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The Divine Imperative for Women Ministry¹

Ezamo Murry*

On an evening of social hour, the young creative women students of Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, Assam had kept the audience mesmerized by their music and dances for an hour. The climax was their last item which was a shadow play. As the images moved on the white screen the narrator broke the silence by her solemn voice, describing the life of the woman from birth to death – insecurity, hardship, discrimination and agony she goes through. Then Jesus came, carrying the heavy cross and raised the down trodden woman to her God-given dignity of life. Without any pre-condition, Jesus the Author of life set the woman free. The soul that is free from the bondage of sin and death, man or woman, not only woman, sings for joy but begin to serve the liberator in gratefulness.

Recently, a Guwahati daily carried a caption, *Thank Jesus if you are a Woman's Libber*. The writer referred to a woman, thus, "a woman Jesus met who was generally known in her town as a sinner, but whom Jesus saw through the eyes of love."² The woman whom Jesus loved and redeemed cannot but seek to serve (subjective urge). On the other hand, when Jesus healed or saved any soul he would have the person testify it in living (objective obligation). So is women ministry both personal gratefulness and a divine imperative.

Our ministry to our redeemer is an irresistible gratefulness as well as an affectionate appeal from the Lord to join Him in His work. The ministry is therefore, not a matter of give and take between male and female, for it is not a prerogative of one gender. It is an imperative consequence of all those saved. Women joining men in the common ministry is not even a fulfillment of legal demand of gender justice. It is a re-discovery of the divine mandate for all creatures. As no one need to thank us for worshipping God there is no need to call each other for ministry to God. The right of every person for ministry is not an estate or employment opportunities that a man or a woman should give to and take from the other.

Jesus saw the potentiality in women for ministry and so he prized them more than the men. Jesus saw women's ability to persevere, to appeal and mediate, to

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comfort and heal, to network relationships, to nurture and sympathize, and to love selflessly. All these qualities are the ingredients of constructing families, communities and even kingdoms. It is often said that Jesus' experience with the women members of his Nazareth home instilled admiration of women in him. Harry Emerson Fodsdick the great teacher, underlined some of those events where Jesus was found dealing with the women with a special care.³ For Jesus not only drew the gems of his teaching from parables involving life and work of women but he personally encountered and cared for them. That approach of Jesus to women was a break from the traditional attitude toward women, which are mentioned below to provide us our *modus operandi* in dealing with the women today.

1. Could it be that there were more women listeners to him than men, we do not know? He had drawn so much from the women's experience – two women grinding together (Lk. 17:35), a house swept and kept in order (Lk. 11:25), a woman lighting a lamp and sweeping the house to search diligently for the lost coin (Lk. 15:8-10), Women cooking and making dough (Mt. 13:33). The kingdom of God in earth can be built only by such simple things done honestly and wholeheartedly, not by costly human treasures or human pride of goodness. The parable in Mt. 25:31-46 depicts such ideal too.
2. Even as Jesus was indignant with the culture of subordination he was compassionate to the suppressed women. He admired the spirit of humble pleading in the women as against the boasting of men. He portrayed the male judge as unjust who had no reverence for God or humans, but recognized the humble pleading of the widow (Lk. 18:1-8). In the Canaanite woman, Jesus saw a great faith and he was moved by her perseverance as she pleaded for her daughter (Mt. 15:21f). At times, the uncompromising attitude of men may provoke parties to confront and destroy each other. Men may challenge each other condescendingly causing strife in the world. But God has endowed in women the spirit of entreaty for softening hardened hearts and bringing reconciliation and reconstruction.
3. In the popular Carol, "Silent night, Holy night", Mary is ascribed as 'gentle and mild'. The gentle, mild, soothing, and graceful part of humanity is pre-dominant in women and Jesus was very gentle in dealing with this fragile but curative element (the feminine part of humanity). Road sign on the highway, 'be gentle at my curve' is a life-saving reminder. Among the rich putting gifts to the treasury Jesus saw a poor widow putting two copper coins. Jesus acclaimed that the poor widow had put more than all of them (Lk. 21:1-4). The woman must have come to the offering box with a precarious heart of inadequacy, not because of her gender but because of her economic status. She was sure, however, that God wants 'our best' and not comparison or competition. Her vision of God as one who expects from all 'each according to his or her ability' made her dare go to offer from her best. On another occasion, the men folk made a judgmental remark on the way the woman poured the oil on Jesus as an expression of her gratefulness and devotion to Jesus. Jesus handled the situation gently and tactfully, saying,

“Leave her alone. Do not annoy her, for she has done a beautiful thing to me.” The people hurt her ego but Jesus gently raised her ego adding, “Wherever the gospel is preached all over the world, men will speak of what she has done in memory of her” (Mk. 14:4-7). Theologians continue to debate the *rationale* of her pouring such expensive oil on Jesus but they may seldom talk of the beautiful things women do which Jesus did not fail to recognize. Things of beauty on earth are often skin-deep only unless they are of the nature of the beauty described by Jesus. Men and women equally can do beautiful things for God.

