

Women in the Church

Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice

Introduction and Part I

A Report of the
Commission on Theology and Church Relations
of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

September 1985

Abbreviations

- AC** - Augsburg Confession
- FC** - Formula of Concord
- Ep** - Epitome of the Formula of Concord
- SD** - Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

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INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century has witnessed a veritable revolution in the roles of women and men. To some degree this revolution is attributable to rapid societal and cultural change. For example, the continued process of urbanization has shifted the population from the farms with their relatively clear and traditional roles for women and men, into the increasingly bureaucratized cities, where traditional identities have become blurred. This transition and its concomitant upheavals have had some positive results. More opportunities are becoming available to women now than ever before. Their unique contributions to society are increasingly recognized. At the same time, dramatic changes in male-female roles have also produced confusion and uncertainty. Perhaps this confusion and uncertainty has affected the church as much as any other institution. In the wake of the feminist movement, the campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment, and related sociological and political developments, various Christian denominations have become involved in discussions of the role of women in the life of the church. Should churches ordain women into the pastoral office? Should church polity be rewritten so that women may serve as elders or deacons? Is there any ecclesiastical position from which women should be excluded in principle? These and other similar questions have been prominent on the theological agenda of numerous church bodies.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has not been immune from these developments. Overtures to past conventions of the Synod, inquiries received by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, and discussions in various forums reveal the need for careful study of this matter. In response to a specific request from the Synod that it study "the role of women in the church," the CTCR has therefore prepared this

document in the hope that it will assist members of the Synod in their consideration of this important topic. **[1]**

As it prepared this study, the Commission was acutely aware of the difficulties attending an examination of this subject in a report of limited scope. A vast body of literature on the many aspects of women's involvement in the mission of the church exists, which continues to expand in the light of contemporary discussion. Moreover, fundamental issues relating to principles of Biblical interpretation are involved in the study of this question. The extent to which the Bible reflects the culture and customs of its own time and the relationship between Scriptural principles and their contemporary application are important examples of issues about which there is disagreement. Thus, the Commission acknowledges at the outset that not all issues ultimately pertaining to this subject can be addressed.

This study is comprised of three basic parts: first, a survey of the Biblical witness to the involvement of women in Israelite culture and worship, in the ministry of Jesus, and in the life of the apostolic church; second, a distillation of the primary principles which the Scriptures present concerning women in the church; and third, a discussion of the application of these principles in concrete matters of practice today. This report is not designed to be exclusively a study of the question of ordaining women to the pastoral office. While much of the content will impinge on that issue and while such a specific study may be desirable at some point in the future, the issue of women's ordination is not the focal question here. Similarly, the Commission does not intend this document to be a reworking of its 1968 report on "Woman Suffrage in the Church." Nor is the present document a study of male-female relationships in general societal or marital contexts, however important these may be. **[2]** Rather, the Commission seeks in this report to outline and integrate two themes clearly present in the Word of God: 1) the positive and glad affirmation of woman as a person completely equal to man in the enjoyment of God's unmerited grace in Jesus Christ and as a member of His Body, the church; and 2) the inclusion of woman (as well as man) in a divinely mandated order which is to be reflected in the work and worship life of the church. The proper correlation of these two

Biblical teachings is crucial if the church's thinking on this topic is to be determined by Holy Scripture and not by the dictates of cultural demands. (John 8:31)

I WOMEN IN THE SCRIPTURES: AN OVERVIEW

The formulation and interpretation of principles regarding women in the church today must be carried out against the backdrop of the picture of women presented in the Scriptures. In both the Old and the New Testaments women are spoken of with deep respect for their personhood and for their vital work in the Kingdom of God. The commonplace contention that the Bible demeans women simply cannot be sustained if one takes seriously the Scriptures' recurrent affirmations of the service of women, who stand before God side by side with men as recipients of His gifts of grace.

A. The Old Testament

While Israelite culture was patriarchal in its structuring of family and clan, the Old Testament gives a prominent place to the character, leadership, and service of many women (indeed, two of its books-Ruth and Esther-are named for women). This truth is especially evident in the giving of the titles "prophetess" and "judge" to women and in the participation of women in individual and family worship of God.

