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Does Equality of Discipleship Add Up to Church? A Critique of Feminist *Ekklesia*-logy

“A discipleship of equals” is the now-familiar name that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has given to a Church from which women would no longer feel estranged. The following comment aims to examine whether the concepts represented by the phrase in her writings adequately represent what the early Christian tradition understood by “Church,” especially in regard to maintaining the body of believers within the tradition of the Word.

According to Schüssler Fiorenza, the word “Church” itself has become part of the problem with which the ecclesial institution confronts women. This is so because the word “Church” has arisen from the “lord” language of the early Christian period, “Church” being but an anglicized version of the Greek *kyriak*, meaning “belonging to the Lord” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993a, 196). In its turn, the word “lord” is a classic formulation of early Christian perceptions of social arrangements arising from the exercise of patriarchal authority and power. Thereafter the continuous oppression which the same patriarchal power brought upon women in the Church has rendered it a hostile environment for them.

To make matters worse for women, in the Church patriarchal power (-*arch*-) takes the form of hierarchical power, this being a power profoundly intensified by its supposed source in the area of the sacred (*hier*-). Through power originating in this source, the hierarchs provide access for non-hierarchs to the divinity. Thus, on this Christian feminist perception, women who faithfully adhere to the institutional Church are still caught up in “malestream” religious experience (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 4) where they “have been excluded from the interpretation of the world and of the divine” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990b, 329); unless they extricate themselves, they will suffer in their woman-ness. Since it is unacceptable that Christian fidelity should be so rewarded, the problematical task for women is to devise a theological construct which preserves them in faith at the same time as it liberates them from what has oppressed them. It is important to note that what oppresses women is also oppressive of men, even of those who exercise the power, so that the objective of a discipleship of equals is to be realized for the benefit also of men. Thus, in the terminology Schüssler Fiorenza has

found herself constrained to develop, women and men together constitute “the ekklesia of wo/men” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 27; Schüssler Fiorenza 1990a, 293).

WHY THE QUESTION ARISES

To question whether a discipleship of equals can function adequately as a Church is not to set out on a reactionary line for “apologetic patriarchal interests” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990b, 329) against the great initiative of feminist theology represented by the work of Schüssler Fiorenza. Nor is it the condescension of one of those “liberal theologians” who have been the object of Schüssler Fiorenza’s strictures for condescension toward feminist theology from within the security of their androcentric domain (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985, 259). Rather, the critique has originated from a long-felt need to enter into the Christian feminist discourse about Church for the purpose, first, of learning about Church from women’s experience of it and, second, of gauging in what ways my own laboriously built-up views of a Church for our times might merge with those envisioned by today’s women. Certainly, on the basis of the ecclesiological implications of ministry, as the ancient Greek Christians conceived of that central ecclesial activity (*diakonia*), the Church would not be true to itself so long as it conducted itself exclusively through a ministry of men (Collins 1990, 260; 1991; 1992, 3; 1993; 1995a, b).

Since claims to women’s ministerial capacity necessarily arise from the feminist ecclesial construct called “a discipleship of equals” and are also integral to any consideration of the ancient ministry / *diakonia*, it could be important to investigate whether the two approaches support one another. Fortunately, or so it seems to me, the task of investigating the place of ministry within “a discipleship of equals” is not nearly so complex as would be a similar investigation conducted within the confines of “the *ekklesia* of wo/men,” even though, from the viewpoint of feminist theology, these two are equivalent expressions of Church. This estimation of the comparative levels of difficulty in the two tasks would seem to be accurate in light of the fact that a discussion conducted according to the rhetoric of the *ekklesia* of wo/men takes us into a still new and largely unexplored underworld of theology where the rhetoric itself changes: where even the word “Church,” as we have already intimated, has to be acknowledged as one of “the inscribed symptoms of historical struggles” which declare the “marginality and victimization” of women (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 29).

In contrast to the still developing discourse of an “*ekklesia* of wo/men,” the discourse of “a discipleship of equals” takes us into a more familiar landscape. This country is not without the tripwires of paradox, it is true: for when all are disciples, who is the teacher? While

we will be told that the teacher is the prophetic child of Sophia, the prophet Jesus is long since gone from our midst, so that now and in the future to which spirit do the multitudes of disciples attune themselves? We will touch on this and one or two other questions, but at least in talk of "discipleship" we recognize something out of our basic experience of relationships just as in talk of "equals" we realize that we are entering the political sanctum of our culture. Thus we can talk comfortably enough about processes of learning and about human rights in the arena of Church without feeling we are merely caught up in androcentric paradigms. In proceeding, then, I am not unmindful that our conventional discourse will be taking place upon the glass floor that in one aeon or another is likely to shatter as the rising "women church" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990b, 323) pushes through.