4. *Women’s contribution to the Hymnody of Christendom*

The Christian hymnal, often called as the *Layperson’s Book of Theology*, is held by the preacher and by every believer next to the Bible. Among the earliest of such hymnals is the *Sacred Songs and Solos* (Some people call it *Sankey*, in short), was compiled by D. L. Moody and Ira David Sankey. Moody (1837-1899) was a US evangelist who became famous in England. Sankey was Moody’s musical colleague. This duo moved the 19th century western Christendom by their evangelistic campaigns. Mention may be made of another woman Fanny J. Crosby (1820-1915), who wrote 8000-9000 hymns, some of which were used by Moody and Sankey evangelistic campaigns. Ira D. Sankey remarked, “The success of Moody and Sankey in their evangelistic campaign was due, more than any other human factor, to the use of Fanny Crosby’s hymns.” Crosby was the third person of the trio that moved the world that time with their gospel. Sankey had included 148 of Crosby’s hymns in his *Sacred Songs and Solos*, the hymnal of their evangelism. The words, figures, and the imagination of the woman to describe the beauty of God and the human situation are so powerful.

One may also wonder why National hymns like, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, and *America the Beautiful*, are written by women Julia Ward Howe and Katharine L. Bates respectively. The powerful words in Hymns like *Beneath the Cross of Jesus; Master the Tempest is raging; Just as I am, Day is Dying in the West; Take my Life...; I gave my life for thee; Jesus paid it all; I’d rather have Jesus ...; I love to tell the Story; Tell me the Story of Jesus; Just a word of Jesus; More about Jesus; I need thee every hour; Jesus Calls us; There is a green Hill far away...* All these are written by women other than Crosby. Haven’t they touched the cord of tenderness in human hearts and led the humanity to Jesus by their inspiration? Think of the irony – most of the communion hymns we sing are written by women who, the conservative tradition holds, are not qualified to administer the Communion! For example, *Break thou the Bread of Life...* (Mary Lathbury) *Thy life was given for me...* (F. Havergal) *Beneath the cross of Jesus...* (Elizabeth Clepano) *There is a green hill far away...* (Crosby) *Jesus paid it all...* (Elvina Hall) *Though yours sins be as scarlet...* (Crosby).⁴

Crosby is called ‘*The Queen of Gospel Hymnody*’. Mary Lathbury’s *Day is dying in the west*, is called ‘one of the finest and most distinctive hymns of modern times’ by the students of Hymnody. When Abraham Lincoln first heard Julia Ward’s *Battle Hymn of the Republic* he cried out in tears, “sing it again” in one of the

patriotic rallies.

That is what I mean by the power in women to appeal, persuade, envision, and endure even when men cannot do so. These God-given qualities in women are the prerequisites for ministry of the Gospel.

5. Jesus is often called 'the champion of womanhood.'⁵ In defense of women he revolted against the one-sided judgment of the culture of that body. He saved the women caught in 'adultery', who alone was accused by the culture for the act of adultery that deserved death. Jesus did so not that he approved her act but that justice be done to her (Jn. 8:1-11). The divorce law of that day favoured men and was discriminatory. Jesus called the men folk as having 'hardness of heart' and defended the women from cheap divorce (Mk. 10:2-9). If Jesus had not met the woman of Samaria she would have lived and died in disrespectful obscurity. Jesus made her immortal by showing her the fountain of life (Jn. 4:5-30).⁶

Jesus is rightly called a revolutionist. Dr. Barclay calls the *Magnificat* (the song of Mary. Lk. 1:47-51), "*the most powerful revolutionary document in the world.*"⁷ For, Jesus changed the unjust social system by using the poor and the women in His high calling. Would not Jesus engage such potential women in his ministry?

Woman-Power in Today's Culture

Tradition in many cultures holds women as of lesser capabilities than men and so employ more men than women for work. Women, from the practical world have proved how they are capable as men are in many areas of work. Let us take an example from the most risky and daring undertakings – military life: A recent daily news reported,

The US women entered military academy in 1976 and they were well received by their colleagues who had dominated America's bastion of masculinity. Many officers and cadets were openly hostile to the idea of women in the ranks. After thirty years, this animosity is dissipated. The biggest positive change in the military academy has been *its inclusion of women, which shows the academy adjusting to the times.*⁸

The report mentions two women officers, graduating this year, Erica Watson Barggren, a second lieutenant, and Ensign Iannois, from the US Military Academy and the US Naval Academy respectively. The Superintendent of the Military Academy remarked, '*with people like Erica and Iannois, the women who went before and those who follow in their footsteps, the military seems to have marched into the 21st century to the beat of a more humanistic drum (WFS)*'.

