

The Ordination of Women and the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity

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Do we realise what we would be letting ourselves in for, if we ordained women? In his book *What will happen to God?* W. Oddie makes the provocative claim (26):

'Women's ordination... is thought of by many of those most committed to achieving it as a means of installing immovably, in the permanent structures of the church itself, a permanent shift in the Christian tradition : to ordain women as priests will be to change at its foundations our idea of God. And this is no intemperate and unfounded accusation but an ambition coolly announced by the most substantial feminist writers. It may be that this ambition should be achieved; but it is right that Christian people should at least know what many of those who are seeking to bring about the change really intend'.

He holds that the main change would be to the teaching on the fatherhood of God. This would, of course, result in the radical reconstruction of many other areas of doctrine.

As far as I am concerned, the assertion of St Paul in 1 Cor 14:37 that Christ has commanded that women should not be speakers in the liturgical assembly of the congregation settles the matter for me. My conscience is bound by that word whether I understand the reason for it or not. But at the same time, I will try to figure out the reason for that prohibition no matter how tentative my conclusions may be. This paper then is my attempt to do so in the light of Oddie's claim, because I agree with him in his assertion that Christ's prohibition in 1 Cor 14:33^b-38 as speakers in the church has something to do with the doctrine of the Trinity and our participation in the life of the Triune God through the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacrament.

1. The Apostolic Ministry and the Mission of the Triune God.

The three foundational texts for our teaching on the institution of the public ministry by our Lord are either trinitarian or binitarian in content and structure. First, in John 20:21-23 Jesus 'commissioned' the eleven disciples, as the Father had 'commissioned' him (cf. John 13:20; 17:18), and gave them the Holy Spirit, so that they could pronounce the pardon and judgment of his heavenly Father to human beings. When they forgave or retained sin, they stood in the shoes of the Father and acted by the power of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, in Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus who had received all authority in heaven and on earth from his Father, and who promised to remain with the eleven apostles after his ascension, commissioned them to make disciples of all nations, by baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them all that they had received through him from his heavenly Father. Thirdly, in Luke 10:16 Jesus gave the following promise and warning to the seventy two preachers who are regarded in our confessions as the prototypes for the public ministry of the word:

'Whoever hears you hears me,
and whoever rejects you rejects me,
and whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me'.

He thereby 'commissioned' them as his representatives (Luke 10:1,3), as he had been 'commissioned' by his heavenly Father (10:16).

If we take these three foundational texts together, we must conclude that the apostles and those who received the Office of the Keys from them were involved in the mission of the Triune God to all people here on earth. They exercised the keys by teaching divine doctrine and correcting false doctrine, by proclaiming divine salvation and divine judgment, by absolving and retaining sin, by baptising and withholding baptism, by admitting people to the Lord's table and excluding people from it. As they did this, they worked together with the Son who did the work of his heavenly Father by the power of the Holy Spirit.

2. The Pastor as the Representative of the Son and the Father

The teaching of Jesus in Luke 10:16 shows that, when pastors preach God's word, they do not just speak for Christ but actually represent him. So those who hear their words do not merely hear Christ's words but hear Christ speaking to them. This means that Christ identifies himself so closely with preachers in their preaching that those who received them received him in and through them (Matt 10:40; John 13:20; cf Gal 4:14; Did 11:2, 4). On the other hand, those who rejected the preachers did not just reject their message and Christ's message; they rejected Christ himself. The preachers of the gospel do not then function on behalf of an inactive Christ, like a person with the power of attorney for a disabled relative, nor do they represent their absent Lord, like the deputy of our Prime Minister when he is absent from office. Rather they represent the risen Lord Jesus who is actually present with his people in the liturgical assembly. So when pastors preach and administer the sacraments, we do not just hear Christ speaking; we 'see' him at work.

In his Apology to the Augsburg Confession VII & VIII, 28, 47–48), Melanchthon concludes from Luke 10:16 that those who hold the office of the ministry 'represent the person of Christ'. Like St Paul who in 2 Corinthians 2:10 forgives the sinners in Corinth 'in the person of Christ', they act 'in the person of Christ'. In their office they quite properly impersonate him. Thus, when they present the word and the sacraments to the saints, they offer them 'as Christ' (Latin: 'Christi vice') and 'in his place' (Latin: Christi loco), for Christ's word and his holy body and blood cannot be divorced from him as a person or received apart from him.

