

CONSCIENCE AND THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN

1. Conscience is, the word itself already indicates it, always a knowing with. It is a knowing together with “another” who is more than I am, who has authority over. When I have a good conscience, then the other is agreeing with what I am doing or/and thinking. I am free to do so. I don’t feel threatened. When I have a bad conscience, I feel threatened, I am afraid, I feel unhappy.
2. We know about our conscience. We have experiences with it. So we know in advance that if we will do this or that, we will have a good conscience, and doing that or the other, we will have a bad conscience. Although this mostly is true for us we all know of these experiences that we were sure we would have a good conscience and it turned out that we in fact had a bad one, and the reverse. Out of experience we know that we can make mistakes.
3. It can even be more complicated. The “other”, with which we are communicating in our conscience, is not always clear and univoque. The homogeneity of the “other” we relate with in our conscience, got lost in the same time that the homogeneity of our culture got lost. We do something with a very good conscience, because everybody does it (“everybody” is the other), and having done it we get a very bad conscience, because another “other” than “everybody” becomes the other in our conscience, condemning us. And this is just one example of all the hazards we can get into with our conscience.
4. So anyway, our conscience is not something “authentic”, just belonging to us, forever one with our very being. We only have it, with its contents, in being together with others. And, not being authentic, only existing in the relationships we grew up in and live amidst of, it can change.
5. It is clear already from the former paragraph, that conscience is not something rational. We very often do not understand our conscience at all. Rationally our conscience often is only a hindrance, an obstacle to reach our common-sense goals. Worse, our experience is, that when we fight against this disagreeable conscience, it invalidates us more and more. We make a model-obstacle out of it. So rational arguments never do to change a conscience.
6. In our conscience we always are communicating with another, with the Other. The Other, because the other in our conscience always has more power than we ourselves have. This power is not a physical power, in which sense ever. It is an existential power, a power, able to wreak the peace and the freedom of our life and so our life itself.
7. In everyday life, not thinking about all these things very deeply, we in fact do not know who is this ‘other’, with whom we communicate in our conscience. As soon as welcome in a religious context, as soon as our conscience has to do with church life, we usually take the short cut: The other, of our conscience, is God. What our conscience forbids, God himself forbids. So we think.
8. In fact, the Other in our conscience, incorporating all the realities we lived in and live in, is exactly as complicated as life itself. Very important parts of this Other are:

- 8.1 Our parents, who told us the conditions we had to oblige to, if life would be agreeable (the Ueber-Ich of psychoanalysis).
- 8.2 The traditions in which our parents lived and in which they brought us, including the religious traditions and the traditions of the church they belonged to.
- 8.3 The whole of culture (or rather sub-culture), in which we grew up, which gave us the possibility to find a place in life. Culture has to do with differences. Without differences, there is no culture. So culture defends its differences by rules. Trespassing them brings life in danger. When we trespass the rules we get a bad conscience.
- 8.4 In the end, knowingly or unknowingly, the Other is God, the highest instance, and transcendence in the proper sense. In the same time we have to know and acknowledge that in normal life we always communicate, in our conscience, with God via the traditions and culture we were brought up in. This means that as soon as times are changing, putting before us new “challenges, giving us the task to make choices which our parents, let along our ancestors, never thought about, it is not any longer possible “simply” to fall back upon our conscience. Then it is our conscience itself, which is at stake.
9. Churches live, as all other human institutions, in traditions. No human institution, and so on church, can live without traditions. To preserve the contents and to be able to give it to the next generation, to prevent that it loses the reality of the Gospel, the church and churches, always needed traditions and institutions. These were always traditions and institutions, having to do with the culture, in which the church lived at the time in which the traditions got shape. Traditions in fact always “narrow” the possibilities of the Gospel, to channel it through the times. They always are absolutely necessary, and, they put walls around the total freedom of the Word of God, of the gospel.
10. Churches always lived in a culture with its own character. The traditions and structure of the churches, whose members partook in the general culture, in which the churches as such too lived, always accommodated, had to find a place in the whole of culture. The first Christian community was, in a sense, outside of the culture of its time. It expected the coming of the Lord and so it lived in another world. When the coming of the Lord was delayed, the church began to seek and find a place in culture in general, accommodating itself to the general properties of that culture. One of those was a very clear difference between men and women. Helped and enticed by the tradition of the Old Testament, the church became, in accordance with culture, patriarchic.
11. The changing of culture always provokes difficulties for traditions and structures. Because churches have to do with the most important realities of life, these changes are usually very difficult for them. Deep changes always have to do, both with big steps into new forms of church life (as in Reformation time) and, in the same time, very deep anxieties and fears. Changes in culture always put before churches the question how they have to behave amongst the havoc. How do they find (new) and eventually promising ways. The big temptation always was to stick to traditions, which culture itself left. That the churches often did this, or seemed to do so is the more astonishing, because the churches are looking forward to the coming of the Lord, and not looking backward to the flesh-pots of Egypt.