1. The Old Testament prophet possesses a number of unique characteristics, but technically a prophet is one through whom God speaks. The Hebrew word for prophet is **nabi**, and its feminine form is **nebiah**. This term is used to refer to three specific women. [3]

a. Miriam, the sister of Moses, was called a woman prophet when she sang a victory praise of God at the time of the Israelites' escape from Pharaoh's army (Ex. 15:20-21). That she was one through whom God spoke is also clearly implied in Num. 12:1-2. Although there is little indication of her work beyond these passages, she is referred to as a leader on a par with Moses and Aaron in Mic. 6:3-4.

b. Deborah, in Judges 4:4, is called a prophetess and also a judge in Israel. In the latter role Deborah exercised decisive leadership. When Israel was severely oppressed she called forth the will in the men of Israel

to fight for freedom. The Israelite general said he would fight only if she led the way. Deborah gave the command to attack, and victory was secured (Judges 5). However unusual it may or may not have been for women to serve in major civil roles, the example of Deborah shows a woman raised up by God to govern and to deliver His people.

c. The third woman given the title of prophetess was Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). When the high priest at the Jerusalem temple told Josiah he had discovered the book of the law of the Lord, the king sent his emissaries to find out what further message God had for him. They sought out Huldah who was well-known for her commitment to God and for her ability to speak for God. She told Josiah very clearly and specifically God's message.

2. In private and public worship in the Old Testament participation of women went beyond the hearing and obeying of the law. They were free to approach God in prayer just as the men (Hannah, 1 Sam. 1:10; Rebekah, Gen. 25:22; Rachel, Gen. 30:6, 22) God responded to their prayers (Gen. 25:23; 30:6, 22) and appeared to them (Gen. 16:7-14; Judges 13:3). They were also expected to take an independent part in bringing sacrifices and gifts before God. (Lev. 12:6; 15:29)

Women appear to have had certain circumscribed roles in the public worship, too. For instance, Hannah approached the sanctuary (1 Samuel 1). Women ministered at the door to the tent of meeting (Ex. 38:8), and while it is not clear what form this service took, it did play some part in the worship. [4] Women also participated in the psalm choirs and processions of the temple (Ps. 68:25; 1 Chron. 25:5-7, Neh. 7:67). Although they were not permitted to serve as priests, this is never interpreted to mean that they were less than full members of the worshipping community.

In sum, although the Old Testament reflects the patriarchal nature of the society in which it was written and with which it is concerned, the relationship of women to their fathers and husbands did not stand in the way of their joyful participation

in the worship life of God's people. In the words of Biblical scholar Mary J. Evans, "They had a significant role to play ... not only in their role as mothers and in the home, but also as individuals, and they were not barred from leadership when the circumstances required it." [5]

B. The Ministry of Jesus

The New Testament manifests the same genuine appreciation and respect for women. Jesus' ready acceptance and inclusion of women in His life and work stands in sharp contrast to the disdainful and condescending attitudes toward women of so many of His contemporaries. He saw them as persons to whom and for whom He had come into the world. This can be seen in the interactions of the Lord with individual women, in the prominence of women in His parables, and in the actual participation of women in His ministry.

1. The encounters of Jesus with women illustrate both His willingness to associate with them and also His respect for their intelligence and faith. His conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-30) shows His willingness to dismiss conventions of men which stand in opposition to His purposes. Normally a Jew would not address a Samaritan and normally a man would not speak to a woman in public. However, the Lord's conversation with this woman shows how He disregards these conventions of society in order to communicate about Himself and the Kingdom. The Samaritan woman emerges in this conversation as a perceptive and articulate individual, fully capable of engaging in theologically profound discourse. Certainly, if Jesus had considered this woman to be an inferior being and unable to speak of spiritual matters, He would not have spoken to her in concepts presupposing prior knowledge (e.g. the concept of "living water," John 4:10). Nor would He have responded to her question about the place of worship (4:21). Her sex did not affect the manner of His approach to her. It is instructive to note that this woman is the first individual to whom Jesus, in the Johannine account, clearly reveals that He is the Messiah. She is also the first messenger of that revelation outside the circle of disciples (v. 29). The

witness role of the Samaritan woman is emphasized by John. He says that the villagers "believed ... because of the woman's word." (John 4:39)

The conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite woman provides another example of the Lord's respect for women (Matt. 15:21-28). In this exchange it was the woman's faith in Him as the Messiah that Jesus perceived and that moved Him. She therefore receives a place in sacred history as the first Gentile convert.