Pastors, however, do not merely represent the risen Lord Jesus; Jesus himself maintains in Luke 10:16 that they represent God the Father even as they represent him. They bring the kingdom of God and its peace with them personally to the people who receive them and accept their proclamation (Luke 10:5–9). Those who reject the preachers of the gospel do not just reject Christ; they reject the Father who sent him. Hence God's judgment quite properly falls on those people for their rejection of Christ's heralds. On the other hand, the people who receive those whom Christ sends receive the Father who sent him (Matt 10:40; John 13:20).

This understanding of the pastor as the representative of God the Father was elaborated by Ignatius of Antioch towards the end of the first century. He claimed that the bishop who led a congregation in its worship was 'a type of the Father' (Trall 3:1); he presided 'in the place of God' the Father (Ign Magn 3:1). Melanchthon also alludes to this teaching in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession (XIII, 12). In his discussion on whether ordination is a sacrament or not, he asserts that God is present in the ministry. This means that when a pastor publicly exercises the office of the keys, he represents God the Father. He speaks the Father's word of law or grace, accusation or absolution, disapproval or approval, judgment or blessing. Luther sums up all this rather well in a sermon on John 14:10 where he says:

'Furthermore, when Christ commands His apostles to proclaim His Word and to carry on His work, we hear and see Him Himself, and thus also God the Father; for they publish and proclaim no other Word than that which they heard from His lips, and they point solely to Him. Thus the process goes on; the Word is handed down to us through the agency of true bishops, pastors, and preachers, who received it from the apostles. . . Thus the apostles and pastors are nothing but channels through which Christ leads and transmits His Gospel from the Father to us. Therefore wherever you hear the Gospel properly taught or see a person baptised, wherever you see someone administer or receive the Sacrament, or wherever you witness someone absolving another, there you may say without hesitation: 'Today I beheld God's Word and work. Yes, I saw and heard God Himself preaching and baptizing'. To be sure, the tongue, the voice, the hands, etc, are those of a human being, but the Word and the ministry are really those of the Divine Majesty Himself. Hence it must be viewed and believed as though God's own voice were resounding from heaven and as though we were seeing Him administering Baptism or the Sacrament with His own hands (LW 24, 66, 67).

3. Christ's choice of Men as Apostles and Pastors

The incarnation of God's Son as a male person was not just a tactical concession to avoid offense in the patriarchal societies of the ancient world, but was, I maintain, an integral part of his mission to reveal God the Father to humankind in the Old and New Testaments (see John 1:18; 17:6). His incarnation as a male person led in turn to his choice of men as apostles and teachers of the word.

The case for this presupposes the scriptural teaching on the relationship between the creation of the first Adam and the redemption of humanity by the second Adam, as well as the scriptural teaching on the typological relationship between them (see Rom 5:14). To put it quite simply, Adam, the first human father and husband, is a type of God the Father and of Jesus the heavenly bridegroom as well as a type of the pastor who represents both of them.

When God created human beings as 'male and female' (Gen 1:27), he did not just design men merely for the business of sexual procreation but also to personify his asexual fatherhood in the order of creation. God's fatherhood is therefore not the result of the projection, by analogy, of human fatherhood on to the deity, so that God is held to be something like our human fathers. Rather, as St Paul asserts in Ephesians 3:15, all human fatherhood is derived from God's fatherhood. Human fathers are meant to be like God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This means that the role of human fathers is not just determined by their masculinity but is shaped by God the Father's activity in naming and providing for, assessing and approving, accepting and blessing his human children.

Neither Adam nor any human father after him has ever in reality ever remotely embodied and mirrored the fatherhood of God. In fact, we fathers seem to reflect his fatherhood to our children more by our failure than by success. As a result of our inadequacy they are often filled with a deep longing and spiritual need for some father figure to compensate for what we have failed to be to them and give to them.

