

Ecumenical Perspectives on the Ordination of Women
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It is obvious to everyone, whether they are in favor of the ordination of women or not, that women weren't ordained for most of Christian history. There are some minor historical indications that female pastors and even bishops did exist in the earliest Christian communities; and they start appearing (again) about a hundred years ago. But the plain fact is that most of church history has had only male clergy and no female clergy at all.

However, what people don't usually realize is that, for most of this time, the church never gave any *reasons* for not having female clergy. It seems as though it never even occurred to anyone to ask the question seriously until the late nineteenth century. In only a few ancient church documents can you find very brief passing comments on the matter, usually in connection with some kind of conflict taking place, but you will never find carefully thought-out reasons for prohibiting female pastors. The first time anything like that arises is in the work of Thomas Aquinas, the 13th-century systematic theologian. He argues that women cannot be ordained because it is not proper for them to receive the tonsure (the special monk's haircut!) and because they are in a "state of subjection." It doesn't matter that there were female prophetesses, since the gift of prophecy is not a sacrament, or rulers like Deborah, since Deborah was not a temporal, not spiritual, ruler (*Summa Theologiae*, Supplementum Tertiae Partis, Q. 39.1).

Martin Luther, of course, did not start ordaining women as part of his overall project of church reform. But he did develop a dramatically different doctrine of the ministry from the medieval church. This change had consequences for understanding the ordained ministry and even the place of women in the church. Luther's main concern in disputing with the Roman party was distinguishing between the *priesthood* and the *ordained pastorate*. Medieval theology understood priests to be a class apart, by virtue of the sacrament of ordination, and the priesthood was equivalent to the ordained pastorate. But Luther understood *every* Christian to be a priest. Among these priests, some are selected – by the church community at large – to be pastors; but this is only a matter of office and maintaining order in the church. The difference between baptized Christians goes no deeper than that.

So, Luther explained: "Thus there is only an external difference because of the office to which one is called by the congregation. Before God, however, there is no distinction, and only a few are selected from the whole group to administer the office in the stead of the congregation. They all have the office, but nobody has any more authority than the other person has... As St. Paul says in Gal. 3:28, you must pay no attention to distinctions when you want to look at Christians. You must not say: 'This is a man or a woman; this is a servant or a master; this person is old or young.' They are all alike and only a spiritual people. Therefore they are all priests. All may proclaim God's Word, except that, as St. Paul teaches in I Cor. 14, women should not speak in the congregation. They should let the men preach, because God commands them to be obedient to their husbands. God does not interfere with the arrangement. But he makes no distinction in the matter of authority. If, however, only women were present and no men, as in nunneries, then one of the women might be authorized to preach" ("Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter," *Luther's*

Works, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann [St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.], 30:54–55).

Luther affirms here that there is no spiritual difference between men and women, and that *all* Christians may proclaim God's Word. The reason for women's silence in church is that they are supposed to be obedient to their husbands. Luther obviously didn't think that this was an argument that needed much defending; and of course, in the sixteenth century, social reality simply assumed that men were in charge and women obeyed. But even in this kind of world, Luther could imagine a situation where women were free of any man's authority and so were free to preach to each other.

In another place he goes a little further. He lists leading women of the Bible and can imagine a time and place where it would be not only possible but *necessary* for women to preach: "Paul forbids women to preach in the congregation where men are present who are skilled in speaking, so that respect and discipline may be maintained; because it is much more fitting and proper for a man to speak, a man is also more skilled at it... [Paul] was arousing men to preach, as long as there is no lack of men. How could Paul otherwise have singlehandedly resisted the Holy Spirit, who promised in Joel: 'And your daughters shall prophesy.' Moreover, we read in Acts 21: 'Philip had four unmarried daughters, who all prophesied.' 'And Miriam the sister of Moses was also a prophetess' [Exodus 15]. And Huldah the prophetess gave advice to pious King Josiah [II Kings 22], and Deborah did the same to Duke Barak [Judges 4]; and finally, the song of the Virgin Mary [Luke 1] is praised throughout the world. Paul himself in I Cor. 11 instructs the women to pray and prophesy with covered heads. Therefore order, discipline, and respect demand that women keep silent when men speak; but if no man were to preach, then it would be necessary for the women to preach. For this reason we are firmly convinced on the basis of the Holy Scriptures that there is not more than one office of preaching God's Word, and that this office is common to all Christians; so that each person may speak, preach, and judge, and all the rest are obliged to listen" ("The Misuse of the Mass," LW 36:151–52). Again, notice the surprising conclusion: there is only one office of preaching and it is common to every Christian. It is the concern for *order* that restricts who holds the office – but not *nature* or *spirit*.

