

The Role of Women in the Church

Rev. Dr Thorwald Lorenzen

1. Seeking an understanding with the reader/listener

a. *The question of authority.* As Christians, when we face a controversial question, we seek the *will of God*. There are many ways in which the will of God may be discerned. *One way* is, for instance, that we ask for the voice of *conscience*. Yet we know that our conscience is informed, not only by God, but also by our unbending self will and by our education and our cultural norms. We therefore need to *evaluate and measure* the voice of conscience. *Another way* to discern the will of God is to look into the *biblical writings*. Yet we know that biblical writings were also used by Jesus' opponents, and by the opponents of the earliest churches. We therefore need a *key* to interpret the biblical writings.

b. *Jesus Christ, as he is portrayed by the Scriptures and witnessed to in the Scriptures, is the one word of God that we are to hear, trust and obey.* In the early church the *key and measure to interpret Scripture and conscience* was *Jesus Christ*. In the *Johannine Community*, for instance, *Jesus Christ* is the *word of God* which we are to hear, trust and obey. By this *one word* all other words must be measured (John 1:1-18; 1 John 4). *Paul* in his interaction with the Christians in Corinth clearly elaborates that not his conscience, but Christ crucified is the measuring stick by which all his words must be measured (1 Cor 1-2, 4:3f.). In all his writings Paul is concerned that he must say nothing that is not in harmony with Jesus Christ (Rom 15:18; 2 Cor 13:13). Jesus Christ is the only foundation for the content of the message (1 Cor 3:11). In the *Book of Revelation* it is the *lamb that was slain* (i.e. Christ crucified and risen) who alone can unravel and interpret God's mysterious plans for the world (Rev 5). The same can be argued for the other New Testament writings.

c. *The "living" word of the gospel.* For the earliest Christians, *Jesus Christ*, the *risen Christ*, was present in the *preaching of the gospel* (Rom 10:17; John 5:24). The gospel was *preached* before it was written. The gospel by its very nature was and is a *living word* before it became and becomes the written word.

i. *Continuity and discontinuity.* This preaching of the gospel, the *living word* of God, was always in *continuity* and *discontinuity* with the *situation* in which the word was preached.

Continuity in language, culture and custom was necessary to win the trust of the people, to make contact with them, and to communicate the gospel to them. That is the reason why in the early Christian "*household codes*" the instructions for the behaviour of Christians are closely modelled on the behaviour that was customary and acceptable in the Greco-Roman world. For instance, Christian women are counselled not to speak in church (1 Cor 14:35), not to teach or have authority over men (1 Tim 2:12), and to accept the fact that the man is the head of the household (Col 3:18; Eph 5:22.24). Slaves are told to obey their masters (Col 3:22; Eph 6:5) just as children are told to obey their parents (Col 3:20; Eph 6:1f.). Bishops should be in good standing with the society around them (1 Tim 3:7) and deacons should manage their household well (1 Tim 3:12).

At the same time, the *uniqueness* and the *radical newness* of the *Christian* message could only come to light if the *discontinuity* of the gospel with the culture is also recognised. With the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has spoken a *new word*, a *history creating* and *history shaping* word, into the world. In each situation it was therefore the theological challenge to have enough continuity to make communication possible, without compromising the uniqueness and the newness of the Christian gospel. The wives are therefore not only counselled to respect their husbands and be subordinate to them, but husbands should love their wives (Col 3:19; Eph 5:25.28.33). For Christians, the ultimate authority for the moral vision of life cannot be culture and custom, but must be God's revelation in the resurrection

of the crucified Christ: “you are slaves of the Lord Christ” (Col 3:24, compare 3:14). He, the crucified and risen Christ, is the foundation and the content of the gospel.

This reflection on *continuity* and *discontinuity* leads to an important *hermeneutical rule*: in trying to discover the content and emphasis of the *Christian* vision of reality, we must pay more attention to the *discontinuity* than to the continuity with the situation in which faith becomes an event. The identity and integrity of faith often lies in its *difference* from the surrounding culture. Relating this to our discussion, when we emphasise that women must respect and submit to their husbands, that they must not teach men, that they must be quiet in church etc., then we are emphasising the similarity, not the difference from the culture in which the early churches took shape. It is in the texts where the equality of male and female is affirmed, where women take leadership roles in house churches, where women are recognised as “apostles” and “deacons” and “prophets”, there the *newness* of the *Christian* faith begins to effect and shape history.

