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Women in the Church: a Biblical Survey

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Prolegomena

The phenomenon of cultural relativity, with the adaptations it imposes, is repeatedly illustrated within the bible itself. We see the Israelite nomads moving from the wilderness into the settled agricultural life of Canaan; we see a peasant economy giving place under the monarchy to an urbanised mercantile economy, with the attendant abuses against which the great prophets of Israel inveighed; we see the post-exilic adjustment to life in a unit of a great, well- organised empire—first Persian, then Hellenistic, then Roman. Even within the limited confines of the new testament we see the gospel transplanted from its Jewish and Palestinian matrix into the Gentile environment of the Mediterranean world. In this last respect we could pay special attention to the way in which John, while preserving the authentic gospel of Christ, brings out its abiding and universal validity in a new idiom for an audience very different from that to which it was first proclaimed.

One major concern of the scribes and Pharisees of our Lord's day was to apply to their contemporaries a code of laws originally given in quite another way of life. The sabbath law, for example, was formulated in relation to a simple pastoral or agrarian economy, in which 'work' was a clearly understood term. But what kinds of activity came within the prohibition of 'work' in the more complex situation at the dawn of the Christian era? The scribes saw that detailed definition was necessary if people were to have clear guidance in this matter: in one of their schools thirty-nine categories of 'work' were specified, all of which were banned on the sabbath.

That was one way to tackle the problem of cultural relativity; the way of Jesus was different. He preferred to go back to first principles: any kind of action which promoted the original purpose of the commandment fulfilled it; any kind of action which hindered that original purpose violated it. But it was for people to decide for themselves which actions promoted the original purpose and which actions hindered it: he would not lay down precise regulations.

The gospels exhibit the contrast between the scribal way and the way of Jesus in the handling of the old testament. Subsequent church history, down to our own generation, exhibits the same contrast in the handling of the new testament and the varying attempts to apply its principles to changing situations. Canon law, whether it is explicitly so called or not, exemplifies the scribal way — the tradition of the elders.

Cultural relativity is certainly to be reckoned with when the permanent message of the new testament receives our practical attention today. The local and temporary situation in which that message was first delivered must be appreciated if we are to

discern what its permanent essence really is and learn to re-apply it in the local and temporary circumstances or our own culture.

We take this for granted in the case of missionaries taking the gospel to lands of different traditions from their own. Even with our instant and our worldwide intercommunication, culture shock remains a reality—a two-way reality. Let us similarly take it for granted that a sympathetic awareness of the cultures in which the gospels and epistles first appeared will help us to understand those documents in their own setting and also to profit by them in our own setting.

I. In creation

The basic teaching of the creation narratives is that when God created mankind (Adam) in his own image, he created them male and female (Gen. 1:27).

In the narrative of Gen. 1 no question of priority, let alone of superiority, arises. In the narrative of Gen.2 the female is formed after the male, to be 'a help answering to him'—not, as a later interpreter put it, 'he for God only, she for God in him'. The priority of the male in this creation narrative does not bespeak his superiority: any suggestion to this effect might be answered by the counter-argument that the last-made crowns the work—but either argument is beside the point.

II. In the fall

It is in the fall narrative, not in the creation narratives, that superiority of the one sex over the other is first mentioned. And here it is not an inherent superiority, but one that is exercised by force. The Creator's words to Eve, 'your desire shall be for your husband, and he will rule over you' (Gen.3: 16), mean that, in our sinful human condition, the man exploits the woman's natural proclivity towards him to dominate and subjugate her. Subjugation of woman, in fact, is a symptom of man's fallen nature.

If the work of Christ involves the breaking of the entail of the fall, the implication of his work for the liberation of women is plain.

III. In the new creation

(a) The attitude and teaching of Jesus

Jesus was born into a male-dominated culture. Some of its basic presuppositions he quietly and indirectly undermined. His treatment of the divorce question, for example, not only illustrates his constant appeal to first principles; its chief practical effect was the redressing of a balance which was heavily weighted against women. His male disciples immediately realised this, as is shown by their response. 'If a man cannot divorce his wife under any circumstances', they meant, 'it is better not to marry' (Matt.19:10).

Unwarranted inferences have sometimes been drawn from the fact that all twelve of the original apostles were men. But in fact our Lord's male disciples cut a sorry figure

alongside his female disciples, especially in his last hours; and it was to women that he first entrusted the privilege of carrying the news of his resurrection.

He treated women in a completely natural and unselfconscious way as real persons. He imparted his teaching to the eager ears and heart of Mary of Bethany, while to the Samaritan woman (of all people) he revealed the nature of true worship. His disciples who found him thus engaged at the well surprised to find him talking to a woman: for a religious teacher to do this was at best a waste of time and at worst a spiritual danger.

