

NACC - July 9, 1980
Seattle, Washington
Workshop

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WOMEN IN TODAY'S CHURCH

Our topic, Women in Today's Church, was chosen for us by the NACC Executive committee. The reason for the choice was stated: This topic "has at its heart a major and critical concern which will be shared by those who choose to attend" for they are "already convicted of the reason for and the 'why' of your topic." As assignee of this topic "you are not being asked to preach or exhort," but to be a "resource person" so that "creative ideas are generated and demonstrated." This I shall try to do using resources written primarily from 1970-1980.

A concern for women in today's church is evidenced by both Protestant and Roman Catholic bodies. Books, popular magazine articles and even entire issues of scholarly journals have been written on the subject. Changes in church polity, practice are apparent.

1972 The Kirk of Scotland inducted its first woman parish minister.

1973 Women made their legal debut as delegates to the General Synod of the Reformed Church of America.

The United Church of Christ selected a woman moderator.

1978 The percentage of women seminarians rose to 40%.

NCC reported 10,470 women now have full ministerial credentials. Some 80 or more Protestant bodies around the world ordain women. Presbyterians report 315 ordained clergy women.

1979 108 women are Lutheran clergy.

1980 Directors of the American Friends Service Committee have named the first woman as its chief executive officer in the 63 year history of the Quaker service organization.

Sister Theresa Kane, the nun who last fall welcomed Pope John Paul II to Washington Shrine of the Immaculate Conception with an appeal for admission of women to full ministerial rights, has received the 1980 U.S. Catholic Award for furthering the cause of women in the church.

This concern for women is a concern of women, evidenced by "a growing number of women who are concerned about the ministry of the church and ways in which it can more fully represent a partnership of men and women in service,"¹ and by women strongly opposed to change for themselves or other women so that one writes, "the enemy of most women is other women."² Perhaps this is the reason for the executive committee's "critical concern."

Women at the NACC represent unity through diversity.

In the convention hall sits a woman convinced that she may teach only in the nursery department. Seated in her row may be a person who teaches a mixed adult class, a Religious Education Director, a Bible College instructor, a professor in a Seminary. ALL women.

In the convention hall sits a woman certain that woman's place is in the home. Seated in her row may be a C.P.A., an advocate of E.R.A., a medical doctor, public or private school teacher, university professor, politician. ALL women.

In the convention hall sits a woman horrified at a woman "speaking in public." Seated in her row may be an ordained person, a preacher, a song leader, a Bible School superintendent, a missionary. ALL women.

In the convention hall sits a woman convinced that women should not hold an executive position in the church. Seated in her row is a deacon, elder, trustee..., all board members. ALL women.

We repeat: Women at the NACC represent unity through diversity.

This is as it should be and must be if we desire unity. The coming together of like just produces more of the same; the harmonizing of diversity produces unity. 'Twas true in Creation. God created man (mankind) in His image--male and female created He them (diversity) -- and the two became one (unity) -- and both were given dominion over the earth. Genesis 1:26-31.

God looked at mankind, saw unity through diversity, and it was very good. In this partnership, our humanity is fulfilled and realized.³

And, lest women get tangled up in the phrase, "But woman is just the helper of man," remember that same word is used 16 times in the Old Testament, never as sub-ordinate, always super-ordinate. "He (God) is my helper" (Ps. 54:4). We sing, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." This is an attribute of God.

Then, both male and female sinned, breaking their relationship with God and each other. But, God, desiring restoration, sent His Son to restore mankind to oneness with Him and itself. John 17:20-23.

Jesus, more than anyone else who walked the earth, understood diversity and unity. "I and the Father are one." John 10:30. He came to speak the words of God and do His works that mankind could become a new creation, restored to God and each other. He would break down the middle wall of partition separating Jew and Gentile, male and female, bond and free.

View Him in His relationship with women as He begins breaking down the dividing wall. Jesus:

Declared his messiahship to a woman. John 4:26

Made a woman the first witness of the resurrection. John 20:17

Jesus appeared first not to Peter, the "vicar" of his church, nor even to John, the "beloved." Women were the first to receive the central fact of the gospel and the first to be instructed to tell it abroad.⁴

Had close women friends and disciples who followed him on his preaching and teaching trips. (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and many others, Luke 8:1-3)

Praised the faith of a poor widow and outcast woman. Luke 21:1-4, 7:36-50.