- ii. *The spoken and the written word.* The transition from the “preached” and “living” word to the “written” word calls for careful theological reflection. When the gospel is preached - in Jerusalem and Antioch and Corinth and Galatia and Rome - then the *situational* dimension is immediately present. The preacher must speak the word of God into the *situation*. The preacher must address questions and problems that are *situational*. The preacher must communicate with the hearers “there and then” or “here and now”. He or she must speak their language, respect their culture, and address their questions. That is the reason why in the New Testament we have *four* gospels and not one. That is the reason why Paul did not write one letter and send copies to each of the churches, but that he wrote different letters to the different churches. The christological content of the gospel took on different forms in the different situations.

When the *spoken word* was written down, the danger arose that the *living* gospel became *frozen into words on paper*. These words did not only contain the “pure” gospel, but they also contained the cultural trappings that were necessary to communicate the gospel. With the transition from the *living* word to the *written* word, the danger was of course, that the *situational* dimension was given dignity beyond the situation when and where the gospel was originally preached. The danger is that the living word of God was frozen into the letter of the law which was then considered valid for all situations. We fall into that trap if we forget, for instance, that the four Gospels or the Epistles to the Romans or Galatians or Corinthians or Timothy were not written *to us*. The same words do not mean the same things when the situation changes. It is *our task*, when we read the New Testament writings, to distinguish between the situational elements and those elements that transcend the situation. The fundamental theological challenge is that we do not reduce the newness and uniqueness of the resurrection of Christ to what is acceptable to our customs and culture, to the poverty of our reason and to the ambiguity of our experience. When we read that the Spirit gives life, while the letter kills, then behind this there is the danger that we make the written texts instruments of our self interest.

- d. For Christians the “word of God” is *gospel*, not law. Christ came that we might have life; Christ is the fulfilment and therefore the end of the law (Rom 10:4); Christ liberates the believer from the watchdog of the law (Gal 3:23-28). It is the task of the church’s teaching ministry to protect the liberating power of the gospel against the constant temptation of moralism and legalism.

- e. *We must be suspicious of our own interest.* None of us, who want to be faithful to the text of the Bible, come to the text without presuppositions. We are all sinners and as such we are bent to *use* the Bible to validate and serve our own interests. We must be quite open and honest at this point. We must bring our hidden agendas to light if we are to be servants of and not masters over the word.

f. The living “word of God” must as such remain tied to the “story of Jesus” which remains alive through the “power of the Spirit”. The ways by which the early church tried to avoid the danger of freezing the living word of the Gospel into the letter of the law include:

- Healing, exorcisms, and baptism were carried out “in the *name of Jesus*” and “in the *power of the Spirit*”.
- The identity meal of the Christian community, the Lord’s Supper, was grounded in the *Passion of Jesus*: “... the Lord Jesus *on the night when he was betrayed* took a loaf of bread ...” (1 Cor 11:23).
- An anonymous theologian - whom we call “Mark” - wrote a gospel to *interlock the Christian faith* and the Christian church with the *passion story of Jesus*.
- The *Cross* (Paul, Mark, Hebrews, Revelation) and the *humanity of Christ* (John; 1 John) were emphasised so that faith would not be separated from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.
- Towards the end of the 4th century the churches agreed on a *canon* so that the richness of faith remained tied to the poverty of Jesus.
- In post New Testament times the church made *explicit* what was *implicit* in the New Testament: that for Christians, God could only be understood as the divine *koinonia* of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (the *trinity* as the identity symbol of the Christian faith and the Christian church). Neither the church, nor the Bible, nor Mary are part of the trinity.

g. *Application*. What does this mean for our search for the will of God when we are confronted with controversial questions?

- i. For Christians, God’s will is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of *Jesus Christ*.
- ii. Jesus Christ, the *one* word of God that we are to hear, trust and obey, is accessible for us only through the *Scriptures*.
- iii. The dignity of the *Bible* consists in its *witness to Christ*. For Christians, the Bible has no independent dignity. The Bible participates in the uniqueness and newness of Christ; but it is a *derived* dignity.
- iv. The Bible is a collection of literature in which is written down what was the word of God in a *particular situation*. The Bible was not written directly to us. The Corinthian correspondence was written to Corinth, not to Galatia. Before we ask, what the text *means* for us, we must ask what it *meant* then.
- v. In interpreting the Bible we must therefore *seek* the will of God in that we try to understand the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Christ in its relationship to the question or problem at hand.

