

### **Feminism and Reformed Ecclesiology**

“Is the Christian Church useable as ecclesia for women and men seeking liberation from patriarchy?”<sup>1</sup>

“It is precisely when feminists [and pro-feminist men] discover the congruence between the Gospel and liberation from sexism that they also experience their greatest alienation from existing churches... These churches continue to ratify, by their language, institutional structures, and social commitments, the opposite message. The more one becomes a feminist [or pro-feminist] the more difficult it becomes to go to church.”<sup>2</sup>

Rosemary Radford Ruether’s question is urgent and deserves significant consideration. However, I believe that in order to maximally benefit the Christian church, her question needs to be asked differently. In this paper, I will examine a series of queries in an attempt to bring into dialogue the works of theologians around this central question: *Is feminism usable for the Christian church to better fulfill its function and mission?* Using the works of Douglas F. Ottati, Gordon D. Kaufman and Ruether, herself, I aim to elucidate the nature of the Christian church’s function and mission, especially the Reformed church, in relation to the world. Also, I will explore the ways in which feminist ideology might be of aid to the church’s function and mission. Finally, I will exposit specific ways in which Ruether suggests feminism be applied to ecclesiology.

#### ***What is the nature of the church’s relationship to the world (feminism being part of the world)?***

Douglas F. Ottati offers the following definition for the Christian church: “The church is the association of those who acknowledge God’s transformative way with the world in Jesus Christ, and whose purpose it is to increase love of God and neighbor.”<sup>3</sup> According to Ottati, the Christian church is both *koinonia* and *ekklesia*.<sup>4</sup> The church is *koinonia*, meaning the church is an essential communion of persons guided by a common vision of a world in reconciling relation to God. “It is

---

<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward A Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 194.

<sup>2</sup> Ruether, 193-194.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas F. Ottati, *Reforming Protestantism: Christian Commitment in Today’s World* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 94.

<sup>4</sup> Ottati, 94-95.

an association with a common ethos or spirit, a fellowship in faith, a community in common devotion, vision, and disposition ‘where two or three are gathered’ in Christ’s name (Matt. 18:20).”<sup>5</sup> The church is *ekklesia*—an institution guided by a common heritage and committed to the organization, communication and persistence of the Christian faith tradition. “The church is an institution that expresses, shapes, and guides the spirit of community in Christ by means of practices, rites, and roles.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the energy of a common vision (*koinonia*) is given form and influence in the integrity of a tradition (*ekklesia*). The church is necessarily both so that it might have maximal significance and influence in the lives of persons (*koinonia*) through the symbolic function and meaning of its language, rites, polity, etc. (*ekklesia*).

The church is not simply a collection of persons and their traditions; the church looks beyond itself to “God’s transformative way with the world.”<sup>7</sup> The church not only acknowledges God’s ways, it seeks to align itself with God’s liberative and reconciling work in the world. “It appropriates God’s way, the way of grace that crosses boundaries, journeys into the far country, and traverses the frontier in order to go over to the betrayer, to rehabilitate the betrayer, and to reestablish the possibility of abundant and good life.”<sup>8</sup> This is especially significant as we consider the relevance of a feminist ideology to ecclesiology. Christian feminists and pro-feminists, of course, do not imagine themselves any more or less “the betrayers” than any other member of the church. Often they feel betrayed by the current status quo of their faith communities. Instead, we might consider these persons “others” who have been isolated, ostracized and excluded from both *koinonia* and *ekklesia*.

The church, then, is called to a true realization of the nature of sin. “It knows that no human capacity, no person, movement, or institution (including itself) is sin-free.”<sup>9</sup> When the church, as an institution and a community of persons, looks to God’s transformative way with the world, it

---

<sup>5</sup> Ottati, 94.

<sup>6</sup> Ottati, 95.

<sup>7</sup> Ottati, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Ottati, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Ottati, 97.

necessarily recalls God's transformative way with itself in Jesus Christ. In this recollection, "sinners who are curved in upon themselves and their isolated groups, whose human spirits are thus constricted and diminished so that they do not participate faithfully in God's commonwealth, confront true faithfulness."<sup>10</sup> The church's response, then, to the often prophetic voice of "others" ought to embody the humility and boundary-crossing responsiveness of the faithful God disclosed in Jesus Christ.