Performed miracles for women. Matthew 8:14ff; John 2:1-11

Changed his mind when a woman reasoned with him. Mark 7:24-30

Disregarded the taboo in Jewish law declaring a woman with a flow of blood unclean. Matthew 9:20-22

Violated the law forbidding the Jewish male to speak alone with a woman not his wife. (Even the disciples were astonished, John 4:27)

Overthrew the traditional concept of woman's place as upheld by Martha. Luke 10:38-42

Stated that the biological role of mother does not in itself give a woman status and honor. Luke 11:27-28

Provided women with greater respect and security in marriage. Matthew 19:3-9

Women had never known a man like this Man -- there never has been another -- who never nagged at them, never flattered them or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them either as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything "funny" about woman's nature.⁴

When Jesus ascended He left His body, the church, to demonstrate the restored oneness -- that the world might believe.

Central in the New Testament is the conviction that the kingdom of God has broken into history and the old social order is transformed; now, by virtue of baptism in Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no 'male and female'" (Galatians 3:28, with reference to Genesis 1:27)... Women were admitted to baptism and membership in the Church, without qualification, from the outset (unlike the Gentiles). Women were members of the earliest community which formed the nucleus of the Church (Acts 1:14-15) and were among those who received the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Ministry, which derives from the gifts of the Spirit communicated by baptism, was open to women.⁵

The church was built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (some of whom were women), Ephesians 2:20.⁶

There is evidence that many of the functions which later were associated with the priestly ministry were in fact exercised by women, and no evidence that women were excluded from any of them. There were women instrumental in the founding of churches (Acts 18:2, 18-19 with I Cor. 16:19 and Romans 16:3-5); women in leadership roles (Romans 16:1-2, 6, 12; Phil. 4:2-3); women with functions in public worship (I Cor. 11:5); women engaged in teaching converts (Acts 18:26). Woman prophets are attested (I Cor. 11:5; Acts 21:9). In Paul's greetings at the conclusion of Romans, a woman minister (**ἡ διακονῶσα**) of the church at Cenchreae is named (Phoebe: Romans 16:1; cf. I Timothy 3:8, 11), and very likely a

woman apostle (Junia; Romans 16:7). Thus, while male leaders may have been more prominent and numerous in the early church, and while women's activities may have been somewhat limited by what was culturally permissible, many roles which ultimately were associated with the priestly ministry were evidently never restricted to men.

Everyone in the Church is subject to Christ and to one another out of reverence for Christ who is the head of the Church.

Ephesians 5:21-24: Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.

Lest we women concentrate on "the husband is head of the wife" and fail to notice that in the church everyone is subject to one another, let us pause to consider the phrases: "Be subject to one another" and "Christ is the head of the Church."

When we are baptized, behold, all becomes new. The baptized have a new relationship to God and each other. Born into the Family, they have the same Father, the same Elder Brother and each is related to the other by birth. Each is asked to do for the other as the Elder Brother, the head, does for them. They are to have this mind among themselves, which they have in Christ Jesus, who, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself. (No coercion here.)

The Head is the servant, the one who humbles himself, the one who still serves and according to Luke 12:37 when He comes again he will gird himself as a servant and continue to serve us.

Following the example of this Brother, we in the family serve each other. The women serve the men, youth, children; the men serve the women, youth, children; etc. Is it so difficult to imagine an elder a servant of women when, Christ, the Head, is servant of his church and it of him, and the husband, the head, is servant of his wife, and she of him? Then, there is no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another. Galatians 5:26.

Could it be that a study of Women in Today's Church might result in a healing of the whole church?

Thinking women do not desire power and authority to rule over men, We have no right to insist that men be subject to us for, if we do, the words of our Lord ring loud and clear:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you: but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Matthew 20:25-28.

By "using our heads" we readily see this applies to both male and female. Is it possible that we wrestle with a problem which is a male problem even more than female?

Have you ever wondered why women who have kept church doors open are expected to step down when men enter? Why women missionaries can perform acts of ministry overseas forbidden to women in some churches? Why women have been accused of being so in the fore as to drive men away from the church, resulting in more women than men in churches?

Could it be that men drive men away from the church? Picture the medical male doctor, the male lawyer, the male business executive told that he is to be "ruled" by a male who just managed to get through High School, would be incapable of being foreman in his factory, is twenty years his junior in age! This one is his spiritual guide? Could it be that a study needs to be made of such words as "rule?" Is it a rule of law, example, or neither? Is the aim of church polity domination, harmony, or neither? Is shepherding leading or driving, or neither?