Many other encounters of Jesus with women demonstrate His striking concern for their faith and His brotherly love for them. Women were seldom pictured in Rabbinic literature as exemplifying trust in God or as possessing theological acumen. But Jesus sees women as exercising such virtues (the encounter with the repentant woman at the home of Simon, Luke 7:36-50; the woman who suffered with an issue of blood, Mark 5:25-34). Further, although the title "son of Abraham" was a standard phrase used throughout Hebrew and Jewish literature to refer to a member (male) of the chosen people, Jesus calls the woman he heals on the Sabbath "daughter of Abraham" (Luke 13:10-17). For Jesus, women were to be valued highly; He was interested in them as persons and received them as full-fledged participants in the blessings of the people and covenant of God. Their sex was an integral part but not the totality of their personhood.

2. The parables which Jesus tells presuppose, and thereby reveal, His acceptance of women as treasured members of the human family. They present women in ordinary activities which dramatically illustrate various points which Jesus wished to make. A woman mixing leaven in flour provides insights into the nature of God's Kingdom (Matt. 13:33). A woman looking for a lost coin illustrates the concern of God for lost sinners (Luke 15:8-10). The wise and foolish bridesmaids are examples of the need for everyone to be prepared for the unexpected moment of Christ's return (Matt 25:1-13). A woman appears in a parable of Jesus to illustrate an aspect of the Kingdom of God such as perseverance in prayer (Luke 18:1-8). Thus, in dramatic contrast to His

contemporaries, who frequently avoided mentioning women at all, Jesus often refers to women in His parables and sayings, always in a positive way.

3. Women were not only recipients of the Lord's ministry. St. Luke reveals that Jesus on numerous occasions gladly received the help and ministry of women (Luke 8:1-3). St. Mark attests that some women followed Jesus and ministered to Him when He was preaching in Galilee (Mark 15:40-41). Women were a part of His close circle of friends and companions. The verb **diakoneo** (to minister or serve from which the English word "deacon" is derived, is used to describe what these women did in addition to "following" Jesus. [6] The inclusion of women among His close companions in a significant way witnesses to Jesus' positive attitude toward them. While it was not out of the ordinary for rabbis, for example, to receive support from women of means, it was most unusual that the followers should include women. But Jesus' attitude towards women encouraged them to take the extraordinary step of following Him, striking breach of the custom of the day.

When all the disciples except one had abandoned Jesus, women accompanied Him to the place of His crucifixion. They were present at His burial. These same women found the empty tomb, met the resurrected Christ and angels, and reported the news of His resurrection to His unbelieving disciples (Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-11; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1-2, 11-18). None of them, however, is included among the number of the apostles; they were parallel to the disciples as traveling companions, but they were not included among the twelve. [7]

Significantly, Jesus does not say anything about women having a specific role in life. He issues no commands that apply to women only. Rather, the value Jesus gives to women is displayed in His relationship with them. In these relationships He affirms their personhood and manifests a noticeable concern that they hear His message and understand it. He relates to them with love and respect. He speaks to them, teaches them, heals them. He never speaks of them in a contemptuous way and never treats them as if they were unimportant. Jesus never gives the impression that only men were "full Israelites." He regards

women as One whose message and concern is for the whole people of Israel. Women stand alongside men as recipients of the universal invitation to the Kingdom through Christ. (Matt. 12:50) **[8]**

C. The Apostolic Church

Women were present in the upper room praying prior to Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples (Acts 1:14; cf. 2:17-18). From that moment they, like men, were added to the Christian community, endured persecution and suffering, brought others to faith in Christ, and were involved in the building up of the body of Christians. The activities in which women participated varied, but they included prophesying, performing charitable services, and serving as missionary workers. **[9]**

