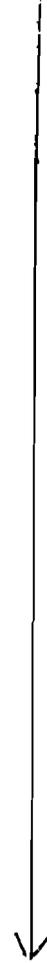


Excerpts from Madson, Meg, "The Decision to Ordain," *The Voice of the Shepherdess*, ed. Peter J. McCord, 30-42. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1996.

LUTHER ON WOMEN

Martin Luther, of course, never dreamed of ordaining women. But when he encouraged priests to marry and later married himself, he opened the door to a new partnership between men and women based on mutuality and friendship. For centuries Christians valued a life of monastic celibacy more highly than marriage and family. The Reformation challenged this credo. As if to expose an ancient slander, the Reformers left touching portraits of their wives as indispensable companions in ministry. Luther boasted simply: "I would not give up my Katie for France or Venice."⁵ The Reformers transferred the accolades previously reserved for celibacy and the monastery to marriage and family life. Karlstadt spoke for many Reformers when he said, "It is better to make a home and teach the Word of God to one's family than to mutter frigid prayers alone in a sanctuary."⁶

Luther, to be sure, was a man of his time and to a large extent viewed women in terms of the needs of his time. In the sixteenth century women were needed to bear and raise many children in order that a few might survive to maturity. The natural restrictions of childbearing meant that women were dependent on and subordinate to men. Luther believed that this natural subordination of women was confirmed by Scripture, as Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.⁷ Luther also believed that women did not possess the natural qualities needed for ministry, such as a strong voice, clear expression, and good memory.⁸ While these qualities can be developed, such training was simply an unrealistic expectation for the majority of women in the sixteenth century.



Nevertheless, that women needed to devote themselves to children and home did not mean that women could never preach publicly and administer the sacraments. When Luther attacked the clericalism of his day, he asserted that even women serve in the public ministry of the church when they baptize in emergency situations:

Not only baptism but also preaching and granting absolution can be done by women if men are not available, as is the case in nunneries.¹⁰ Could women administer communion? This sacrament is, to be sure, never an emergency sacrament as baptism can be. And communion is not a more important sacrament than baptism and absolution, since all three sacraments are founded on the same Word of God.¹¹ Luther even said that there is but one sacrament, Christ, and three sacramental signs (baptism, communion, absolution).¹² Clearly what matters most for Luther is that God's visible and audible Word (Augustine) be proclaimed. The proclaimer/administrator plays a secondary role in the drama of salvation.

CAN WOMEN REPRESENT CHRIST?

Some traditions say "no." The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod argues on the basis of a biblical literalism that women should not exercise authority over men in the church.¹³ The Roman Catholic Church has said "no"¹⁴ because women lack physical similarity to Jesus. Only males can assume the iconic role of representing Christ in the Eucharist. If ordained ministry means re-presenting Christ, the logic of the Catholic position is compelling. Some feminists agree with Catholic doctrine that ministry means re-presentation. In order to include women as representatives of Christ, they emphasize that clergy represent Jesus' humanity and that his sex and race are secondary matters. The problem with this position is that by de-emphasizing the particularity of Jesus as a first century male Jew, this view tends toward Gnosticism.¹⁵

LUTHER ON MINISTRY

What has been decisive for twentieth century Lutherans facing the question of ordaining women is Luther's view of priesthood and public ministry. In place of the distinction between priest and layman, Luther affirmed the priesthood of all believers. No special spiritual callings or special gifts of grace set Christians apart from

one another: "All baptized women are the spiritual sisters of all baptized men, having the same sacrament, spirit, faith, spiritual gifts and goods. . . ." ¹⁶ All baptized Christians are given the command, "Go make disciples of all nations. . . ." All are authorized to proclaim the promises of Christ whatever their station in life.

Yet within the church some Christians are called to the *public* ministry of Word and sacrament. The Gospel itself gives definition and identity to the public office. ¹⁷ The whole notion is as simple and pragmatic as Paul's question in Romans 10:14. If faith comes through hearing, how are they to hear without a preacher? God commands his word be spoken in sermons and made visible in sacraments. In the Augsburg Confession, Article 5 states:

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through other means, God gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.

