitarians, however, reply that the NT principle of the priesthood of all believers suggests that the successor of the Levitical priesthood is the Church as a whole rather than the ordained office. Because of Christ's work, believers together comprise "a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5, 9).

Although the principle of believer priesthood has gained acceptance in nearly all Christian traditions, historically evangelicals have been at the forefront in emphasizing it. Our commitment to this principle is connected with the evangelical emphasis on the Church as consisting ultimately in the whole people of God. Evangelicals have understood believer priesthood to mean that the task of the Church belongs to the people as a whole. Consequently it is the Church, and not merely certain persons in the Church (i.e. ordained clergy), who are charged with the responsibility of representing God and Christ to the community of faith and to the world.

³⁰ Lewis, "Priestesses" 234–239.

³¹ Seton, "Should Our Church Ordain Women?" 16.

This ecclesiology readily leads to an egalitarian view of the ordained office. The clergy are not the mediators between God and the people. Nor do clergy mediate Christ's authority to the Church. Rather, they assist the people in determining the will of the risen Lord for the Church. Hence ordained ministers are chosen by God (and acknowledged by the Church) to lead the people as a whole in fulfilling the mandate Christ has given to the entire Church.

A church in which all participate in the mandate encourages women and men to work side by side in its varied ministries. Women and men learn from each other, uphold one another and contribute their personal strengths to the common mission. In such a church how could the partnership suddenly dissolve and men serve alone in leadership? Why would this kind of church, which otherwise focuses on the activity of all persons in the corporate ministry, suddenly erect an ordained office characterized by a hierarchy of male over female? Indeed, evangelical ecclesiology is best reflected as male and female serve as partners within the ordained office.³²

3. *The Church as a priesthood of gifted persons.* Evangelical ecclesiology builds from the belief that the sovereign Spirit calls different persons to differing functions in the Church, including oversight responsibilities. The principle of the universal priesthood indicates that spiritual giftedness—rather than ethnic origin, social status, or gender—is central to the Spirit's sovereign choice. But does the Spirit limit his endowment with leadership gifts to males?

The NT presents a basically egalitarian conception of spiritual gifts (*charismata*). Paul indicates that a common divine source stands behind all gifts (1 Cor 12:6, 28), for the presence of these gifts is not due to human merit but the will of the sovereign Holy Spirit (12:7–11) and the grace of the risen Christ (Eph 4:7, 11). Further, these endowments are bestowed on each believer rather than merely on a select few. The Lord of the Church imparts the gifts for the good of the Church as a whole (1 Cor 12:7) and the completion of the common task of his people (Eph 4:12).

This intimate connection between gifts and ministry suggests that the Church must find a place for the giftedness of all persons, whether male or female. We must welcome men and women to serve together with whatever gifts the Spirit bestows on them. But the question remains: Does the Spirit endow women with the gifts essential for the ordained office?

The OT prophets anticipated a time when the Spirit would work through both women and men (e.g. Joel 2:28–29), which era, according to Luke, dawned with Pentecost (Acts 2:14–18). For the accomplishment of its mandate our Lord has poured out his Spirit, who endows each believer with spiritual gifts. These are distributed throughout the community according to the Spirit's will, for the Spirit is free to endow whomever he chooses with whatever gifts he wills. The NT offers no hint that the Spirit restricts the gifts that equip a person to function in the ordained office (e.g. teaching,

³² Evans, *Woman* 110.

preaching, leadership) to men while distributing without distinction those necessary for other ministries. The implication is obvious. As one observer concludes: If gifts equipping for pastoral ministry “are distributed by *God* to women, what higher authority does the Church have for denying the women their expression?”³³

Complementarians are quick with a response. Important as they are, the *charismata* do not constitute the only factor in determining the role of women in the Church. But to skirt the ecclesiological implications of the NT teaching on spiritual gifts complementarians must set forth a sharp distinction between *charismata* and the ordained office. Ronald Fung is a typical example. He finds no contradiction between “Paul’s teaching concerning the indiscriminate distribution of spiritual gifts to men and women alike” and the restrictions he claims “Paul imposes on women’s ministry by reason of woman’s subordination to man.” “What it does mean,” he adds, “is that *gift* and *role* are to be distinguished.”³⁴ In other words, to salvage the complementarian interpretation of Paul’s attitude toward women in ministry Fung (like others) imposes an artificial dichotomy between the Spirit’s gifting and the exercise of the ordained office.

