



## WHERE HAVE ALL THE WOMEN GONE?

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*“Soon afterward Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.”*  
—Luke 8:1–3

*“And they [Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome] went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”*  
—Mark 16:8

This is an essay about social and personal perceptions and the role they play in the theological convictions we hold. However much we might think that an objective weighing of the evidence should determine our theology, that is simply not the case. We also take into account the spirit in which theologies are expressed and the niche we can find for ourselves in the church. And that is not wrong in and of itself. Salvation is holistic, so our response to salvation is also holistic, and ought to be. Remember that justification by faith is a *doctrine* about a *relationship*, and the distinction between law and gospel is as much about the *content* of God’s words as the *way* they are proclaimed and perceived. Lutherans have no investment in the false alternative between the what and the how of theology.

The specific set of perceptions I’m going to examine here are those surrounding “orthodoxy” and “feminism.” The scare quotes around those terms should already indicate how much perception influences the meaning of a word. I’ll start by telling of my own reactions to these terms and the realities they represent. Then I’ll allow some others to express their own perspectives. I’ll conclude by making suggestions about what to do with the knowledge gained.

When I was in seminary and later in graduate school, I couldn’t help but notice a seeming paradox: that I was about the most “orthodox” of the women students, but I had come from the most “liberal” background. I was staggered and somewhat disbelieving when women from “conservative” backgrounds related the kind of notions they’d been raised with. I had certainly never been told that my choice of clothing was the one thing standing between young men and sin, or between young men and rape. I had never been told that my chief duty in life was to submit to my husband. I had never been told that I was ontologically disqualified from speaking the word of God on account of my biological sex. The only thing I remember being told specifically pertaining to being female was that women are more vulnerable, sexually speaking, because of the potential for pregnancy, so make good choices. That my anatomy should have anything else to do with my Christianity, my vocation, or my pastimes was never a topic of conversation. Apparently that made my family and church so liberal that I had the luxury of being doctrinally orthodox.

At first my fellow female students’ generally positive disposition toward feminist theology and negative attitude toward classical orthodoxy perplexed me. But I gradually came to realize that (theological) feminism held no attraction for me because nothing had ever been taken away from me—and that itself was because I was already enjoying so many of (social and political) feminism’s fruits. Besides being spared the worst of repressive American Christianity, I’d also never had to deal with the personal fallout of sexual assault, though I have been sexually harassed—the first time, incidentally, at a church school playground. It took many years and a slow process of imagining my way into other women’s religious lives before I could begin to see the pull of theological feminism and the repulsion of orthodoxy.

It took me such a long time to grasp the attraction of feminism because I had been given to believe, by certain Christian men of my acquaintance, that feminism was an ungrateful betrayal of the truth by idolatrous man-haters for reasons that were wholly inexplicable. Undoubtedly there are some feminists who are motivated by sinful idolatry. (Undoubtedly there are orthodox males motivated by sinful idolatry, too.) But I no longer believe they're anything like the majority. It seems to me now that, when women distrust orthodox Christianity, it's because something has happened in their lives to render it untrustworthy. The women I've known who are most alienated from Christian orthodoxy are the ones whose humanity has been most called into question. The church was somehow either responsible (and there's no dodging it: sometimes the church really *is* responsible) or unwittingly identified with the perpetrators. The trust had been so fatally damaged that anything offered as *the* teaching of the church was automatically suspect, even if irrelevant to women's questions otherwise.

It also took me awhile to sort through the genealogy of theological ideas regarding women. Most male theologians in the American Lutheran world today are to some extent positively influenced by feminism, of the social, political, and even theological type (there are really not many anymore who would argue that men have to be the mediators between women and God). But quite a lot of these men would deny the influence or refuse to acknowledge that feminism itself helped them along to their current views regarding women. It is taken by them to be simply obvious that women are equal in their humanity with men, intellectually capable, not solely responsible for sexual sin, not required to be only stay-at-home wives and mothers—and that all of these things can be found in the Bible and classical Christian teaching without any recourse to such a tainted discipline as “feminism.” But the fact is that no

end of male church leaders and Bible readers through church history have come to quite different conclusions. It isn't honest to dissociate feminism from changed-for-the-better attitudes toward women, or to define feminism always by its negative features or excesses, an all too common strategy. The most frequent version I hear of this is “feminism is trying to turn women into men.” The ignorance of the history of feminist thought is the only truth on display here.