One more quote from Luther will make the point. His Roman opponents were trying to prove to Luther the illogic of his own arguments about the universal Christian priesthood by pointing out that women are not ordained. But Luther was not persuaded and actually made even more room for women as Christian leaders in the process. He wrote: "Mostly the functions of a priest are these: to teach, to preach and proclaim the Word of God, to baptize, to consecrate or administer the Eucharist, to bind and loose sins, to pray for others, to sacrifice, and to judge of all doctrine and spirits. Certainly these are splendid and royal duties. But the first and foremost of all on which everything else depends, is the teaching of the Word of God. For we teach with the Word, we consecrate with the Word, we judge all things by the Word. Therefore when we grant the Word to anyone, we cannot deny anything to him pertaining to the exercise of his priesthood... The first office, that of the ministry of the Word, therefore, is common to all Christians. This is clear, from what I have already said, and from I Peter 2... The second function, to baptize, they [the papists] themselves have by usage allowed in cases of necessity even to ordinary women, so that it is hardly regarded any more as a sacramental function. Whether they wish or

not we deduce from their own logic that all Christians, and they alone, even women, are priests, without tonsure and episcopal 'character.' For in baptizing we proffer the life-giving Word of God, which renews souls and redeems from death and sins. To baptize is incomparably greater than to consecrate bread and wine, for it is the greatest office in the church – the proclamation of the Word of God. So when women baptize, they exercise the function of priesthood legitimately, and do it not as private act, but as part of the public ministry of the church which belongs only to the priesthood... Yet I ask you, what is this splendid power of consecration, compared to the power of baptizing and of proclaiming the Word? A woman can baptize and administer the Word of life, by which sin is taken away, eternal death is abolished, the prince of the world cast out, heaven bestowed; in short by which the divine majesty pours itself forth through all the soul... Publicly one may not exercise a right without consent of the whole body or of the church. In time of emergency each may use it as he deems best" ("Concerning the Ministry," LW 40:21, 23, 25, 34). Here Luther will not accept a difference between different kinds of ministries of the gospel – there is no sensible reason to allow some to preach or to baptize but not to consecrate the Lord's Supper, because they are all aspects of the one single ministry of the Word. So, to repeat one last time: Luther does not prohibit women from being pastors because they are incapable, because it is unnatural, or because the Spirit doesn't give them the necessary gifts. It is a matter of social order within the church, and in Luther's time the social order regarding women was so similar to that in the time of St. Paul that he never thought to question it.

The question then becomes, what happens when the social order changes? In Luther's time it was simply not imagined that women could ever be public figures like national presidents, doctors, university professors, or business leaders. Almost their only option for a "career" was to be a nun – which Luther opposed for different reasons. It is easy to imagine that women pastors in the Reformation would have caused a scandal. And yet there were important women at the time of the Reformation, first and foremost Luther's wife (and business leader!) Katharina von Bora; or Argula von Grumbach, a wife and mother who challenged the entire university faculty in Ingolstadt to debate after they condemned a student for his pro-Luther leanings; and as the centuries went on, Lutheran women found ways to contribute to the public life of the church as much as they were allowed. We now find ourselves in a very confusing situation: some places in the world take the full equality of women for granted, others assume just the opposite, and quite a lot of places are in a confusing in-between situation, with mixed opinions. Therefore determining what best fits the social order of the church for *all* parties is very difficult indeed.