The problem with the complementarian argument, however, runs deeper. The limitation on a woman’s use of the gift of teaching to those roles that do not place her in authority over men subsumes ecclesiology under anthropology. In this manner the argument simply reverts back to the question of the relationship of the sexes, which complementarians find embedded in the creation order. This appeal, however, is Biblically and theologically suspect. Even if God had built this principle into creation from the beginning (which we have already indicated is not the case), this would not necessarily require that the Church continue to practice male leadership and female subordination. Christ did not establish the Church merely to be the mirror of original creation but to anticipate the eschatological new community. We are to live in accordance with the principles of God’s new creation and thereby reflect the character of the triune God.

IV. WOMAN AND THE ORDAINED MINISTRY

As we have already discovered, the discussion of ecclesiology naturally leads to the ordained office. Indeed, the debate between complementarians and egalitarians revolves around the nature of the ministerial office. Complementarians claim that ordained ministers function in capacities that only men can fulfill. Because only men can exercise the spiritual prerogatives of representation and authority demanded by the ordained office, the people of God cannot set apart women for ministry. Women do have a place in the Church, of course, but their activities are limited to supportive roles. Rather than eliminating women from serving, however, the representative

³³ E. M. Howe, “The Positive Case for the Ordination of Women,” *Perspectives* 275.

³⁴ R. Y. K. Fung, “Ministry in the New Testament,” *The Church in the Bible and the World* (ed. D. A. Carson; Exeter: Paternoster, 1987) 209.

and authoritative aspects of the ordained office invite the full participation of men and women.

1. *Woman and the representative office.* Neither the task of representing the local congregation within the wider Christian fellowship nor the prerogative of representing the Church in the world is inherently incompatible with the ordination of women. Difficulties arise, however, with another aspect that many traditions associate with the ordained office: Clergy represent God to the people. We have already touched on one dimension of this. Now we must look at another aspect: Do ordained ministers represent Christ? And if so, does this bar women from ordination?

Complementarians argue that because Jesus was a male, the ordained person—as Christ's representative—must also be male. Hence a woman cannot be an "image" (*eikōn*) of Christ.³⁵ But in what sense do ordained ministers represent Christ? Some answer that clergy do so primarily by presiding at the Lord's table. Because the officiant at the eucharist is the representative—perhaps even the representation—of Christ, the ordained person must be a biological resemblance of Jesus.

Although the officiant at the Lord's supper does fulfill a certain representational function, this representation is fundamentally vocal rather than actual, oral rather than bodily.³⁶ In the eucharistic celebration the presider announces Christ's words of invitation. In so doing the officiant serves as the mouthpiece for the risen Lord, who is the true host and the true speaker.

Nothing inherent in this representational function would bar anyone from officiating at the table on the basis of gender. In fact, rather than eliminating women from the ordained office the Church's eucharistic doctrine may actually be enhanced by the participation of women in representing Christ at the Lord's table. Many communicants view the event either as a mass in which the priest acts as Christ, offering our Lord's body and blood to God, or simply as a reenactment of the last supper in which the pastor acts the part of Jesus. An all-male clergy perpetuates these theological misconceptions,³⁷ whereas women and men serving as officiants would be a step toward weaning communicants off such understandings.³⁸

Deeper than representing Christ at the eucharist, however, is the idea that the ordained person functions as an ontological representation of Christ. Some complementarians oppose women's ordination because the ordained person embodies in some symbolic manner the actual nature of our Lord. But what aspect of Christ's nature do ordained persons represent? At this point

³⁵ This argument is cited in Boucher, "Ecumenical Documents" 412.

³⁶ M. C. Chapman, "The Ordination of Women: Evangelical and Catholic," *Dialog* 28 (Spring 1989) 135. Chapman appeals to M. Luther, *Book of Concord* (ed. T. Tappert; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 448. G. G. Hull hints at a similar position; cf. *Equal to Serve* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1987) 220.

³⁷ J. A. Baker, "Eucharistic Presidency and Women's Ordination," *Theology* 88/725 (September 1985) 357.

³⁸ This point is argued in *ibid.*

complementarians are hard pressed to avoid pointing to Jesus' maleness as indicating the maleness of God.

Drawing from the NT and the writings of the early Church, egalitarians aver that clergy symbolize Christ in his humanness, not in his maleness.³⁹ They assert that to elevate maleness as an essential requirement for ministry would stand in opposition to the inclusive significance of Christ's saving work.⁴⁰ Consequently, rather than barring women from ordination egalitarians argue that classical Christology demands the inclusion of women in the ordained office.⁴¹

In two respects the egalitarians are correct. If clergy do function as the representatives of our Lord, then restricting the ordained office to males can readily cloud the symbolism of Christ's inclusive humanity. Ontological representation demands that women and men serve together within the ministry.

