Unity without Uniformity

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During the course of the debate in the Swedish Lutheran Church on whether to ordain women Krister Stendahl published a very influential essay on *The Bible and the Role of Women* (Fortress, 1966). In it he used Gal. 3:28 to argue for the emancipation of women and claim that the dichotomy between men and women had been overcome by Christ in the church and in the world. Because this applied both in relation to God and in relation to each other, women were therefore eligible for the ordained ministry. Since then, Gal. 3:26-29 has provided many Lutherans with the scriptural mandate for the ordination of women. This, I hold, misinterprets and misapplies what Paul says.

Gal. 3:26-29 does not deal, either explicitly or implicitly, with the ministry of word and sacrament. Here Paul teaches that, despite their diversity, all baptised people are united with Christ and so share in his sonship, his fraternal relationship with the Father. By grace they have the same theological status before God the Father and have all received the same Spirit as their promised inheritance. While Paul’s choice of the three antithetical pairs of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female is determined by the contrast between circumcision and baptism, their similarity to the lists of pairs in 1 Cor. 12:13 and Col. 3:11 shows that they are meant to teach the unity of all people in Christ, rather than the abolition of all human differences in church and the world.

These antitheses most likely refer to the law for circumcision in Gen. 17:9-27. According to God’s law, three groups were eligible for circumcision and the privileges that ensued from it: the physical offspring of Abraham rather than the Gentile offspring of Adam; the slaves that belonged to his household rather than free men who were employed to work in it; male members of Abraham’s family rather than his female descendants. Thus the law for circumcision provides us with a coherent rationale for the selection of these three antitheses in which the second part of each antithesis lists those who were excluded from the rite of circumcision.

When Paul maintains that all who are baptised “are one in Christ Jesus,” he does not teach their equality with each other, but their unity in Christ that transcends all their diversity. An examination of the idiom “you/they/we are one” bears this out (John 17:11, 21-23; Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 3:8; 10:17). In each case this idiom describes the unity that is established between different persons, with all their various gifts and tasks, by receiving some common gift from God (eg. Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 3:5; 10:17). That God-given unity does not abolish human diversity, but, in fact, employs it for the common good of all people Thus Paul does not use this idiom in Galatians 3:28 to assert that all people are created - or recreated - equal, but to teach the unity of diverse persons in the body of Christ.

Paul claims that Greeks, slaves, and women also share in Christ’s sonship and the gift of the Holy Spirit. They are not just part of God’s extended family as “children of God” but are actually included in Christ’s unique relationship with God the Father. Since by baptism both women and men are “sons of God,” they are also coheirs with Christ, the only Son and heir of God the Father. Their theological status therefore depends on their union with Christ. Yet even though they have the same status as coheirs with Jesus, they do not all do the same work, or have the same gifts. They all participate in the work of Christ, but they do not perform the same tasks in the church and the world. Thus the unity of women and men in Christ does not abolish the order of the family, or establish the church as an egalitarian community. Instead, it confirms their diverse tasks and gifts in both domains (1 Cor. 14:33b-38; Col. 3:11-19; Tit. 2:1-10; cf. Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-26). The unity of men and women in Christ, and their common status with God the Father, presents them with new possibilities for humble service of others in community, each according to their station and vocation. That kind of love, that kind of service, is what is so new for them as those who are a new creation in Christ (Col. 3:9-4:1). Their terms of service are not derived from any general principle, let alone the principle of equality, but from God’s word and its institution of the family and the church.

In the Augsburg Confession we Lutherans confess that “the Gospel does not

overthrow civil authority, the state, and marriage but requires that all these be kept as true orders of God and that everyone, each according to his own calling, manifest Christian love and genuine good works in his station in life” (16:5). Even though all Christians have the same status with God by union with Jesus, they each have different vocations in keeping with their given location in the church and the world. Their unity in Christ does not result in uniformity but confirms their amazing diversity as stewards of God’s manifold grace in all its riches (1 Pet. 4:10).

The use of “equality” as a theological term does not sit at all well with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son who did not grasp at “equality” with his Father, but who, in obedience to his will, sacrificed himself for all those who, like Adam and Eve, wanted to be equal in status and power and glory with God (Phil 2:6). Thus the New Testament only speaks about theological equality rarely in connection with the gift of the same Spirit to all Christians (Acts 11:17) and their possession of the same faith from their justification by God (2 Pet. 1:1). And rightly so! This vague legal term was popularised as a political slogan by the French and American revolutions. Its careless use by the church translates the proclamation of the gospel into legal discourse with its concern for personal rights and privileges, social rank and status, political position and power.

Theological implications may be drawn from a passage in Scripture to confirm, or to elaborate, a point of teaching. But such deductions may not be used by themselves, without further scriptural foundation, to establish doctrine and to impose it on the church. They must not contradict what is explicitly taught on that matter elsewhere. The use of Gal. 3:28 as the scriptural foundation for the ordination of women does just that. It contradicts Paul’s prohibitions in 1 Cor. 14:33b-38 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15. Such a procedure does not provide a sound scriptural basis for the abolition of an established ecumenical rule that comes from Christ’s command and the teaching of the apostles.

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