(b) The attitude and teaching of Paul

No distinction in service or status is implied in Paul's many references to his fellow-workers, whether male or female. Among the latter we recall Phoebe, deacon (not deaconess!) of the church at Cenchreae (Rom. 16: if.), who by her safe delivery of the Epistle to the Romans performed an inestimable service to the church universal, and Euodia and Syntyche of Philippi, who received Paul's commendation as women who 'laboured side by side' with him in the gospel together with Clement and others (Phil.4:3). Paul uses the designation 'apostles' more comprehensively than Luke does, and he may even include at least one woman among them, if the companion of

Andronicus in Rom. 16:7 is Junia, a woman (as Chrysostom understood), and not Junias, a man.

From the standpoint of Paul's upbringing he voices a revolutionary sentiment when he declares that 'in Christ Jesus . . . there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave or free, there is neither male nor female' (Gal.3:28). Already in his time the Jewish morning prayer probably included the passage where the pious man thanks God that he was made a Jew and not a Gentile, a free man and not a slave, a man and not a woman. All three of these privileges are hereby wiped out: real as they were in the Judaism of Paul's day, they are abolished in Christ. In Judaism it was the males only who received in their bodies the visible seal of the covenant with Abraham; it is a corollary of Paul's circumcision-free gospel that any such religious privilege enjoyed by males over females is abolished. To the present day among orthodox Jews the quorum for a synagogue congregation is ten free men; unless ten such males are present the service cannot begin. (We may, incidentally, be happy that for christian meetings we have the less stringent quorum of 'two or three', with nothing said as to whether they are men or women.) Paul, on the other hand, expects Christian women to play a responsible part in church meetings, and if, out of concern for public order, he asks then to veil their heads when they pray or prophesy, the veil is the sign of their authority to exercise their christian liberty in this way, not the sign of someone else's authority over them.

Nothing that Paul says elsewhere on women's contribution to church services can be understood in a sense which conflicts with these statements of principle. This applies to the limitations apparently placed on their public liberty in 1 Cor. 14:34 ('the women should keep silence in the churches') and 1 Tim.2: 11 ('let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness'). Critical questions have indeed been raised about the text of 1 Cor.

14:34f.(which the 'western' recension places after verse 40) or the direct authorship of the pastoral epistles. The evidence is not sufficient to extrude 1 Cor. 14:34f. from the authentic text; the prohibition expressed in these verses refers to the asking of questions which imply a judgement on prophetic utterances (so, at least, their context suggests). As for the pastoral epistles, we have received them as canonical scripture, and that goes for 1 Tim.2:9-1 5. I am disposed to agree with Chrysostom, who read the Greek new testament in his native language, that in 1 Tim.2:9f. we have a direction (developing the teaching of 1 Cor. 11:2-16) that woman's dress and demeanour should be seemly when they engage in public prayer. In verses 11 and 12 of this chapter, however, women are quite explicitly not given permission to teach or rule. The relevance of the two arguments—(a) that Adam was formed before Eve and (b) that Eve was genuinely deceived whereas Adam knew what he was doing when he broke the divine commandment—is not immediately obvious; I am not too happy with the suggestion that the former is an early instance of the principle of primogeniture, which the special rights of the firstborn are recognised.

Exegesis seeks to determine the meaning of the text in its primary setting. But when exegesis has done its work, our application of the text should avoid treating the new testament as a book of rules. In applying the new testament text to our own situation, we need not treat it as the scribes of our Lord's day treated the old testament. We should not turn what were meant as guiding lines for worshippers in one situation into laws binding for all time. (It is commonly recognised that the regulations regarding widows, later in 1 Tim., need not be carried out literally today, although their essential principle should continue to be observed.) It is an ironical paradox when Paul, who was so concerned to free his converts from bondage of law, is treated as a law-giver for later generations. The freedom of the Spirit, which can be safeguarded by one set of guiding lines in a particular situation, may call for a different procedure in a new situation.

It is very naturally asked what criteria can be safely used to distinguish between those elements in the apostolic letters which are of local and temporary application and those which are of universal and permanent validity. The question is too big for a detailed discussion here. Where the writings of Paul are concerned, however, a reliable rule of thumb is suggested by his passionate emphasis on freedom—true freedom by contrast with spiritual bondage on the one hand and moral licence on the other. Here it is: whatever in Paul's teaching promotes true freedom is of universal and permanent validity; whatever seems to impose restrictions on true freedon has regard to local and temporary conditions. (For example, to go to another area, restrictions on a christian's freedom in the matter of food are conditioned by the company in which he or she is at the time; and even those restrictions are manifestations of the overriding principle of always considering the well-being of others.)

An appeal to first principles in our application of the new testament might demand the recognition that when the Spirit, in his sovereign good pleasure, bestows varying gifts on individual believers, these gifts are intended to be exercised for the well-being of the whole church. If he manifestly withheld the gifts of teaching or leadership from christian

women, then we should accept that as evidence of his will (1 Cor. 12:11). But experience shows that he bestows these and other gifts, with 'undistinguishing regard', on men and women alike—not on all women, of course, nor yet on all men. That being so, it is unsatisfactory to rest with a halfway house in this issue of women's ministry, where they are allowed to pray and prophesy, but not to teach or lead.