Perhaps it is time for all of us in the church to become servants of each other, rather than officials exercising authority over others. Maybe we all need to trade in power for subjection. Ephesians 5:21.

Our diversity causes us to use our heads and search our hearts. Can we "count others better than ourselves," "looking to the interests of others?"

Diversity is a fact. Look around the assembly tonight. Divergent gifts are represented. Some have the gift of speaking; others quake at the thought of standing before people. Some are able to teach; others are afraid to even ask a question. Some sing like birds; others croak like frogs. Some can organize; others continually disorganize. Some have a business head; others cannot balance a check book. Some are educated; others hate books. Some work with their hands; others are all thumbs. Some are leaders; others are followers. Some join organizations; others stay home.

What we are saying is: THIS IS GOOD. We have different gifts. When we love, respect and appreciate each other in diversity we have the unity God saw as very good.

Conclusion:

Our brotherhood faces a time not unlike Civil War days. Then the issue was slavery. Sermons were preached on both sides. Each side searched the scripture, certain it had found the truth. Alexander Campbell was jailed because he would not agree that slavery was forbidden in scripture. Through it all we kept our heads and searched our hearts and the brotherhood did not split over that issue. Others did. To this day "North" or "South" in front of a denominational name reminds us of the Civil War.

Today we face the issue of women in the church. It comes at a difficult time with raucous female voices raised in pugnacious support of what is called the Feminist Movement. This, in itself, has closed ears and minds.

Yet we dare not be so emotionally "set" that dialogue is blocked before it actually begins. Surely, an examination of truth does not threaten us!

Let us listen to the reasoning of those who say, silent is silent, forbid to teach is forbid to teach, submission is submission, head is head. Let us hear as "from hundreds of pulpits women are still being instructed to 'get their own way' through apparent submission and coy 'feminine wiles'"⁸ Let us recognize that Women's Groups in churches study books telling them how to seduce a husband "under the dining-room table."⁹ Let us look at diagrams titled God's Order for the Family with the husband under the authority of Christ, the wife under the authority of the husband.¹⁰ Let us read books which list scripture regulating rather than eliminating hierarchical roles.¹¹

Then, let us listen to those who through their study of scripture believe that for those who are baptized the old grounds for discrimination and oppression which have "found their justification in the O.T. law and in the culture of Paul's time, are no longer valid, and since these divisions are broken through and overcome in baptism, discrimination based on them is ruled out now, not just in some future age of freedom." II Cor. 5:17.¹²

NOW is the time to "keep our heads." We did it before. Can we do it again?

I close with a paragraph I copied from a personal letter written by Dean E. Walker to his brother, Barclay:

Fellowship in the ministry includes "counting others better than self." There is wisdom and strength in this paradox. Sometimes we gain much from the patience which allows, without recrimination, colleagues to prevail for the moment in spite of our sense that they may be mistaken in the current issue.

NOTES

¹Letty M. Russell, "Women and Ministry," Sexist, Religion and Women in the Church, Alice L. Hageman, ed. (New York: Associated Press, 1974), p. 51.

²Mary G. Durkin, The Suburban Woman (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 87.

³Gottfried Oosterwal, "Comments on: Women and Men: Colleagues in Mission," Gospel in Context, Vol. 2, No. 2 (April, 1979), p. 22.

⁴Dorothy Sayers, "Are Women Human?" Eternity, Vol. 25 (Feb., 1974), p. 68.

⁵Report of the Catholic Biblical Association, "Women and Priestly Ministry: The New Testament Evidence," The Council on the Study of Religion Bulletin, Vol. 11 (April, 1980), p. 45.

⁶Paul Jewett, "Why I Favor the Ordination of Women," Christianity Today, Vol. 19 (1975), p. 19.

⁷Report of the Catholic Biblical Association, p.45.

⁸Eva Figes, "Patriarcal Attitudes," Journal of Psychology and Theology, Vol. 2 (Fall, 1974), p. 302.

⁹Marable Morgan, The Total Woman (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1973), p. 120.

¹⁰Larry Christenson, The Christian Family (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc.), pp. 17-18.

¹¹A. Duane Litfin, "Evangelical Feminism: Why Traditionalists Reject It," Bibliotheca Series, Vol. 136, pp. 258-71.

¹²Joanne Dewey, "Image of Women," The Liberating Word, Letty M. Russell, ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 76.

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Additional resources to be given during question-answer period.

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