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Department on Cooperation
of Men and Women in Church,
Family and Society

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ORDINATION OF WOMEN - AN ECUMENICAL PROBLEM

(Contribution by the World Council of Churches Department on Cooperation of Men and Women in Church, Family and Society to the Section on "The Redemptive Work of Christ and the Ministry of His Church" at the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal, 1963, prepared by an ad hoc committee meeting in Geneva, May 10-12, 1963)

I. Introduction

1. At the Assembly in New Delhi the Committee dealing with the questions of the Department on Faith and Order expressed an urgent request to the Working Committee on Faith and Order "to establish a study of the theological, biblical and ecclesiological issues involved in the ordination of women". The initial request was made with the situation in the European churches in mind. But in the general discussion it was emphasised that this study must not be restricted to Europe. At the same time the hope was expressed that it would be undertaken "in close conjunction with the Department on the Cooperation of Men and Women in Church, Family and Society". The proposal was accepted by the Working Committee of Faith and Order at its meeting in Paris, which decided to place the question of the ordination of women on the agenda of the Fourth World Conference of Faith and Order, to be held at Montreal, Canada, from the 12th to 26th July, 1963.

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2. This decision was felt to be necessary because the problem is of practical concern to an increasing number of churches. Many churches welcome women to the ordained ministry and have found the policy advantageous. Others, having adopted this policy, face serious internal tensions. In others, the policy is under discussion and provokes heated debate. The matter frequently becomes acute in negotiations for church unity. And even apart from formal negotiations, it affects the mutual relations of churches which ordain women to those which do not. It would be wrong, therefore, to view this issue as a result of feminist demands or agitation

by a few enthusiasts. It concerns the total understanding of the ministry of the church and therefore has deep theological significance.

3. The range of the discussion and the urgency of the problem is something new in Christian history; it has been occasioned by social and cultural movements, although the solution of the problem requires theological decision. Social and cultural movements have their proper place as a challenge to translate Christian doctrine into possible new forms of church life and church order. It is true that the danger must be avoided of accommodating Christian truth to the current ideology, but we must also say that God may use secular movements for showing his will to us.

4. In our day there has been a rediscovery of two theological factors particularly relevant to our present study: a new insight into the nature of the wholeness of the body of Christ and a better understanding of the meaning of the partnership of men and women in God's design.

a. It is a basic tenet of the New Testament that the whole body is called to witness to the name of Christ; all members - men and women - have therefore their appropriate ministry to which they are called by him. This basic Christian truth was for many centuries overlaid. It has been rediscovered in our own day by all parts of Christendom. b. It is an essential element of the Christian message that man and woman are created in the image of God and are therefore of equal dignity and worth before him. The developments in our time have shown us that this truth has not always been sufficiently understood and emphasized. All the churches are confronted with the necessity of finding a new expression for this basic truth.

5. It is in this context that the question of the ordination of women is raised. Even the churches which oppose such ordination will realize that these new theological emphases have a relevance for them. The question involves many controversial points of exegesis, of dogmatic formulation and of ecclesiastical life. We have concentrated upon some of these.

II. Exegetical considerations

Many are of the opinion that the evidence of the New Testament speaks clearly against admitting women to the ministry. However, it

should be seen that the New Testament is not always used in the appropriate way in the discussion of this issue.

1. Modern historical research on the Bible has given us a new awareness of the extent to which the biblical witness is conditioned by and oriented to historical situations. Therefore biblical teaching cannot be abstracted from the historical context in which the books have been written. The Bible is not a collection of proof texts, and questions cannot be answered by quoting single passages. Therefore, if we are confronted with problems of today's world we cannot find the answer by quoting single passages. Every question must be understood and answered in the light of God's revelation in Christ which is the centre of Scriptures. This methodological principle is very important for the discussion of ordination of women. Both supporters and opponents tend to quote single passages for or against such ordination. However it should be clear that no answer is given by a single reference e.g. to Gal. 3 or I Tim. 2. An answer can be given only by taking into consideration the whole of the Bible and the historical situation to which each single passage refers.

2. Sometimes it is said that the "biblical doctrine on men and women" does exclude any consideration of admitting women to the full ministry. But the New Testament does not contain a developed doctrine on this relationship. As the New Testament in all its parts witnesses to Christ it is not concerned to establish a system of doctrine. Every question with which the church is confronted is answered by referring to the central reality of Christ. The centrality of Christ even makes possible the use of different anthropological statements in the Bible. Therefore one cannot speak of New Testament doctrine on men and women and draw conclusions from such a doctrine we think is established. We have to examine the new situation in which we live in the light of Christ's Lordship.