In seeking the will of God we try not to *use* the biblical texts to serve and further our own interests or to validate traditional and cultural norms, but we seek to let *revelation* determine our thoughts and deeds, and therefore our language. Our interpretation of biblical texts must reflect the *new age* that has been ushered in through the *Christ-event*: “... *now* the righteousness of God has been manifested *apart from law*, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Rom 3:21f.). In the interpretation of texts our understanding of and our commitment to the *newness and uniqueness* of the Christ-event is at stake.

2. The resurrection of Christ as foundational event

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was not the beginning of a religion, but of a revolution. It was unexpected. It cannot be explained with inner-historical, religious, or psychological categories of expectation. It was a *new act of God*. It was an unexpected surprise of joy, hope, and promise. When one searches for categories that may provide analogies to this new, unique, and unexpected event, the events of *creation* and *salvation* come to mind. In Romans 4

the apostle Paul can therefore speak of God as the One "who gives life to the dead", who "calls into existence the things that do not exist", and "who justifies the ungodly" (Rom 4:5.17).

The *resurrection of Jesus*, which *as such* is not accessible to us, *reached into history* with the appearances of the risen Christ, *creating faith and shaping the community of faith, the church*. This happened in the power of the Spirit (Rom 1:3f.), so that Easter and Pentecost should theologially be seen together. The Spirit applies the riches of Christ to the poverty of our human existence.

The *newness* of God's revelation in Jesus Christ became historically manifest in the "body of Christ", the church, the *koinonia* of people where Christ is believed and obeyed. How does the *koinonia* manifest that it is the "body of Christ" and not just another religious club of which there were many in the ancient world? The *newness* of the resurrection resulted in a church proclamation which has been preserved for us in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians.

3. Galatians 3:28

a. *The Text*. The revolution of the resurrection is captured in a Pauline text in *Galatians 3:23-28*. Let me remind you:

"Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is *no longer Jew or Greek*,
there is *no longer slave or free*,
there is *no longer male and female*;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."
(Gal 3:23-28)

Without going into details, the following remarks may summarise the message of this text.

b. *The "old" and the "new"*. Historical reality is divided into *two periods*:

- i. The period "*under the power of sin*" (v.22) which is *the period "under the law"* (v.23). This period is negatively characterised as *period of imprisonment and restraint*. The law is described as a *paidagwgo/j* (not *dida/skaloj*). *Paidagwgo/j* is not a positive word. It does not refer to a schoolmaster who guides the pupil into a positive human development. The law is not the positive schoolmaster that leads Judaism towards Christianity. The *paidagwgo/j* refers to a slave who leads the child of his master to school and protects the child against molesters. He had the reputation of being rude and rough, limiting the freedom and development of the child.
- ii. The period under sin and law comes to end with the *coming of Christ and the coming of faith*. Christ is the fulfilment and the end of the law, as Paul says at another place (Rom 10:4). The restraint and the imprisonment under the law is replaced by the *justification of faith* (v. 24). The Christian therefore is no longer subject to the law (v. 25). In Christ, a new, a divine reality has broken into the history of estrangement and death. Law and sin are replaced by gospel and faith (compare also Rom 3:21-26). Against the Jewish Christians in Galatia who maintained that respect and obedience to the Torah is still necessary for salvation, Paul asserts a radical break, a discontinuity between law and gospel, sin and faith. As he did in the important conference in Jerusalem, narrated in Galatians 2:1-10, for Paul, his own calling, the credibility of the gospel, and therefore the nature of grace and of God, were at stake at that point.

c. *Faith and baptism.* This new reality of the resurrection of the crucified Christ arrives in the life of the believer and the believing community through *faith and baptism*. In faith and baptism Christ becomes the determinative centre of the life of the believer and the believing community. What does that mean?

The love of God and God's salvation is *universalised*. The title "*children of God*" (v. 26) was traditionally used for *Jews*. But through Christ and in the power of the Spirit, who universalises the work of Christ, the *Gentiles* are included in the "children of God" - "through *faith*" of course; and this faith is celebrated and publicly confessed in *baptism*.