THE CLAIM TO MINISTRY

The best place to begin looking for connections is among those facets of the discipleship of equals where we would expect to recognize a reflection of church-like features. Undoubtedly the best opportunity to catch such a reflection will be where Schüssler Fiorenza positions the discipleship of equals in such light that it exhibits some characteristic of the face of the Church more clearly than she asserts the historical institution can do. Thus more than once she aligns various models of Church against each other. In one such comparative exercise she offsets two understandings of the people of God. One model presents an understanding of the people as "laity" distinct from "the clerical-sacerdotal hierarchy"; the latter, being exclusive of women, stands out as sexist, discriminatory, and patriarchal (Schüssler Fiorenza 1981, 184). The other model works from an understanding of the word "people" (as in the Greek word *laos*) as comprehending all in the Church, where the "constitutive sacrament . . . is not ordination but baptism." The consequence is that "all the baptized . . . are empowered and responsible for building up church" (185). She writes: "Ministry . . . is the responsibility of all; it is not a prerogative or privilege of one class or of one sex, but it is rooted in the baptism of all believers" (186).

At the time of writing this, Schüssler Fiorenza judged that the conflict between the two models was at "a critical juncture," with only the second model offering women a participatory role freed of patriarchal influences oppressive of women (Schüssler Fiorenza 1981, 187; 1979a, 89). In an earlier critique she had demanded that such a participatory role not be based on a mere complementarity of sexes, with women bringing to the ministry the femininity of which historically it had been deprived; rather, participation was only to be envisaged on the ground that it arose from the conversion of women through their experience of sexist oppression and, furthermore, led to the conversion

of the patriarchal system (Schüssler Fiorenza 1979b, 134–40). That the oppression had been systematic has required the development of the hermeneutics of suspicion for the purpose of investigating biblical texts and traditions “as one would ‘search’ the place and location where a crime has been committed” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993b, 11). She expressed the objective of women’s ministerial aspirations in the following terms: “We should seek to become ministers . . . in order to subvert clerical-hierarchical structures and to transform the church into a discipleship of equals” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990a, 304).

Thus we see that a particular concept of ministry is integral to the model of Church which Schüssler Fiorenza requires for women if they are really to participate in it instead of being integrated into a preexisting model. In the preexisting model ministry was exclusively the responsibility of hierarchs, that is, it came to priests and bishops through ordination. In the more recent model, ministry is the responsibility and right of all the baptized. Immediately, therefore, we have a significant point of contact between “discipleship of equals” and ministry/*diakonia*. We will see other points of meeting in considering other aspects of the discipleship of equals.

A MINISTRY WITHOUT POWER

Major structural elements in the clerical-hierarchical model are the idea of sacred power (hier/arch) and the concomitant use of that power in the exercise of authority. In regard to the idea of sacred power, Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us of the origins of hierarchy in two historical sources. The first of these is the anti-Jewish theology of early Christian writers which presented Christianity as replacing God’s saving work in Judaism (“supersessionism”) and as inheriting the Jewish Temple’s sacerdotal caste system. The other and enduring source is the historic moment when the Christian Church accommodated itself to the pagan priestcraft of the Roman empire as soon as the Constantinian establishment extended the hand of peace and provided incentive for worldly compromise (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 16). Both developments brought with them sexist structures of the most resolutely exclusivist kind and are therefore to be as resolutely eschewed if the Church of today is to have room for women.

Such developments affecting the growth of an idea of sacred power in the Church provoke reflection, however, on what it is that keeps a discipleship of equals free of the sexist limitations imposed throughout history by the experience of hierarchy. The liberating factor is to be found at that point where the Jesus tradition advocates “nonkyriarchal relationships” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 94): when a relationship is “nonkyriarchal” it operates out of the native bonding between people and not from any overbearing requirement (-archy) of a master or lord

(kyri-). A sevenfold series of sayings within the Jesus tradition which contrast the social positions of the first and the last, the greatest and the least, the leader and the servant is represented at the high point of Jesus' mission in Mark's presentation (10:42-45) and there applies to "relationships within the discipleship of equals" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983, 148). One of the constants in these sayings tends to be the word "minister/*diakonos*," as in "whoever wishes to be great among you must become your servant/*diakonos*" (Mark 10:43). Schüssler Fiorenza's feminist reading of these teachings, which are so deeply imbedded in the tradition, is that they are not directed at all Christians but "only [at] those who have status and power" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990a, 305). The purpose of the teaching would be to reject "the patriarchal-hierarchical pyramid as such" and "to level it by urging those on the top of the pyramid to join the work and labor of those on the bottom," thus eliminating patriarchal-hierarchical structures altogether and creating an "equality from below" for the discipleship of equals (305). Once again, therefore, a value attributed to early Christian "ministry/*diakonia*" appears at a critical point in Schüssler Fiorenza's unmaking of oppressive ecclesial structures and sets the conditions for the new *ekklesia* of wo/men.

