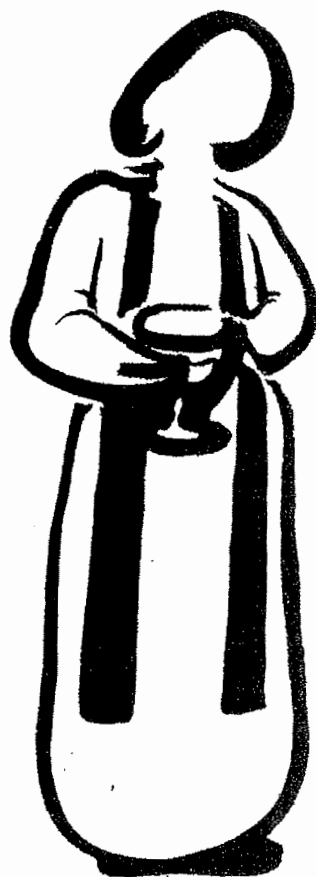

Why does the Uniting Church in Australia Ordain Women to the Ministry of the Word?



The March 1990 meeting of the Assembly Standing Committee of the Uniting Church in Australia resolved to approve the document "Why does the Uniting Church in Australia Ordain Women to the Ministry of the Word?" as expressing the biblical and theological reasoning which leads the Uniting Church to ordain both women and men to the Ministry of the Word (Minute 90.32.7)

Resolutions of the Assembly Standing Committee arising from the document "Why Does the Uniting Church in Australia Ordain Women to the Ministry of the Word?"

In March 1990 the Assembly Standing Committee received the document "Why Does the Uniting Church in Australia Ordain Women to the Ministry of the Word?" and expressed thanks to those who had drafted it. Standing Committee went on to pass several motions arising from its consideration of the document. In March 1991 Standing Committee gave further consideration, in light of comments received from a number of people expressing concern about one or two of the 1990 resolutions. Standing Committee then rescinded two of the 1990 resolutions and passed two others in their place.

The combined set of resolutions now reads as follows (with Standing Committee minute number noted):

Standing Committee resolved to -

1. affirm that the Uniting Church ordains both women and men to the Ministry of the Word in the conviction that a fundamental implication of the gospel of God's love in Christ is that there can be no discrimination on grounds of gender. For this understanding the Uniting Church appeals to Scripture as testimony to the living Word, who is Christ; (91.3.5)
2. affirm that the Holy Spirit has called and continues to call women as well as men to the Ministry of the Word; (90.32.4)
3. acknowledge that in ordaining women as well as men to the Ministry of the Word the Uniting Church in Australia, in company with other churches, has departed from an almost universal practice of the church catholic throughout most of history, but believes that the Uniting Church does so in obedience to the gospel; (90.32.5)
4. advise presbyteries that because
 - (a) the Church is committed to recognise among its members men and women called to all forms of ministry within the Church, and, in particular, to ordain both men and women; and because
 - (b) the Church requires that a candidate for ordination shall express adherence to the polity and discipline of the Church (Regulation 2.3.1(a)(ii))a presbytery should not ordain a candidate who
 - (i) denies the validity of the ordination or ministry of women as Ministers of the Word; or
 - (ii) is unwilling to work with and mutually support both men and women as colleagues in the ordained ministry; or
 - (iii) is unwilling to encourage, equip and support both men and women in all forms of ministry in the Church and to teach the Church's position in this regard; (91.3.3)
5. approve the document "Why does The Uniting Church in Australia Ordain Women to the Ministry of the Word?" as expressing the biblical and theological reasoning which leads the Uniting Church to ordain both women and men to the Ministry of the Word; (90.32.7)
6. invite other denominations to consider the theological position of the Uniting Church in Australia on the ordination of women and authorise those who represent the Uniting Church in ecumenical dialogues to use the document as an exposition of that position. (90.32.8)

Gregor Henderson

17 April 1991

1. INTRODUCTION

The Uniting Church in Australia ordains both women and men to the ministry of the Word. In doing so, we recognise that these men and women are called by God to preach the gospel and preside at the sacraments. We are concerned, however, that this is not yet the practice of the whole Church. We are deeply concerned about this, because it has become clear to us that the ordination of both men and women is a fundamental implication of the Gospel. We believe that to deny ordination to a person on the grounds of gender alone is to deny a basic feature of this Gospel, which reveals God's love for all human beings without distinction.

In issuing this statement, however, we hear words of astonishment directed to us. Some of these words come from other traditions of the universal Church. Others come from people within our own tradition who continue to be troubled about the ordination of women. Some voices say, 'Who are you to depart from God's directions in the New Testament that women should keep silence in Church?' Other voices say, 'Who are you to depart from the universal practice of the Church through almost all of its history?' We hear these words of astonishment: they come from our sisters and brothers in Christ, and we need to respond to these questions.

First, however, we on our part must express a more fundamental astonishment. It may offend some, but we are compelled to express it as people called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The whole Church rejects categorically any suggestion that ordination should be denied to anyone for the sole reason that they belong to a certain culture or class or language group or race. The Church rejects such a suggestion with horror because it would amount to a denial of the Gospel. It would set aside the fundamental truth that Christ died for all human beings without distinction. He brings the peace of God to people across all divisions of culture, race, language or class. The community of those called to preach the gospel and preside at the sacraments should embody the whole human race as it responds to God's astonishing love.

We must also affirm the fact that, over the years, women have been coming forward in growing numbers in the Uniting Church in Australia, deeply convinced that they were being called by God to the Ministry of the Word. Again and again, their conviction has been affirmed, not only by selection conferences and presbyteries and their theological teachers but also, after their ordination, by the congregations to which they have been appointed, which have seen their ministries abundantly blessed by God.

Therefore we express a fundamental astonishment that Christ's Church would offend against the Saviour's suffering love for all people, by claiming that no women are called by God to the ministry of the Word. This claim would need strong reasons to support it. Indeed it is difficult to see what could be an adequate reason to support this view. We look forward in prayer to the day when the whole Church will reject the exclusion of women from the ministry of the Word with the same vigour with which it rejects any refusal of ordination on the basis of culture, race or class.

We write with the vision of this day before us, and to move forward to this day we find it necessary now

1. to restate our position;
2. to give an account of the process by which we, as a church, arrived at this position - a process which reached completion in comparatively recent times; and
3. to offer our reflections on the witness of the Bible and the tradition of the churches with regard to this issue.

2. WHAT IS OUR POSITION?

1. We ordain both women and men to the Ministry of the Word because we believe ordination without discrimination on grounds of gender is a fundamental implication of the gospel of God's love in Christ for all human beings, without distinction. For this our understanding we appeal to Scripture as testimony to the living Word, which is Christ.

We are aware that many opposing the ordination of women also appeal to Scripture, especially to parts of the writings of St. Paul. This raises the issue of biblical authority and interpretation, to which we feel compelled to make a detailed response. We will attempt

1. to state clearly the fundamental assumptions about the relationship between Biblical exegesis and the faith of the Church which come to expression in the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church and
2. to set out in detail our understanding of the utterances of Scripture which bear upon this issue.

2. We remind the members of the Uniting Church, ministers, candidates for the ordained ministries and, in particular, Presbyteries - which have responsibility for the act of ordination - that the Basis of Union affirms the ordination of women.

The Basis of Union articulates the nature of the Uniting Church including its understanding of ministry.

Paragraph 14 reads:

"The Uniting Church, from inception, will seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to recognise among her members men and women called of God to preach the Gospel, to lead the people in worship, to care for the flock, to share in

government and to serve those in need in the world."

Candidates asking the Church to ordain them as ministers in this denomination must understand and affirm the Basis of Union in total before their ordination can take place. If they cannot in good conscience affirm the ordination of women or work together in joint settlement with women ministers, we believe it would be wrong to ordain them to a ministry in the X Uniting Church. It is true that:

" 'to adhere to the Basis of Union' is understood as willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in this Basis. Such adherence allows for difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith." ¹

We would argue that the matter of the ordination of women would be as close to the 'substance of faith' as for example, the ordination of black persons.

3. We affirm that the Holy Spirit has called and continues to call women as well as men to the ministry of the Word.

We affirm with joy, and find it impossible to deny, that the Spirit has equipped many women with gifts and graces for the ministry of the Word. We believe there is 'no gift without its corresponding service' ². Christ's people, seeing the gifts, cannot hinder the service: that would be fighting against the Spirit who gives the gift, against Christ who calls into service. We cannot declare unfit for service those whom Christ by the Spirit declares fit. Indeed, we are bound "to provide for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows upon them" ³ by ordering our corporate life accordingly.

In practice, we have found that even where the faithful have been doubtful about, or even opposed to, the ordination of women they have been unable to refuse to accept the faithful service of word and sacrament rendered by a woman. Where the gospel is faithfully proclaimed, those who recognize the gospel receive it. Who will reject the word of Christ because it comes through a woman? Who will refuse to receive the bread and wine and the water of baptism because they are administered by a woman? Whether male or female, we are 'earthen vessels.' Yet the faithful recognize and receive the word and the bread not because the minister is male or female but because they understand who really ministers these to them—Christ, the true and only Minister and Pastor.