Jesus became a male person to fill that vacuum and to fulfil that spiritual paternal role. He revealed the fatherhood of God the Father by perfectly embodying the divinely intended spiritual character of human fatherhood and by fully discharging the spiritual vocation of human fathers. He therefore claims: 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). Jesus in turn appoints mature men to be pastors and teachers in the family of God. They are, as Luther teaches us in the Large Catechism (I, 158–163), to be spiritual fathers to their charges. They are to disclose God's fatherhood by their own management of the church as God's household (see 1 Tim 3:5). Like the apostles, they not only beget 'children' through the gospel but also model and teach how to live as children of God in Christ Jesus (1 Cor 4:14–17; 2 Cor 6:13; 1 Thess 2:11, 12; 3 John 4).

In his teaching on marriage in Ephesians 5:22–33, Paul maintains that, when God created Adam as the husband of Eve, he created him and every human husband as a type of Christ, the heavenly bridegroom. The role of a man as a husband was therefore spiritual as well as physical. As the heads of their wives, husbands, by their love, were meant to model and mirror the demonstrative, self-sacrificial love of Christ, the heavenly bridegroom, for his bride, the church. Now it is, of course, true that we who are husbands reflect Christ more by our failure than by our success, for who of us could ever claim that we have loved our wives 'as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' (Eph 5:25).

God's Son therefore became incarnate as a male person to fulfil the role which had originally been given to Adam. As the Messiah he not only revealed the typological character of human husbandhood but also redeemed both men and women by his self-sacrificial love. He husbands the church and presents the church to his heavenly Father as his lovely holy bride (Eph 5:27; Col 1:22; Rev 19:7; 21:2). Christ's maleness does not therefore disclose the maleness of God the Father, who is of course a-sexual, but qualifies him to fulfil his role as the loving redemptive head of the church.

Jesus in turn calls men who are either celibate, or who have proved to be faithful husbands of one wife (see 1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6), to be pastors. As pastors they are appointed to represent Christ. They are to betroth people spiritually to Christ in holy baptism (2 Cor 11:2); they are to love, cherish and nourish the church. C.S. Lewis therefore claims (239):

'it is an old saying in the army that you salute the uniform not the wearer. Only one wearing the masculine uniform can (provisionally, and till the Parousia) represent the Lord to the Church: for we are all, corporately and individually, feminine to Him. We men may often make very bad priests. That is because we are insufficiently masculine'.

Christ then did not become incarnate as a male person, nor did he confer the holy ministry on certain chosen members of the male sex, in order to indicate that God the Father was a male person, but to fulfil the role of Adam as a type of Christ and of God the Father. If we grant that this is so, then it follows that the ordination of women contradicts the spiritual vocation of men as husbands and fathers

and empties marriage and family life of much of their spiritual significance. It also obscures the mystery of Christ and his work in the order of redemption. It obscures the role of Christ as the head of the church as well as the nature of the church as his holy bride. Most of all, it obscures the fatherhood of God and the role of pastors as spiritual fathers. The ordination of women creates symbolic confusion in both the order of creation and the order of redemption.

4. The order of the ministry as a reflection of the order of the Holy Trinity

The church is not a natural human community which resembles either the family or the state. It is a supernatural heavenly community which is modelled on the community of divine persons within the Holy Trinity. The order of the public ministry, together with the arrangement of all relationships in the church, has been designed by God himself to mirror the order of the Holy Trinity.

The Holy Trinity is a community of three differentiated persons whose relations with each other are no more interchangeable with each other than the relations of husband and wife in marriage. God the Father is the eternal source and head of the Holy Trinity. The Son is begotten by the Father and derives his unique divine identity as Son from his Father. The Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son and receives everything from them, even as the Spirit returns completely in love back to the Father. Each is different from the other and yet identified by the other. Each is ordered harmoniously in relation to the other under the headship of the Father.