Still, a bad experience with men does not automatically a radical, revisionist feminist make. I have known women who, in the face of attacks on their humanity both verbal and physical, have adhered to doctrinal orthodoxy anyway. But it has always been an “in spite of” rather than a “because of,” accompanied by a great deal of frustration at the church's failures to take women's questions seriously. And they seem to be a minority. Heresy is the church's unpaid debt, as the saying goes, and if the debt here doesn't quite equal that of our nation at the moment, it's still a deep one and long overdue to pay it off.

Whatever the exact reasons, the ongoing alienation between many women with feminist leanings (however construed) and Christian orthodoxy is a sad and awkward one for me. Despite the fact that I wrote my dissertation on the ordination of women and have dealt with women's questions in both scholarly and pastoral ways, I have never felt at ease in self-identified gatherings of “feminist theologians.” But obviously enough, they don't feel at ease among “orthodox theologians,” a place that has never been problematic for me. The question became more acute recently when I was asked to draw up a list of Lutheran theologians in America who might be interested in participating in a theological fellowship that desired to be doctrinally orthodox and confessionally Lutheran. It was easy to come up with a long list of men. It was hard to come up with a short list of women. Where have all the women gone?

Lacking any better means for answering my own question, I decided to conduct an informal poll. Like all polls, informal or not, it proves nothing. But I was struck by the consistency of the answers. The persons polled were my female acquaintances whom I took to be “orthodox” or “confessional” Lutherans. Their relationship to “feminism,” and indeed how they would define it, varies widely. They represent several Lutheran denominations in the U.S. Some are lay and some are clergy; their ages span from young adult to retired. The question was why they adhered to confessional Lutheran Christian teaching, and why they thought other women did not.

The answer to the first part of the question was easy for everyone: they believe it makes the best and most compelling case for understanding the Scriptures, human experience, and our holy God. The second part was more illuminating (after all, I was already convinced by orthodox Lutheranism myself). The comments were not so much directed toward the women who have parted company with orthodoxy as to the “male defenders of orthodoxy.” I think it's best to let the women speak for themselves.

One remarked: “I think part of it is the linkage of this cause with the LCMS, which in turn is associated with the refusal to ordain women. But that's not the whole story. I think also some cultural and interpersonal factors come into play. Many of our ‘orthodox,’ ‘confessional’ male colleagues are not very good about being in conversation with others. They tend to pronounce in a very one-sided, authoritarian (note: not *authoritative*) fashion that does not welcome questions and dialogue. They also tend to make fun of those who disagree with them, not a good way to initiate dialogue with those persons. This tends to turn off our female colleagues, who tend to be dialogical and want to ask questions and leave some things open. Remember, Luther's catechism is in Q & A form—which should tell our heritage that questions are welcome and

dialogue encouraged.” It would be easy to misread this as an opposition to “making assertions,” which Luther said, contra Erasmus, was a necessity in the discipline of theology. Rather, this person has identified the vice of valuing the fact of making assertions over the content of the assertions.

Another said, “Women like us attempt to stay because the theology is true to how we understand Scripture, faith, God through Jesus Christ, and so on. However, there are cultural constraints that grow up around orthodoxy making it more of a cultural expression than a faithful communion—and that cultural expression is dramatically inhospitable to women. It seems to me that orthodoxy is built on ‘faith alone’ (of course, in concert with the other solas). Yet the culture that seeks to express ‘faith alone’ loses its grip on the main thing in the name of fear and then grasps wildly to hang on to the sides of the bully pulpit as if all faith will be lost ‘if X creeps onto the scene.’ Faith in Jesus Christ alone is meant to encourage us to suffer one another in love and certain hope in Jesus Christ. Orthodox/confessional movements are so fearful of losing this ‘thing’ that was never theirs to begin with (faith, given by God through Jesus Christ) that they’re trying to enforce cultural controls in its stead, calling it ‘fidelity.’ These fearful cultural controls include questioning women’s abilities rightfully and faithfully to perform tasks outside the purview of children and food. The gospel is not the cultural possession of an elite group. It is the free gift of life given by God, not a thing to be had. Out of fear, orthodoxy seeks to make it a thing to own and control—as if there is only one right way to have and practice faith (and clearly, that way is safer without women in leadership). I see women put off by orthodox/confessional Lutheranism because they cannot bear the weight of cultural pressures placed on them, cultural pressures that seek to usurp the primacy of the gospel. Those who stay become little more than poster children for the movement and are not