4. We recognize that in ordaining women as well as men to the ministry of the Word we, in company with other churches, have departed from an almost universal practice of the church throughout most of its history. We believe we do so in obedience to the

Gospel.

We do not believe we are introducing something new; rather, we believe we are at last acting on an imperative which was part of the gospel of Christ from the beginning but in the past, for all kinds of reasons, was obscured and not put into practice, even by the early church, as it should have been. Again, this is nothing new. Krister Stendahl has argued that the New Testament itself contains "elements, glimpses which point beyond and even 'against' the prevailing view and practice of the New Testament Church"⁴. We would speak rather of glimpses which point beyond the prevailing view and practice of the later New Testament Church but we strongly support his contention that the gospel is greater than its bearers. It is only in recent history that Christians have come to acknowledge that the institution of slavery is contrary to the gospel; no Christian now would defend the opposite view, even though one can appeal to Scripture in support of slavery and the church has in the past actually done so. It is now universally recognised that the gospel itself stood in tension with a centuries-long practice of the church. The good news is that the gospel won!

We believe the gospel is winning, and will win completely also, in the matter of the ordination of women. To serve its victory, we enter into dialogue with some of the major objections to the ordination of women that are raised by some sister denominations (Section 7). We pray that we may do this both boldly and in a spirit of humility and service.

3. A BRIEF HISTORY

3.1 WHAT WAS THE POSITION OF THE THREE CHURCHES PRIOR TO UNION?

Congregational

The ordination of women had already been accepted by each of the three churches which came together to form the Uniting Church in Australia. The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church reaffirms that position. Although this is not the place to present a detailed history of the movement leading to the recognition of the ministry of women, we feel it is important to note the main steps which led to that recognition.

The first woman to be ordained in Australia, the Revd. Winifred Kiek, was ordained within the Congregational Union of South Australia in 1926. There appear to have been no obstacles to the ordination of a woman, and women have been ordained in Australian Congregational Churches since that time.

Methodist

In 1927 the President-General answered a request for a ruling from the President of the Victoria and Tasmania Conference with a ruling stating that the regulations of the Methodist Book of Laws relating to candidates for the ministry were based on the assumption that all candidates would be men.⁵

Presbyterian

In 1929, the General Conference appointed a committee 'to gather information as to the practicability of admitting women to the Ministry of our Church'⁶. In an address to the members and adherents of the Church, the same Conference, referring to the debate on this issue, stated that 'a majority, while in substantial agreement upon the principle involved, felt that the practical difficulties were so great as to warrant further discussion in the Annual Conferences'. The matter was referred to the Conferences, Quarterly Meetings and Synods for report to the next General Conference.⁷

In 1932 the General conference affirmed 'the principle that an unmarried woman who believes herself called to the work of the ministry of our Church, should be allowed to offer under the conditions prescribed in the Book of Laws'. In view of 'the practical difficulties occasioned by our itinerancy, and also in view of the vote registered in our Church courts', a committee was appointed to consider 'the types of ministry for which women are specially fitted.'⁸

In 1935 the report of the above committee was adopted, and the principle that unmarried women might offer for the ministry re-affirmed. However, practical difficulties occasioned by itinerancy led the Conference to decide that at that time the Church was unable to accept women candidates into its ministry. As an alternative an Order of Deaconesses was proposed. This was referred back to the Committee.⁹

In 1957 the question of the practicability of the admission of women to the ordained ministry of the church was referred to a commission.¹⁰ The General Conference of 1966 saw no difficulties which could not be overcome with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the Standing Committee was given the power to act and make it possible for Annual Conferences of 1968 to admit women candidates.¹¹

The first woman minister in the Methodist Church in Australia, the Revd. Margaret Sanders, was ordained in 1969.

The General Assembly of 1957 sustained an overture from the Presbytery of North Sydney which stated that 'admission of women [to the Eldership or Ministry] would be permitted by the doctrine and teaching of the Presbyterian Church of Australia'. The question was referred to the G.A.A. Committee on "The Nature and Function of the Ministry".¹² This Committee, reporting to the General Assembly in 1959, referred to the wide diversity of opinion on the subject throughout the world, and stated:

"Increasingly it is being recognized that the subject of the ordination of women to the

Ministry raises many serious questions, not only of a practical nature, but also with respect to the nature of Biblical authority and exegesis (particularly in relation to the Pauline writings) and bearings on ecumenical relationships and Christian unity"¹³

In 1962 the Committee reported that it was of the opinion that the whole discussion of the place of women in the ministry of the church had to be put into a wider context.¹⁴ Consequently, a new committee was established on the Service of the Laity in the Church and Community, which reported in 1964 that special work had been done by the Revd. Alan Smart B.A., B.D. specifically on the place of women in the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments. Mr. Smart's interim report provided information from contacts made with overseas groups studying this question, namely, the Church of Scotland, the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches. The Committee defined the general problem as 'Does the Gospel through its very nature require masculinity in the Ministry?'¹⁵

In 1967 the Committee reported slow progress in the studies on women in the ministry, referring to 'unsatisfactory argumentation' in documents obtained for study.¹⁶

In 1970 the Revd. Alan Smart presented a third and final report. The report confined consideration of the issue to 'the fundamental Biblical and Theological problem of whether a Reformed Church, which is under the authority of the Word of God contained in Holy Scripture, may admit women to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments?' Non-theological or 'practical' factors were deliberately excluded from this and previous reports.¹⁷

The report concludes:

(1) Careful exegesis of Scripture, in the light of modern Biblical scholarship, has shown that it is impossible to justify the continued exclusion of women from the Ministry by a straightforward appeal to Scripture.

(2) The key theological arguments for restricting the Ministry to men only have been shown to be so defective, particularly in their logic, that they can no longer be defended. Therefore they ought to be abandoned completely.

(3) A dynamic and authentic "Biblical" approach to the contemporary world demands that the Church demonstrate a style of life in which barriers such as sex are removed and that men and women share the fullest possible partnership in the total ministry of Christ's Church. Such a partnership of men and women will include the particular Ministry of the Word

and Sacraments.

To the question with which this report began, namely, "whether a Reformed Church, which is under the authority of the Word of God contained in Holy Scripture, may admit women to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments", we can now answer with a decisive "Yes". A Reformed Church not only *may* but *ought* to admit women to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments in the light of the present day understanding of the Word of God contained in Holy Scripture.¹⁸

This General Assembly sustained overtures from the General Assembly of Victoria and the General Assembly of New South Wales seeking the provision of a new Article of Agreement to declare women eligible for admission to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments. The overtures were referred to State assemblies and Presbyteries for consideration and comment. Fifty Presbyteries approved the remit and three disapproved. All State Assemblies approved, and the General Assembly of 1974 approved the admission of women to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments.

The Revd. M.J. Thalheimer was the first woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church in Australia, in October 1974.

3.2 THE PRESENT

At the time of Church Union there were thirty-six (36) women in the ordained ministry. In 1985 there were 101, a huge percentage increase. In the same year there were 2323 ordained men in the ordained ministry (including those retired and in other forms of work), which means that women constituted 4.16% of the ordained ministry. There is an increasing number of women in theological colleges, and in the future one can expect that the ordained ministry will reflect less of a gender bias.

While women have generally found the ordained ministry to be a positive and enriching experience, there have also been difficulties.

"...the experience of women in their theological training, calls and settlements indicates that ordination alone does not mean immediate acceptance. Some are deeply hurt by the rejection they have experienced and angry and saddened by the refusal of churches to use fully the gifts and skills they bring."¹⁹

Human sin in the form of jealousy, suspicion and domination does find its reflection in the life of the Church in this area as well as in any other. We are called in Christ to conquer these things, not give in to them.

4. THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

In explaining why the Uniting Church in Australia, together with many evangelical and reformed churches around the world, ordains both men and women to the ministry of the Word, contrary to the tradition of the Church through many centuries, we must consider the exegesis of the Bible and the historical stance of the Orthodox, Catholic and Reformed traditions.

Before proceeding to this analysis, it is necessary to state the fundamental assumption which the Uniting Church in Australia holds about the relationship between Biblical exegesis and the faith of the Church, and the relationship between historical traditions and the faith of the Church. Scholars may differ little about the exegesis of relevant New Testament passages or about the shape of the historical tradition, yet hold very different views on how these should be applied to the faith of the Church.

The UCA, coming from the traditions of reformed and evangelical churches, understands that Jesus Christ is the Word of God. The astonishing message of God's unlimited love for human beings revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the message which calls the Church into being, so that it may offer its worship and obedience to God in Christ, by the Holy Spirit. The scriptures are prophetic and apostolic witness to the Word of God.(i.e. to Jesus Christ). They are an essential witness through which the Church hears the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church reads the Scriptures to hear the gospel again and again.