"The church is the association of those who acknowledge God's transformative way with the world in Jesus Christ" defines the church's function. As *koinonia* and *ekklesia*, the church comes together and distinguishes itself from every other household, community and nation through the maintenance and symbolic function of the elements of the Christian tradition. The church looks beyond itself and identifies God, transforming the world into an emancipatory community of inter-related beings. This emancipatory work is done both in the church and in the world. So, then, the church's mission, "to increase love of God and neighbor" is extended to the world both beyond and within itself. Borrowing categories from Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, Ottati sets out to define the church's mission in the context of its multivalent relationship to the world. This discussion is relevant here in that it will allow us to begin to understand the church's responsibility to receive critiques from communities outside itself. Also, the church will, at times, be obligated to incorporate elements of these critiques into its function and mission, including developments made by feminists and pro-feminists.

According to Ottati, the church relates to the world in at least four ways: the church is *in* the world; the church is *with* the world; the church is *against* the world; the church is *for* the world.<sup>11</sup> Among these relationships, there is no primary way in which the church relates to the world. For example, the church is not normatively *against* the world, and only occasionally *for* the world when it recognizes something of itself in the world (usually something it is pleased to notice). Similarly,

---

<sup>10</sup> Ottati, 96.

<sup>11</sup> Ottati, 100-114.

the church is not regularly *in* the world with indistinguishable behavior, customs and traditions. So, as we consider the ways in which the church relates to the world roundabout and within, it is essential that we acknowledge the give-and-take dynamic between these four valences that requires the church to regularly navigate and adjust its relationship with the world.<sup>12</sup>

“The church is *in* the world. As a matter of historical fact, where else could it be? As a matter of faithfulness, where else would it be?”<sup>13</sup> The church, as persons and an institution, recognizes in itself the divine spark of the Creator. The church looks beyond itself and recognizes itself, with an obvious degree of finitude, in relations of interdependence and interrelation both with others and with the Ultimate Other. Not only that, the church recalls the times of its own transformation from the constriction of sin. It recalls itself having been both the betrayer and the betrayed.

“Indeed, we can speak of the solidarity of the church with the world, a solidarity that consists in the recognition that, since Jesus Christ is God’s transformative way with the world, the church too should be in the world, not unwillingly or with bad conscience, but willingly and with a good and faithful conscience.”<sup>14</sup>

The church is in the world, and the world is in the church. The very interdependencies in which we find ourselves swing wide the doors of the church to the world beyond itself. Persons who are shaped and formed by the mundane realities of life—DNA, birthplace, friendships, social class, education—bring the world with them to church on Sunday mornings. In response, the church does well to remain in dialogue with the world that informs and directs so much about human life. The church does this in a variety of ways. Partnerships between domestic and foreign churches, for example, that practice mutual exchange of ideas, resources and persons prevent churches from turning inward towards a crippling loyalty to their own nationality, ethnicity, practices, etc. Further, the church aims, in these partnerships, “to see itself as others see it.”<sup>15</sup> When one group or another comes to the church in protest of its practice or decree, it does well to move beyond defensiveness

---

<sup>12</sup> Ottati, 101.

<sup>13</sup> Ottati, 101.

<sup>14</sup> Ottati, 101.

<sup>15</sup> Ottati, 102.

towards a place where it can begin to understand how and why it has been deemed offensive. It might even begin to realize its own negligence, as persons and as an institution, in its interrelationships with other persons and institutions roundabout.