On the same diakonic basis these teachings are said to countermand the exercise and indeed the notion of authority within the hierarchical Church: "Leadership in the community of disciples must not be exercised as domination and power over but as service and liberation" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985, 247). The reference here is again to ministry/*diakonia*, and indeed to the critique of ecclesiastical authority which Leonardo Boff had conducted from the point of view of a particular but mistaken understanding of the ancient ministry/*diakonia*. In Boff's words: "authority must be exercised diaconally" (Boff 1985, 61). Without that constituent diakonic element, whereby authority is required to become "enabling, energizing, creative," one is drawn to question the "Christian legitimacy" of "the patriarchal authority presently [1985] displayed by the Vatican" (247).

AN ADVERSARIAL MINISTRY

The energies released within the community of disciples in the interplay of ministerial/*diakonical* relationships create the *basileia*, another Greek term, indeed a "central symbol," used to designate the arena of Christian activity. The term is acknowledged to have its ambiguity, being elsewhere variously translated as "kingdom" or "kingly rule," but for Schüssler Fiorenza it represents the territorial notions of "empire," "domain," or "commonweal." This concept of a region of Christian activity sets the concept of *basileia* in direct confrontation with the dominant political reality of the first century, the Roman empire, and represents to a "people victimized by an imperial system . . . an alter-

native world free of hunger, poverty, and domination" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 92–3). Thus did the Jesus movement take on a political character, requiring that the *basileia* continue today to sustain "critical practices of struggle for transforming societal and religious kyriarchal institutional discourses" (28).

This requirement constitutes a radical politicization of the whole process of being a discipleship of equals. Hence the proliferation in Schüssler Fiorenza's own discourse of political terms generated by force of conceptualizing the "commonweal" announced by Jesus as an alternative political reality: "the full democratic assembly of wo/men" (27), "fully responsible democratic citizens" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990a, 293), "the full decision-making assembly of free citizens" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991, 372). Actions of the discipleship arising from this politicization are part of the struggle to maintain the "domination-free structures" which fidelity to the ministerial/*diakonical* teachings in the Jesus movement demand (Schüssler Fiorenza 1979c, 176).

Within a discipleship liberated from kyriarchal relationships, conventional ecclesial procedures begin to operate differently. Ecclesial ministries are no longer subject to "clericalization and hierarchical monopolization" because, as already observed, "baptized and confirmed members of the church . . . are entitled to hold responsible leading positions in the church" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1967, 35; 1975, 88–9; 1979a, 88–9; 1983b, 228–9). The women in the Jesus circle already demonstrated this because "they . . . do what Jesus came to do, namely, to serve (*diakonein*)," and they could well have been "among the leaders of the Jesus-movement in Palestine" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1977, 113). What is required of role players in the discipleship is open: "Vocation, spiritual giftedness, and commitment suffice" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1967, 35). Indeed certain women already have responded to this mode of ecclesial activity and "already act on their call to the sacramental priesthood, which they understand themselves to have received from the Spirit and from the people of God" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1979b, 149; see 1981, 194; 1993a, 130).

DISCLAIMING SERVILE MINISTRY

The preceding paragraphs are not designed to catalog and disparage theological views about Church which many would consider unconventional within a Roman Catholic context. They seek rather to show the intimate connections between the revolutionary feminist ecclesial agenda in Schüssler Fiorenza's writings and an underlying evaluation of ministry/*diakonia*. That this evaluation worked influentially on her thinking about Church from her earliest period would seem to be apparent from its prominence in a paper of 1967, "Should Women Aim for Ordination to the Lowest Rung of the Hierarchical Ladder?" And that

it remained a significant dimension for more than twenty years would also appear from the careful critique she made of it in a graduation address of 1990, "Feminist Ministry in the Discipleship of Equals." In this address she forcefully rejected the conventional use to which ministry / *diakonia* has been put in modern times for the purpose of advancing claims for a broader access to ecclesial ministry.

