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Source: *Pacific Journal* 2 (2007): 71-72.

Publisher: Fresno Pacific University.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/367>

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Response to Hope Nisly's "The Church and Women: Power, Language, and Institutions"

VALERIE REMPEL

As Hope Nisly suggests, reflecting on the question of how the church has been good for women is far from an irrelevant question. While most Christians would agree that the Gospel itself is good news for all people, the church as an institution is often flawed and thus has a mixed record in regards to women.

If one were to define "good" as primarily about access to power and decision-making, than the church's record is, indeed, dismal. As Nisly points out, while women have often been active in new expressions or movements of Christian faith, their voices and roles have generally been restricted as those movements became institutionalized. That was true of the early church experience and has been more recently true of the Pentecostal movement. Leaders within the Christian tradition have often allowed themselves to be shaped as much by larger societal patterns as by the liberating words of the Gospel.

It must be noted, however, that women have exerted a great deal of power in the creation of parallel worlds within the institutions of the church. For example, monastic houses throughout Christian history have frequently been places of scholarship and service in which women formed strong bonds and developed effective ministries. During the nineteenth century women created a network of missionary societies and organizations that helped finance and staff protestant missionary efforts around the world. In fact, some scholars have argued that the leadership skills nurtured within the evangelical tradition gave impetus to the women's rights movement. More recently, scholars are beginning to examine the contemporary women's ministries that are congregationally based, as well as para-church organizations such as Women Aglow, and pointing out the ways in which women exercise power and develop skills for leadership. While not without problems, these are ways that women have worked at the margins of the church to create meaningful space for themselves.

Any answer to the question of whether or not the church has been good for women must include the area of spirituality. Here the record is more positive. Many women have found a rich and authentic spirituality within

the Christian tradition. The intimacy of conversation with God, an affinity with the sufferings of Jesus, and a sense of the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit have empowered many women. Within the Catholic tradition, Mary the mother of Jesus and the female saints have provided a counterpoint to the overwhelmingly male imagery of the church. The Protestant tradition's emphasis on Bible reading and prayer has helped nurture a sense of personal relationship with God. These have been possible because of the church's own teaching and spiritual practices.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the language of submission has been used in ways that have deeply perverted the Gospel. Many women have experienced the Gospel message as mediated by the church to be deeply harmful to mind, body, and soul. Curtailing education, limiting participation in the ministries of the church, and emphasizing a particular creation order have often resulted in the oppression of women in church and society. All too often the institutional church has ignored the reality of domestic violence or implied that if women would only "behave" such problems would go away. The language and practices of the church have often been used in ways that diminish women's own humanity and distort the image of God.

That women have been able to work within oppressive institutions and structures gives witness to the power of God to work in ways that challenge the limits of our own structures. This does not mean we can say a simple, "yes, the church is good for women," or rest content. Instead, it calls us to continually examine the patterns we set in place and to judge them by the liberating message of salvation.