When we ask ourselves how to order the life of the church today, the fundamental question for us is therefore not, 'What did the New Testament writers think about this?' nor 'How did the New Testament Church order its life?' although of course much is to be learned from that. The fundamental question for us today, and for every period of history is rather, 'What is the gospel of Jesus Christ?' This is then followed by, 'What does the gospel imply for the ordering of the Church?'

Christians of the first century sought to respond to the Lordship of Christ in a variety of ways. Their response will challenge us in turn to make our response with the same seriousness. But our faith is not in the church but in Jesus Christ as the Lord of the church. We must model our life on the gospel of Christ, and on the New Testament Church only in so far as it faithfully responds to that gospel. Indeed, once we have come to see the gospel through the Scriptural witness, we cannot exclude the possibility that New Testament exegesis will reveal cases where the writers fail to see the full implications of the gospel.

Similarly, it is important to consider the traditions of

the Church through the centuries, as that life of communal thought and prayer, of worship and obedience, in which the Church has sought to hear the gospel and respond to it in love and obedience. But a study of what the Church has done over the centuries is not yet a statement of what the Church should have done, or what we should do today. The normal practice of the Church must still be examined in the light of the gospel. There will be occasions when the gospel calls for a change in some aspect of the Church's life which has gone unquestioned for many centuries.

It would be arrogant indeed to suggest that the study of the Church's traditions is without value. We are not the first generation to reflect on the call of the gospel to the Church: other generations have done so before us. If a widespread consensus has been reached over the centuries, there will normally be good reasons for it; we must take note and weigh these reasons carefully before concluding that the consensus is wrong. However, this caution cannot be used to prevent change from occurring if, after careful thought, the practice of the Church Catholic is shown to be out of harmony with a fundamental implication of the gospel.

It goes without saying that the church should not change its practice simply because of the spirit or opinions of the age. Our age is one in which discrimination of any kind on grounds of sex is widely condemned. We cannot just move with whatever the age requires, but neither can we refuse to consider an issue simply because it is in accord with a movement in society. Whenever the church finds itself confronted by contemporary society with a new issue, its first concern must be to discern what the implications of the gospel are for the issue in question. In other words, our fundamental question, whether with regard to the Bible or tradition or trends in society, is always the same: 'What course of action is truest to the mind of Christ insofar as we are able to understand it?'

5. THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE

In order to answer what we see as the fundamental question we must listen to the witness of the Bible, for it is through that witness that we hear Christ, the Word of God, that we know the gospel and discern the mind of Christ.

The whole New Testament has very little to say about the ordination of anyone, and nothing specifically about the ordination of women. Neither proponents nor opponents of the ordination of women can refer directly to Scripture. The question of the ordination of women has acquired in our time an altogether new urgency. When new questions emerge, the Biblical witness points us to the guidance of the Spirit.²⁰ In applying the gospel to a new situation there is always the risk of

arbitrariness; this risk is inescapable and cannot be avoided. The witness of Scripture, however, gives us certain guidelines and principles.

5.1 THE NEW EQUALITY IN CHRIST

5.1.1 The Ministry of Jesus

In his ministry, Jesus addresses and encounters women in the same way as men. We take this fact so much for granted that it is easy to overlook its significance. In Jesus' time, this was striking and unusual. The structure of the synagogue and of Jewish public life was strongly masculine.

Yet, in John 4 Jesus speaks with a woman in public — something no respectable rabbi would do, revealing himself to her as the Messiah. Her response is to become, in effect, the first apostle to those outside the Jewish faith. In John 11, after a theological discussion with Martha, Jesus announces to her that he is the resurrection and the life. This prompts a confession which is functionally parallel to Peter's confession of Christ in Matthew's and Mark's gospels.

Jesus gives a woman the full dignity of an Israelite.²¹ He not only allows Mary to sit at his feet listening to his teaching - in the traditional posture of a student of Torah (no rabbi would allow a woman to study Torah!); he affirms that to do just that is the one thing needful and more important than the traditional female role shown by Martha.

He lets himself be touched by women²², including a woman who was unclean and therefore untouchable by virtue of "a flow of blood"²³. He calls her "Daughter".

Jesus is accompanied and supported by a number of women disciples, an exceptional fact in the Palestinian world ²⁴.

He appears to them after his resurrection. In all likelihood, the male disciples of Jesus went into hiding after his arrest and condemnation, so that the only followers of his to witness his crucifixion were women²⁵. Again, it is women who are the first recipients of the gospel of his resurrection ²⁶. By their presence at cross and tomb, they are decisive for the very continuity of the movement after Jesus's arrest and execution.

In his parables Jesus speaks readily of the daily life of women. There are pairs of parables on the same theme, one involving men, one women - the watchful servant and the ten maidens, the friend at midnight and the importunate widow, the lost sheep and the lost coin.

Where woman is put down, treated as property or chattel, Jesus protects and defends her ²⁷. Where the

Mosaic Law gave to the husband and him alone the right of divorce, Jesus forbids all divorce. This freedom towards women is in line with his acceptance of all that is despised, weak and of no account (women and children, pagans and Samaritans, prodigals and prostitutes). In his freedom and love, he transcends the religious Law (sabbath regulations, ritual purity laws etc.) as well as the taboos and divisions of the world.

Woman, like man, gains her dignity and personhood from the address and visitation of God in Christ. She, like man, is called to faith and obedience ("your faith has saved you"). Natural or biological superiority or inferiority becomes irrelevant: when a woman in the crowd praises motherhood/womanhood ("Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!") Jesus' reply is "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"²⁸. The only thing that matters is the grace of God in Christ; and the only thing that matters as far as the human response is concerned is faith.

5.1.2 Women and the Twelve

No women were included among the twelve apostles. This fact is sometimes used today to argue that "only men can be ministers." In our opinion this is not legitimate.

We believe the Twelve had a unique, once-and-for-all historical function. For one thing, they exercise the once-and-for-all function of witnessing to the foundational events, particularly to the resurrection²⁹. But this is something which they share with other eye witnesses. What is the significance of Jesus' selection, from within that wider circle of witnesses, of a group of twelve and, more specifically, twelve men?

This is clearly a highly symbolic action, one which articulates his call to the whole of Israel, the people of the twelve tribes. The Twelve were to be the first fruits, the nucleus, of the new people.³⁰ For such a symbolic action to be effective, it was clearly necessary to call twelve *men*, since the founders of the twelve tribes were twelve men.

Such a reconstruction, however, by no means entails the conclusion that Jesus envisaged the Twelve as the models and precursors of the office-bearers of a later church. Indeed, such a conclusion is rendered highly unlikely by the fact that they appear to have played no part of great significance in the early days of the church in Jerusalem. It is clear that they were accorded a certain pre-eminence in the counsels and leadership of the early Church, but more than that can hardly be said. They faded out of the picture rather early. It was certainly not they, as a group, who initiated the Gentile Mission³¹.

Nor do we find the term 'apostle' restricted to the Twelve in our earliest records, viz. the Pauline epistles. Paul uses the term to denote a much wider group than the original Twelve, a group which certainly included himself³² and probably also some women (see below 5.1.3).

To a large extent, ministry and authority in the early Church seem to have been spontaneous and charismatic in nature. It was probably the onset of persecution under Herod Agrippa I (37-44 A. D.) that led to the emergence of a firmer pattern of leadership. In that development the key figure was not one of the Twelve but James, the Lord's brother. It is highly unlikely that this would have happened, had Jesus himself seen the Twelve as the precursors of the office-bearers of a later Church.

We call the Church apostolic because its witness and faith is based on the foundation laid by the first apostles: Christ. Faithfulness to the apostolic teaching is entrusted to all of us, the whole body, in all its ministries. The ministers of word and sacrament are set aside to bear special responsibility for the safeguarding of this teaching; they are apostolic in so far as the Spirit enables them to be faithful. They are equipped and enabled for their ministry by the Spirit who gives the necessary gifts and teaches us the things of Christ.

5.1.3 Women in the Early Church

We believe that Jesus called forth a discipleship of equals. We would argue that the early Church, reflecting the special impact made by Jesus on women in Israel, included women among its leaders from the very beginning. The new equality was expressed in the early church by the participation of women in a variety of ministries.

It may well be that Paul, in his famous statement in Gal. 3: 27-28 about the rendering void of all distinctions in Christ, was actually quoting from a baptismal hymn or credal fragment in common use across a range of communities³³. This would indicate that Paul's view was not some kind of radical new breakthrough but one which was widely accepted in the early church.

Moreover, there are a number of references in Paul's letters to women both as prominent leaders and as missionaries who had been active both before Paul and independently of him. Paul's own references to these women show that he himself esteemed them highly both as human beings and colleagues. The language of Paul's greetings to them suggests "great warmth, appreciation and even intimacy in the relationships with such female collaborators"³⁴.

Thus Euodia and Syntyche laboured side by side with him in the gospel³⁵. Alas! not a few scholars, from the

first century on, have tried to turn them into men³⁶.

Again, in Rom. 16: 1ff, Paul gives a warm recommendation to a woman called Phoebe. He also gives her three titles: sister, *diakonos* and *prostatis*. Yet her significance for the early Christian mission is far from being fully recognised. One commentator after another minimises the significance of her titles. It is, for example, an anachronism to describe her as a deaconess. There is no good reason to doubt that she was a minister of the church, on a par with men.