The Indian Military Academy began to accommodate women officers in 1993. A couple of years ago (on 25.11.02), a woman, P. Bandopadya, became the first woman Vice Air Marshal of Indian Air Force.⁹ If these women soldiers of the world die fighting for their countries as they often do, they are never a sacrifice of lesser quality than men martyrs. Late Indira Gandhi died a martyr for India. In August 2002, the late Mother Teresa, was declared the greatest Indian of the post-independence.¹⁰

No one can dare to say this honour is of lesser quality than any men of honour. Again, Chennai born woman, Indra Nooyi, the President of Pepsico, was listed by the *Fortune Magazine* as one of the five most powerful women of USA. Her advice is noteworthy, "Rather than wonder why inequality is holding women back, I spend my time doing things to expand my ability."¹¹

No one can question the hard work of the women. Women work double of what men do. Margaret Thatcher, the then British Prime Minister, was reported telling the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, "We women have to work twice as hard as men to get the same results, don't we?"¹² Jane Wallbrown, a woman pastor in US admits the same fact when she says, "I would make a blanket statement that a woman has to be twice as competent as any man in order to get a job as a woman pastor in the United States."¹³ These instances are referred to here to endorse that when women are qualified for a job they are more qualified than men due to their sincere and hard work. Three years ago, Alison Richard was made the first full-fledged Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University. That historic change took place after 800 years leaving Oxford behind as the last bastion of male domination.¹⁴

More fascinating changes are reported even among the Hindu women. A news caption, "Women Priests for the Jet Age", has the following lines:

In Pune, no eyebrows are raised when a woman priest conducts marriages, pujas, or even sheath. In fact, there is a growing, preference for women priests for conducting these ceremonies. Not only are women trained in priesthood in large numbers, the long lost tradition of performing the sacred thread ceremony for girls to give them right to perform all religious rituals in the family has also been evolved.¹⁵

The above report said that the Shahar Seva Samiti of Pune has trained 700 women priests from all castes since its inception from 1976.

The traditional understanding of the women's role in both the secular and the sacred realms are now revolutionized as exemplified above. In the churches too the vital roles of women are more and more acknowledged as more and more ordination of women are reported. The tip of the hard shell in this matter among the Baptists of the North East India is breaking too. Of the Presbyterian Church of India, the Administrator, Rev. Haia, is quoted as saying,

There is nothing against ordaining women in the church in the Presbyterian Church of India Constitution, but this is the practice... we are all for it but ordinary people still will not accept women, however, changes is on the anvil.¹⁶

Some Rationale of Women in Ministry today includes

1. God's creation and redemption is efficacious to all creation including man and woman. Worship and service in gratefulness to the Creator becomes a method of living in grace. Men and women, are therefore, obliged to render service to God. This is no human assignment but a divine assignment to all.

2. Both the feminine and the masculine characteristics of humanity are present in the Godhead. Humanity is therefore an androgynous personality. In the Godhead, care, nurture, and healing are expressed in God's feminine posture. Ministry in the church and the world by one gender alone is therefore, incomplete.
3. Women are *response-able* and capable to execute their work. When Madeline Albright became the first woman US Secretary of State in 1996, it was reported that she was appointed, not on pressure from women but '*she was uniquely qualified to serve in the position.*'¹⁷ Once, a Delhi paper cited Tom Peters, the management guru, as saying, "*Women are better managers. Women are multi-taskers while men need training to multi-task, wisdom and creativity makes women good managers.*"¹⁸
4. By reason of God's special gift women are the best ambassadors. Ministry in the work of mediating, bridge-making, and reconciling between God and world. A study shows how wives' absence from home for a considerable time makes the husbands prone to stress and sickness. Wives are found good in arranging constructive social contacts. Such contact with family and friends cut down stress. Study of Divorce made this evident that the immediate effect of divorce to the man is to reduce their constructive social contact with others, and this persists until he re-marries. The absences of women in the society will therefore severe human relationship.¹⁹ The natural gift of relating in women can be a vital instrument of networking and uniting God's people for action. Women establish rapport with others faster than men.
5. In the church, as in the overall population of the world, women are overgrowing men. One daily paper had a cartoon showing three cages, one holding a *dinosaur*, one a *dodo*, and another a *man*. The cartoon showed a group of women inspecting those preserved species saying to each other, "what a fine species the world has lost." The cartoon was titled 'Male going dinosaur way':²⁰ Another news said, there are 'more women, than men in UK'.²¹ Another report said, "*the male gender's days are numbered because having one X and one Y chromosomes leaves them with no back up if genetic problems crop up. Women with two X chromosomes are in genetic terms by far the stronger sex because they have a built in spares. ... so males are almost on the way out*" (Professor Roger Short of the Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne).²² Although I belong to the vanishing gender, I do not wish to go away too soon. The point I would like to make is that women are increasing and men are decreasing. We need more and more women ministers in the Church to attend to the greater need of the greater population.
6. In this seminary where I teach, more than a third of the student strength is women. They score the highest in academic performance; they are among the best musicians, the best singers. All the three first class held by ETC in the last Senate results of April, 2005, were women students. Many of them are also the officers of the community organizations of the college. It is difficult to ignore the potentiality God has given them in leading and transforming the society. As I write this, I am told that all the staff guides from the affiliated

