

IX
THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN
AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM, 1975

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Ordination of Women

Carol Anderson and Carter Heyward, ordained deacons in the Episcopal Church, were asked to help two bishops serve Communion. The large congregation, which included a number of Episcopal priests, divided into two lines to take part. The communicant first knelt as a male bishop put a wafer on his tongue, then moved over a few feet and knelt again as a female deacon held out to him the communal wine cup. Part way through the Eucharist both Ms. Anderson and Ms. Heyward had a surprise.

As Ms. Anderson extended the cup to a serious-faced young priest, he suddenly reached for it and tried to grab it away from her. "Go to blazes!" he hissed. "You're ruining the church!"

The deacon maintained her grip on the cup. "I can't," she calmly answered. "I'm busy."

Ms. Heyward was having problems of her own nearby. She too was serving a young priest. His fingers touched hers around the bowl of the cup. As he drank, he dug his long fingernails into her until tears came to her eyes. "I hope you burn in hell," he whispered, then moved on down the line.

Deacons Anderson and Heyward represent a growing phenomenon in American Protestant churches: women at the communion rail, in the pulpit, beside hospital beds, in armed-services chaplains' offices. Magazines, journals, and newspapers—both secular and religious—are crowding their pages with articles about the ordination and hiring of female clergy. Major book publishers are bringing out books such as Priscilla and William Proctor's *Women in the Pulpit*,¹ a survey of women's activities in today's churches; and Carter Heyward's *A Priest Forever*,² a statement of her own experiences and beliefs.

The women's movement is forcing itself upon our attention. It cannot force us to change our practice—no church that simply mimics other churches has a right to exist. But we must become aware of what other churches are doing and why they are doing it so that we can better understand the reasons for and implications of our own practice.

What are the other Protestant churches doing today? Has female ministry become the order of the day, or are female pastors a widely scattered but vocal handful well exploited by the press? Are the liberal churches clearly on one side of the ordination issue, the conservative churches on the other? To find out more about what is actually happening in the Protestant churches today, I sent a questionnaire or a personal letter to administrators of all the Protestant churches, as well as to deans of all the Protestant theological seminaries listed in the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*.³ The responses I received represent more than 60 percent of all American Protestant church members. From the responses I was able to ascertain the following facts:

1. Most churches permit women to be ordained to the ministry. Nearly four fifths of the Protestants in my survey belong to churches that permit the ordination of women. This is not necessarily to say that four out of five church members would welcome a woman pastor. Many

¹(1976).

²(1976).

³(1975).

churches with a congregational form of government permit a great deal that is rarely carried out in practice.

A number of churches that do not ordain women will allow a woman to serve as supply pastor if the need is great. Fewer than 15 percent of the Protestants in my survey belong to churches that flatly refuse the pulpit to women. They refuse even if the nearest male is a Hindu deaf-mute in traction at a hospital a hundred miles away.

2. Woman pastors make up only a small percentage of Protestant ministers. In spite of the general acceptance of female clergy, most Protestants belong to churches whose female ministers make up less than 5 percent of the total clergy. All of the churches ordaining at least one woman for every 20 men have been doing so for 60 years or more. None of the recent converts to the ordination of women can even begin to reach the one-in-20 mark, let alone equality of hiring.

3. Churches give a wide variety of reasons to support their practice. Both those who ordain women and those who do not, cite Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and tradition to fortify their positions. The more I studied how other churches are looking at the ordination of women, the more convinced I became that I could not understand a church's practice apart from its theology. I therefore took the two groups—those who ordain women and those who do not—and subdivided them further according to the reasons behind their practice. In this article we will look first at the churches who do not ordain women, representing about 20 percent of the members of the churches who responded to my questionnaire and letters.

The churches who do not ordain women fall mostly into two categories. About two thirds refer to Scripture to support their practice. The remaining third appeals to tradition. This latter group is represented by the Episcopal Church, as well as a few smaller churches. If my study were not restricted to Protestant churches this group would also include the Roman Catholic and a number of Orthodox churches, thus becoming the single most important force against the ordination of women.

Sometimes the traditionalist position is ridiculed: “We can't do it because we've never done it before.” No doubt simple inertia can explain the resistance to change of some church members and leaders, but it would be most unfair thus to dismiss the millions who take tradition seriously.

Jesus chose 12 males to be His disciples, traditionalists point out. He vested authority in these men to lead the church and to keep it pure from doctrinal error. When a vacancy occurred among the church leaders the remaining leaders assembled and, guided by the Holy Spirit, chose a successor—a man. When the seven deacons were chosen, they were set apart by the laying on of hands (see Acts 6:1-7).