1. Acts 21:9 and 1 Cor. 11:5 specifically indicate that women functioned as prophets in the early church. Commentators differ on exactly what kind of prophesying was done by women in the apostolic church-some take the association of prayer and prophecy as a description of officiating at public worship; others equate prophecy with preaching. While not much is said about the type of prophecy given, these interpretations are deficient. Prophesying is distinguished from preaching in Eph. 4:11. Preaching is a form of teaching, but the distinctive characteristic of prophecy is that it results from God having put His very words into the mouth of the one speaking (2 Pet. 1:21-22). In other words, the prophet depends on special inspiration to speak a message which is more than a product of human thought. While a prophetic inspiration could form the basis for an exhortation, prophecy was a message delivered as words from the Lord. It is evident that there were women in the apostolic church who were moved by the Spirit to prophesy. Certain women exercised a particular verbal gift. **[10]**

2. Charitable service-caring for the needy, the sick, the visitors-was a major activity among the early Christians, and the New Testament pictures women serving faithfully and actively in to way. Tabitha is described as being full of good works and charity (Acts 9:36). Widows, recognized as a group in the church (1 Tim 5:3-16), dedicated themselves to prayer and intercession.

This service role of women in the church is highlighted particularly by Paul's reference to Phoebe as a **diakonos** (Rom. 16:1-2). Many scholars connect this text with sources from the third century which the office of deaconess appears clearly defined for the first time. [11] However, in the vast majority of its occurrences in the New Testament, the term **diakonos** means simply "servant" or "one who ministers" to another. [12] The apostle introduces himself, together with his co-workers, as a **diakonos** (servant, minister) of Christ, of the gospel, of the new covenant (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; Eph. 3:7; 1 Thess. 3:2), and speaks of his apostolic work as a **diakonia** (Rom. 11:13). He also writes of Stephanas and his household who "have devoted themselves to the service of the saints". (1 Cor. 16:15)

What Paul means, therefore, is that Phoebe, a representative of the Cenchreaean church, had been a helper of many, even of himself. The term "helper" (**prostatis**) most probably refers to a patron who by virtue of greater wealth is able to provide one with material assistance or moral support. [13] Phoebe's service is the basis for Paul's request to the Romans that they "take care of her in whatever manner she may have need of you" (v. 2). They want to do for Phoebe what she has done for the apostle and others-assist them in their material requirements. Phoebe's ministry, then, like that of Stephanas and his household, was to assist the saints. This servanthood function was assumed by many men and women in the apostolic church.

3. The early church was very active in missionary endeavors. Christian communities sent many missionary workers from their home communities to plant new ones where there was no Christian church. While much of this missionary activity is mentioned, the New Testament focuses on St. Paul and his co-workers, many of whom were women.

In Romans 16 the apostle greets some of these women by name and acknowledges their important contributions to the life and growth of the church. Priscilla is a woman who receives particular mention. She is greeted not only in Rom. 16:3, but allusions to her, also appear in Acts 18, 1 Cor. 16:19, and 2 Tim.

4:19. In Acts she is engaged with her husband, Aquila, in teaching the great orator Apollos. Priscilla must have been, therefore, well-educated in the teachings of the Christian faith and a most capable instructor. [14] Paul's reference to the couple as "fellow-workers" is to be noted. The term was used by the apostle for a number of persons who worked with him. (Rom. 16:9, 21; 1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 1:24; 8:23; Phil. 2:25; 4:3; Col. 4:11; 1 Thess. 3:2; Philemon 1, 24) After Priscilla and Aquila, Paul greets still other women: Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis, all of whom "worked hard" in the Lord (v. 12). Here Paul uses a term that commonly refers to the toil proclaiming the Gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 4:12; 15:10; Gal. 4:11; Phil. 2:16; Col. 1:29; 1 Tim. 4:10). In Rom. 16:13, 15 he greets the mother of Rufus and the sister of Nereus. In Phil. 4:2-3 he mentions two other women- Euodia and Syntyche-who have labored beside him in the gospel. Although it is impossible to determine from Paul's words what specific missionary tasks these women assumed, there is no doubt that he often benefited from the cooperation of women in his apostolic labors and that women were no less fervent than men spreading the gospel message. [15]

The early Christian churches followed the pattern established by Jesus of including women as integral members. They attended worship, participated vocally, were instructed, learned of the faith and shared it with others. They also played a significant role in life of the community, teaching men and women and caring for those in need.