The *newness* of the resurrection of Christ has arrived in the world and begins to shape history. The salvation that Christ has brought, undoes the estrangement and injustice of sin. "There can be no doubt that Paul's statements have social and political implications of even a revolutionary dimension." Paul mentions *three implications of the newness and the power of the resurrection when it arrives in the lives and communities of believers*.

d. "*There is no longer Jew or Greek.*" Cultural barriers that separated Jews and Greeks for centuries, and from the Jewish point of view, it gave Jews a feeling of election and superiority. "In Christ" any privileges based on nationality and culture and race, are suspended. The "other" becomes interesting for its own sake, and "in Christ" I no longer need to separate myself from the "other".

e. "*There is no longer slave or freeman.*" Although the church did not hear or understand this for 1800 years, here "in Christ", where the gospel is heard, believed and obeyed, the abolition of slavery must be realised and practiced. This probably caused major problems in the earliest churches because slavery was an important economic and social pillar of ancient society. The churches wanted to maintain good relations with the society around them in order to communicate the gospel. And indeed, the churches were so small and vulnerable, that a social and political revolution was out of the question. When, for instance, the slave *Onesimus* was converted, theoretically he could have asserted his newly found freedom "in Christ", but Paul sends him back to his master. But he does so with a letter, appealing to his owner *Philemon* to treat him as a *brother*. In Paul's situation, where the church was a vulnerable and fragile minority in an antagonistic world, this was understandable. To use Paul's understandable hesitation to go on justifying slavery for another 1800 years is one of the tragic ironies of history and one of the terrible errors of the Christian church. Fortunately, today both the churches and the human community as a whole has understood and agreed that slavery is wrong. The abolition of slavery belongs to the core of human rights that have universal and absolute validity.

f. "*There is no longer male and female.*" In whatever way we may look at this statement, it clearly says "that in the Christian church the sex distinction between man and woman have lost their significance." This does not mean, of course, that there are no differences between men and women. Indeed the differences between men and women are important for the encounter of love, and they are essential for the survival of the human race! But "in Christ" the *natural* differences must no longer be used to determine *theological* roles.

i. *Genesis 1:27.* Theologically it is significant that in Galatians 3:26-28 Paul picks up terminology from *Genesis 1:27*, when he asserts that in Christ Jesus "there is no longer male and female." This means that through the ministry of Christ, God's original creative intention has been restored.

The so-called "Priestly" creation story in *Genesis 1:1-2:4a*) portrays the creation of the human being as being "in the image of God ... male and female he created them" (1:27). The human being is a communal being who seeks communion with each other and practices the partnership of equals.

- ii. *Genesis 2:18, 23-25*. The other creation story (the so-called “Jahwist” creation story in *Genesis 2:4b-3:24*) first portrays the creation of the male (humankind) (md) - “*adam*”) “from the dust of the ground (hmd) - “*adamah*”), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a *living being*” (2:7). But the male alone is considered to be a deficient human being, so “... the Lord God said, ‘It is *not good that man should be alone*’” (2:18). Human beings are communal beings who become what they are in their togetherness: “... if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to the person who is alone when they fall and has not another to lift them up” (Ecclesiastes 4:10). So God made the human being *whole* (“*at last*”; “*one flesh*”) by creating “a helper as a *partner*” (2:18). This should be interpreted in the widest possible sense. It does not only mean that God created a *sexual partner* for the man or that God created a *farm help* for the man. “What is meant is the personal community of man and woman in the broadest sense - bodily and spiritual community, mutual help and understanding, joy and contentment in each other.” It would certainly go beyond the intention of the text to derive any subordination of woman to man from this text. Indeed, given the situation of patriarchy in which this text was formulated one must conclude quite the opposite. Human beings can only become who they are in mutual partnership and assistance. The man, therefore bursts forth in ecstatic joy when God gives him a partner:

"This *at last* is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman
for out of Man this one was taken."

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they *become one flesh*.

And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Gen 2:23-25)

Nevertheless, this state of unashamed bliss and partnership in creative relationship with God and nature is not how things are. Life as we know and experience it is different to that. We live in an estranged state where sin and self-will rather than God's intention and will rule. The human being wants to “have” and “define” and “rule”. The consequences are estrangement from God, from each other, and from nature. An unbending self-will constantly frustrates the communal dimension of human existence. The striving for human autonomy presents a conflict with a life based on faith. Exploitation of nature for immediate and short-sighted human ends replaces a caring partnership with nature as creation. Creative partnerships on all levels issue into struggle for domination. This state, the way things are, the birth-pain and the subordination of women to men, as well as the hard work and the struggle with an unfriendly environment in order to make ends meet for the man, are interpreted as punishment for the human estrangement from God (Gen 3:16-19).