Ordination to sacred office qualified a man to act as a leader in the church. In the days before the printing press gave Christians the Scriptures in their own languages, the bishop decided what was true teaching and what was false doctrine. As the church transformed the Lord's Supper from a shared meal to a sacrament it became extremely important that an ordained priest officiate at the service. And priests, as everyone knew, were males.

The question, then, for the Episcopal Church, as well as for its larger cousin, the Roman Catholic Church, is this: Can an apostolic priesthood be preserved if women are admitted to it? On the more practical level, can a woman be given authority by God to lead the church? Can she be given power to administer the sacrament? For an Episcopalian with a traditional view of the meaning of the priesthood and a sacramental approach to the Eucharist, these questions cannot be dismissed lightly.

The larger group of Protestant churches who do not ordain women bases the practice primarily on Scripture. Churches in this group quote from the Creation and Fall accounts of Gen 1-3 and from Paul's prohibitions in 1 Cor 11:2-12; 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-15. Most of these churches emphasize a high view of Scripture.

These people take the Bible seriously. Although they do not always understand the Bible as we do, they are to be commended for their faithfulness in following what they believe. In general they believe Genesis teaches that man should have authority over woman. They understand Paul to mean that only men should lead the worship service.

The largest individual church in this group is the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, with 2.7 million members. The Missouri Synod gave women the right to vote in voters' assemblies and the right to hold certain administrative positions in 1969, claiming to understand these rights as avenues to service, not to power. The pastoral ministry, however, is still viewed in terms of power and authority. A woman cannot be a pastor in the Missouri Synod because, it is believed, she was created subordinate to man. Changing social circumstances, no matter how great, could never justify a female leader of worship.

Of the churches I contacted who for scriptural reasons do not ordain women, about half follow the Missouri Synod's example in forbidding only the pastoral ministry and the highest administrative posts to women. They allow women to teach, serve on committees, hold administrative offices, and in some cases even serve as supply pastors. The other half of this group are much more stringent in their interpretation of Genesis and Paul. Women may teach only the small children and other women; they may hold administrative offices only in connection with women's organizations; they may not serve as supply pastors no matter what the circumstances. The American Baptist Association, the Southern Methodist Church, and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod are examples of this application.

The Mormon Church likewise claims to follow Scripture in restricting its priesthood to males. Female Mormons can administer only traditionally female organizations. Mormons are far from believing that Scripture is inerrant, so their position is not identical to that of, say, the Southern Methodist Church. All the same, in this case they apply the Scripture quite literally; their all-male priesthood seems to be in no danger of crumbling.

Woman Pastors in Protestant Churches

Ten years ago I had Thanksgiving dinner with a family group that included a minister and her husband. An ordained minister of the Four-square Gospel Church, she with her husband pastored quite a large congregation. I had never seen a woman minister before. In fact, I found the whole idea rather amusing. The woman herself, however, was not amusing. She was a respectable, modest, attractive, middle-aged matron, much like the women I saw at church every week. As a college sophomore I was not sure how to reconcile my preconception of a woman minister with the woman across the table. The easiest approach was simply to ignore the fact that she was a minister, which I did.

In 1976 it is becoming difficult to ignore women preachers. About four out of five American Protestants belong to churches that ordain women to the ministry. More than 5,000 women are presently serving as pastors in Protestant churches. Several thousand more are studying theology at Protestant seminaries and graduate schools.

Prevailing social custom should never be used as a basis for church policy. On the other hand, a church sent to minister to the world needs to know where the world is. In this paper we

began by becoming acquainted with our closest neighbors, other American Protestants. We have looked at those Protestants who do not permit the ordination of women. Now we will look at the Protestants who do. I have divided the churches that ordain women into five groups: Congregationalists, Liberators, Cautious Liberators, Exegetes, and Old-Time Religionists.

Congregationalists

Besides the Southern Baptist Convention, a number of smaller churches that include the word “Congregational” in their names make up this group. They generally permit, but do not promote, the ordination of women. Each congregation is on its own to decide.

I have talked by telephone with Albert McClellan, associate executive secretary of the Southern Baptist Convention. “We have a woman pastoring a church in Tennessee,” he told me. “There may be another one in Georgia—or is it Kentucky?” I asked whether any Southern Baptist congregation could have a female pastor if it wanted one. “Of course,” he assured me. “From the beginning of our church we’ve allowed the individual congregations to have the final say in the matter. But at present there doesn’t seem to be a great demand.” Mr. McClellan may have estimated on the low side. A recent newspaper article listed the Southern Baptist woman preachers at 15. At any rate, there are few for a church with more than 12 million members—yet the church does permit the ordination of women.