12. Anyway, as soon as culture is changing, the church has the task to find its new place in the changing culture. This new place has to have to do with culture as it is taking shape if the church wishes to prevent that it becomes a sect, staying in the same time within the reality of the Gospel. This reality of the Gospel always breaks through all restricting boundaries of all structures and so never can be, as such, a weapon to fight against new structural possibilities in culture.
13. In the Reformation we the protestant churches reacted in their manner on the already changing patterns of gender-divisions. They made it possible for women to become deacons in the church. They could fall back on the New Testament, to do so. We certainly now have to cope with much bigger changes and challenges, without having the possibilities to quote New Testament texts if we wish to go on with culture and give women the full ministry. Actually, without having in the New Testament the examples of women who have this full ministry, the world of the old Christian church was a patriarchal world and this is fully reflected in the New Testament. Nevertheless relationships are in fact turned over and, most central, Paul knew that in the end, it only matters to belong to the Lord and that for him we are all equal, that he does not make any of our differences, looking at us and belonging to us.
14. One of the most striking aspects of the changing of culture is the changing of the structures of the relationship between women and men. In fact these structures are disappearing more or less, and in fact more and more altogether. Men and women come nearer and nearer to each other, are exposed to each other. And the boundaries between them are fading away. Differences always were there to make life possible, by preventing the eternal fights and struggles for power, which immediately show up when these differences disappear. So in fact most of us are very happy indeed, that everything between women and men becomes so easy, so “self-understanding” in the same time we are becoming very afraid. Because structure is disappearing we see the risk to get into endless power fights in which you might lose question of the ministry of women is caught up with all these feelings of being very happy with the changes and, in the same time very afraid. So we run the risk of two short cuts, neither of which are desirable.
 - 14.1 Either we are happy as culture goes and find it “absolutely self-understanding” that women get the full ministry. In that case there is no real solution, and we can even very easily change sides, when our experiences in life make us afraid.
 - 14.2 Or we are already very afraid and we use, in fact, our conscience to be against the ministry for women. In fact it has nothing to do with conscience and only with our fear. Of course, very often we are mixed. The reality hardly ever is so clear as described here. Anyway, we only can speak about conscience, if it is a knowing together with the Other, in a relationship, in which the point in case gets it placed. As long as we are only thinking about, or acting out of our fears about the ministry of women, probably, whatever we say about conscience has nothing to do with conscience at all.
15. Although conscience is an existential reality, it certainly has to do with thinking. In the end the decision out of conscience is an existential one and is fundamentally it cannot be explained. It is just this decision, but the way to the decision to the spot where conscience, so to say, takes the decision, has to be thought through. All the aspects have to be taken in to account. A very important one is the fact that women testify about and for themselves that they know themselves to be called for the ministry and that many

other women testify that they know, in their faith, being obedient to the Lord, that he calls women into the ministry. As long as we, women and men, are one in the Lord and so trust each other, we have to accept that a trying to get rid of this reality means not taking the call of the women seriously and in fact it means breaking up the unity of the communion with Christ. When we think this through, we must come to the conclusion, that every man and every woman who is, in her/his conscience, sure that women cannot be in the ministry, who says NO to this possibility, when this calling is already a reality, puts her/himself outside of the community of Christ, to which these women belong. Of course they can be mistaken. It must be possible to talk together about this possibility but when these women stay in their knowing that they are with the Lord when they wish to be ministers, or that women can be ministers, then this fact has to be respected. All games to get rid of it – and of course there are very many; this is not the place to sum them up – fall back on those who play these games.

16. Women becoming ministers is a change of a tradition as old as the church itself. So the fact if and that women can become ministers is always a question of conscience, otherwise it is taken too lightly. At the same time the whole point is taken exactly as lightly, when a reviewing of the conscience does not take place. When such big changes hover up, we cannot fall back on our common sense conscience. How the contents of our conscience gets form? Is it just our conscience, we always exactly knowing what is right and what is wrong? Then it almost certainly it is a conscience of a past time, a conscience with an “Other”, who/which belongs to the past. Is it the conscience of some theologians, so put by us on a pedestal, nearly Gods? Is it the conscience of our ecclesiastical tradition, again thus a conscience, belonging to a passing, or past culture? In fact, if the whole of culture is pushed upside down – and churches should, as such, be jubilant about that, expecting as they do the all changing coming of the Lord – there is only one possibility of Another, the Other, the Lord himself, talking to us in the Gospel. He breaks all structures and traditions. He brings in His space. The freedom and space, which were, rightly so, channeled in traditions and convictions, which fall away with the culture in which they are needed. A good conscience in a church has only one Other, the Lord and the deep knowing, that in Him, there is neither man or woman.
17. Of course, again, there is much to be said about the destructing of the relationships of women and men and all the havoc and misery, brought by this very deep change. Thinking and deciding, only seeing this misery certainly is unbelief and a sin. The other side is, that culture at last gives the church the possibility to give shape, in its very life, that in Christ there are not any longer structural differences between women and men, so making it, at last possible that both, free from structures, really become themselves, so being in the Lord, together and serving each other in all their real human possibilities.
18. All those who do not agree that women are in the ministry, those who are very happy, and those who hesitate, in the end deciding this side or that, have to think very carefully, taking into account all the aspects involved, and in the end, following our conscience, we say yes or no. Both, if they are really decisions out of conscience, have to be respected. In the end, in cases of conscience, we are as Luther in the Diet of Worms in 1521: Here I stand I cannot decide else. I take all the consequences upon me”. But, of course, only then.