colleges like Eastern Theological College (ETC), Clark Theological College (CTC), Baptist Theological College (BTC) and Trulock Theological College (TTC) to the North India Theological Student's (NITS) Conference during October, 2005, in Aizwal happens to be women. The ordination of Rev. Marlene Marak, a lecturer in ETC, Jorhat by the Garo Baptist Convention on the 5th June, 2005 is a tangible step taken by the churches of this region in recognizing the need of women partnership in ministry.

Time has come for the women of the North-East also to mobilize themselves and exert their God-given responsibilities. A couple of years ago, the Naga Women organized a Conference in Kohima with the theme, '*Arise and Shine*', to evolve an action for 21st century.²³ The North-East Church organised a women's meeting in Shillong, a month ago, where 40 leading church women leaders met and formally launched the NE chapter of the *Inter-denominational Christian forum*. The meeting also discussed the topic, "*Role of Christian Women in the 21st century*."²⁴ Again, following the International Women Conference in Beijing, the North East Network (NEN) was organized. NEN is one of the leading women NGOs promoting women's human rights. The vision of NEN is to build a society where there is gender justice, equality, and proper human rights across the sections.²⁵ The Assam branch of the Country Women's Association was launched in October, 2002 in Guwahati.²⁶

All these phenomena show that the women of every society are now awakened to the mandate they have to serve the Lord and live the fullness of life that the Lord gave them. Women in partnership with men in ministry complete God's symmetry of the whole person. Women's creative wisdom paired with men's fulfills the principle of synergy for effective ministry. Women have to take part in ministry as a divine imperative, not as generous sharing from men's privilege. Men need not call women to ministry nor can men prevent women from joining the ministry. Every redeemed person should return and thank the Redeemer in service to Him. So are women in ministry a divine imperative.

Some questions for Reflection

1. What Women Organizations are in existence in your State or District/ Association? If there are such organizations, what are the objectives of those organizations? Are the objectives promoting life, healthy communities, and service of God?
2. Do the men folk of your church think sharing ministry with women is an act of their relaxation and generosity toward women?
3. Do you think the women of your church have properly identified their God-given and inborn talents and used these to edify the ministry? Do they double the ability in them or remain frustrated for not having some of the abilities of men?
4. If the fullness of women's right is established in the world will the women thank the culture, education, the law of the land, or God?

5. When women speak of equal treatment and respect for women's right in forums like today do they personally practice these ideals from their home, beginning from their baby sitter?

NOTES

1. Modified from a paper presented during the *Consultation for Women Leaders of North East India*, held in ETC, Jorhat, December 10-13, 2002, organized by the Department of Women Studies, ETC, Jorhat.
2. "Thank, Jesus if you are a women's Libber" – Maureen Dowd, *Asian Age*, October 12, 2002.
3. Harry Emerson Fodsick, *The Man from the Nazareth*, (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1949).
4. Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Hymn Stories*, (Secunderabad: OM Books, 2001).p.143.
5. *Man From Nazareth*, p.143.
6. *Ibid.*, p.151.
7. William Barclay quoted Stanley Jones, in his *Commentary on Luke*, 1.47ff.
8. Elayne Clift, "Women in the US Army", *The Sentinel*, 29-8-02.
9. *Times of India*, November 28, 2002.
10. *India Today*, August, 2002.
11. *The Asian Age*, October 3, 2002.
12. *The Asian Age*, June 5, 2002.
13. R.L. Hnuni, ed., *Transforming Theology for Empowering Women*, Published by the Women Studies, (ETC, Jorhat, 1999), p.107.
14. *Times of India*, November 28, 2002.
15. *Times of India*, June 22, 2002.
16. *The Sentinel*, 29 June, 2002.
17. A Daily not traced at the time of writing this report.
18. *Times of India*, November 3, 2002.
19. *Times of India*, September 5, 2002.
20. *The Eastern Clarion*, Jorhat, May 12, 1997.
21. *The Telegraph*, October 2, 2002.
22. *The Eastern Clarion*, December 22, 1996.
23. *The North East Sun*, October 15-31, 2001.
24. *The Sentinel*, October 5, 2002.
25. *The Sentinel*, November 18, 2002.
26. As I was completing this page, I was told that there is a State level Working Committee on Women Empowerment of Nagaland constituted in September, 2002.