For Lutherans ordained ministry means proclamation of the Gospel rather than re-presentation of Christ. ¹⁸ The ordained minister is not a priest in a sacrificial ritual or a persuader urging a Christian view of life, but a proclaimer of the promises of Christ. Because ordained ministry means proclaiming the promises of Christ, then proclaimers of the promises cannot be restricted to those who are male, Jewish, or whatever. No accidents of birth, neither race nor sex, can disqualify one from ordination. Re-presentation is not the issue. What matters is delivering the message, the promises of Christ, "to you." As Luther wrote:

For our faith and the sacrament must not be based on the person whether he is godly or evil, consecrated or unconsecrated, called or an impostor, whether he is the devil or his mother, but upon Christ, upon his word, upon his office, upon his command and ordinance; where these are in force, there everything will be carried out properly, no matter who or what the person might be. ¹⁹

The Lutheran understanding of ministry is expressed with particular clarity in the final report of the eighth round of the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic dialogue: "Christ alone is the sole mediator and the one who is mediated." ²⁰ More specifically, applied to our question, "the word and the sacraments are sometimes spoken of as 'means' (*Mittel, instrumenta*) through which the Holy Spirit gives faith to those who receive the gospel (CA5)." ²¹ Lutherans "rarely

speak of 'mediation' in this connection and prefer rather to speak of the ministry of word and sacrament, the actual doing of the deed in the living present."²² Lutherans have refrained from extending the category of the means of grace "through exemplary or properly authorized 'intermediaries' " in such a way that "mediation (is extended) ecclesialogically via sacramental ordination, episcopacy, and perhaps speaking of the church as sacrament here on earth. . . ."²³

To sum it all up: the decision in 1970 to ordain women was not traumatic for Lutherans largely because it did not involve fundamental change in their doctrine of ministry. Since the Augsburg Confession of 1530, Lutherans have held that ordained ministry means proclamation rather than re-presentation through a special priesthood which stands *in persona Christi*. The office of ministry, that is, the actual preaching of the word and sacraments, is divinely ordained, even though ordained ministers, male or female, are not in themselves instruments of salvation.²⁴

ECUMENICAL CONSEQUENCES

Wolfhart Pannenberg, a Lutheran Professor at Munich, Germany, has said "the greatest obstacle to ecumenism anywhere" is women's ordination.³⁰ If this is true, then perhaps for the sake of Christian unity, women ought not be ordained? After all, as Lutherans have said, ordaining women is not a *status confessionis* question for Lutherans, that is: binding for the faith. Lutherans may legitimately differ on this matter without the Gospel itself being at stake.³¹ But is Pannenberg's statement true? Are women the greatest obstacle to unity? Even if Lutherans ordained only men, Lutheran orders would still be judged deficient by Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox churches. Basic differences on the question of ministry remain. The question of ordaining women is a secondary question that quickly leads to primary questions that have divided the churches for centuries: questions about the nature and purpose of ordained ministry, teaching authority, and the role of the church in salvation.

For example, in the Roman Catholic Church the question about women priests has been decisively addressed. Pope John Paul II has said there must be "no more discussion" of women priests. In his May 1994 Apostolic Letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, the pope writes, "I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer

priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."

In using the word "definitively," the Pope has upped the ante in matters of papal authority. According to some sources, he wanted to make this an infallible, *ex cathedra* declaration, but his more moderate advisors counseled against this.³² He seems to have held that this was too important to leave to the ordinary magisterium and introduced a new category of teaching, "definitively," heretofore unknown in the terminology of papal teaching authority. It would seem that this declaration is not strictly infallible but more infallible than previous pronouncements on this question.³³

Of course, even absolute papal statements have changed over the centuries, as numerous scholars have noted.³⁴ Already *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* has been challenged. For example, the Belgian Catholic bishops responded to *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* by calling for a broader discussion about tradition:

Is tradition really the sole norm of faith, and if so what is the meaning of the Spirit's guidance? More generally, are there no new questions that have not been answered by tradition because they have not previously been asked?³⁵

In spite of the Pope's definitive ruling there is much discussion and questioning among Catholic laity, priests, bishops, religious and theologians, as every reader of independent Catholic journals knows.