It is also inadequate to translate *prostatis* by 'helper'. The natural and obvious sense of this word is 'patron', 'protector', and there is no reason why it should not be given its full weight here. Paul's choice of this word would have suggested to his readers a person of considerable influence, who had espoused the cause of the church in Cenchreae.

Again, in Rom. 16: 7, Paul sends greetings to two people whose names (in the accusative case) are *Andronikon* and *Iounian*. The first is clearly a man's name. As for the second, only since the thirteenth century have commentators taken it to be the accusative of another masculine form, viz. *Iounias*³⁷. After all, the two people in question are described as apostles, and how could an apostle be a woman? But this view has to fly in the face of the fact that the masculine name, *Iounias*, is not attested. It is far more likely, therefore, that what we have here is the accusative of the feminine name, *Iounia*, which in its Latin form, *Junia*, is attested as a woman's name in the Hellenistic world of the Roman Empire. Indeed, several early Church fathers understood it this way, notably Chrysostom, who marvels at the devotion of this woman that she should be counted worthy of the name³⁸.

In Rom. 16, nearly one third of those to whom Paul sends greetings are women, and they are all said to have shared with him in the building up of the Christian communities. Nothing is said to distinguish the kind of work they were doing from that of men. Nothing is said which suggests that their work was of a subordinate character.

5.1.4 Neither Male nor Female: The Order of Creation Transcended

In Gal 3.24-29, Paul writes (in the context of a passionate argument opposing salvation by obedience to the law to salvation by faith in Christ alone):

"...the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus, you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for

you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

In the light both of the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of women in the early church, it is surely quite wrong to represent Paul as the one who made the great theological break-through, by first enunciating the principle³⁹ that in Christ "there is neither male nor female". We would rather hold that Gal 3.28 is a key expression not only of his own theology but of the self-understanding of the Christian missionary movement, which arose independently of him.

At the same time, we stress the importance of this passage for Paul's own theology and for the argument of the epistle as a whole. The central point of Galatians is that any priority of Jew over Gentile, master over slave, male over female with respect to the kingdom of God is abolished by the coming of Christ, the coming of faith. There is now one and only one thing that counts: the salvation brought by "our Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father"⁴⁰ offered to Jew and Gentile, slave and Greek, male and female alike. Through the faith that accepts that salvation, all are 'sons' of God; all are one in Christ through faith.

This does not mean that the distinctions as such are abolished: Jews are still Jews, Greeks are still Greeks; slave and master (there seems to be no urgency in the New Testament to emancipate slaves), man and woman remain what they are. "But in Christ, by baptism and hence *in the church* ... something has happened which transcends the Law itself and thereby even the order of creation."⁴¹ The phrase "neither (is there) 'male and female'," as it literally reads in the Greek, is a direct allusion to the creation stories in Genesis: "male and female he created them" (Gen 1.27). The distinction between male and female is, it is true, a basic given of creation, but in Christ there is something more important than 'male and female.' It is not 'male and female' that is the ultimate reality but the Risen Christ who pleases to dwell in all who believe in him.

Not to recognise this new reality by treating these distinctions (male/female; free/slave; Jew/Greek) as absolutes again, is to act as if Christ had never come, as if the new creation in him were not relevant. Trying to found the church's life on distinctions that have forever been declared void by Christ would be to reject the gospel altogether: hence Paul's passion and exasperation in the letter to the Galatians. For Paul, this is not a trivial matter but belongs to the very centre and basis of our faith. The issue at the time was the attempt to re-establish a fundamental distinction between Jew and Greek, apart from and in rebellion against the new

unity and equality in Christ. In our time the issue is the attempt to re-establish a fundamental distinction between male and female, apart from and in rebellion against the new unity in Christ. We believe in either case what is at stake is the gospel itself.

Opponents of the ordination of women sometimes argue that the principle here stated that "there is neither male nor female" applies only in a spiritual sense or that its fulfilment is reserved for heaven. Yet "the social and practical implications of the statement about Jew and Greek could not be neutralized in the church by limiting them to man's relationship to God"⁴². Certainly Paul did everything to apply this principle in practice in the life of the church. The new reality is lived out in the social dimensions of the church; it determines whether or not, as a Jew, you will sit at the same table with a Gentile, for example.

While in the New Testament there is no apparent urgency to emancipate slaves, the seeds of emancipation are clearly sown in the new relationship between Christian slave and Christian master, who are now equal sisters and brothers of the same Lord. A new freedom enters into their social relationship. For this to be implemented in society at large took many centuries - yet implemented it finally was.

For us today, the new reality in Christ will show itself in whether or not we will ordain women to the ministry of the word. Not to ordain women today is like saying: "In world affairs you may accept emancipation - and before God there is neither man nor woman - but in the church's life and its worship it is not so." Then one would have to go on to say 'In the world slaves are emancipated by now, but in the church that should not be so... etc.etc.'⁴³

We believe the new order in Christ of which Gal. 3: 28 speaks should be understood as the fulfilment of the original purpose of God in creation, as set out in Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 1 clearly depicts God creating man and woman as the two equal and complementary parts of the same human being and unique divine image. Even in Genesis 2, where man is created first and woman second, the point of the story is not subordination but the incompleteness of the man without the woman, and his delight in her when she is brought to him. The dominance of man over woman referred to in Genesis 3: 16 is not the intention of the Creator but the result of the Fall. Christ thus brings to fulfilment the unity and equality between men and

5.1.5 A New Creation

women willed by the Creator.

"So for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old order is gone and a new being is there to see," writes Paul in 2 Cor 5.17 (*New Jerusalem Bible*). We believe that as Christians we may live out of this hope. We may live out of the faith that Christ died for us, is alive in us, renewing the whole creation. He is therefore also renewing our human nature, whether male or female, remaking us in his image; the image of a renewed humanity where the sinful human divisions and mutual domination between race, status, religious moral goodness, and sex are 'rendered void', where all human beings may recognize Christ with all his grace in them, and themselves in Him. The image of the risen Christ transcends male/female; the maleness belonged to his earthly life (he had to be something!) but is irrelevant to his risen life. Any human being who believes in Christ may and does bear his image, and we are to treat each other no longer 'from a human point of view' (according to class, power, status, sex, race, intelligence, morality etc) but from God's point of view, who sees in each human being who believes in Christ, the image and reflection of Christ. This is our new identity. We do not as yet 'see' it (in terms of factual proof or irrefutable evidence) but we may believe in it, hope for it, and live by it as by a reality already reaching - from the future - into our life now, empowering us to live by the new order of the kingdom rather than by the old sinful order which still surrounds us and attempts to renew its hold on us.

Because all this is so, and because this is our hope and joy, and the hope and joy of the whole human race, we declare with Charles Wesley: "my heart is full of Christ and longs this glorious matter to declare." We would not declare it rightly if we declared it without woman. Male and female, slave and free, Greek and Jew together are the body of Christ, the image of Christ, and in their very unity the witness to Christ. The Christ for and in the one is also the Christ for and in the other. To proclaim Him by word, sacrament and pastoral care (the 'Ministry of the Word') is not a 'right,' neither for male nor for female, but a joyful calling and service of gratitude entrusted to those whom the Spirit so equips and appoints.

5.2 THE SUBORDINATION OF WOMEN

It must be frankly recognised that the New Testament does not speak with one voice on the question of the place of women in the Church. We do not think it either helpful or honest to harmonize or obscure these contradictions. They help to remind us that the New Testament is not a textbook of systematic theology, still less a code of Church law, but rather a collection of occasional writings from the Church's formative period which provides us with windows into a number of

different early Christian communities. The New Testament will not relieve us of the necessity to make our own faith decision, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

5.2.1 Contradictions in Paul?

Paul himself does not seem to speak with one voice. The same Paul whom we believe to be the clearest spokesperson in the New Testament for the freedom and equality of women, seems to insist that wives should be submissive to their husbands, that it is scandalous for women to speak publicly in worship, that "a man...is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man"⁴⁴ and so on. It is passages such as those which have given rise to the image of Paul still held by many people, inside the Church as well as outside it, as the original male chauvinist, "the founder of an age-long conspiracy to deny women their rights"⁴⁵. We maintain, however, that this image of Paul is a compound of prejudice and half-truth. It was able to arise and persist because of the obscurity of some of Paul's utterances. Not only has he expressed himself cryptically at certain crucial points, he has assumed in his readers a familiarity with contemporary circumstances, customs and concepts which we do not have.

Some Misunderstandings

Some misunderstandings we believe can be cleared away. It is often assumed, for example, to be an unquestioned fact that Paul was opposed to women playing any leading role in worship. We are convinced that such an assumption rests upon an uncritical reading of the texts.

I Corinthians 11:2-16: Praying with a veil?

In I Cor 11:2-16, according to the traditional interpretation, Paul is upset by the way that some women in the Corinthian church are praying or prophesying without wearing a veil. Some recent scholars, however, like Murphy-O'Connor⁴⁶, or Schüssler Fiorenza⁴⁷, have argued that what is upsetting Paul in the Corinthian community is the way in which certain members, *male and female*, are wearing their hair⁴⁸.