Because the church remembers God's transformative ways with itself, and acknowledges a nagging tendency to turn inward towards loyalties that do not honor or participate in the created order, "the church is *with* the world, confessing our common faults and sins."<sup>16</sup> One of the primary foundations of Reformed ecclesiology is the idea that no person or institution is above or outside the corrupting power of sin (Romans 3:21-26). Granted, this power manifests itself in various ways and to various degrees in persons and institutional structures. Nevertheless, when the church prays, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us," it acknowledges itself, again, as both betrayer and betrayed and commits itself to preemptive acts of pardon and blessing towards those who appear to threaten.<sup>17</sup>

"Consequently, the church is *with* the world, confessing sin in two related senses... It confesses that it is captivated by forms of worldliness that infiltrate the church, so that the idolatrous devotions, disordered loves, and sins that plague the world are often duplicated in the church... [In the other case], the church is captivated not by forms of worldliness but by forms of 'churchliness.'"<sup>18</sup> This constricting tendency of the church to turn inward on itself is expressly related to our question of feminism's role in the church's function and mission. As we said before, the church does well to remain in dialogue with other persons and communities, and to aim to see itself through the eyes of its onlookers. When the church confesses its sin, then redemption and reconciliation are possible. Ruether's feminist vision for the church claims that the church has, in fact, become fixated on sinful forms of "churchliness" and calls for reform. A confessing church, a church *with* the world, will hear Ruether's claims and consider her vision without immediately dismissing it. Because the church acknowledges the influence of sin on itself and sins way of creeping into the hearts, minds and polity

---

<sup>16</sup> Ottati, 104.

<sup>17</sup> The Lord's prayer in Matthew 6

<sup>18</sup> Ottati, 105-106.

of persons and institutions, a confessing church will open its ears to words of reform coming from the world.

“Precisely as the association that acknowledges God’s transformative way with the world in Jesus Christ, the church is also *against* the world, criticizing its idols and constricting corruptions.”<sup>19</sup> And as we have said, this means that the church is often called to criticize itself as perpetrator and proponent of the status quo. In a world of competing allegiances, our loyalties inevitably rub up against each other—sometimes violently. In profit driven economies, corporate interests intersect human concerns. One nation’s land claim is disputed by another’s. We should not be surprised to see idols and constricting corruptions in the church. As we have said, the world informs the basic categories of our lives and these compete for our loyalty.

“Reforming piety therefore issues in an indispensable dimension of prophetic criticism. It denounces the inordinate and destructive narrowness that inevitably accompanies interactive orientations centered on the isolated causes and interests of individuals and groups.”

This “prophetic criticism” issues a double decree in regards to feminism’s usability for the church. On the one hand, feminists and pro-feminists are certainly not exempt from the constricting power of sin. They too have competing loyalties that may often cause them to wrongly relate to God and others. The church might hear a feminist critique of the church’s function and mission and consider it skewed. The church might deem feminism’s insights inappropriately loyal to some and disloyal to others. Still, the church must *hear* the critique.

On the other hand, the church might appropriately find itself on the receiving end of prophetic feminist criticism. The church may find itself *against* the world within. Feminist critiques might reveal inappropriate loyalties to polity, creed, practice and the like. Like any person receiving a stinging word of accountability from a stranger, or harder still a friend, the church might find that

---

<sup>19</sup> Ottati, 108.

feminist critiques and constructions elucidate the nature of the church *in, with* and *against* the world. Still, the church must *hear* the critique.

Finally, the church is *for* the world. The church imagines great possibilities and potentialities for Creation. As we have said, this multivalent relationship requires a certain give-and-take among the many ways in which the world relates to the church. Often, the church is perceived as simply *against* the world. Church leaders who circuit-ride various talk and radio shows denouncing various forms of “social depravity,” all the while ignoring the great possibility of God’s transformative way with the world, present and imagine a church that is, in fact, constricted and inappropriately loyal to itself.

The church ought not simply be a community and institution that proclaims the emancipatory possibilities in God’s transformative ways; it embodies God’s reconciling and rehabilitating ways in its polity, practice *and* proclamation. The church proclaims and embodies God’s grace to all persons. This grace is life giving and sustaining. This grace gives a resounding “yes!” to sin’s “no.” “If sin means the brokenness of human relationships with one another and with God, then grace means the transforming divine power and initiative that elicits a new responsiveness to God and neighbor.”<sup>20</sup> The church is only able to acknowledge itself *in* the world, because it knows God’s ability to transform the world. The church goes to its knees *with* the world because it knows the forgiveness of God. The church imparts prophetic criticism *against* the world because it knows God judges the world. Finally, the church is *for* the world because it sees that God is for the world, rehabilitating and transforming it.