Let me add that an appeal to first principles in our application of the new testament demands nothing should be done to endanger the unity of a local church. Let those who understand the scriptures along the lines indicated in this paper have liberty to expound them thus, but let them not force the pace or try to impose their understanding of the scriptures until that understanding finds general acceptance with the church—and when it does, there will be no need to impose it.

IV. The priesthood of women

The recent debates about the admission of women to the priesthood in the Church of England and similar communities arise largely from a conception of christian priesthood which we do not share. In these debates it has been freely conceded by many that women may perform in church practically all the ministries performed by a nonconformist pastor. The one thing she may not do is to celebrate the eucharist.

The concept of priesthood implied in such a position is of a restricted order to which certain selected men are solemnly ordained. The exclusion of women from this order is defended by a variety of arguments, some of which are more unconvincing than others. Without the presence and action of such an ordained priest, it is held, a communion service is irregular, if not invalid.

Well, we may say, this is an issue which does not affect us: we believe in the priesthood of all believers; we do not recognise a restricted order of priests. Would it be all right, then, at one of our communion services for a woman to give thanks for the bread and break it, before it is distributed to the congregation? I suspect that some of our brethren would—reluctantly, it may be—concede anything to a woman rather than this. (I apologise if I am doing them an injustice; this is the impression I sometimes get.) But why? The thanksgiving and the preliminary breaking of the bread at the table are priestly acts only in so far as the person who performs them does so as representative of the other communicants who are there exercising their common priesthood, not as representative of Christ, who is really present at his table and needs no one to represent him. Why should not a christian woman who shares our common priesthood perform such a representative act on behalf of her fellow-worshippers as well as a christian man? This is not a rhetorical question; I should like to be given a scriptural answer.

At some of our women's conferences, I am told, while every other part of the programme is run very competently by women, it is thought desirable for one or two token men to be imported to conduct the communion service. This is not the fault of the conveners; they know very well, however, that some of their sisters would be discouraged from attending if their spiritual directors thought that the communion service

would be conducted by women. J. N. Darby was no feminist, but he had a strong vein of common sense. He thought it a little out of place for a woman even to start a hymn, 'but I do not object', he added, 'if she does it modestly'. But when he was asked if christian women might take the Lord's supper together in the absence of men, he said, 'If three women were on a desert island, I do not see why they should not break bread together, if they did it privately.' Herein he showed his common sense. Of course, they could scarcely do it otherwise than privately, if they were alone on a desert island; and there are other desert islands than those which are entirely surrounded by water.

V. Brethren traditions and practices

The mention of J. N. Darby may suggest that the Brethren movement—unlike (say) the Society of Friends—has tended to be male- dominated from its inception. I do not forget that elect lady, Theodosia, Viscountess Powerscourt, but even she 'knew her place.'

Two factors have perpetuated such an attitude: one, the continuing high-church tradition in our movement; the other, the scribalism (not to say legalism) of our application of scripture.

There have indeed been outstanding exceptions. the Brethren assembly on the Hohenstaufenstrasse, Berlin, was founded by Toni von Blücher (a female desendant of Wellington's comrade-in-arms at Waterloo) and some like-minded women. When in due course a man joined their fellowship, he was (unlike themselves) so utterly ungifted that his presence made no difference to their procedure. And I know of one Brethren meeting in the north-east of Scotland—at Rhynie, Aberdeenshire—which in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century obstinately persisted in allowing liberty of ministry to women as well as men. In my boyhood I met a very old lady, Mrs Lundin-Brown, who used to spend the summer in our part of the world. Her christian activity went back well before the revival of 1859, and she enjoyed the fellowship of the Brethren despite her assiduity in the public preaching of the gospel. By the time I knew her she was nearing her century and could no longer continue her preaching, but would not be restrained from taking part audibly in prayer-meetings in the most traditionalist Brethren assemblies in the north of Scotland. An old lady of indomitable will can get away with anything!

Such an exercise of liberty was untypical for that age in most denominations. But nineteenth-century attitudes tend to persist in quarters where they are not clearly distinguished from first-century principles.

Conclusion

What was said at the beginning of this paper about relativity in earlier days applies to our own times also. We too are culturally conditioned; only we do not notice it. The women's liberation movement has conditioned not only our practices but our very vocabulary. But, in such an important matter as we are now considering, it would be a pity if we were influenced by contemporary world-movements in thought and practice rather than by the guidance of the Spirit, as he speaks his liberating word to men and women today through

the ministry of our Lord and his servant Paul. That ministry, that liberating word, is enshrined for us in the pages of scripture: to use scripture aright is to hear what the Spirit is saying through it to the churches of the twentieth century as well as what he said to those of the first.