Further, as the ecclesiological considerations of the last section suggest, whatever representative function ordained ministers fulfill is indirect, not direct. It arises from their role as the representatives of the Church.⁴² Ultimately the image of God—of which Christ is the perfect exemplar—is a social reality. We reflect the divine image as a corporate whole, the fellowship of Christ's disciples who comprise his body. Therefore the Church—the community of believers of each nation, class and sex—is the ontological representation of Christ. As the representation of the Church they serve, clergy likewise become the ontological representation of our Lord. But because Christ is creating one new human reality (Eph 2:15) in which distinctions of nation, class and sex are overcome (Gal 3:28), the Church (and consequently Christ) is best represented by an ordained ministry consisting of persons from various nations, from all social classes, and from both genders.

2. *Woman and the authoritative office.* Clergy not only fulfill a representative role but also exercise authority. Complementarians argue that the authoritative aspect of the office is an impediment to the ordination of women because the leadership authority present in it is appropriate to women. Because women's responsibility is to support male leadership, complementarians infer, it is sinful for women to exercise leadership over men.⁴³

This way of framing the complementarian position returns us to the issue of gender-role distinctions. Earlier we explored the topic in the context

³⁹ S. C. Barton, "Impatient for Justice: Why the Church of England Would Ordain Women to the Priesthood," *Theology* 92/749 (September 1989) 404.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* See also K. Untener, "Forum: The Ordination of Women: Can the Horizons Widen," *Worship* 65/1 (January 1991) 57.

⁴¹ Boucher, "Ecumenical Document" 413.

⁴² For a recent statement of this view from a Roman Catholic perspective cf. E. J. Kilmartin, "Apostolic Office: Sacrament of Christ," *TIS* 36/2 (1975) 260–261.

⁴³ "Role of Women in the Church: A Report of the Study Panel of the Free Church of Scotland," *Diakonia* 4/3 (March 1991) 78.

of creation. Now we must pursue it in the context of the Church, asking whether Christ intends that only men exercise the authority associated with leadership.

3. *The choice of the Twelve.* Complementarians find evidence of Christ's intention in his establishment of an all-male apostolate.⁴⁴ But the maleness of the twelve apostles does not provide sufficient grounds from which to conclude that all ordained persons must be male. Such a conclusion fails to understand the foundational, unique and temporary role played by the Twelve in the Church.⁴⁵ Even if our Lord's selection indicated that only men were foundational to the establishment of the Church, nothing in this choice would prove that Christ wills that male leadership remain the norm. In fact Jesus' own demeanor indicates the contrary, and the early believers followed our Lord's egalitarian attitude, for women served side by side with men in the NT communities.

The complementarian argument also fails to understand the actual significance of Christ's choice of the Twelve. Rather than inaugurating a permanent distinction of roles among his followers based on gender, our Lord's selection was a symbolic act understandable only in the context of Israel's history. His selection of twelve male apostles, reminiscent of the original patriarchs, was an eschatological sign⁴⁶ denoting that Jesus was reconstituting the ancient people of God.⁴⁷

4. *The nature of leadership.* In addition to the male apostolate, complementarians appeal to the representative function of the ordained office, which they extend to its leadership aspect. Because it is Christ himself who leads his people through his representatives, in their role as leaders pastors represent the Lord. Women, in turn, simply cannot represent Christ, and as a consequence they cannot represent his leadership function within the Church.

The complementarian argument, however, proves too much. Carried to its logical conclusion, it would preclude women from involvement in any form of Church service. Ultimately all service is representative. Christ is the ultimate agent at work—through his Spirit—in all the activities of the believing community. If women cannot represent our Lord as the one who leads his people, they also are disqualified from representing him as the one who is acting in other dimensions of Church life.

More crucial is another flaw in the complementarian appeal to the representative view of leadership. The primary task of leaders is not that of representing to the people of God Christ's own leadership function. Rather,

⁴⁴ J. A. Borland, "Women in the Life and Teaching of Jesus," *Recovering* 121.

⁴⁵ Even certain contemporary Roman Catholic thinkers such as K. Rahner agree with this conclusion. See I. Raming, "The Twelve Apostles Were Men," *TD* 40/1 (Spring 1993) 22.

⁴⁶ See for example *ibid.* 21.

⁴⁷ Cf. E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1966) 110.

Christ places leaders within the fellowship so that they might facilitate the people themselves in fulfilling their mandate (cf. Eph 4:11–12). The role of leaders, therefore, may be best capsulized by the word “empowerment.”⁴⁸

Ministry occurs as all believers use their Spirit-endowed gifts to carry out the mandate Christ has entrusted to the entire fellowship (Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12:7; 1 Pet 4:10–11). This means that women too must use whatever gifts the Spirit bestows on them, including the gift of leadership.