WHICH GOSPEL SHALL WE PREACH?

Pannenberg's claim that women's ordination is the greatest obstacle to ecumenism was made partly in response to the now-notorious "Re-Imagining" Conference held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in November 1993. The question of ordaining women, according to Pannenberg, has grown in magnitude because the Vatican sees it as being linked to radical feminism. The linkage between the ordination of women and radical feminism is troublesome. To be sure, some women promote heretical doctrines as new feminist truths. The Re-Imagining Conference was widely criticized in the independent journals of mainline churches for promoting heretical doctrines.³⁶ Yet throughout church history the presence of male heretics has not caused the churches to consider refusing to ordain any men at all. So why should no woman be ordained just because some women are heretics? Nevertheless, many Lutheran women and men would agree

with Pannenberg that radical feminism is “counterproductive to women’s best interests in the church.”³⁷

Women, Lutheran or otherwise, do not agree upon what is in their best interests. Christina Hoff Sommers, a philosophy professor at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, describes current divisions in secular feminism as a conflict between “equity” feminism and “gender” feminism.³⁸ Equity feminism is simply the belief in the moral and legal equality of the sexes. An equity feminist wants for women what she wants for everyone – a level playing field and equal opportunity. Gender feminism, on the other hand, is an all-encompassing ideology that says women are trapped in a patriarchal oppressive system and the only way out is by constructing new realities based on women’s experience.

A similar fault line exists between Lutheran feminists. Lutheran equity feminists believe in and work for the equality of men and women in the church. This includes the ordination of women and their access to all levels of church leadership. At the same time equity feminists pledge themselves to the same confessional standards as do the men in their church: salvation is by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone. These Lutheran women are not ashamed to hold that Christian faith and language are tied to historical particularity, to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, a first century male Jew.³⁹

Lutheran gender feminists, by contrast, generally assert that Christianity is fatally flawed by patriarchal assumptions and must be fundamentally revised or “re-imagined” to reflect their own experience. In doing so, such feminist theologians abandon the particularity of the gospel and their theologies become a reflection of feminist consciousness. Not surprisingly, when experience has control and priority over revelation, then God reveals to you what you always wanted to hear. Theologians, including Lutheran feminist theologians, who grant hermeneutical weight to human experience implicitly challenge the Lutheran way of doing theology, which is to promote Christ alone (*was Christum treibet*).

In 1995, American Lutherans marked the twentieth-fifth anniversary of the ordination of women. The official ELCA celebration of this event is titled, “Breaking Open the Jar: 25 years of Remembrance and Hope.” This three day event “honors the gifts of women” and generally focuses on women and their achievements. Among the objectives for the event, there is none which mentions the Gospel of Jesus Christ and only one activity – finding inclusive images for God – mentions the Lord whom women have been called to serve. Worship

services will “emphasize contemplation,” not the proclamation characteristic of the Lutheran tradition. Interest groups will focus primarily on relational questions – how women relate to male colleagues, laity, mobility in the church, and ministry and mothering. There are no interest groups raising questions about feminist theology from a Lutheran perspective or exploring the richness of the Lutheran doctrine of ministry. The program is focused on power and image issues and seems designed exclusively by Lutheran gender feminists.