The Christian church, then, owes it to itself and the world, its partner, to hear from feminists and pro-feminists who offer words of critique and words of hope. Though many of these persons have been excluded from the *ekklesia*, and even some from *koinonia*, they too stand in earshot of God. “Yes!” the church ought to look to the world for insights and improvements. There is, in fact,

---

<sup>20</sup> Ottati, 112.

no sin or threat outside itself that is not within. There are, however, voices calling from outside to come in.

*How might feminism be of aid to the church's function and mission?*

It has already been said that modern persons' lives are shaped and directed by the world. Genetic predispositions, geographic location, birth-order, social class and many, many more mundane particularities form the content of persons' lives. Often and inevitably these particularities come into competition with each other, both intra and interpersonally. Continually, the facts of our lives come into conflict with the content of our faith. If one is employed and reports directly to a woman, it is prudent to treat that woman respectfully, to honor her position in the company and to do as she asks, within reason. One even assumes that she has earned her position and is fit for and capable of her roles and duties. However, if this same one is a member of a local congregation or parish that insists (implicitly or explicitly) that women are unfit or unordainable for leadership in the church, then this one immediately has a conflict of loyalties. Here, this one experiences what Gordon D. Kaufman calls

“a deep bifurcation in the faith that actually orients the lives of many moderns, a division between certain Christian values, meanings, and commitments that continue to remain important and those many features of actual day-to-day living and believing that are largely defined and informed by modern (secular) ideas and practices.”<sup>21</sup>

This bifurcation exists, largely, because of a persistent belief in the church that the world—its sciences, technologies, politics, etc.—is more affected by the constriction of sin, or at least less affected by the transformative ways of God. This, of course, is not actually the case (the church is *in* the world). Further, this bifurcation need not exist if God is God of all and in relation to all. Kaufman's aim, then, is to develop a “Christian categorical scheme broad enough and deep enough to accommodate the many perspectives and the enormous complexity and detail of our modern

---

<sup>21</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 434.

knowledges (without seriously distorting them).”<sup>22</sup> This categorical scheme is another step towards the usability of feminism for the church. This categorical scheme will help us identify and transform symbols, rites, polity, etc. that perpetuate this bifurcation and, at the same time, alienate feminist women and pro-feminist men.

“The church is the association of those who acknowledge God’s transformative way with the world in Jesus Christ, and whose purpose it is to increase love of God and neighbor.”<sup>23</sup> The church’s first allegiance is to God, and the church is “in the business” of perpetuating the influence of God in Christ in the world. It is, therefore, the church’s responsibility and privilege to evoke the symbolic function of “God” and “Christ” in historically and socially relevant and responsible ways. “Since the symbol ‘God’ is important to [the church] in ways not true of society at large, they take greater cultural responsibility for it than most other institutions or communities.”<sup>24</sup>

In order to maintain the significance and authenticity of “God” in society, the church must regularly and responsibly revise the symbolic meaning and function of “God.” In Nazi Germany, images of a white, blue-eyed, blonde-haired “Christ” (still prevalent in the global West/North) provoked and prolonged the torture and extermination of Jews, homosexuals and those deemed “other” than the popular image of the incarnate “God.” Feminists charge that the maintenance of exclusively male language and imagery for “God” perpetuates the subordination of women in the church and society at large.<sup>25</sup> How might the 21<sup>st</sup> century church look to the lessons learned (or not) by Christian leaders in Nazi Germany only a half century ago?

The defense of male language and imagery for God is largely nostalgic. Persons look to scripture as revelation of a gendered “God” with little or no regard for the social location of religious persons and leaders trying, in their own time and place, to maintain the symbolic function of “God” (YHWH, Adonai, Elohim, etc.). Kaufman warns,

---

<sup>22</sup> Kaufman, 435.

<sup>23</sup> Ottati, 94.

