



What About . . .

The Ordination of Women to the Pastoral Office

Greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Many denominations ordain women to the pastoral office, even some Lutheran churches. It is important that Missouri Synod Lutherans be able to give a kindly response and explanation to those who may question our position on this issue. We have an opportunity to speak the truth in love.

What does God say about women serving in the pastoral office?

The Lord teaches us through His Word that women are not given the responsibility of serving the church as pastors. We read the following statements:

“As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says . . . what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:33–34, 37).

“Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent” (1 Tim. 2:11–12).

“The saying is sure: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Now an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife. . .” (1 Tim. 3:1–2).

“This is why I left you in Crete . . . that you might appoint elders in every town as I directed you, if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife. . .” (Titus 1:5–6).

God has given His church many gifts. Among them is the gift of the office of the public, pastoral ministry. We receive what God gives, in the way He has given it, and in the form He has given it. We do not tell God that His gift is not good enough for us, or that we don’t like the form in which He has given the gift. We receive God’s gifts as He gives them, with thanks and praise. We rejoice in the opportunities God has given us, as His redeemed people, to serve Him in the church, and in our daily lives.

The church which wishes to remain faithful to the Word of God cannot permit the ordination of women to the pastoral office.

The Bible says that we are all one in Christ. Don’t these words imply that women may serve as pastors?

There are those churches which believe that St. Paul’s words in Gal. 3:28 mandate the service of women as pastors: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

But this verse does not teach that there is no distinction between these various groups; rather, it teaches the equality of salvation that all Christians have in Christ Jesus our Lord. Paul wants us to know that all individuals are equally sinful and equally saved by the work of God through Jesus Christ.

Gal. 3:28 does not contradict or overturn St. Paul’s comments elsewhere. This passage does not speak to the issue of the ordination of women; instead it is speaking of the equality of our salvation in Christ, for which we praise the Triune God, but it certainly does not mean that all may serve as pastors.

If men and women have equal rights, why can’t women be pastors?

The issue of the ordination of women is not a matter of “human rights” or “church traditions” or various human opinions and customs. Nor is it a matter of “discrimination against women.”

Various social reformers in our culture would have us believe that men and women are totally interchangeable and that their God-given differences simply have no bearing on life in this world. Not only does this run contrary to the clear testimony of nature, it also contradicts the Bible. The Bible teaches us a different view of God’s creation.

The Scriptures teach us that both men and women were created in the image of God, but are two distinct and special creations of God. We praise God for His wisdom in creating human beings as both man and woman.

We believe that God has gifted men and women with different responsibilities and duties. For example, men are gifted by God to be husbands and fathers; women are gifted by God to be wives and mothers. So also in the church, God has gifted men and women with different, though complementary, opportunities and responsibilities for service.

What are the roles of men and women in the church?

Together, men and women serve their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Men have the divine obligation to be the spiritual

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leaders of the church. Women are called to be of assistance to men in this capacity. An attitude of service guides what we do in the church, not a demand for “rights” or an attitude of “lording it over” one another. We have one Lord and one Master, Jesus Christ. We serve Him in the ways He desires.

God has given the responsibility to serve as pastors only to certain qualified men. The church calls these men to serve as representatives of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in the pastoral office. Women are not called to serve in this way because God has not given this responsibility to women.

Why didn't Jesus call a woman to serve as an apostle? Why, through the Apostle Paul, does He prohibit women from serving as pastors in the church? We must leave the answers to these questions to God. We remain with what has been given to us by God in His Word. God has not given the church the option of calling and ordaining women to the pastoral office. We honor and respect God's will in these matters and praise Him for the many gifts He has given us all, including the marvelous opportunities He provides to both men and women to serve Him.

Why then do some churches ordain women as pastors?

Here again, as with so many issues, the reason for differences we have with other church bodies is based on their differing attitude toward the Scriptures.

Our Synod affirms the truth that the Holy Scriptures are God's perfect and errorless revelation to us. We receive what God has given to us in His Word. We are not free to overlook that Word, ignore it, explain it away, or otherwise disregard what the Lord has revealed through the Apostle Paul.

Churches that ordain women have chosen to regard St. Paul's writings as his own personal opinions. This is a difficult position to maintain in light of the fact that St. Paul goes out of his way, on more than one occasion, to repeat his position on this matter, and explicitly declares that this is not merely his personal opinion, but a command of the Lord.

How can faithful Lutherans respond to the ordination of women?

First, we never should become defensive or antagonistic about this issue. Instead, we need simply to speak the truth in love, witnessing to our beliefs and recognizing this as yet another opportunity to say, “This we believe, teach, confess and practice.”

Second, we need to be loving and gentle with people who belong to church bodies that ordain women. In many instances, they are simply unaware of why this has been done. They have been given incorrect information and have no clear

foundation in Scripture to understand why the ordination of women is contrary to the Word of God. We need to explain these issues in love, with gentleness and compassion.

Third, it is important for us to explain how women may serve their Lord in the church in a fulfilling manner. There are many ways for women to serve as full-time church workers in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, including service as teachers, directors of Christian education, directors of Christian outreach, deaconesses and parish nurses. Laywomen have many opportunities for service through various church societies, guilds and leagues, along with the service they provide as volunteer teachers. They have additional opportunities to serve in their local congregations as members of various boards and committees. We thank God for the many blessings and gifts that come to the church through the service of women.

We need to emphasize the opportunities that God has provided to all of us, both men and women, to serve Him in His kingdom. How unfortunate it would be if we permitted ourselves to become ensnared in self-centered demands for “rights,” and thus take our eyes off of our Lord's call to service. Demanding from God what He has not given is contrary to what it means to be a child of God. When our focus is on love and service to one another, we realize that there is more than enough for all of us to do.

We serve each other in love, conforming our service to the Word of God. Nobody in the church is called to be the “master” over anyone else. Pastors are Christ's servants who care for the people of God with Christ's Word and Sacraments. Thus, through these gifts, our Lord graciously gives Himself to us for our salvation, in humble sacrificial service, according to His Father's will. We are privileged to be able to follow Christ's example with thankfulness in our hearts for His many gifts, most importantly the gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation. May God bless our service to Him, for the sake of the Gospel of Christ our Lord.

— Dr. A. L. Barry
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