really considered sisters in Christ who are called to join together in the good work given to us by God.” I should note that this woman is a pastor in the ELCA, not a disaffected Missourian.

And again: “For some of my male colleagues, there seems to be a delight in being in a small theologically correct ‘in-club’—a dynamic somewhat akin to that known among fundamentalists. They forget that Israel was chosen not to rejoice in its rightness but to be a witness to the nations. They put the boundaries high for admission to their club and forget all about all those people around the margins (not of society but rather of his movement)—whether well-placed Pharisees like Nicodemus or people at the bottom like the woman at the well—that Jesus kept in touch with. I am sure that many of our male colleagues don’t grasp the impact of their styles and actions. They are genuinely puzzled that many women feel alienated from their cause.”

Another made the point with stronger language: “I think many women of our generation are put off by the attitudes of the male defenders of orthodoxy. Or, at least, that’s part of it. They tend to be very black-and-white in their thinking, and there’s a lot of testosterone in the room at the gatherings of such men. Even though I agree with [a certain confessional Lutheran male professor] on some things, I don’t like the students he attracts. They tend to be young men ready to pick a fight with whoever disagrees with them. The liberals can also be assholes, but they tend as a whole to be more gracious than conservatives.”

In other words, the issue seems to be more the culture of orthodoxy than orthodoxy itself, which may never get a fair hearing. Quite a lot of men are equally turned off by this culture, though apparently in fewer numbers than women, and they don’t generally take it as reason to abandon the *content* of orthodoxy. One man I know calls it “jock theology.” Confirmation of the cultural problem came from another direction, when a number of the

women I polled declined to answer on the grounds that they were “not orthodox.” This was rather startling to me, so I asked which parts of orthodoxy they disagreed with: the doctrine and name of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, his cross and resurrection for our salvation, the authority of Scripture, the salvific nature of baptism, the real presence in the Lord’s Supper? Oh no; they were all on board with these. “Orthodoxy” meant to them things like an inflexible approach to worship, a literalist biblical hermeneutic, certain accounts of original sin, or simply an unwillingness to ask questions and entertain serious challenges. It’s a sad day for orthodoxy when it has a bad reputation even among its adherents!

The disappearance of orthodox women is also due, though to a lesser extent, to pressures imposed by other women. One person remarked, “As for women, most of it is treatment—these guys think it is OK to treat women professionals badly, ignore them, harass them, and so on. Some of it is the generation of women fifty-five years and older, who exert pressures on the disciplining of younger female scholars.” This creates an intolerable situation for younger women trying to find their way. One such reported, “I’ve seen direct abuse or humiliation from men *and* from women, because we’re obviously traitors to our own gender if we believe that anything good happened before liberation theology. I don’t know why, but I think the hostility is greater in theology than in other disciplines, and orthodox women especially get it from all sides. We’re suspect to people who are orthodox because we’re women, and we’re suspect to liberals because we’re not toeing the party line. I can also resonate with the disgust at the way orthodoxy is defended, though personally, I’m not sure I find the polemical diatribes on the other side any more satisfactory. In the ELCA, theology and history are treated as secondary to practical ministry and biblical studies in many

seminaries. Many of the presentations of orthodox Christianity at [an ELCA seminary] were embarrassing caricatures, not even taken seriously, so how would anyone know what they were missing if nobody is taught to read orthodox historical or theological texts with charity?"