Whatever the occasion of the discussion may have been, Paul's primary concern seems clear. It is not whether or not women should pray or prophesy in public. This they are fully entitled to do, as citizens of the New Age. Rather, the issue is that whenever they do pray or prophesy in public they should do so appearing as women and not as pseudo-men. It may also be right, along with several recent authors, to read beneath the surface of Paul's expostulations here a rejection of anything moving even slightly in the direction of homosexuality⁴⁹. However that may be, the passage yields one fact that cannot be denied: women did pray and prophesy in the Pauline churches, and Paul

I Corinthians 7: Suspicion about sexuality?

accepted the practice. If he insists that women should wear something on their heads, while praying or prophesying, he is equally insistent that men should not.

"It is well for a man not to touch a woman", says Paul in v. 1b. This has often been regarded as proof both of Paul's neurotic suspicion of sexuality and resultant devaluation of women. Recent study, however, has suggested that the label "ascetic" properly belongs, not to Paul, but to a group of Corinthian extremists, whom Paul is actually countering in chapter 7. This chapter opens with an explicit statement that it is written in response to matters raised in a letter to Paul from Corinth. It is clear from later chapters of the epistle that the Corinthians had not been content merely to ask for guidance. They had put their own case and expected Paul to agree with them. We believe that in v.1b Paul is quoting from their own letter. The rest of the chapter, particularly with v. 2, should then be taken as Paul's rejoinder to the Corinthian position.

It appears that the Corinthian ascetics were proposing that all Christians should renounce marriage, or, at least, sexuality, but Paul pricks the bubble of their ascetic idealism. Partners are to practise abstinence only for a season and for prayer and by mutual consent. No one is to bully them into thinking that sex is evil or that marriage is wrong in and of itself.

It is true that Paul expresses a preference for the single state, but this is partly because he believes that the time is short and partly because he opts for the extended family of the Church rather than the nuclear family⁵⁰.

The remarkable thing about chapter 7, however, is that from start to finish Paul treats husband and wife as equals. Each time, Paul addresses himself to both husband and wife, even to the point of tautology and awkwardness. There is a striking mutuality of his statements about male and female rights and responsibilities, a mutuality which diverges sharply from the ethos of the surrounding culture, which tended to see everything solely from the point of view of male rights and convenience⁵¹. Here Paul expresses in practical admonition the new equality of males and females as brothers and sisters in the Lord, both equally responsible to the Lord.

5.2.2 The Order of Creation

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 - the head of a woman is her husband?

However, the implication of the subordination of women to men may appear in I Corinthians 11:2-16 - a passage abounding in obscurities, that can hardly be said to have surrendered all its secrets. V. 3 reads in the RSV: "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God."

Obviously a metaphorical meaning is intended for the word "head", but which metaphorical meaning is the correct one? The word is commonly understood here to mean "ruler", "authority". That is Hebrew and English idiom, but it is not a native Greek idiom. Liddell and Scott in their standard Greek-English lexicon do not give the meaning "ruler" as a sub-category within the metaphorical usages of the word, nor is there any suggestion in the article on *kephale* in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* that the word ever had such a metaphorical meaning in Greek literature.

But what about Hebrew? The Hebrew word *rosh*, "head", is used in the Old Testament to mean "ruler", but, when it is so used, it refers to the sovereignty of one person, not over another person, but over a community. Furthermore, in such contexts it is regularly translated in the Septuagint by *archon* or *archegos*.

There is, however, a common, idiomatic use of *kephale* in Greek to denote a source, and this meaning fits v. 3, as well as v. 8. If this is correct, then no subordination of woman to man is intended; what is in mind is the order of the creative events. This interpretation, moreover, is no novelty; it was the view of Cyril of Alexandria⁵². Brendan Byrne's view is that "Paul is setting up a sequence, not so much of derived existence, but of derived authority or capacity to do something," and that his statements imply, "if not precisely subordination, at least a derived status for woman"⁵³.

So it is open to debate whether subordination is really implied in v.3. But what about v.7, where Paul writes that "a man...is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man." Many commentators give to the word "glory" here the sense of "reflection", but there are no clear instances elsewhere, either in biblical or secular Greek, of the use of *doxa* to mean "reflection", and the same thing is true of the Hebrew word *kabod*. How, then, are we to understand the word?

Feuillet has pointed out that the glory of God can denote not only the manifestation of God's power or attributes but also that which does him honour or glorifies him. He therefore suggests that here man should be understood as the glory of God in the sense that, as the chief work of the created universe, he does God honour.

In what sense, then, is woman "the glory of man"? The passage which Paul appears to have in mind here is not Genesis 1 but rather the Yahwistic account in chapter 2. This passage considers woman in her specific role, insofar as she is distinguished from man. Though drawn from man's side, she is man's invaluable and irreplaceable complement. She is precisely the

helpmeet whom he had sought in vain among the other creatures. She is, therefore, the glory of man, not in the sense of being his reflection, since she is different from him, but rather in the sense that she represents his joy and pride, by bringing him an incomparable wealth of which he would otherwise be deprived⁵⁴. The reason why Paul speaks of man as 'The image and glory of God' but does not say the same about women, in contrast to Gen. 1:26f, where man and woman together are declared to be created in God's image and likeness, is probably that at this point he is thinking of the two creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 together, in a somewhat harmonized way.⁵⁵

We now turn to v. 10, which, in a literal translation, reads, "For this reason, the woman ought to have authority on the head because of the angels." It seems clear that Paul is referring to some sort of head-covering. But why call it "authority"? The view has long been current that the word denotes a sign of the authority exercised over the woman by her husband. There is now a growing consensus of scholarly opinion, however, that the Greek cannot be made to yield any such sense. Neither in Paul's own usage nor in the whole range of Greek literature is *exousia* ever used in the passive sense of an authority to which the subject must submit. The word means not power submitted to but power exercised by someone, authority, autonomy, liberty⁵⁶. So Paul's point must be that a woman should bear her sign of authority ('permit', 'licence',) on her head.

Furthermore, even if it were conceded that v. 3 implies, if not a subordinate, at least a derivative status for women, we still have Paul's clear statement in v. 11 that "in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman." There are indeed some signs that in this passage Paul is arguing against himself. He seems to feel ill at ease about his own argument, taking it back by reminding his readers of the new equality of male and female in Christ.⁵⁷

1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 - Should women keep silent?

In I Cor. 14: 33b-36 Paul admonishes women to keep silent in church meetings. Indeed, they are not even to ask questions. There are several reasons, however, why many scholars believe this passage to be a later insertion into the original letter. The history of the text of the New Testament shows that such insertions were not uncommon, and to scholars they are an everyday matter. Apart from many linguistic reasons, the main reason for not ascribing this passage to Paul is that it contradicts what he has just been saying in chapter 11, where he presupposes that women do have the right to preach and pray publicly. We do not believe there is any adequate way of harmonising these two passages, despite frequent attempts to do so. As Byrne puts it, "The sudden irruption of the injunction imposing

silence on the women...comes as something of a bolt from the blue"⁵⁸; (his own considered opinion is that it is "a reasonable exegetical judgment" that the verses are not authentically Pauline). Some manuscripts remove the verses in question to the end of the chapter.

Those who find such arguments convincing usually suppose that the verses in question are a gloss, i.e. an addition, stemming from the same circles as produced the Pastoral Epistles, which reflect similar sentiments and concerns. If Paul did write these verses, however, then we must decide which position lies nearer to the centre of his thought: that which is expressed in I Cor. 14: 33b-36, or that which is expressed most clearly in Gal. 3: 28. We cannot have it both ways. More importantly, we must decide which position lies nearer to the centre of the gospel which Jesus not only preached, but lived and embodied.

The Post-Pauline Literature

The 'subordination passages' in Paul's letters and those from the so-called "house tables", or tables of household duties in Col. 3: 18f and Eph. 5: 22-33 seem to have a common emphasis: one way or another they appeal, in support of the subordination of women, to the order of creation. In I Cor. 11.3-16, there is an appeal to the order of creation in support of Paul's contention that women should wear a veil when praying or prophesying. In I Peter 3.7 the wife is called the weaker vessel: an easier prey to the temptations and seductions of Satan just like Eve. In I Tim. 2: 11-15, where women are told to keep silent and by no means to teach or have authority over men, the reason given is that "Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty." In I Cor. 14.34f. Paul, if indeed it be Paul's voice that we are hearing, also appeals to the Law, alluding to Gen. 3.16.

All of these passages assign to women a clearly subordinate role. And I Timothy does rule out the possibility of women exercising leadership in the church. This has to be conceded. The question is how much weight should be given to these passages in shaping the order of the Church in our own day? Should they be given more weight than, say, Gal. 3.28?