The tone of this and other official celebrations of this anniversary prompted one female seminary professor to write the following:

I am happy to join the church in celebrating (the 25th anniversary of the ordination of women). We should however, remember that wherever we find ourselves in the ministry of the church, our task is to proclaim Christ, and him crucified. There is no other reason for calling women into the ministry. For this reason, I am distressed to note that too many of the celebrations of this event seem to focus on the gifts women bring to the task of proclamation, rather than the joyful Gospel they are called to preach. In most of the publicity for the celebrations of this anniversary, there has been too little about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and too much about women. This lack of witness to Jesus Christ would have mystified our foremothers, from Mary, the Mother of Our Lord, to the woman who broke open the alabaster jar, on down to the women missionaries of the last 150 years who could not stop telling of Jesus because of what he had done for them and could do for others by his death and resurrection. We should do no less.⁴⁰

Other Lutheran women, like this professor, are challenging the leadership of Lutheran gender feminists. An ad-hoc group of ordained Lutheran women is hosting an independent celebration parallel to the official three day gathering. Calling themselves Daughters of the Word, they are offering a single evening event that focuses on the Lutheran understanding of ordination and celebrates the newfound wholeness of the church that has come through the inclusion of Lutheran women in ordained ministry.⁴¹

NOTES

1. Gracia Grindal, “Getting Women Ordained,” *Called and Ordained: Lutheran Perspectives on the Office of the Ministry*, T. Nichol and M. Kolden, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 161-79.

2. The first Lutheran church to permit the ordination of women was the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which introduced the possibility in 1922 and ordained a woman in 1928. In 1938 the Norwegian government granted the right to appoint women pastors if they were not rejected by the congregation. However, the first Norwegian woman was not ordained until 1961. Denmark permitted the ordination of women in 1947, Czechoslovakia in 1953, Sweden in 1959, France prior to 1962, and most of Germany by 1968. A survey conducted by the Lutheran World Federation in the early 1980s showed that over fifty Lutheran churches were ordaining women.
3. Grindal, *Called*, 173.
4. See Raymond Tiemeyer, *The Ordination of Women* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970).
5. *D. Martin Luther's Werke* Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar: Bohlau, 1883ff.) Tischreden 1:7 (hereinafter WA); *Luther's Works*, ed. by J. Pelikan, H.C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann, vols. 1-30 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-86); vols. 31-55 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957-86) 54:8 (hereinafter LW).
6. Cited by Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 383.
7. WA 12:308; LW 30:55.
8. Cf. WA Tischreden 2: #2580.
9. WA 12:185; LW 40:23,25.
10. WA 8:489, 497-98, LW 36:141, 151:52; WA 12:180:81, LW 40:23; WA 12:722, LW 35:18; WA 30:111, LW 51:183; WA 30:524, LW 46:220; WA 50:633, LW 41:158.
11. WA 12:18; LW 40:23.
12. WA 6:501; LW 36:18, cf. Melancthon in Apology 13:4, p. 211 in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed. and tr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958.)
13. "Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice," *A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod* (September, 1985).
14. The 1976 *Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood (Inter insigniores)* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has set forth the Roman Catholic position that only males can be ordained because only males can represent Christ, a male. In his letter of February 17, 1986, to Archbishop Runcie, Cardinal Willebrands, using *Inter insigniores*, states:

The ordination only of men to the priesthood has to be understood in terms of the intimate relationship between Christ the redeemer and those who, in a unique way, cooperate in Christ's redemptive work. The priest represents Christ in his saving relationship with his body the church.