The Holy Trinity is therefore an ordered community of persons with its own unique 'order' (taxis) of self-giving, reciprocating love. This order is characterised by the loving, obedient 'subordination' of the Son to the Father. Just as the Father works only through the Son and does nothing apart from the Son, so the Son fulfills the will of his Father and seeks only to please him. Even though he is in all ways equal to the Father and in no way inferior to the Father, he is nevertheless utterly subordinate to the Father. Thus as St Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 11:3, God the Father is the head of Christ the Son, even as Christ is the head of every human husband and every human husband is the head of his wife. In 1 Corinthians 15:25–28, Paul goes so far as to say that the Son is not just subordinate to the Father until the resurrection of the dead on the last day but will be forever subordinate to the Father, so that God the Father may be all in all. Christ's relation as Son to his Father is therefore characterised by his subordination to the headship of the Father. It has nothing to do with the dominance and power of the Father. It involves and expresses the harmony of the Son with the Father and his love for the Father.

The 'order' of the church as a supernatural community of love differs radically from the order of the family and the order of the state as a political entity because it is based on the order of the Trinity and has been established to reflect that order on a human scale. In the church there are no autonomous persons with sovereign power and individual rights. Rather we have a community which is characterised by willing subordination. Subordination is normal and natural. People who all equally and fully share the same status as children of God in Christ, are all called to be subordinate in some way under Christ.

Now this call to subordination in the divinely instituted order of the church is based on the willing subordination of the Son to the Father. As Christ willingly subordinates himself to the Father, so the church subordinates itself to Christ and his word (2 Cor 9:13). Indeed, all its members are to be subordinate to each other in the life of the congregation (Eph 5:21). Pastors too are to be subordinate to Christ and his word. Since Christ has appointed male pastors to represent himself and his heavenly Father in the ministry of word and sacrament, the members of the congregation, whether male or female, are to subordinate themselves to their pastors (1 Cor 16:16; Tit 1:10; 1 Peter 5:5). All other ministries are subordinate to that basic ministry and dependent on it. Those who serve in that ministry pass on what they have received from God the Father through Christ and his apostles. The exercise of the public ministry depends on this pattern of subordination within the church and cannot operate properly apart from it.

The ordination of women uncouples this link between the order of the Holy Trinity and the order of the Christian congregation. On the one hand, it is associated with the deconstruction of the Holy Trinity with the rejection of the Father's headship and the Son's subordination to the Father. It involves the subsequent reconstruction of the Holy Trinity as an egalitarian community of interchangeable persons. On the other hand, it leads to the loss of spiritual authority by the leaders of the church and delivers the church to the tyranny of fashion, the clash of opinions, and the self-assertive exercise of unauthorized power.

5. Conclusion

William Oddie claimed that the ordination of women would involve a radical change in the teaching of the church about the fatherhood of God. His claims cannot be lightly dismissed as alarmist

propaganda, because many of those who have promoted the ordination of women also reject the understanding and use of the term Father as the proper name for the first person of the Holy Trinity. This is commonly justified by the claim that the term Father is nothing but a title, a metaphorical designation for the mystery of the transcendent deity. While some invoke God as Mother, most insist on the use of inclusive language for the deity in worship. They therefore avoid the use of Father as a proper name and replace it with other general designations and titles.

It is, of course, impossible to demonstrate conclusively that the ordination of women must logically lead to the rejection of God's fatherhood; or vice versa, that the rejection of God's fatherhood leads to the ordination of women. We aren't, after all, dealing with a system of ideas, a religious philosophy or ideology, but with catholic spiritual realities which are all interdependent and interconnected in a kind of ecological order. My claim is that, since the acceptance of the ordination of women may have implications for the way we view, name, and confess the Triune God, we can not ignore this issue but must deal with it fully before proceeding much further. Those who dismiss the traditional understanding of 1 Corinthians 14:33^b–38 and 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and advocate the ordination of women must demonstrate that the ordination of women does not imply and will not promote the rejection of God's fatherhood.

I close with some unsettling remarks from C. S. Lewis which have kept nagging at my mind and in my conscience ever since I first read and dismissed them years ago when I was a seminary student. He says:

'Suppose the reformer stops saying that a good woman may be like God and begins saying that God is like a good woman. Suppose he says that we might as well pray to 'Our Mother which art in heaven' as to 'Our Father'. Suppose he suggests that the Incarnation might just as well have taken a female as a male form, and the Second Person of the Trinity be as well called the Daughter as the Son. Suppose, finally, that the mystical marriage were reversed, that the church were the Bridegroom and Christ the Bride. All this, as it seems to me, is involved in the claim that a woman can represent God as a priest does.'

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