Most scholars believe that Ephesians and I Timothy were written in Paul's name after his death, and many would say the same about Colossians. In certain respects, all of these letters reflect a development away from Paul's thought. Brendan Byrne speaks of the later New Testament texts reflecting a "relentless drift towards the dominance of men", and adds that the more one charts this drift, the more one comes to appreciate what a mighty impulse in the opposite

direction the Christian movement must have received in its beginnings from Jesus himself, an impulse which the later records never quite managed to obscure⁵⁹.

Robin Scroggs, who also regards all three letters as Post-Pauline, has drawn attention to a significant point of contrast with the acknowledged Pauline letters. He points out that early Christian writers tended to adopt two forms of Hellenistic parenesis or exhortation, the catalogues of vices and virtues and the house tables. It is precisely in the latter that various hierarchies and dominant/subordinate societal structures are accepted. In the acknowledged Pauline letters there is a liberal use made of the catalogues but never any use of the house tables. On the other hand, the hortatory sections of the Deutero-Pauline letters are heavily laden with the house tables. This can hardly be accidental⁶⁰.

There is, however, one important difference between the house tables of the New Testament letters and their prototypes in Hellenistic literature. In the latter, the exhortations to responsible behaviour are nearly always addressed only to husbands, fathers and masters. In the New Testament, they are addressed equally to husbands and wives, fathers and children, masters and slaves.

It is also worth noting that, whereas the author of Ephesians says several times that the married woman ought to be subject to her husband, he never tries to establish this obligation by referring to the harsh text, Gen. 3: 16. The Old Testament text which he has in mind is rather the Yahwistic account of Genesis 2, which represents woman as man's partner, in whom he discovers, as it were, half of his own being.

The Pastoral Epistles

While the Pastoral letters contain several echoes of Paul's teaching and presuppose his authority as a living force, they really belong to a different setting and may not even stem from communities directly founded by him. They were written at a time when the Church was fighting against Gnosticism⁶¹. In this movement, every individual was his/her own teacher and had his/her own "spirit"⁶². Moreover, women were playing a dangerous role⁶³. This situation has strongly influenced the author's judgment. It seems clear from passages like I Tim. 2: 8-15 that a concerted effort is being made to suppress expectations on the part of women to play a more significant part in community life, expectations which may have survived from the earlier period of equality. Hence, in Tit. 2: 3-5 we find the domestic role of women being fully reasserted, as in the traditional household codes. The overriding motive is the good reputation of the community among outsiders. The word of God must not be brought into disrepute⁶⁴. A similar tone pervades the fairly lengthy instruction concerning widows in I Tim. 5: 3-16. The

5.3 HOW SHALL WE RESOLVE THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT VOICES?

enemy is to be given no occasion to revile us. In a hostile and suspicious world, the community must exemplify those household virtues which that world holds in the highest regard.

At first sight, it might seem that the obvious thing to do is to be guided by the majority. Once one has taken that decision and worked out which position represents the majority view, it is tempting to make the further move of explaining away the exceptions, so as to arrive at a uniform picture. Thus, as we noted earlier, some have argued that Gal. 3: 27-28 is true only in a spiritual sense or that its fulfilment is reserved for heaven. It is by reasoning of this kind that some scholars are convinced that the ordination of women is contrary to the New Testament.

If it could be shown, however, as we believe that it can, that some of the New Testament's utterances on the role of women in the Church arise directly from reflection on the gospel, whereas others are prompted primarily by a prudential concern for the Church's image in society, then priority should surely be given to the former. We have found examples of the latter kind of utterance in the Pastoral Epistles. The author or authors do not speak under the constraint of the gospel so much as out of a concern that the Church should enjoy the good opinion of society. Paul's dominant theme, on the other hand, is different: this is what God has done in Christ; this is what you *are* because of what God has done; now go and live it out in all your relationships.

This, of course, raises a wider issue, viz. that of authority. Our own position is, as we have already stated in Section 4, that our ultimate authority is not the letter of scripture but rather Christ himself, the living Word of God, to whom scripture bears witness and who speaks through it.

It needs to be recognised that none of the texts commonly quoted in this debate specifically addresses the *ordination* of women. In fact, the whole New Testament has very little to say about the *ordination* of anyone. What we do find is clear evidence of God's initiative in the direction of involving women in ministry.

Are we to suppose that God's initiative in this new direction reached its climax in New Testament times? Or did God intend the Church to continue on in the same direction? We have already referred to the issue of slavery. We believe God intended movement in the *direction* in which the New Testament pointed. We believe this direction is towards the new equality of male and female in Christ, and toward a new creation in Christ transcending all old orders including that of

6. THE TRADITION OF THE CHURCH

6.1 CHURCH PRACTICES 100 - 500 A.D.⁶⁵

male and female.

We cannot have it both ways. If we take the position that the New Testament rules out the emancipation and therefore the ordination of women, then we ought, in the name of consistency, to discontinue a number of the current practices of all major Western churches. We should forbid women to speak publicly in church, and forbid them to teach or have any authority over men, and advocate subordination within the church, regardless of any trends in society. We doubt if there would be any churches that would be prepared to take these steps.

We must now consider the thought and practice of the Church throughout the centuries. This will raise two questions:

1) whether reasons have been given over the centuries which would cause this church to reconsider its opinion, and

2) whether the fact of a continuous tradition of non-ordination of women to the priesthood is itself a reason to maintain this tradition.

Already in the Pastorals it is assumed that an *episkopos* is a man, but a *diakonos* may be a man or a woman.⁶⁶ It seems clear that the Church did not ordain any women to the presbyterate or the episcopate at any time after these two institutions appear as distinct from each other in Ignatius. We do not give much credence to isolated claims of exceptions⁶⁷, because the weight of patristic comment is so strongly against any thought of a woman having any form of authority over men. This we recognise as a change from the fluid position of the early Church where, as already discussed, women played a full part. We accept that the *presbytera* in Basil's *Short rules*⁶⁸ was probably the senior woman of a monastic community, although the usage seems to be unique.

By contrast, there was a widespread, but not universal practice of ordination of women as deaconesses, especially in Syria and Asia Minor. Their role is discussed in the Didascalia and the Apostolic Constitutions, and deaconesses are frequently mentioned by the Greek fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries. Their role was confined to ministry with women: assisting at the baptism of women, teaching women and welcoming women at worship. This continued until the tenth century in the East and remains canonical, if not an actual option in Orthodoxy.

The ordination of deaconesses was less welcome in the West, and was condemned by the councils of Nîmes (394), Épaon (517), and the second council of Orleans (533)⁶⁹.

According to Gryson's analysis, the reasons for restricting the role of women in the Church lie in the directions, mainly in the pastorals and 1 Corinthians, that a woman should not teach in the Church. This is expressed mainly in passages which speak of the role of women teachers in Marcionism and Montanism. Thus Tertullian, writing against Marcionism refers to Paul:

"Once more, when he enjoins upon women silence in the Church, that they are not to speak, at all events with the idea of learning - though he has already shown that even they have the right to prophesying - it was from the law that he received authority for putting the woman in subjection"⁷⁰

Also Origen, writing against the Montanists:

"I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men.' He wants women to "teach what is good" in the sense that they have to inculcate chastity in "young women", not young men, for it is not becoming for a woman to be a teacher of men."⁷¹

And the Didascalia

"It is neither right nor necessary that women should be teachers and especially concerning the name of Christ and the redemption of his passion. For you have not been appointed to this, O women and especially widows, that you should teach, but that you should pray and entreat the lord God."⁷²

There are two exceptions to the principle that women should not teach men: a woman could teach her non-believing husband, and a woman might prophesy. These exceptions are also justified from Paul. It was also argued that a woman should not baptise. This was justified by the argument that Jesus was not baptised by his mother Mary⁷³. Such teaching suggests that some women were, in fact, baptising, but it is not clear whether they were in orthodox churches.

Women were also excluded from presiding at the eucharist.

Thus the Ecclesiastical Canons of the apostles:

"John said, " You have forgotten, my brethren, that our teacher, when he asked for the bread and the cup, and blessed them, saying, "this is my body and my blood, did not permit these (the women) to stand with us."⁷⁴

In Tertullian we also find the claim that women are excluded from the sacerdotal office⁷⁵. In the fourth century it became common for the word *hiereus* to be applied to presbyters and bishops, which then invited comparison with the all-male priesthoods of the Old Testament. This comparison also led to canon law requirements. For instance, only a person without

blemish could become a *hiereus*.

Alongside this, the fathers clearly believe that it is part of the God-given order of creation, that men should command and women should obey. They based this on Old Testament precedent.

Thus Origen:

"For it is improper for a woman to speak in an assembly" no matter what she says, even if she says admirable things, or even saintly things, that is of little consequence, since they come from the mouth of a woman.⁷⁶

Also the Apostolic Constitutions:

'For the woman is the body of the man, taken from his side, and subject to him, from whom she was separated for the procreation of children. For he says, "he shall rule over you". For the principal part of the woman is the man, as being her head. But if in the foregoing institutions we have not permitted them to teach, how will anyone allow them, contrary to nature, to perform the office of a priest?'⁷⁷

It is clear that the reason why the Fathers restricted the role of women was a desire to follow commands and precedents in the scriptures. This desire led them to restrict the role of women much more than contemporary Greek society and some of the heretical sects did. They were selective in the use of scripture. The comments of these fathers do not provide any reason to deny ordination to women over and above those from scripture, which have already been considered. If we read the same Bible that they read and come to different conclusions, it is because we read the Bible not as a book of commands and precedents, but as apostolic witness to Christ.