3. If the passages in the New Testament dealing with the position of women in the church are seen in their historical contexts it becomes clear that they are written with a particular intention and in view of a particular danger for the church. E.g. it is important to see that the passages of the Pastoral Letters have in view the danger that by the public activity of women marriage could be dishonoured. It is the intention of the New Testament which we have to seek in examining its literal content. Right exegesis does not consist of imposing biblical formularies on a given situation but of interpreting it in harmony with that intention.

And though we have to avoid carefully any arbitrary freedom this principle is of great importance.

4. Modern research has led also to a new understanding of the relation between the Old and the New Testament. The results of historical research do not allow us to interpret Old Testament passages according to the methods sometimes used in the New Testament period. E.g. we are no longer able to use the method of interpretation we find e.g. in I Cor. 11 and I Tim. 2. This does not mean that these passages are for us empty of meaning. They are still significant. But we discover their meaning for today only by distinguishing between the intention of the Apostle's arguments and his patterns of presenting them.

5. Modern exegetical research has led to a deeper understanding of the eschatological character of the Christian message. The statements on the relationship of men and women are to be understood in this perspective. If it is stated that men and women are equal it is said in view of the Eschaton. This does not mean that the differentiation of the sexes ceases to exist. We live in and are faithful to the order of creation, but at the same time the order of nature has been overcome by this new dimension. Men and women are not living any more either in isolation or in a restricted togetherness. They have received a new freedom also from the domination by their sex. E.g. it is in this freedom that in the New Testament new forms of ministry are possible for men as well as women. It is in the same freedom that e.g. celibacy is offered as a way of life to men and women. It is important to take into serious consideration this eschatological dimension of the church's life. Though the church lives in historical continuity with its origins it is always called to open itself anew to the future and to give a fresh expression to its eschatological message.

6. These exegetical considerations apply equally to two larger but related questions: the message of the Bible regarding the Christian ministry and the meaning of ordination. These two questions are answered in various ways by our churches. They must now subject these answers afresh to critical examination in the light of recent research on the Bible and on the early centuries of Christian history. Unable to venture into this vast field, this committee expresses its hope that discussions of the ordination of women will be carried on in close connection with discussions of the ministry and of ordination, and that concern for the former will strengthen concern for the latter.

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III. Dogmatic considerations

1. The Bible views the persons of the Trinity as beyond the sphere of sex, which is fundamental only to human kind. This affirmation is specially clear for the person of Jahve in the Old Testament who was carefully distinguished from the pagan background of gods and goddesses. But this is also true for the person of Jesus Christ, who is image of the new man (including men and women) and for the person of the Holy Ghost. Therefore, as the ministry is the announcement to the world of the trinitarian reality and work, we must renounce the argument in favour of the masculinity of ecclesiastical ministry on the basis of the fact that God is called Father or that Jesus Christ is incarnated as male. This argument was used neither in the biblical sources (i.e. by St. Paul or St. Peter) nor in the early tradition. It distorts the parabolic and symbolic language in which trinitarian formulas describe the divine mystery and identifies language with reality and thereby literalizes the action of the triune God; thus it obscures the soteriological purpose of the ministry as a function of the body of Christ by overstressing the significance of the sex of the minister as a person in the created order.

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2. Sometimes it is said that the subordination of the woman to the man is inherent in the order of creation and that therefore it would be a violation of God's order of creation for a woman to take a public responsibility. Some biblical passages seem to indicate such an understanding of subordination and it is rooted in Christian tradition. But it is doubtful that it can be maintained. The image of God is presented in the Bible as the coexistence of man and woman. They are called together to dominate the world of creation (Genesis I,II). Their relationship is to be understood as complementarity rather than as subordination. The more we are aware that the meaning of creation is disclosed by God's redemptive work in Christ the more we realize that God created man and woman in partnership. It is true that Paul refers to Gen. 2 when he reminds the woman to be subordinated. But reading the New Testament as a whole it becomes clear that the first emphasis is laid on complementarity. It seems therefore evident that subordination does not belong to God's order of creation but is part of the good order in society commonly accepted in Paul's time.

3. In recent times there is in many churches a new emphasis laid on baptism as the consecration to a new life of witness and service to the world. This emphasis is to be seen in close connection with the calling of the whole people of God. It raises inevitably anew the question of the relation between baptism and the consecration to the special ministries in the church. Many churches teach that ordination is a sacrament clearly to be distinguished from baptism; other churches consider ordination as a setting apart within the baptismal grace. However all churches see a close relation between baptism and the ministry, and if it is true that baptism leads to participation in the ministry of the whole church explanation must be given on what grounds a baptized woman, who shares all the privileges given through baptism, can be excluded from the ordained ministry.