Liberators

The second-largest American Protestant church, the 10-million-member United Methodist Church, joins with the United Church of Christ to lead this group. Sensitive to secular liberation movements, these churches promote liberation for oppressed minorities as well as for women. They make little reference to Scripture, although they express the belief that the gospel of Christ is a call to liberation. Problems of interpretation do not seem to bother them, perhaps because for them the Bible is the Word of God only in a general sense. (I should add that the opinion on liberation issues is often divided, particularly with regard to homosexuality. Although a gay caucus attended the recent United Methodist General Conference session, delegates continued to refuse to recognize homosexuality as a totally acceptable alternate life-style.)

The United Methodists now have nearly 600 ordained women serving as pastors. At least that many more are studying theology in seminaries and graduate schools. Although female pastors still make up less than 5 percent of their clergy, the number of United Methodist woman ministers is rapidly increasing.

Cautious Liberators

The Lutheran Church in America, with more than 3 million members, leads this group. In many respects their publications resemble those of the Liberators (although I came across no reference to homosexuals in the Lutheran literature). Both emphasize social justice backed by affirmative-action programs to hire more women. The difference lies in their treatment of Scripture. The Lutheran Church in America at least touches on the Pauline statements about women in the church. Believing Paul’s essential thrust to be best expressed by Gal 3:28 (“there is neither male nor female”), they understand his pastoral judgments on the woman’s place in light of the socio-religious conditions of the Hellenistic world. The Lutheran Church in America does

not wish its 1970 decision to ordain women to be understood as acquiescence to social pressure, but as a response of the church to the need of the world.

Exegetes

Another Lutheran group, the 2.5-million-member American Lutheran Church, leads those who have made a thorough study of scriptural passages and have arrived at the conclusion that women should be ordained as ministers. American Lutherans take issue with the conclusions of their sister church, the Missouri Synod, in their interpretation of the created order, in their application of Paul's statements about women, and in their view of the nature of the ministry.

While the Missouri Synod believes that man was created superior to woman, the American Lutherans deny that this is implicit in Scripture. While the Missouri Synod sees Paul's counsel as divinely dictated decrees valid for all time, the American Lutherans see it as conditioned by time and place. In other words, the fact that first-century Corinthian women were told to be quiet in church does not necessarily mean that twentieth-century New Yorkers are meant to follow the same advice. The office of pastor, to the Missouri Synod Lutheran, carries overtones of leadership and authority. The American Lutheran prefers to emphasize the servanthood of the minister.

The American Lutheran report, "What Do the Scriptures Say About the Ministry of Women in the Church"⁴ concludes, "In the complex society of New Testament times, women carried out ministerial functions far in advance of their day; today when the limitations of that society are no longer with us, we should make use of the freedom and responsibility which we are given in the gospel."

Old-time Religionists

A great many American Protestants, including more than a million members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and another million in the Assemblies of God, must wonder what all the fuss is about. They have been ordaining women for 60, 100, 200 years without affirmative-action programs or equal-opportunity-employment agitation. Many of these churches emphasize freedom in the Spirit. They may speak in tongues and hold healing services. On the other hand, the Church of the Nazarene is also included in this group. Although it has ordained women since 1908, it is emphatically opposed to the more spectacular "gifts of the Spirit." (It was a Nazarene church that ousted Pat Boone a few years back when he began praying in tongues.)

What then do these churches have in common? They share a marvelous indifference to the women's liberation movement. Some say the Bible compels them to ordain women. They cite Gal 3:28 and talk about the freedom of the gospel. Some speak of the recognition of gifts within their midst. Others say the Holy Spirit motivates them to ordain women. Having ordained women for years, they can afford to sit back and smile at the controversies raging about them.

It is said that politics chooses strange bedfellows. Certainly theology does the same. The peripherally Protestant Mormons join the staid Episcopalians in barring women from the priesthood. The evangelical Nazarenes join the liberated United Church of Christ in encouraging women to enter the ministry. And different groups of Lutherans glare at one another across the abyss.

⁴*Inter-Church Relations*, (1972), p. 469.

A variety of factors contributes to the responses of the churches. Secular political ties, social pressures, and the news media are at least as influential in creating the present situation of women in the church as are a theology of inspiration, a concern for apostolic succession of the priesthood, and sensitiveness to the leadings of the Holy Spirit.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church does not ordain women to the ministry; yet a chief founder of our church, herself a powerful public speaker, was a woman. Women have always served as deaconesses. A few have recently been ordained as elders. A dwindling minority serve as high-level administrators of the church.

As more and more Protestant churches encourage women to enter the ministry, we too will be faced with some major decisions. We cannot make these decisions correctly apart from an adequate understanding of God's Word. Through careful Bible study we will be enlightened on matters involving cultural change. Whatever our decisions, our foremost concern should be one of bringing our lives into alignment with God's will.