These claims have regularly been made on the following simplistic lines: ministry / *diakonia* was the original Christian designation of ecclesial functions, but ministry / *diakonia* was originally and basically about lowly service at table. Therefore, all modern ecclesial ministry / *diakonia* should be characterized by lowly service, is thereby within the capacity of all, and should be open to all. As Schüssler Fiorenza points out strongly, however, for women to pursue claims to ecclesial ministry on the grounds of their capacity in lowly service would be a retrograde step and would merely reinforce oppressive historical attitudes to them and lock them into their position as second-class citizens within the discipleship (Schüssler Fiorenza 1967, 23–38). Accordingly her own claims for women are based rather on the conviction already noted that women "walk and work in the power of the Spirit" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1981, 194), and she lays the call to lowly service instead, as also just noted, upon those men who are on the highest ranks of the hierarchical system (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990a, 305).

A HIGHER VIEW OF MINISTRY

At this point the meeting of the ancient ministry / *diakonia* with the modern programmatic discipleship of equals is at its most awkward because within the original Christian discourse about ecclesial community the place of ministry / *diakonia* was more far-reaching than Schüssler Fiorenza allows. Indeed, in mounting her critique of the misuses to which ministry / *diakonia* has customarily been put, she brushed to one side the uses which were actually paradigmatic for the first ecclesial groupings of Christians. These are her references to ministry / *diakonia* as embracing people "in the service of the god/s, in the service of a city or commonwealth, or in the service of great ideas or ideals" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1990a, 298). These areas of ministry / *diakonia* are precisely those within which lay the essential ecclesial activities of the first Christians we know of: such ministry / *diakonia* embraced the purveying of the word of God and the carrying out of tasks in the name of the Christian community. Both kinds of tasks were high tasks, appointed tasks, and reserved tasks not open to those without the commission of God or community. The tasks were indeed called ministry / *diakonia* for the very purpose of making clear that the activities were carried out under a sacred commission either of God or of God's people. And we know this to have been so by force of the ancient language itself. Linguistic

researchers in this area of the early Christian rhetoric have substantiated and illustrated the high and exclusive rights which certain members of communities had to ministry / *diakonia* (Collins, 1990; 1992; and *passim*). As a consequence this term and its associated terms are no longer available for the kind of argument developed by Eduard Schweizer (171–80) or Hans Küng (495–502), nor even are they of use for the revisionist adversarial uses to which Schüssler Fiorenza has attempted to put them in relation to such gospel material as Mark 10:42–45.

Moreover, her politicization of the terms as they appear in the seven-fold saying within the Jesus tradition to which she sometimes appeals is misplaced. In using the sayings to reveal how radically the discipleship of equals stands in opposition to the political power structures of this world she merely imports into the discipleship another set of political values—democracy, decision-making assembly—which is as alien to the *basileia* of the Jesus movement as domination and oppression. In setting up contrasts between last, least, child, servant, on one side, and first and greatest on the other, the teachings are not replacing one political system with another but are rejecting all political infiltration of the ecclesial community. The teachings are saying that the *basileia* does not operate by politics of any kind and that it only begins to operate when politics is left outside. Only then is the individual exposed purely to the workings of his or her response to the gospel message. Only when this is happening does a *basileia* based on human relationships become possible. Thus in these sayings Jesus exposes the unworldly level on which the *basileia* functions (Collins 1990, 247–8 ; 1992, 148–51).

A MINISTRY UNDER THE CHRIST

In placing the ecclesial community on such a precarious foundation the early tradition is not overlooking the role of the Spirit. The Spirit will call but, to judge from the experience of the first communities as relayed in the writings of Paul, the call will always be validated in some public way. This is the message of Paul's communication to the Corinthians at their time of crisis, especially in 1 Corinthians 12, a passage to which Schüssler Fiorenza rarely alludes. As with her understanding of ministry / *diakonia*, where she has come under the longstanding influence in ecclesiology of Eduard Schweizer (see 1967, 35; Collins 1990, 35–7, 193–4), so in relation to Paul's thinking on the Church's gifts, Schüssler Fiorenza would seem to have been under the equally longstanding influence of Ernst Käsemann (see Collins 1993, 81–2) for whom ministry / *diakonia* is among gifts distributed upon all in the Church, as of the newer influence of Hans Küng, so pervasive in Catholic circles in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (Schüssler Fiorenza 1967, 35).

These are both crucial points in the theology of Church where argument turns on the meaning of the original testament bequeathed to those people whom the *Catechism* calls "the assembly of those whom God's Word 'convokes'" (no. 777). If the Spirit and "the Lord" (1 Cor 12:4-5) do not call all to ministry by virtue of baptism (Collins 1992, 120-36; 1993; 1994), and if from on high "the Christ" (Eph 4:12) does not endow all the saints with "ministry" for the upbuilding of the body (Collins 1992, 110-7), then the contours of the discipleship of equals need to be reshaped if that discipleship is to configure with the Church envisaged and experienced by the earliest known adherents.

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