6.2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS TRADITION

However the further question arises whether the fact of a universal tradition is itself a reason to maintain this tradition. It could be argued that the Spirit has guided the Church, even if the Church did not understand the reason why it had been guided in this way. Here there is a fundamental difference between Reformed tradition and some other traditions concerning the relationship between church traditions and the gospel.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, it is understood that the worship of the Church throughout the ages is not open to revision in the light of theological thought. Rather, theological thought must seek to understand the worship and order of the Church. Thus the Russian Orthodox response to "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry"⁷⁸ contains the following statement:

"The faith of the Church through the ages contained the fullness of the apostolic tradition preserved and witnessed by the church in its teaching, conciliar experience, liturgical-

sacramental devotion, gracious holiness of the life and teaching of its holy martyrs, confessors, fathers and doctors."

Therefore, the possibility of ordination of women to the presbyterate cannot be envisaged. One finds Orthodox statements which confess difficulty in explaining why the church does not ordain women, and conclude not that there is no reason, but that theologians need to reflect further to discern the reason.⁷⁹

Hence the Orthodox Church in America said:

"But we Orthodox Christians cannot admit that two thousand years of Christian practice in virtually all traditions should be changed without deep and serious reflection, prayer, and careful consideration of all aspects of the issue."

Roman Catholic statements reveal a debate on this issue. Thus Inter Insigniores gives 'The Church's constant tradition' as the first reason for refusing ordination to women.

However, there is no shortage of Roman Catholic writers who point out that the length of a belief or practice in the Church does not in itself make that belief or practice part of the Church's normative Tradition. Rather one must weigh the significance of that belief or practice to discern whether it relates organically to the Tradition.⁸⁰

How does the Church assess the fact of a continuous tradition as an argument in theology? Clearly there is need for a continuing encounter at depth between Reformed and Orthodox theology. Both are agreed about the fundamental importance of Trinitarian and incarnational theology. Both find the Greek fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries as part of our common heritage of faith. The ecumenical movement has made reformed theology much more aware of the extent that it had read these fathers through an Augustinian perspective and so misunderstood them. The full implications of the reassessment remain to be seen.

An encounter between the traditions would expose the reality that our different views about the ordination of women reveal a more fundamental difference about the relationship between the gospel and aspects of the tradition of the Church.⁸¹ This issue is beyond the scope of this study. We can only bear witness to the profound nature of the difference and do so in prayer that one day this difference can be overcome. In the meantime we make the point that the Uniting Church is acting with integrity and obedience to the gospel as that obedience is understood from within a reformed theology.

We would also need to consider whether this difference

arises from any fundamental difference about Trinitarian and incarnational theology. We do not believe that it does, but that question will be considered in the next section.

7. THE ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

7.1 THE PRIEST AS ICON

We must now explore questions about whether there is a theological significance in a male priesthood. Some have argued that the priest should be male because the priest is an icon of Christ.

Within Roman Catholicism, this argument has been given considerable status by its use in *Inter Insignores*. It is the only theological argument used there. It takes up the classical thought that the priest acts *in persona Christi*, and concludes that, as a sign of this, there should be a 'natural resemblance' between Christ and his minister. It then uses the Biblical imagery which speaks of the Christ / Church relationship as a bridegroom/bride relationship. In response to objections it argues that Christ continues to be male in the glorified state. It replies to the objection that the priest also acts *in persona ecclesiae* - and therefore could be female - by arguing that the priest's action *in persona Christi* is primary, and the other is secondary.

The argument has also been used by Orthodox theologians, who see the issue of the maleness of the priest as an icon of Christ, and the whole issue as aligned to the issue of icons, and the denial of this as a quasi Nestorian denial of the real humanity of the Son of God as a particular human being within history. Kallistos Ware has written: 'The bishop or priest is therefore an imitator, image or sign of Christ, the one mediator and high priest. In short the icon is not to be equated with the prototype but nonetheless receives the honour referred to the prototype. He then quotes Schmemann: 'If the bearer, the icon and fulfiller of that unique priesthood, is man and not woman, it is because Christ is man and not woman'.⁸²

It seems to us that there are profound difficulties with this argument. The first one is the novelty of the argument. We do not know where this argument first occurs in theological literature, but no statement we know of finds any trace of it in any classical source. It is a doctrine which appears for the first time in the twentieth century.⁸³ It is puzzling that theologians who strongly stress their adherence to the faith of the Church throughout the ages, and to the organic unity of the scripture and tradition, should give such credence to a doctrine which has no precedent in either scripture or tradition.

The second difficulty is the question why likeness to

7.2 DIALOGUE WITH THE ORTHODOX TRADITION

Christ applies to the male/female distinction, and not to other distinctions within the human race. Why does the Church ordain people who have no Jewish descent, who have never been to Palestine, who do not speak the Aramaic language and whose skin colour or eye colour probably differs from that of Jesus? All these are given aspects of the real human life which the Son of God lived for our salvation, but the Church is rightly not concerned about the lack of a natural resemblance between Christ and the priest.

This issue is heightened by a study of the classic statements of the Christian faith. Certainly, the Son of God became human as a male, but the faith of the Church has never seen any ontological significance in this maleness. Rather it has focussed on the reality that he became human, and so the grace of God is freely offered to us all: women and men, old and young, of all races and languages. So John's gospel says 'the word became *sarx* 'flesh''. So the Nicene Creed affirms that for us humans *anthropous*, the Son *sarkothenta* 'became human'. Thus if one took the view that the priest is an icon of Christ, it does not follow that a woman cannot be such an icon simply because she is a woman.

The question of the role of men and women in the life of the Church has led Orthodox theologians to develop the theme of the irreducible ontological distinction between male and female, as a profound distinction given by God in creation as part of his loving purpose. It is argued that this distinction is grounded profoundly in Trinitarian and incarnational doctrine. Thus Schmemmann has said:

'I cannot discuss the problem itself because to do so would necessitate the elucidation of our approach, not to women and to priesthood only, but above all to God in his Triune life, to creation, fall and redemption, to the Church and the mystery of her life, to the deification of man and the consummation of all things in Christ. Short of all this, it would remain incomprehensible, I am sure, why the ordination of women to priesthood for us is tantamount to a radical and irreparable mutilation of the entire faith, the rejection of the whole scripture - and needless to say, the end of all "dialogues".'⁸⁴

Similarly, Thomas Hopko has written that this issue: 'raises questions not only about the priesthood and episcopate but about the very nature of human beings as created in God's image and likeness. In a word, the issue here is about God, and so about Christianity, the Church, and life itself. The Orthodox generally hold that the answer to the question about the ordination of women contains the answers to all theological questions.'⁸⁵

Before exploring these issues, it is important to state that reformed theology is becoming more aware of the differences between the Augustinian tradition and the Eastern, and seeking to explore the issue of the priority of the person as raised in Eastern theology, and to understand its implications for issues of anthropology and ecclesiology. The work of T. Torrance and D. Ritschl are examples. The recent deletion of the *filioque* from the Nicene Creed by the Uniting Church 1985 Assembly was not only a matter of restoring original wording, or of seeking to please another tradition, but also a growth in understanding that the Eastern tradition is, in some ways, a more Biblical and more theologically adequate way of understanding than the Augustinian heritage. However one does not speak for all Uniting Church theologians in saying this. Theologians of the reformed and evangelical traditions must explore these issues much more, in discussion with all other theological traditions, and it would be premature to say what the final outcome of such discussion might be.

Yet a study of Orthodox attempts to demonstrate an organic connection between the theology of the Greek fathers and the need for a male priesthood seems to yield very little coherent argument.

Thus Hopko develops the view that there is a correspondence between the Son and Adam and between the Spirit and Eve, as a basis for seeing men and women as having an equality of nature but very distinctive roles in the created order, complementary to each other. This involves a voluntary submission of women to men, just as the Holy Spirit points to Christ. The concept of order without inequality in the Trinity is important here. Limouris develops a similar argument.⁸⁶

It is clear that this proposal will be seen as a helpful comparison by those who already accept both Trinitarian doctrine and male priesthood, but it is hard to see why it should convince anyone who accepts Trinitarian theology but not male priesthood. It could rather be argued that, while the distinction between male and female is certainly given in creation, it hardly follows that one has a role like the Son, the other like the Spirit. The theological theme of the freedom of the person who transcends his/her nature without denying it would rather suggest that the Church should not limit the call of God to the ordained ministry on the basis of sex or other divisions of nature. We do not see how it is consistent to believe that the person is called to transcend nature in the royal priesthood of all Christians, but is limited by nature in the sacramental priesthood.

Rather we would see the ordained ministry as a sign to

8. CONCLUSION

the world of the love of the Trinity, reaching out in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, to all human beings without distinction. One sign of this unlimited love of the Trinity is that the ordained ministry must include within its number people of both sexes, just as it includes people of all races, languages and classes.

