

WHOSE CHURCH? WHICH MINISTRY?

Paul R. Hinlicky



When I was a theological student in the 1970s, the ordination of women had just begun in the former Lutheran Church in America. It followed quickly in the American Lutheran Church and then the small group that had broken from the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, to which I belonged. By the time of the merger of these groups to form the present Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988, the ordination of women was established practice. In 2005, the ELCA celebrated the 35th anniversary of the ordination of women. Today the ELCA has approximately 11,000 ordained ministers in good standing. Of these, approximately 2,600 are women. At the conclusion of this essay, I will report on how the innovation has fared in these years. But the more immediate task is to set a context for that data because, I submit, we don't usually grasp the import of it correctly. Much more than "women in the ministry" is at stake. What the ministry is to which they are ordained is the real question.

I have supported the ordination of women from the beginning; it was one of the reasons I left the LCMS in 1974. Through my own thirty years of ordained service I have consistently maintained that support.¹ I continue to support the ordination of women, even while opposing some theological trends associated with, or theological conclusions drawn from, the practice.² I acknowledge that the practice has been ecumenically controversial from the beginning and remains so, though not always for the same reasons. Examining the practice from these angles provides the needed context for understanding the nature of the success the ELCA has had with it.

Let me begin then with a brief statement of my own theological rationale on behalf of the ordination of women. It is a culturally appropriate modernization for us in the United States. It conforms with our biblical and confessional norms, when these *norma normata* are themselves

normed by the *norma normans*, the word of our free justification by the Son and reconciliation to the Father in the Spirit, Whose living temple is the church. Here ordained ministry serves the word and sacraments of Christ the Son. Let me explicate this statement step by step.

First, the church under the Spirit is always "modernizing," since it lives in time and can never "go back" to some golden age of the past—if one ever actually existed.

Second, modernization must be culturally appropriate; after all, the evangelical point of modernizing is to remove false obstacles in the minds of contemporary people so that they can hear the Christian message, and so come to faith and new life in the church at the calling of the aforementioned Spirit of the Father and the Son. Importing culturally inept mandates for modernization from the outside, on the other hand, is a form of neocolonial imperialism.

This can happen when the Western European or North American experience with feminism is simply imposed on cultures which do not share the same historical development but are now expected to adopt a Western trajectory of development.

Who is to say what, when, or whether modernization is appropriate? The local churches themselves must decide, although in a dialogue with other churches who share the same biblical and confessional norms.

Third, for Lutherans there is a subtle but decisive point concerning the relation of the Spirit and the letter (II Corinthians 3). One can read the "letter" of the Bible and the confessional documents with perfect historical and grammatical correctness (or deep critical insight) but get the "Spirit" all wrong, if one mistakes the historical circumstance in which "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" as itself a binding "biblical worldview."³ The text of Scripture and its interpretation in the confessional writings are, however, historical acts conditioned by their own times, which are not our times. Concretely, in both biblical times and in the sixteenth century, the biological impera-

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tive of reproduction defined the role of women in society, including in the church (where the only Christian alternative to marriage and children in a household was the convent). How striking, then, in this very historical context, that the Spirit at work in the ministry of Jesus treated women with equal dignity to men (especially evident in the Gospel of Luke), made of Mary Magdalene the first witness of the empty tomb, indeed apostle of the resurrection to the menfolk in hiding (John 20), and went on to put women to work in the fluid ministries of the earliest churches (Romans 15–16). When the letter is read in the light of the Spirit, it becomes clear that women are not only equal recipients with men as hearers of the Word, but potentially equal agents with men as speakers and doers of the Word.

So, fourth, we enjoy the gospel freedom in our changed historical circumstances of modern medicine with birth control technology and expanded economic opportunity to redefine the role of women in society, including the church (and its ordained ministry). Indeed, the apostolic imperative (Galatians 5:1) not to surrender Christian freedom may even require us to do so. Just as Paul opposed Peter for restricting Gentiles from table-fellowship with Jewish Christians, we may in Christian freedom oppose those who arbitrarily bar ordained service to women. The doctrine of justification has always had this critical, reformatory edge as *norma normans*, breaking apart human traditions obscuring the Spirit of the Word and in just this way freeing the New Testament community of Jesus (Galatians 6:15).

Let us now consider two possible lines of objection to the preceding outline of an argument. First, from the left, one could argue that justice for women oppressed by eons of patriarchy demands as a gospel imperative relentless agitation for the ordination of women as a symbol of the liberation of women generally—no matter what the cost, since smashing the patriarchal church is itself part and

parcel of the liberation. The Spirit belongs to those oppressed and seeking liberation. They are the ones have insight into the letter and may even set aside what once was said in the light of new revelations. The foregoing is the well-known hermeneutical claim of liberation theology. Second, from the right, one could argue that the Spirit promised to guide the church to all truth cannot have been away on vacation during these past two millennia, but in fact has exhibited divine guidance in the unbroken tradition of what has everywhere been accepted by everyone at every time. In this latter case, the Spirit belongs to the tradition, including its male-only clergy. From this perspective, the church has neither authority nor freedom to innovate by ordaining women. This is the well-known stance of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

In my judgment, we ought to refuse both these claims and instead heed Luther's insightful diagnosis in the Smalcald Articles, where in principle he tied together these apparently radical opposites of the "left-wing" (Thomas Müntzer) and the "right-wing" (the pope) as alike "enthusiasts."⁴ "Enthusiasts" are those who claim "the Spirit" as authority for new or old practices but neglect both to identify the Spirit as the Holy Spirit of Jesus and His Father and to persuade the community theologically of this identification, thereby winning free assent. Rather, with Luther, we must say that the Holy Spirit's justifying and liberating work consists in the Word of our reconciliation to God and inclusion in the holy community on this basis. How does this apply to the question of the ordination of women?