Excursus on the Service of Women in the Early Church [16]

Within the "official" ordering of the early church's life there were two primary orders of women: widows and deaconesses. From the beginning widows were recipients of the church's charity in return for which they were "appointed for prayer" (**Apostolic Tradition** 11; cf. 1 Tim. 5:3 ff.). According to Tertullian (c. 160-220 AD), the widows were an **ordo** (**Ad uxorem** 1.7.4) and were assigned a place of honor within the assembled congregation parallel to that of the presbyters. In the third century, however, the widows received additional responsibilities. They exercised charity, especially to women, and they taught. Their teaching seems to have been restricted to inquiring unbelievers, for

while widows could speak concerning idols and the unity of God, they could not speak about Christ and His work. Lest the pagans mock, inquirers about such matters were sent to the elders for instruction (for the widow, see **Didaskalia, Apostolic Constitutions**). In the **Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ** (c. 450) widows were a part of clerical orders and had a broad range of responsibilities, primarily to women: teaching women catechumens, rebuking those who strayed, visiting the sick, anointing women being baptized and veiling them so that their nudity would not show, seeing to it that women attended church and that they did not dress in a provocative way. Obviously, many of the duties of the widows were dictated by concerns of modesty and social acceptance. The female diaconate was a very significant feature of the church within Greek and Syriac Christianity. The West did not have deaconesses until around the fifth century and then only reluctantly. From numerous sources (especially **Didaskalia, Apostolic Constitutions**) an outline of the activities of the deaconess can be discerned. They:

1. **assisted the bishop in the baptism of women, especially in the anointing of the body. Here concern for modesty was uppermost.**
2. **assisted women who were in need or who were ill.**
3. **served as an intermediary between women and the male clergy.**
4. **guarded the door by which women entered and left the assembly and ensured that the younger women gave way to older women in the place reserved for them.**
5. **verified the corporal integrity of the virgins.**
6. **bore messages and traveled about on congregational business.**
7. **gave private instructions to catechumens when necessary.**
8. **within Syrian Christianity gave the Eucharist to women who were ill, to nuns, to young children and to their sisters (apparently other deaconesses), when a priest was not available.**

Indicative of the high status of deaconesses in the East was the fact that they were ordained as clergy. The **Apostolic Constitutions** make this especially clear (8, 19, 20), but it is also confirmed by the wording of Canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon (451

AD). On the other hand, Western, Latin sources are punctuated by prohibitions against the ordination of the deaconess.

Yet, ordination did not give one access to all the functions of clergy. Ordination placed one into a specific **ordo** with its own prescribed functions. Hence, a bishop could ordain, but a presbyter could not; a presbyter could baptize, but a deacon could not.

Concerning the role of women, there is a general exclusion of them from priestly duties and from the public teaching. The patristic argument against women performing sacerdotal functions, while making use of Biblical passages such as Gen. 3:16; 1 Cor. 11:3 ff, 1 Tim 2:12, 14, is often based on Scriptural history and Jesus' own ministry.

Against the Collyridians, Epiphanius writes: "Never from the beginning of the world has a woman served God as priest" (**Panarion** 79). He, then, in litany fashion, reviews all those in the Old and New Testaments who served as priests. "But never, " Epiphanius again concludes, "did a woman serve at priest." Similarly, the practice of Jesus is determinative although Mary and other women were present with Jesus, He chose to be baptized by John and he sent the twelve apostles for preaching. Such an appeal to Biblical history and the practice of Jesus was not just an appeal to tradition. It was predicated upon the belief that Jesus was the incarnated Word of God by whom all things were made and through whom all things were redeemed. The **Apostolic Constitutions** make the point: Jesus did what He did, and He has delivered to His church no indication of women priests because He "knows the order of creation." What He did, being the Creator of nature, He did in agreement with the creative action. Similarly, since Jesus is the incarnate Word in whom the creation is being made new, He, as Head of the church, the new people of God, typified in His ministry the new life of the church not only in its "spiritual" but also in its fleshly contours.