But more importantly, facilitating leadership means that the Church is best served by leaders of both genders. Complementarians claim that Christ calls only men to leadership in the Church, which according to John Piper and Wayne Grudem means that men alone “bear the responsibility for the overall pattern of life.”⁴⁹ Limiting leadership to men, however, readily results in a truncated understanding of the Church’s mandate, for male voices so easily articulate a solely male-oriented “pattern of life.” Consequently the Church is best facilitated in its task as men and women contribute their unique perspectives at all levels of Church life, including that of vision and decision-making.

A facilitating leadership also carries implications for leadership style. Male dominance in the Church has coincided with what we may view as a distinctively male conception of leadership. Many participants in the contemporary debate over women in ministry understand leadership as the exercise of power over others. The (male) leader must use the power inherent in the office in order to effect his own views, program and agenda. If we accept this understanding, of course, we are forced to question whether women can properly exercise power, especially power over men.

The chief flaw in this approach, however, is that it sets aside our Lord’s teaching. Central to his entire ministry was the declaration that the divine way of life lies in humble servanthood. In so doing, our Lord went against accepted norms, for he asserted that to be a leader means providing an example to others of the nature of service (Mark 10:42–45).

This principle is directly applicable to the ordained office: Ordination sets a person apart to be a servant leader. In fulfilling a leadership role in the Church the ordained person seeks to be a servant to the people. Indeed the fundamental task of pastors is that of leading the whole people of God in service (Eph 4:11–13). Consequently, rather than being set in a position of dominance over the people the ordained person stands with them as together they seek to be obedient to the Lord of the Church. The consensus document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* articulates the point well: “Ordained ministers must not be autocrats or impersonal functionaries.” Rather, they are to “manifest and exercise the authority of Christ in the way Christ himself revealed God’s authority to the world, by committing their life to

⁴⁸ J. W. Gardner, *On Leadership* (New York: Macmillan/Free Press, 1990) 21–22. The popularity of the designation is illustrated in the title of W. W. Burke’s article, in which he argues that “leaders empower via direction and inspiration and managers via action and participation.” “Leadership is Empowering Others,” *Executive Power* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986) 75.

⁴⁹ Piper and Grudem, “Overview” 64.

the community.”⁵⁰ Our Lord intends that humble servanthood characterize each of his followers. But in this, pastors are to lead the way. They are to be “examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:3) “in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Tim 4:12). In short, they are to be models to the congregation of Christlike character and servanthood.

Complementarians acknowledge the servant nature of the ordained office.⁵¹ Their more hierarchical understanding of church structure, however, tends to undermine their good intention to maintain a servant focus. It is difficult to view pastors primarily as servants of the people of God when ordination appears to endow a privileged few with power and status. This problem is compounded when over half of the membership of the Church find the door to ordination barred by restrictions based solely on gender. Women have often displayed a more perceptive understanding of the significance of servant leadership than men have. And in our society women form a more effective symbol of servanthood than do men. Yet so many Christians are quite willing for women to be servants in the Church but not to serve in the very role which is intended to embody Christlike service. True Biblical leadership, to which servanthood must be central, is best symbolized as men and women minister together in this crucial dimension of Church life. These considerations should dispose us toward anticipating that the Spirit will call women, as well as men, to servant leadership positions in Christ's Church.

5. *Leadership, authority and power.* A final question focuses on whether women can properly be invested with authority and can properly exercise power. A grave impediment to the prospect of women clergy lies in the popular understanding that sees authority and power—which are inherent in the ordained office—as masculine traits, whereas submission and powerlessness are feminine.⁵²

This, however, is simply not the NT picture. The authority and power Jesus demonstrated differed from the understanding prevalent in the world. Christ taught that God's reign comes through what to us often seems insignificant, such as the mundane work of a woman (Luke 13:20–21). What our Lord preached he also modeled. Jesus repudiated the royal ideal of the Messiah,⁵³ choosing instead to be endowed with the power of a servant. Although possessing the authority of the Son sent by the Father with a mission, Jesus never exercised authority or displayed power with the purpose of dominating others. Rather, he was always concerned to minister to human need. The NT understands the authority and power Jesus gives to his disciples in exactly the same way (e.g. Mark 3:15; 6:7; Luke 9:1; 10:19).⁵⁴

⁵⁰ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) 23.

⁵¹ Piper and Grudem, “Overview” 64.