- On May 30, 1994, Pope John Paul II issued an apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, reaffirming the Catholic Church's ban on women priests. He emphasizes that the disciples were specifically and intimately associated with Christ's mission and that their apostolic mission is to represent Christ. Specifically it is in the sacrifice of the Mass that the priest is intimately associated with Christ: "For it is one and the same victim: he who now makes the offering through the ministry of priests and he who then offered himself on the cross; the only difference is in the manner of the offering."
15. Efforts to minimize the offense of the gospel are not new. In the 1930s some German Christians were offended by Jesus' Jewishness, so they revised the Bible to minimize his Jewishness. In a similar way some feminists today take offense at the fact that Jesus was a man and therefore they revise the Bible to minimize his maleness. Such efforts are problematic. The Christian faith has to do with revelation in time, through historical particularity. God came in the flesh in the first century as a Jewish man, probably about 5'7" with a hooked nose. Efforts to minimize some aspect of Jesus' person in order to conform to modern sensibilities inevitably leads to a Gnostic distortion of the gospel.
 16. WA 10/2:282; LW 45:24.
 17. See Roy Harrisville, "Ministry in the New Testament," *Called and Ordained*, T. Nichol and M. Kolden, eds. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) 3-23, for a standard Lutheran interpretation of the New Testament witness on this question.
 18. *Ministry, Women, Bishops: Report of an International Consultation in Carigny, Switzerland 1992*. The Lutheran World Federation (Geneva: LWF, 1993). Although this document has a certain status as a Lutheran World Federation report, it does not develop a Lutheran argument: it does not proceed methodologically from the Word, as can be seen especially in its discussion of adiaphora pp. 30-31 and "The Lutheran Concept of Pastoral Ministry," pp. 66-67.
 19. WA 38:242; LW 38:200.
 20. "Lutheran Perspectives on Critical Issues," *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, eds. H. G. Anderson, J. F. Stafford, J. A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), p. 38.
 21. *The One Mediator*, 38.
 22. *The One Mediator*, 38.
 23. *The One Mediator*, 39.
 24. Walter Kasper, "Basic Consensus and Church Fellowship," *In Search of Christian Unity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991) 36: "In Catholic understanding the sacramentality of the church means not only that the church is the place and sign of salvation, but also that it is the instrument of salvation. As a matter of comparison, the document on doctrinal condemnations in the sixteenth century notes that Protestant doctrine also holds that 'mediation' of the doctrine of justification happens in the church, but Protestants have reservations about speaking of 'mediation' through the church."

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25. For Lutherans, entrance into the public ministry is on the basis of a properly or regularly agreed upon manner, as stated in Augsburg Confession, Article 14: "It is taught among us that nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call."
 26. Of the 130 Master of Divinity students in my class six were women. In 1994-95 there were 725 women preparing for ordination in the eight seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 44.8% of total enrollment.
 27. *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, 67, in Tappert, *The Book of Concord*.
 28. *Book of Concord*, p. 33.
 29. *Book of Concord*, p. 33.
 30. *National Christian Reporter*, May 27, 1994.
 31. The Lutheran Church of Latvia revoked the ordination of women in 1995.
 32. Tom Fox, "Bishops pull pope back from brink," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 17, 1994, p. 3.
 33. Now that it is clear that "definitively" equals "infallibly," future discussions of women's ordination *both* for Roman Catholics and Lutherans should focus on teaching authority. Roman Catholics should not be sidetracked by the fact that, in the ebb and flow of Vatican diplomacy, women will soon be ordained to the permanent diaconate, and Lutherans should not be sidetracked by the success or failure of radical feminism in our culture."
 34. Peter Hebblethwaite, "Ban on women priests is shaky conclusion," *National Catholic Reporter*, September 2, 1994, p. 12.
 35. Peter Hebblethwaite, "Catholics try to digest papal bombshell," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 1, 1994, p. 6.
 36. For a Lutheran critique see Katherine Kersten, "God in Your Mirror?" and "Old Heresies from New Feminists," *Lutheran Commentator*, vol. 7, no. 6 (May/June 1994).
 37. *National Christian Reporter*, May 27, 1994.
 38. Christina Hoff Summers, *Who Stole Feminism: How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).
 39. Gerhard Forde, "Naming the One Who is Above Us," *Speaking the Christian God*, A. F. Kimel, Jr., ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 110-19.
 40. Gracia Grindal, "25th Celebration: too little about Jesus, too much about women," *The Concord*, 27 (April 6, 1995) p. 8.
 41. A recent survey conducted by the Student Resource Center of the largest Lutheran seminary in the U.S. found that "the overwhelming majority (of women) have reported satisfaction with their decisions to become pastors." See "Resource Center surveys women alumnae," *The Concord*, 27, no. 13 (1995) p. 1.
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