A shallow grasp of the tradition has been my principal problem with a lot of feminist theology, too. I once read an account of Luther by a prominent feminist theologian who understood his doctrine of justification to mean: God can't stand the sight of you, so God looks at Jesus instead and pretends it's you—but this is bad for women, who are already taught to hate themselves. Well, yes, that would be bad for women as well as for men who struggle with self-hatred, but don't lay that at the foot of Luther! On the other hand, if a woman has learned that those who uphold the tradition are those who demean her humanity, why would she bother to read the tradition more charitably?

Similar thoughts came from another woman: "For one, the church doesn't have a lot of room for those who are more theologically orthodox yet possibly politically liberal. It's territory that is just strange enough to be murky, because those two things are often assumed and presented to the public at large as mutually exclusive. Secondly, I have found in clergy gatherings a tacit resistance to such lines of thought among the *women*. That by holding up more ancient understandings of the faith, you are somehow invalidating all of the work that has gone into getting us 'where we are today.' That you are disregarding all that our sister forebears endured. And that you are being hypocritical. None of this is ever spoken or communicated verbally, but it's an undercurrent." Another says, "Fear, so-called self-actualization, and the co-opting of power (especially linguistic power) by the in-vogue elite have not simply silenced many women but have made it next to impossible for these women theologians to have a serious conversa-

tions in which Scripture, confessions, and the historic liturgical expressions of the faith (including classic trinitarian language) are equal partners with women's 'experience' without being dismissed as hypocrites, hate-mongers, or homophobes, which in the academic market is a fate worse than death."

I wasn't there for the first wave of women entering theology and ministry, so I can't speak from firsthand experience. But I gather that the resistance many men showed to the female infiltration of church leadership and theology had a hardening and radicalizing effect on the women. Many churchmen, incapable of hearing the critiques from or repenting of real sins against the female half of the body of Christ—probably shocked by the suddenness of it, and thinking that they had been doing right by their women all along—turned off their ears and in the process created the kind of women they feared most. Man's orthodoxy begets woman's heresy. And then the men who *weren't* hostile to women heard the accusations made against their sex, resented being lumped together with the bad guys, and began to lose their sympathy for feminist concerns, which only reinforced the women's suspicion.

What a catastrophe! Radical feminists don't arise in a vacuum. They are made, not born, by a hostile male culture. One empathetic orthodox woman commented on these battles, "It was a difficult thing for them, and some of the women went mad. For me, the question is what is most important, rights or faith. The paganism that we are sinking into is brutal to women, which they don't realize yet, but when polygamy starts they will find out." That doesn't suggest retreat to a golden past, because for a lot of women the past really wasn't very golden at all. But a serious alternative to a brutal future is going to require an honest reckoning with the brutality of the past that the church allowed and sometimes even encouraged.

Here's where things stand. Either doctrinal orthodoxy is a male-only thing, which means it is not actually orthodox at all because it does not pertain to fully half of the human race made in God's image; or the culture of orthodoxy has almost become or appears to be a male-only thing, in which case a crisis of evangelization has arisen. I doubt very much that these problems can be solved by legislation or even etiquette, because they cut to the heart of what it means to proclaim the gospel. If anyone rejects the gospel, it has to be because the gospel is encountered as a genuine scandal, not because the proclaimer has caused the proclaimee to stumble. Jesus was very severe on this point: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea" (9:42).

Can we restart this conversation with more charity and patience? The church desperately needs a better reckoning with its legacy regarding sexuality, both positive and negative, than we have managed to have yet. It is quite possibly the most difficult issue to address. Sexuality cuts to the heart of who we are as human beings, encompassing everything from our public personas to our profoundest vulnerabilities to our very ability to make more human beings. The breach between male and female was the first consequence of the first sin; it is not surprising that we still manage our lives together badly, dislike and distrust one other, and fall very far short of the apocalyptic unity of the sexes in Joel 2/Acts 2 and the new creation in Christ of Galatians 3. But if faith in the gospel is at stake, then nothing else could be more important. The worst that can happen is that we will have to repent of sins previously unrecognized. The good news is that, in Christ, confession of sin is not being bound for hell but being cleansed for new life—a new life where women and men are friends, not enemies. *LF*