⁵² Boucher, “Ecumenical Documents” 404.

⁵³ W. Grundmann, “*dynamai*,” *TDNT* 2.300.

⁵⁴ See Boucher, “Ecumenical Documents” 416.

Divine power is made evident in human weakness (e.g. 2 Cor 12:9–10).⁵⁵ This ought to form the foundation for our conception of the authority and power of the ordained office.

Complementarians, of course, are keen to connect authority and power—understood as dominance—with church structures. According to Piper and Grudem, “the New Testament shows that the basic relationships of life fit together in terms of authority and compliance. . . . Most social institutions have structures that give to some members the right to direct the actions of others.”⁵⁶ While acknowledging such principles as the priesthood of believers and the servant nature of leadership, Piper and Grudem adamantly assert that the NT writers instruct the people to follow their leaders.⁵⁷

Statements such as these indicate that complementarians maintain a basically authoritarian conception of the ordained ministry. This authoritarian model provides the strongest impediment to women being ordained to the pastorate, for complementarians see the inducement with this kind of authority and the exercise of power as the prerogative of men.

From the NT perspective we can speak of the authority inherent in the ordained office, an authority that confers the right to exercise power. But this authority and this power are of a different kind than the authoritarian model suggests. Authority flows from the whole people of God upon whom Christ bestows his own authority. And it is directed back toward the community of faith, as those with authority use their authority to serve the whole people of God.

This principle means that the authority of the ordained office is ultimately an authority to serve and facilitate. The NT model for the pastorate is not that of ruler but shepherd. As a result, leaders have authority so that they might care for others by being servants and examples (Mark 10:41–44; 1 Pet 5:1–3). Leaders are to use the authority delegated to them by the people in order to facilitate those under their care in ministering with the gifts and strength God provides to each.⁵⁸

The derived nature of clergy authority means that in the Church hierarchical models must give way to structures that promote mutuality. Jesus did not come to reverse the location of people on the old social ladder—to install the underlings in dominant positions and reduce the upper classes to subordinate status. Rather, our Lord called into question the very model of society based on dominant-subordinate relationships. Consequently in the Church the dominance of clergy over laity must give way to mutuality, the mutual submission of each to the other (Eph 5:21), in which context leaders then serve those whom they are called to lead.

The promotion of mutuality is one of the central challenges the contemporary situation sets before the Church.⁵⁹ Church leaders can take a giant

⁵⁵ Grundmann, “*dynamai*” 2.316–317.

⁵⁶ Piper and Grudem, “Overview” 78.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ W. Liefeld, “A Plural Ministry View,” *Women in Ministry: Four Views* (ed. B. Clouse and R. G. Clouse; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989) 147.

⁵⁹ Gardner, *On Leadership* 187.

step in this direction by modeling mutuality. This includes widening the circle of those who contribute to the leadership task. As even contemporary management theory confirms, the various dimensions of leading need not be vested in those with formal authority but can be distributed among the members of a group.⁶⁰ Hence the authors of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* call for a shared leadership among Christ's people: "Strong emphasis should be placed on the active participation of all members in the life and the decision-making of the community."⁶¹

As the division between "leader" and "follower" loses its rigidity, we will begin to see that leadership is never the prerogative of one designated person working in isolation. Rather, we will discover the benefit of the NT pattern of shared leadership,⁶² which lies at the heart of this plea for the ordination of women. In short, the ultimate question is not the ordination of women, understood as the call for a new "power-sharing" arrangement that invests women with the same prerogatives of power thus far exercised by men. Instead we need nothing less than a revised understanding of the pastoral office. The Van Leeuwen study group put it well: "Simply letting women 'join the old boys' club' solves very little, for it assumes that the competence of women pastors and elders will be measured by their success in thinking and acting just like me. If male-dominated, overly hierarchical modes of church management remain in place . . . then the ordination of women turns out to be a questionable victory."⁶³

We do the entire people of God a disservice if we merely give women access to the power structures of the Church while maintaining un-Biblical hierarchical organizational patterns.⁶⁴ Instead, evangelical theological convictions call us to move to a style of Church leadership that, because it focuses on a shared ministry, more closely mirrors the relational nature of the triune God, more adequately reflects God's intention in creation, and hence more effectively serves the whole people of God in their task of embodying in their institutional life the Biblical vision of God's new community.

⁶⁰ E. H. Schein, *Organizational Psychology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980) 128.

⁶¹ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* 26.

⁶² Gardner, *On Leadership* 150.

⁶³ M. S. Van Leeuwen *et al.*, *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 585.

⁶⁴ See M. Warkentin, *Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 182.