When women started to become part of mainstream public life in the West in the mid-twentieth century, the church was finally confronted head-on with its non-ordination of women. Women in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches started raising questions and asking for better answers. For the first time in the church's history, the question was really thought about and answers offered. This is an important fact to recognize: until the mid-twentieth century, *no* Christian church had a clear, well-developed teaching on whether women could be ordained or not. Most simply didn't do it and left the matter at that. It was only the raising of the question that caused it to be answered. So *no* reasons against the ordination of women are ancient reasons. They are all recent, and they are of varying quality.

For example, in the Roman Catholic church, the doctrine of the priesthood is still essentially the same as in the Middle Ages – the very doctrine that Luther argued so strongly against. Ordination is a sacrament that sets the priest apart from other Christians; it alters his “ontological character.” For a sacrament to be valid, all the different aspects of it have to be correctly in place: so the right person has to do it (a bishop), the right words have to be said and actions performed (vows and laying-on of hands), and the right person has to receive it. Who is the right person to receive it? Obviously, the person must be a baptized Christian. But the Roman Catholic church has asserted that it also must be a man. Several reasons are given for this in the papal encyclical *Inter Insigniores* (1976). One is that Christ chose only male apostles; the assumption is that there is a direct connection between being an apostle and being ordained (though what we now call ordination was a somewhat later development in the life of the church) and that women such as Mary Magdalene or Junia do not truly qualify as apostles. Second, there is the “unbroken tradition” of ordaining only men. But the encyclical realizes that these are not definitive arguments, and so it offers a third argument that, it claims, illuminates the “the profound fittingness that theological reflection discovers between the proper nature of the sacrament of Order, with its specific reference to the mystery of Christ, and the fact that only men have been called to receive priestly ordination” (§5). The encyclical goes on to say that the priest “acts not only through the effective power conferred on him by Christ, but ‘in persona Christi,’ taking the role of Christ, to the point of being his very image, when he pronounces the words of consecration.”

This Lutherans could accept, in a certain sense: we also believe that Christ is the one who truly acts in the sacraments. For example, Luther says in the Large Catechism, “To be baptized in God’s name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself. Although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God’s own act.” However, *Inter Insigniores* goes on to say that the priesthood is “of a sacramental nature: the priest is a sign, the supernatural effectiveness of which comes from the ordination received, but a sign that must be perceptible and which the faithful must be able to recognize with ease... The same natural resemblance is required for persons as for things: when Christ’s role in the Eucharist is to be expressed sacramentally, there would not be this ‘natural resemblance’ which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man: in such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man.” This line of reasoning is very shocking. It simply asserts that male human beings “resemble” Christ in a way that women do not and never can. There is a gulf between women and Christ, and this ends up being the most important thing about the priesthood, for, in the end, a woman has and can do all the same things as a man – but because her natural body does not have all of the same organs as Christ’s, all these matters of divine gifts and the Holy Spirit are irrelevant. Luther may not have imagined women pastors, but he would definitely not have been pleased with this line of reasoning against them! We can even ask, if women do not “resemble” Christ enough to be his priests, how can he “resemble” them enough to be their savior?

A similar line of reasoning arose in the Eastern Orthodox church during the second half of the twentieth century. The first Orthodox reactions simply assumed that women were too emotionally unstable to be priests – and also that their menstrual cycles made them “impure,” a strange preservation of levitical law in the

Gentile church! Eventually they realized that this was unacceptable. But what replaced it was hardly any better. Two theologians, Paul Evdokimov and Thomas Hopko, came up with a theory that men are like the Son of God and women are like the Spirit of God – and the Son is masculine while the Spirit is feminine – thus men can exercise “christic” roles in the church but women cannot; women have to exercise “pneumatic” gifts. (Of course, it is never suggested that men cannot exercise “pneumatic” gifts!) To be a priest is to be christic and masculine like the Son of God, so it is impossible for women to be priests – it is against their very nature. A consultation on the island of Rhodes in 1988 accepted this argument against the ordination of women, imagining it to be in fact a very positive statement about women, since it gave them one whole person of God all to themselves, the Spirit!