We stated in the Introduction that the claim that no women are called by God to the ministry of the Word would need strong reasons to support it. We now state that we have found no such reasons.

We acknowledge that the three churches which came together to form the Uniting Church in Australia only adopted the practice of ordaining women as well as men in recent times, but we emphasise that all three churches did adopt that practice, in common with many evangelical and reformed churches throughout the world. We have also noted that the decision of the Presbyterian Church in Australia was facilitated by a series of exceptionally thorough reports which reached the conclusion that 'a Reformed Church not only may, but ought to admit women to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments.'

We acknowledge that the New Testament does not speak with one voice on the issue of the roles of women and men within the church. We also acknowledge that even Paul seems to find himself pulled in different directions, but we maintain that the overwhelming weight of the certainly authentic utterances of Paul speaks for the equality of women and men and that there is ample evidence that in the period preceding the writing of Paul's letters women enjoyed equal status with men and exercised ministerial functions.

We acknowledge that the later New Testament writings reflect a steady drift towards the subordination of women, but we maintain that the very signs of this drift throw into sharp relief the mighty impulse in the opposite direction which the Christian movement received in its beginnings from Jesus himself.

We also acknowledge that, in ordaining women as well as men, the Uniting Church has departed from the tradition of the church through many centuries, but we affirm that even the most venerable church traditions must be subjected to continual critique in the light of the gospel.

We acknowledge that over many centuries most Christians failed to see any contradiction between the gospel which they professed and the church's practice of restricting ordination to men, but we believe that God has opened our eyes to recognise this discrepancy for the contradiction that it is.

We therefore declare, without reservation, our belief that the practice of the Uniting Church in Australia in ordaining both women and men to the ministry of the Word is fully in accordance with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we beseech those members of other churches, or even of our own church, who have not yet reached this conclusion to think again.

NOTES

¹ Basis of Union, Paragraph 14

² Basis of Union, Paragraph 13

³ Basis of Union, Paragraph 13

⁴ Stendahl, K. *The Bible and the Role of Women*. Philadelphia, Fortress, 1966 p. 34

⁵ Minutes of the General Conference, 1929, p.94

⁶ Minutes of the General Conference, 1929, p.136

⁷ Minutes of the General Conference, 1932, p.218

⁸ Minutes of the General Conference, 1932, p. 132

⁹ Minutes of the General Conference, 1941, pp162-163

¹⁰ Minutes of the General Conference, 1957, p.146

¹¹ Minutes of the General Conference, 1966, p.164

¹² Minutes of the G.A.A., 1957, p.33

¹³ Minutes of the G.A.A., 1959, p.184

¹⁴ Minutes of the G.A.A., 1962, p.151

¹⁵ Minutes of the G.A.A., 1964, p.207

¹⁶ Minutes of the G.A.A., 1967, p.189

¹⁷ Minutes of the G.A.A., 1970, p.182

¹⁸ Minutes of the G.A.A., 1970, p.199

¹⁹ UCA Assembly Social Responsibility and Justice Committee, *Women in the Uniting Church in Australia*, Sydney: SR&J, 1988, p. 48.

²⁰ cf. Acts 15.28, I Corinthians 7.40, Stendahl, 1966, p. 21.

²¹ "this woman, a daughter of Abraham" Luke 13.16.

²² Luke 7.36-50 and parallels

²³ Mark 5: 27ff. and parallels

²⁴ Luke 8: 1-3

²⁵ Mark 15: 40f, 47

²⁶ Mark 16: 1-8

²⁷ John 8.1-11, Mark 10.1-12, John 12.1-8

²⁸ Luke 11.27-28

²⁹ Acts 1. 21f

³⁰ cf. E. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, London: SCM, 1959, p. 31; C. K. Barrett, *The Signs of an Apostle*, London: Epworth, 1970, p. 28.

³¹ cf. Barrett, 1970, pp. 31f

³² cf. I Corinthians 9: 1

³³ cf. H. D. Betz, *Galatians*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979. pp. 181-84; B. Byrne, *Paul and the Christian Woman* Homebush, NSW: St. Paul Publications, 1988, p. 6f

³⁴ Byrne, 1988, p. 73

³⁵ Philippians 4: 3

³⁶ cf. Elisabeth Schussler Florenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York: Crossroad, 1983, p. 170

³⁷ Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979, p.299

³⁸ cf. Byrne, 1988, p. 72

³⁹ Galatians 3: 28

⁴⁰ Galatians 1:4

⁴¹ Stendahl, 1966, p. 34

⁴² Stendahl, 1966, p. 32

⁴³ Stendahl, 1966, p. 40

⁴⁴ I Corinthians 11.7

⁴⁵ G. B. Caird, "Paul and Women's Liberty," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 54, 1971/72, 268

- ⁴⁶ "Sex and Logic in I Corinthians 11, 2-16," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980) pp. 482-500
- ⁴⁷ In *Memory of Her*, pp. 227-30
- ⁴⁸ for a survey, see Byrne, 1988, pp. 36-40; Byrne himself prefers the traditional view.
- ⁴⁹ cf. Byrne, 1988, p. 49
- ⁵⁰ vv. 7f, 26-31
- ⁵¹ cf. Byrne, 1988, p. 19f
- ⁵² cf. R. Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman Revisited," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42 (1974), pp. 534f.
- ⁵³ Byrne, 1988, pp. 42, 44
- ⁵⁴ cf. A. Feuillet, "La dignité et la rôle de la femme d'après quelques textes pauliniens," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1975/76), p. 160
- ⁵⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987, p. 515
- ⁵⁶ cf. Morna Hooker, "Authority on her Head: An Examination of I Cor. XI. 10," *NTS* 10 (1963/64), pp. 410-16.
- ⁵⁷ cf. Nigel Watson, *Striking Home*, London: Epworth, 1987, p. 40; Byrne, 1988, pp. 47f.
- ⁵⁸ Byrne, 1988, p. 62
- ⁵⁹ Byrne, 1988, p. 100
- ⁶⁰ see R. Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman," *JAAR* 40 (1972), p. 284
- ⁶¹ cf. I Timothy 6: 20
- ⁶² cf. II Timothy 4: 3
- ⁶³ II Timothy 3: 6f
- ⁶⁴ Titus 2: 5
- ⁶⁵ Roger Gryson, "The ministry of women in the Early Church," Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1976
- ⁶⁶ 1 Timothy 3: 1-13
- ⁶⁷ According to one tradition, St. Brigid of Kildare received episcopal orders. See F. L. Cross, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, London: The Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 197
- ⁶⁸ Basil, *Short Rules*, 110, 111
- ⁶⁹ Gryson, 1976, pp. 100 - 108
- ⁷⁰ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5:8
- ⁷¹ Origen, *Homilies on Isaiah* 6:3
- ⁷² *Didascalia apostolorum* 3:6
- ⁷³ *Ibid* 3:10
- ⁷⁴ *The ecclesiastical canons of the apostles* 24:7
- ⁷⁵ Tertullian, *De Virginitas velandis*, 9:1
- ⁷⁶ Origen, *Fragments on 1 Corinthians*, 74
- ⁷⁷ *Apostolic Constitutions* 3:9
- ⁷⁸ *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" text (vol II)*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986, p. 10.
- ⁷⁹ J. Meyendorff, *The vision of unity*, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1987, pp. 189f.
- ⁸⁰ K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations (vol 20): Concern for the Church*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982.
- ⁸¹ As G. Dragas points out, this is also an issue about the relationship between the life of the Church and the resurrection of Christ. 'Some general reactions and comments from an Orthodox point of view', *Beyond Unity-in-Tension*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1988, pp. 118-20
- ⁸² Kallistos Ware 'Man, woman and the priesthood of Christ' in P. Moore, ed., *Man, woman and priesthood*, London: SPCK, 1978, pp. 80f.
- A. Schmemmann, 'Concerning women's ordination', H. K. Lutge, ed., *Sexuality-theology-priesthood*, San Gabriel, CA: no publisher, no date, pp. 14f.
- ⁸³ So R.A. Norris, Jr, 'The ordination of women and the 'maleness' of the Christ'. in *Feminine in the Church*, ed. M. Furlong. London: SPCK, 1984, p. 73
- ⁸⁴ A. Schmemmann, 'Concerning women's ordination: a letter to an Episcopal friend', *SVTQ* 17(1973), p. 239.
- ⁸⁵ Thomas Hopko, 'The Lima statement and the Orthodox', in *The search for visible unity*, J. Gros (ed) New York: Pilgrim, 1986
- ⁸⁶ Thomas Hopko, 'On the male character of Christian Priesthood', *SVTQ*, 19 (1975), esp. pp 158-62. Gennadios Limouris, "Men and women: equal partners in the Christian community": an Orthodox point of view, *Beyond Unity-in-Tension*, WCC, 1988 pp. 100-16; George Dragas, 'Some general reaction and comments from an Orthodox point of view', *Ibid*, pp. 117-26