Since through her *function* as *child-bearer* and *caring for the domestic family duties* the woman was based in the home, while the man performed in public, this *functional distinction* was soon cemented into *structures of patriarchy* where a functional sharing of responsibilities became frozen into ontological structures of being in which the subordination of the woman to the man was cemented and then validated by philosophical and theological arguments. The women became the property of the man.

- iii. *Conclusion*. This result of estrangement and sin was undone by the death and resurrection of Christ. Those who “hear” that and believe it, that is, those who are “in Christ”, must allow this “new” humanity to take shape in their lives and in their midst. Christians can, therefore, no longer uncritically adopt the social, cultural, political, religious, and economic customs and traditions. Their conscience is bound to Jesus Christ and therefore they must seek to structure their life together to reflect their ultimate concern which is Jesus Christ.

g. *Conclusion*. The statement of *Galatians 3:28* reminds us somehow of the proclamation of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” during the French Revolution. Here, probably before Paul, the community of faith proclaims that with the resurrection of Jesus Christ the reality of God's *shalom* has broken in a new and intensive way into history, it has created faith in Christ and a community in which the crucified and risen Christ is confessed as Lord. In this community, where Christ is

believed and therefore God is obeyed as God, there the traditional barriers of racism, nationalism, and sexism are relativised - viewed in relation to the gospel of Christ. The resurrection of Jesus proves itself to be a *history creating event*. The difference between the church and the world is, that the church is to live and practice what is true for all of God's creation.

There are of course other realms in which the resurrection power of Christ and of the Spirit began to modify the individual, family, and communal life of Christians. *Catalogues of virtues and vices* were taken over from the social and cultural environment to guide Christians in their behaviour (e.g. in Gal 5:19-23). But they were related to the story of Jesus and modified by that story. The same is true for the so-called *household codes* in the New Testament and the early church (e.g. Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-6:9; 1 Peter 2:13-3:7; 1 Tim 2:8-15, 3:4, 6:1f.; Tit 2:1-10, 3:1; IgnPol 4:1-5:1; Pol Phil 4:2-6:1). They describe the relationship of parents and children, masters and slaves, husbands and wives, often in terms that are close to the non-Christian ethos of that day. And yet there is a change. Now these household codes are not only grounded in creation, tradition or culture, but they begin also to be grounded in *Jesus Christ* ("you are slaves of the *Lord Christ*." Col 3:24, compare Col 3:14) and as such structures are being modified to create analogies to the gospel of Christ. The man must no longer subordinate the woman, but he must love her (Col 3:19; Eph 5:25) which in fact means that they must be subordinate *to each other*. "*Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ*" (Eph 5:21).

4. Jesus and Women

What was proclaimed as a *universal reality* by the resurrection of Jesus had its roots, of course, in the *life of Jesus himself*.

a. Patriarchy. Jesus was born and the early churches took shape in a *patriarchal world*. The male dominated in temple, home, and society, and he knew how to protect his interests. The woman was the possession of the man. She could not study the Torah and could not fully participate in the cult. A man could divorce his wife, but generally, a wife could not divorce her husband. An adulteress or prostitute could be stoned, while the adulterer or the man who went to the prostitute remained unscathed. And these differences were not merely social or functional, but they were undergirded with philosophical and theological arguments. God could only be male because maleness was likened to heaven and was considered to be spiritual, while femaleness represented the finiteness and instability of the earth. Indeed, some early Christians thought that a female had to become a male before she could be saved.

b. Jesus and women. In that social context it meant a revolutionary shaking of the societal foundations when Jesus, as part of bringing the "*kingdom of God*" near to human society, asserted in word and deed the equal dignity of womanhood. He shared his healing grace equally with men and women and thereby asserted that under God there can be no essential difference. An "unclean" woman he called "a daughter of Abraham" (Luke 13:16), and other cultically "unclean" women, like the one with a flow of blood (Mark 5:25-34), he touched and allowed himself to be touched by them. He had female followers (Luke 8:1-3), and he forgave and thereby restored the human dignity of a prostitute and adulteress who according to a male ideology had no chance in the sight of God, society, or the law (Luke 7:36-50; John 4, 8:1-11). He forbade divorce (Mark 10:1-12 par.; Luke 16:18 par.), not to establish a new law about divorce, but to raise the woman to the same level of human dignity than the man. According to Jewish legal tradition it was very easy for a man to dismiss his wife - even when she burned his dinner or when he took a liking to a prettier woman - while the same was nearly impossible for a woman.