<sup>24</sup> Kaufman, 436.

<sup>25</sup> See Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward A Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

“Support for theocentric patterns of life by the churches and other religious institutions will not be widely effective, however, if it is largely backward-looking and nostalgic, attempting to keep alive outmoded and irrelevant patterns of praxis and symbolization simply because they are believed to express ‘the faith... once for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3).”<sup>26</sup>

In a world where gender and sex are often scientifically and socially “fuzzy,” does it help the church to present an image of God that implies that only those who identify absolutely as “male” reflect the divine image? What symbolic functions have been neglected or ignored in the church’s presentation of “God” because of the social constructs of “maleness” and “femaleness?” And are these the only applicable categories?

Kaufman’s categorical scheme calls for an “imaginative construction” of a reformed ecclesiology in dismantling the present bifurcation of faith and developing a more authentic categorical scheme.<sup>27</sup>

“What we are speaking about here are quite momentous changes for the churches—changes in the conceptions and imagery with which they mediate (and interpret) God and Christ and thus form and inform Christian devotion, experience, and worship at deep levels; changes in their understanding and practice of ministry, in their basic rituals such as the sacraments, in their attitudes toward the Bible, in many of their hymns, and so on.”<sup>28</sup>

In fact, Kaufman calls for no more and no less a dramatic reform of ecclesiology than monastics in the medieval world, reformers in the Catholic Church, Quakers in established American religion, Latin American liberation theologians and now feminists, among others.

As we have seen throughout history, the name of God is evoked for a variety of causes and crusades. The church, of course, is no exception to the communities and institutions evoking the name of God inappropriately. Again, Nazi Germany is a recent and radical case-in-point. The church, then, in its function and mission aims to present God in Christ to the world as “ [the One] that crosses boundaries, journeys into the far country, and traverses the frontier in order to go over

---

<sup>26</sup> Kaufman, 437.

<sup>27</sup> Kaufman, 437.

<sup>28</sup> Kaufman, 437.

to the betrayer [and the betrayed], to rehabilitate [them both], and to reestablish the possibility of abundant and good life.”<sup>29</sup> The church’s function (polity, rites, rituals, etc.) is primary in sustaining the symbolic power of “God,” and effective only so far as it is deemed authentic and of aid to the lived lives of persons in the world. The church’s mission (to increase love of God and neighbor) is not accomplished when the church’s function perpetuates nostalgic, out-dated, irresponsible images of “God” in “Christ” and the means by which persons orient themselves towards God.

*What reforms to its function and mission might the church make in light of Ruether’s feminist vision?*

The church is both *koinonia* and *ekklesia*. The church functions as both a community and institution comprised of people from various social locations and influenced by a variety of particularities. The church organizes itself in hopes of perpetuating the symbols, rites, polity, etc. of the Christian faith and tradition in a way that will be cooperative with the transformative ways of God, as well as influential and meaningful in the lives of persons in their own time and place. This effort often calls for reform of current modes of function and mission and never overcomes the finitude of the persons involved. However, the church, as we have said, does well to remain in dialogue with others, and see itself as others do, when envisioning and imagining new possibilities for itself and the world.

“Theologically, it is essential to understand redemption as a communal effort, not just an individual, experience. Just as sin implies alienation and broken community, so rebirth to authentic selfhood implies a community that assembles in the collective discovery of this new humanity and that provides the matrix of regeneration.”<sup>30</sup>

It is important that the church include feminist women and pro-feminist men in its own process of redeeming those modes of function and mission that are out-dated and, indeed, irresponsible. We know that God stands in equal relation to all persons, including those who have long been excluded

---

<sup>29</sup> Ottati, 96.

<sup>30</sup> Ruether, 193.

from church leadership and/or restricted to certain roles in the church. The way forward for the church must be both communal and systemic. It must involve dialogue with those who offer words of prophetic criticism as well as institutional inclusion of those persons, rites, politics and proclamations that have long been considered unfit.