But it is also an extremely problematic theory. There is nothing in the Bible to suggest that male and female or masculine and feminine have their origin in God’s own being. Quite the contrary, Israel was different from all the other nations in refusing to make God into a sexual being. Further, the New Testament does not in any way distinguish spiritual gifts based on being male or female. Gifts are given to individual persons for the good of the community, not to classes of people. Classifying people was one of the biggest problems that the New Testament church faced – the Jew-Gentile divide being the most serious. This Orthodox theory further suggests a kind of division in the work of God between the Son and Spirit and the genders that they represent. It is surprising how widely accepted this argument is, since the Orthodox have generally been very cautious about making statements about God’s own being, preferring the “apophatic” approach of stating rather what we do *not* know about God and how God differs from all creaturely things. Sometimes the Orthodox supplement this line of reasoning with an argument similar to that of the Roman Catholic church, speaking of an “iconic” resemblance rather than a “natural” resemblance. The priest is understood to be an icon of Christ to the congregation. Yet again, the purpose of an icon is to be permeable to the grace of God, not a symbol of sexuality or any other human quality.

What is perhaps interesting is that both Roman Catholics and Orthodox have issued statements admitting that the biblical texts do not give sufficient reason to prohibit women priests. Something more is needed – usually tradition, supported by these very recent arguments. By contrast, most Protestants who oppose the ordination of women insist that their arguments are purely biblical! But the central focus of all such arguments is the submission of women to men according to the so-called “order of creation.” Such ideas assume that God made women always to be inferior (at least socially, if not naturally or spiritually) to men, and that the church must maintain this order. Yet there is no indication in the creation stories of Genesis that this is the case. Actually, Eve is called Adam’s “helper,” and this Hebrew word is only used of God in the rest of the Old Testament, suggesting a superior, not subordinate, sense of helper. And since the progress of creation is always from lesser to greater, one could understand Eve to be the pinnacle of God’s creation! Biblical arguments against the ordination of women further cannot explain how the submission of a wife to a husband becomes a universal rule of all women submitting to all men. Nor do they account for the mutual submission implied in Ephesians 5. It is interesting to note, though, that other biblically faithful Protestants, especially from the Holiness movements and Pentecostalism, were the first to champion women preachers and pastors, because they thought this was *more* faithful to the

Scriptures! They looked at the examples of Priscilla, Lydia, Junia, Mary Magdalene, Huldah, Deborah, and others – as well as Peter’s promise of the gift of prophecy for “daughters,” realized in Philip’s own daughters – and found that women in church leadership was, in fact, the biblical pattern.

In conclusion, there are several lessons to take away from this quick overview of different Christian perspectives on the ordination of women. The first and most important is that, while the church didn’t ordain women for a long time, it never gave reasons for its practice and only recently has been forced to think about it. Second, from a Lutheran perspective, there is no doubt that women are capable and gifted by the Spirit to be ministers of the Word; the only question is what is good for church and society. Third, since Lutherans are committed to the reform of the church in order to be faithful to God’s Word, we must not be afraid of breaking from the expectations of society or the church in the past – Luther was certainly not afraid to do so! Fourth, we must realize that both the Scripture and the church have given a “mixed report” on women; they have not been completely positive or negative about women. Of course, they have not been completely positive or negative about men, either! But somehow no one ever asks these questions about men, so perhaps it is time to raise them. Finally, it is our task to think about the order of church and society according to the gospel – which means in light of what God has done for us first, and only afterward in light of what we can or should do. For Luther, the first half was clear: God has poured out the Holy Spirit on all flesh through baptism. And the second half was clear too: therefore we are all priests of the gospel. These two facts should play the determining role in how we think about what is good for church and society.