Jesus in his thinking and praxis was, therefore, not determined by the culture and theology of his day, but he wanted to reinstitute God's original intention that the human being as the image of God is made up of male and female (Gen 1:27). Jesus was the pioneer of a "new" humanity which no longer uses "God" to validate cultural and social practices, and to protect male interests, but whose passion it was to inject God's grace into a fallen world; to reform human society and to reinstitute

human dignity which had become lost and distorted through humanity's self-interest and pride. Part of the "new" humanity was the equal dignity of male and female.

c. *The first Resurrection appearance to Mary - a woman!?* A first and superficial reading of the New Testament gives the impression that the first appearance of the risen Christ happened to *Peter*. He heads the apostolic list in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 and this is also reflected in the resurrection narratives of the Gospels (Luke 24:34; John 21:1-7). But then there is *this other tradition of the appearance of the risen Christ to Mary* which is reported in Matthew (Matthew 28:9f.) and John (John 20:1.11-18), and which in the later ending of Mark is described as the "*first*" appearance (Mark 16:9).

Is it possible that the newness of the resurrection of the crucified Christ became manifest in the first appearance of the risen Christ *to a woman*, but, given the patriarchal structures of that day, this newness was too much to take, and was soon pressed into the background as men assumed leadership positions in the early church? This raises the age old question how "old" and "new" can relate to each other.

d. *The "old" wineskins and the "new" wine.* As it was the case with the abolition of slavery, the affirmation of the equality of men and women was a tremendous challenge to the early churches. Their faith was new and vulnerable, they were small and in all areas, in Israel, in Asia Minor and in Rome, they lived in an antagonistic environment. It was a patriarchal world in which the newness of Christ had to take shape. Just as *Onesimus* in theory could have claimed the freedom from slavery, so there were probably *women* who claimed their newly discovered equality. They went to church without head coverings. They led house churches. They spoke, prayed and preached in church meetings. Rather than asking their husbands on the way home what had transpired in church meetings, they interrupted the proceedings in the church and asked their husbands then and there. Some of them probably took the Lord's call seriously to become missionaries and evangelists and they may have had success.

A special problem occurred when a *Christian* woman was married to a *non-Christian* husband, or when a *Christian* slave belonged to a *non-Christian* master. In a patriarchal culture it was the male who decided the religious affiliation for the whole family. The same is true for the master who owned the slave. What should a Christian woman or a Christian slave do in such a situation? Should they assert their newly discovered liberty in Christ and thereby disrupt marriage, family and household, or should they *voluntarily and courageously* "submit" to their husband or master in the hope of winning them for Christ?

Newness and emancipation always cause conflict, difficulties and problems. The new wine could not be tolerated by the old wineskins. Just as *Onesimus* was sent back to his master, so in the churches after Paul's death a new caution arose with respect to the equality of women.

This caution is manifest in the post-Pauline texts which are given central theological status by those who oppose the ministry and leadership of women in the church: *1 Corinthians 14:34f.* which by many commentators is considered to be a later addition to Paul's letter, because it interrupts the literary flow, it stands in tension with the theological context in 1 Corinthians 12-14, it uses similar language than 1 Tim 2:12 and the household codes - Col 3:18, Eph 5:22), and it is contradicted by 1 Corinthians 11:5 where the praying and preaching of a woman in church is not questioned. The other text is *1 Timothy 2:11-15* which according to most scholars was written long after Paul had died. To this we add those texts that clearly infer the *subordination of the female to the male*: *1 Cor 14:35; Eph 5:22.24; Col 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1.5; Rom 7:3.*

Given the *minority status* of the churches at that time, who often had to survive in situations of *persecution*, this emerging caution is understandable. We must also remember that the churches sought to seek the *respect* by their social context, not only for their survival, but also as a presupposition for making the *communication* of the Christian message easier. Since the churches in the first three centuries met in *houses*, they adopted Greco-Roman *household codes* according

to which the man was the head of the household. More conservative members of the house churches probably objected when women, and especially rich women (1 Tim 2:9f.), sought to assume roles of influence and leadership in the communities.