Corresponding to Priscilla, who taught Apollos, early Christian tradition was not devoid of women known for their missionary teaching and preaching. The **Acts of Paul** (c. 170) tells of Thecla, who was commissioned by Paul to "go and teach" and who is depicted as teaching both men and women. The **Acts of Peter** mentions Candida, who instructed her husband in the faith. The **Acts of Philip** reports that Jesus sent out Mariamne with Philip and Bartholomew. One tradition makes Mary and Martha, together with Lazarus,

missionaries to the Province (southeastern France). St. Nina is honored as the missionary who converted Georgia. The early church, therefore, did not apply the prohibition of 1 Tim. 2:12 to the mission context. John Chrysostom expressed the consensus: "But, when the man is not a believer and the plaything of error, Paul does not exclude a woman's superiority, even when it involves teaching."

Nascent Christianity was located within a religious environment in which female deities and significant female religious leadership were not uncommon. The polytheism of Greece and Rome had both male and female deities (e.g., Juno, Minerva, Diana), and the mystery religions, oriented toward the natural cycle of birth-death-rebirth, not infrequently had primary female deities (e.g., Isis, Cybele). Not surprisingly, therefore, early Christian groups which evidenced syncretism often had women in prominent positions and assigned to them real theological significance.

In Gnostic Christianity women frequently were regarded as the bearers of secret tradition and divine revelation. Sometimes they were conceived of as the very expression of divine thought (in direct analogy to the view of Jesus as "Word of God"). Simon Magus had a female companion, Helen, whom he declared to be the "first thought of his mind." The Gnostic Apelles was accompanied by Philoumene, a prophetess whose revelations he wrote down and who performed miracles and illusions. Elsewhere, Mary Magdalene was regarded as the bearer of secret knowledge (**Pistis Sophia, Gospel of Mary**), as was also Salome (**Egyptian Gospel**).

Irenaeus (c. 180) tells of a certain Marcus whose religious rites included the consecration of cups of wine by women (**Adversus omnes Haereses** 1.134f). It is clear that "Marcosian gnosticism" was highly attractive to women of higher social rank. In addition, Marcosian tendencies were very resilient in Gaul (France), for at the beginning of the sixth century there were priests in Brittany who were assisted at the Eucharist by women.

Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 380) reports on two groups in which women were preeminent and possessed priestly status. The "Quintillians" honored Eve as the prototype of their female clergy, for she first ate of the tree of knowledge. They had women bishops and women presbyters, arguing that "in Christ there is neither male nor female" (**Pan.** 49).

(Interestingly, the "Quintillians" used Gal. 3:28 in the same way that contemporary "feminists" treat that passage.) The second group, the Collyridians, apparently consisted predominantly of women who venerated the Virgin Mary as a goddess and once a year on a special day offered up to her a loaf of bread from which all members partook (**Pan. 79**). Firmilian of Caesarea (c. 260) tells of a prophetess in Cappadocia who celebrated the Eucharist and who baptized many.

Yet, within the church's own communal life the general prohibition of Tertullian seems to have been commonplace: "It is not permitted to a woman to speak in Church. Neither may she teach, baptize, offer, nor claim for herself any function proper to a man, least of all the sacerdotal office" (**De virg. vel. 9.1**). This did not mean, however, that women were simply quiescent. They were not. Especially in the areas of Christian piety and spirituality women often exercised leadership and authority. Much of the early impetus toward monasticism was supplied by women of wealth and social rank such as Melania and Paula, whose monastic foundations were every bit the equal of parallel male foundations. The Eastern tradition knows of "spiritual mothers" as well as "spiritual fathers," and the sayings of three of them even occur in the "Sayings of the Desert Fathers." In contexts of martyrdom women by precept and example exercised real religious leadership (e.g., Blandina, Perpetua). Within Celtic Christianity dual monasteries of both monks and nuns not infrequently were governed by abbesses (e.g., Hilda of Whitby, who even participated in the "Council" of Whitby). But women were not permitted to hold the sacerdotal office in the early Christian church.