Ruether sees feminist women and pro-feminist men as historically and systemically alienated from the church. Women and men who desire reform of dominant symbols, power structures and polity find the church unreceptive to their input, and as a result are often driven away. As we have said, feminists are subject to the same “prophetic criticism” that holds persons and institutions accountable for their own constriction. There may be, in fact, numerous cases where men and women have called for inappropriate reforms of the church’s function and mission. However, this is certainly not always the case, and we know that are in fact women and men throughout history who have been driven away from the church, even killed by the church, only later to be pardoned in light of emerging knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

As a result of their alienation, feminists, and all persons seeking liberation from patriarchy, suffer “starvation of sacramental nourishment, a famine of the Word of God/ess.”<sup>32</sup> In those cases where women or men value their place in religious life and leadership, persons must largely assimilate to the status quo of current ecclesiology. In some cases, the church accepts a part of the prophetic critique and chooses to allow feminists and pro-feminists into their midst, so long as these members of the church mind their place in the already existing “barking order,” which almost never places women or pro-feminine men at the top. Nevertheless, feminism offers a critique of hierarchy itself, in favor of cooperation and consensus, which is largely ignored and/or deemed logistically impossible.

“Women play the ministerial role by endlessly proving that they can think, feel, and act ‘like on of the boys.’ The ‘boys,’ in turn, accept them only in token numbers that do not threaten their monopoly on ecclesiastical power... [Women] are allowed success only by being

---

<sup>31</sup> E.g. Galileo

<sup>32</sup> Ruether, 194.

better than men at the games of masculinity, while at the same they are rebuked for having lost their femininity. In such a system it is not possible for women to be equal, but only to survive in a token and marginal way at tremendous physical and psychological cost.”<sup>33</sup>

Ruether’s vision for the church requires nothing short of a “conversion from sexism.”<sup>34</sup> This conversion, like Kaufman’s categorical scheme, calls for the revision and reform of a number of current church practices and ideologies. Ruether calls the church to overcome exclusively male imagery for God. As with Kaufman, Ruether realizes that the symbolic function of “God” has real ramifications in the lives of men and women, and Ruether adds that these ramifications often result in the subordination, or worse, of women. Ruether criticizes liturgical and pastoral authority that is exclusively held by ordained clergy. Finally, Ruether calls the church to sponsor social projects that promote liberation for persons and communities traditionally outcast, victimized and/or ignored by the church and world (women, homosexuals, the poor). In this work, I want to look specifically at Ruether’s critique of “clericalism.”

First, it should be said that Ruether’s vision for church reform hinges on “feminist liberation communities” that exist in a parallel relationship to the church.<sup>35</sup> Persons might choose to live, discuss, engage in social projects and/or worship in these communities, all the while maintaining their relationship, albeit superficial, with the *ekklesia*. “The relationship between the two [the church and feminist liberation communities] becomes a creative dialectic rather than a schismatic impasse... [Liberation communities serve as] a support community that really nurtures liberated ways of living together.”<sup>36</sup> Ruether’s assumption that reform of the church must be imposed upon the church is preemptively pessimistic. It seems likely that persons who have been (or feel) driven out of the church would find it difficult, if not impossible, to return to the church even if the objectives of Ruether’s vision had been accomplished. More likely, persons would remain in their own *koinonia*, neglecting the *ekklesia* and negating the reformers initial vision—a united body. While feminist base

---

<sup>33</sup> Ruether, 200-201.

<sup>34</sup> Ruether, 201.

<sup>35</sup> Ruether, 205-210.

<sup>36</sup> Ruether, 206.

communities might serve as important vehicles for both *koinonia* and *ekklesia*, just as scripture study groups and Christian Education committees do, they ought not become separate entities from the church, lest they never be integrated with the church.

For this discussion, it will be helpful to consider how Ruether's vision for "dismantling clericalism" in feminist liberation communities might be applicable to the church, at large.