To use this argument 2000 years later, when the human family has recognised the equality of men and women in the Human Rights Instruments, when the Christian church is very well established and is not opposed or interfered by the state, to deny equality to women is another of the tragic ironies of history. It runs counter to the *intention* of the *biblical* text which wants to bring the liberating power of the gospel into particular situations as much as each situation can take it. We saw that when the biblical texts speak about the subordination of women to men and about the restrictions of the ministry of women, then it was an *adaptation to their cultural context*. Our cultural context is totally different. The equality of women and men is culturally accepted. The early churches sought to gain the respect of the surrounding culture and thereby made certain compromises. When we affirm the equality of male and female we don't even have to do that. The society in which we live has recognised already what we as those who are "in Christ" should have recognised long ago.

Those who build their theological position on "women in the church" and "women in ministry" on texts such as *1 Corinthians 14:34f.* and *1 Timothy 2:11-15*, have absolutised a *situational element* of the text. In my introduction I have tried to point out that one of the dangers that accompanied the process when the living voice of the gospel became a written word was that the situational elements received a lasting status. Interpreting a biblical text must accept the challenge of discerning what is situational and what is lasting. That is what I have tried to do with this paper.

5. Conclusion and Application

We have tried to argue that the foundational event of the Christian faith and the Christian church, the resurrection of the crucified Christ, implies the abolition of structures that define and limit people according to their social class (slave and free), their nationality (Jew and Greek), and their natural disposition (male and female). The *new* reality of the resurrection of the crucified Christ touches the structures of the *old* world and thus began to create and shape a new history. This caused difficulties and tensions. *On the one hand*, old but very powerful structures like slavery and patriarchy had to be abolished, and moral code of ethics were modified to show greater harmony with the gospel of Christ. *On the other hand* the old structures proved to be strong. Certain compromises had to be made in for the fragile and vulnerable churches to survive and to carry out their mission for Christ.

But the newness of the resurrection of the crucified One left remnants which remain an ever present reminder of where we come from and where we should be going.

a. Through *faith and baptism* the richness of Christ flows over into the life of the believer and creates a community of equals. The Reformation emphasised this with their assertion of the "*priesthood of all believers*" which has become an important and precious emphasis in Protestant churches.

b. In earliest Christianity many of the *house-churches* - and in early Christianity there were *only* house-churches! - were led by women, who, of course, carried out all the functions of preaching, teaching, praying, and administering the sacraments, that were related to the leading of a house church: *Phoebe* (Rom 16:1), *Nympha* (Col 4:15), *Lydia* (Acts 16:14f.40), *Chloe* (1 Cor 1:11) *Mary, the mother of John Mark* (Acts 12:12), and *Priscilla*, who is often mentioned before Aquila (Rom 16:3.5a; Acts 18:18.26; 2 Tim 4:19).

c. In *Romans 16* where Paul introduces himself to the church in Rome he greets a number of people by name, among them 9 women. Their hard work for the Lord (v.12f.) most probably included proclaiming the gospel. *Phoebe* and *Junia* are given special mention. *Phoebe* is called a "*deacon*" (not a "deaconess"), and *Junia* (not Junias!) is called an "apostle". Although this was

before the time of designated ecclesiastical offices, the designations "deacon" and "apostle" certainly point to significant leadership functions in the church which most likely included preaching and teaching.

d. The nature of God as trinity - a community of equals and yet distinct differences. We started out by asking for the will of God. We conclude by pointing to the nature of God. For Christians, God is the community of Father (creator), Son (redeemer) and Holy Spirit (sanctifier), each distinct, yet equal in the communal interaction of affirmation, recognition and love.

The new reality, inaugurated by the resurrection of the crucified Christ, transfigures a hierarchical reality of power and domination into a community of equality, service and love.

Confession to the *Lordship of Christ* and to the *trinitarian nature of God* imply an end to hierarchical structures of power and domination and usher in a *community of equals*.

Authoritarian attitudes and structures are to be replaced by an authoritative authority that is grounded in commitment and obedience to Christ, rejects coercion and tries to seek the voluntary agreement of the other. This new vision is illustrated in a saying of Jesus from the gospels:

10:42 And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles *lord it over them*, and their great men *exercise authority over them*. 10:43 But *it shall not be so among you*; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 10:44 and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. 10:45 For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

e. On the basis of the above I can see no reason why God cannot call a woman to ministry. Indeed the opposite would be true. And if God calls women to ministry, then, whatever the church does to recognise such a call in men (for instance, ordination), should be equally applied to women.

TL: Canberra, 06/15/97 .