4. Many churches argue that the original apostolate was composed solely of men, that the ordained ministry of the church is derived from and dependent upon the apostles, and that therefore the ordination of women would compromise the apostolic heritage of the church. It is true that Jesus appointed twelve men as his apostles, and that the earliest church did not include a woman (Salome, the wife of Zebedee, even though women had been eye-witnesses of the Lord's work and the first bearers of resurrection tidings. But the masculinity of the apostolate may be understood theologically more as a fulfilment of God's promise to Israel than as a divine law governing the future of the church. In the twelve the structure of the old Israel, with its patriarchs and tribes, was represented and fulfilled. The apostolate brought the Old Covenant to its authentic consummation, so that Gentiles might share in the glory promised to Israel. (It may be noted that no Gentile was included among the apostles, although this fact has not excluded them from the church's apostolicity.). At any rate, it is by no means clear that the preservation of an apostolic ministry should forever exclude women (or Gentiles) if there are cogent theological reasons for including them.

5. The ministry of the church consists in the edification of the body of Christ in order to witness to the world through administering the sacraments and preaching God's word. It is to be doubted whether the New Testament offers sufficient theological support for drawing a sharp distinction between these two ministries and e.g. to allow a woman to

participate in all the church ministries with the exception of presiding over the Eucharist. Does it show any interest in the qualification of those who should administer the sacraments? It seems clear at least that St. Paul did not separate the sacramental from the non-sacramental ministry. He was far more concerned with the effectiveness of all the gifts of the Spirit in edifying the church and in the reconciliation of the world.

IV. Ecclesiastical life

1. Since it is impossible in the New Testament to obtain any concrete direction concerning the ordination of women other than the fact that they were not of the Apostolic band, the question must be faced in view of a radically changed situation whether their exclusion from the ordained ministry rests upon divine law or upon human tradition. Some churches see divine law being promulgated through the Tradition which has come down to them in the body of Christ. Others would question whether forms of ministry rightly belong to the tradition. There is therefore a call for a re-examination at this point of the value and content of ecclesiastical tradition. In this reexamination of their traditions and canon law, the churches should be aware both of the valid historical reasons for the shape of their old tradition and of the non-theological influences (such as out-dated patterns of sexual prejudices) which have entered all traditions.

2. The churches are faced today with the need to discover new forms of ministry to meet situations which did not confront them in the past. It is clear that women as well as men are called to take their place in these new forms of ministry which may differ considerably in form and function from any ministry the church has yet known. It is the duty of the churches to seek such forms. In doing so, they may find that the ordination of women is the right response to new opportunities. This problem poses itself in most concrete terms in some of the younger churches.

3. The problems raised by the ordination of women are too new for the churches to have reached a common mind on this matter. This means that they will be acutely felt in the field of inter-church relations, especially where churches which take a more traditional view are contemplating union

with churches which believe that in ordaining women they have been led by the Spirit. When the churches seriously face the theological issues involved it is much to be hoped that whatever decision an individual church reaches there will be no accusation of heresy but that its decision will be accepted by others as a genuine effort to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

4. Moreover, in reaching its own decision, each church should consider not only its obligation to its own members and its responsibility for avoiding internal schism but also its loyalty to all churches in all countries. All policies regarding the various ministries are ultimately subject to the authority of Him from whom the one church has received its ministry as a gift. Each church accordingly must decide not only its own way of obedience, but must also determine its attitude towards the status of ministers in churches whose obedience has taken a different path. Each must make its decision in the freedom which Christ has given from the Law, in the love which will not cause others to stumble, and in hope for the consummation of God's kingdom on earth.

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Possible points for discussion

1. Can it be said that

- churches face today a new situation with regard to the relationship of man and woman?
- all the churches have not sufficiently expressed the calling of the whole church and have to find new ways of expressing the sending of all its members, both men and women?
- the issue of the ordination of women concerns all the churches, those opposing change as well as those considering new steps?
- that the biblical evidence does not speak either clearly in favour or against admitting women to the full ministry?
- that biblical passages are always to be seen in their historical context and should be understood rather in their intention than in their literal content?

2. Can we agree that some arguments against admitting women to the ministry are not valid:

- because God is father only man can be ordained.
- because Christ chose only men as apostles it would be against his will to include women in the apostolic ministry.

3. Can we agree that the following points need to be reexamined by the churches:

- relationship between baptism and ordination.
- the evidence of the New Testament and especially the Early Church on the position of women in the church.

4. Can we say that

- the churches recognize in charity the decisions taken in this matter by other churches?
- the churches opposing the ordination are obliged to rethink the position of women in general?
- the churches accepting the ordination without difficulties have to reexamine their understanding of the ministry in the church?