"Clericalism, by definition, disempowers the people and turns them into 'laity' dependent on clergy. The basic assumption of clericalism is that the people have no direct access to the divine. The clergy monopolize the instrument of mediation between God and the laity. The clergy alone have authorized theological training; they alone are authorized to preach, to teach, to administer the Church. They alone possess sacramental power."<sup>37</sup>

This is, of course, a monumental claim. Ruether is working out of a Roman Catholic context, in which more of this declaration may be true than in Protestant Reformed circles. For these purposes, I only want to address aspects of this claim that, to my mind, might be immediately relevant to Reformed ecclesiology: that clericalism disempowers laypersons by granting exclusive liturgical and sacramental authority to clergy.

Ruether says, "Such dismantling of clericalism is implicit in the Gospel concept of ministry as *diaconia* or service. *Diaconia* is *kenotic* or self-emptying of power as domination."<sup>38</sup> Christ is revered as one "who, though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."<sup>39</sup> In Ruether's vision, clergy's ministry is the empowerment of others to fulfill the roles of ministry themselves. This vision is already at work in the church when lay people are trained to lead studies of scripture and invited to assist in the service of the Eucharist. Still, laypersons are rarely empowered to the extent that they, themselves, become leaders of and ministers to ordained clergy.

Dismantling clericalism calls for an empowerment of the *whole* body of Christ in the service of the church's function and mission.

---

<sup>37</sup> Ruether, 206-207.

<sup>38</sup> Ruether, 207.

<sup>39</sup> Philippians 2:6-7

“Ministry in the community of liberation assumes that some people have special gifts and may play particular and different roles. But this specialization of some as teachers, some as administrators, some as liturgical poets and artists, some as community organizers is for the sake of empowering the whole community.”

This empowering vision requires an extensive effort on the part of clergy towards lay training and education. It may be, in fact, that this vision *requires* clergy to give up their exclusive hold on biblical interpretation and Eucharistic service because of the fact that others in the church perform these functions more effectively. Not only that, in developed countries, where participation in the Christian church is sharply declining, laypersons represent the Christian faith most immediately to their friends, family members, coworkers, etc. Clergy have a responsibility to train laypersons to represent the Christian faith in society as effectively as has been expected of clergy at any other point in the history of the church.

Ruether calls her vision of lay empowerment “reappropriation theology.”<sup>40</sup> This reappropriation includes sacramental authority. “The liberation of the church from clericalism also means reclaiming the sacraments as expressions of the redemptive life of the Church that the people are empowered to administer collectively.”<sup>41</sup> This authority extends beyond assistantship to ordained clergy in the service of the Eucharist. Here, it is presumed that laypersons have the same capacity for receiving and mediating divine grace as clergy. Ruether notes the lack of scriptural support for exclusively clerical administration of the sacraments. “Even in the most clerical material in the Pastoral Epistles, the office of bishop is designated as teaching, not as administration of sacraments.”<sup>42</sup>

Ruether believes that a church freed from clericalism will be able to imaginatively and artistically engage the liturgy. The empowerment of the laity and the dismantling of hierarchical power structures will open the door to the important voices and contributions of persons who have

---

<sup>40</sup> Ruether, 208.

<sup>41</sup> Ruether, 208.

<sup>42</sup> Ruether, 209.

previously been silent or uninvolved. Like any good conversation, Ruether believes the church will only be better when it includes the input of equal persons aiming to benefit each other.

*Is feminism usable for the Christian church to better fulfill its function and mission?*

My purpose here has not been to develop a short or simple answer to this question. Instead, benefiting from Ruether's vision, I have sought to create a dialogue between the works of three theologians regarding the church's responsibilities to the world around and within it. I certainly conceive of a number of ways in which the church might benefit from the application of components of Ruether's vision, especially regarding the empowerment of laity. I also recognize moments in her work when words of prophetic criticism may be appropriate—where inappropriate loyalties and/or idealism threatens to steer her vision off course. Still, we have seen that the church is a partner to the world, and vice versa. The church is *in, with, against* and *for* the world, and because feminism is in the world, the church has this multivalent relationship with feminism as well. Going forward, the church will do well to look to every worldly development, including feminism, that promises to further its mission to increase love of God and neighbor. These developments may appear, and actually be, threatening to the church in its current state, but as is the hope in every birthing process, the pangs soon give way to new life.