From this perspective, the first objection about eons of patriarchal oppression from which follows an urgent mandate for women's liberation requires a critique. It is true that women on the whole have been more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse by men on account of a rela-

tive lack of power. The New Testament is well aware of this and fighting against it within the horizon of possibilities available to that time in history (Ephesians 5:25; 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 and 5:1–16, et al.). It is also true (as Simone De Beauvoir recognized in *The Second Sex* where she spoke of the "cruel tyranny of biology" which subordinates women to the reproductive function of the race⁵) that women have been in this position of relative inequality because of the biological fact of their reproductive role. To put the matter plainly: men can walk away from sexual intercourse without bearing its consequences in their bodies in a way that women cannot. Until modern medicine neutralized this "inequality" in consequence of sexual intercourse, all societies in history and across cultures have *needed* (for survival itself) to bind men to the mothers of their children by the social institution of marriage—hardly then the simplistic instrument of patriarchal oppression the objection imagines.

Our theology ought then instead to follow the melancholy analysis of the moral ambiguity that afflicts marriage provided in Genesis 3: as a consequence of equal disobedience to God, Adam is subordinated to the soil from which he came just as Eve is subordinated to Adam (from whom she came). In other words, the vulnerability to sinful abuse (men in the economic struggle with the soil for sustenance, women in the domestic struggle for the man to provide) is a consequence of sin. To employ a scholastic distinction: this double subordination is God's consequent, not antecedent will. Accordingly in Christ, God's original intention for the human couple as expressed in the *imago Dei* passage of the first creation story (Genesis 1:26–28) is redeemed and the double subordination expressed in the curse of Genesis 3 can be mitigated. In other words, we are freed in Christ to fulfill the image of God in the partnership of male and female, concretely in marriage and then more broadly in society. Along these lines the Lutheran Confessions'

teaching on marriage lifts up this partnership of male and female, overcoming the idealization of virginity in the monastic tradition, as may be seen for example in its treatment of monastic vows and clerical celibacy, and, more positively, in Luther's exposition of the sixth commandment. In addition to this classical line of Lutheran interpretation, I would argue that the modern use of reproductive technology to control fertility is permitted in Christian freedom as part of the task assigned to the human couple to have "dominion over the earth." At the same time, this new power (like all our technology) creates new challenges and even dangers. Even more than in the past, we should identify male bullying of women physically, emotionally, or sexually as particularly loathsome and regressive behavior. At the same time we should be aware that modern conditions of sexual equality and gender flexibility create new possibilities for female sin. In plain words: in modern America, women can and do act as badly as men ever did.⁶

From the same perspective of Luther's analysis of enthusiasm, the claim that the Spirit belongs to the tradition like concrete poured and set likewise merits a critique, along the lines of Jaroslav Pelikan's well-known aphorism: "Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living; tradition is the living faith of the dead." The living faith of the dead is that work of the life-giving Spirit in guiding the church into all truth, according to the promise of Jesus in John 16:5–16. Now *this* guidance of the Spirit of the Father and the Son cannot be woodenly equated with Vincent of Lérins's dictum *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*, for the simple reason that not all of us have yet been gathered into the church. So long as history lasts, this gathering continues and includes all the "modernizations" mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Thank God that it does! Aren't we glad that unlike Aristotle and his theological followers in Christian tradition we do not believe any longer that some

people are by nature fit for slavery? Or that women are maimed men? Luther inveighed mightily against the corruption of Christian doctrine on woman, "that most beautiful creature of God," under the influence of Aristotle's biology and politics.⁷ According to John, the Spirit rather leads to truth through the ministry of the Word, in particular through the preaching of law and gospel exposing sin, revealing grace, and overthrowing the devil. "And when [the Advocate] comes, He will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in Me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see Me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned" (John 16:8–11). *Such* preaching about *Jesus* is the work of the ordained ministry, through which *His* Spirit in doing these works leading to all truth. Theological truth then is not whatever the church everywhere once believed (as though we could ever settle even on this), but truth is what the Spirit reveals through the *entire*—as yet *unfinished*—tradition, *by preaching Jesus as our righteousness, sin as our unbelief in Him, and liberation as belonging to Him*. In this light, the question is: could the ordination of women be true? True to God's gospel purpose, as just articulated? How could we ever tell? Not by asking about "women," but by asking about "ordination"!

The theologically prior question is about ordination. Just what is it to which we are ordaining (or refusing to ordain) women? The controversy is not in the first place about "women in the ministry"—a very vague and dubious expression in Lutheran perspective since, by virtue of baptism and the priesthood of all believers, women have always had ministries in the church in keeping with Luther's great paradox: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."⁸ If women are baptized, then all that is said and included in Luther's dictum applies

to them. The controversial question of today—precipitated by the largely unreflective modernization process—really has to do with what we mean theologically about ordination in distinction from this general priesthood of believers in Christ, bestowed in baptism.

I can confirm this analysis from an opposing point of view. Paula D. Nesbitt's decade-old *Feminization of the Clergy in America* is a careful sociological analysis of the difficult time many ordained women have experienced in mainline American Protestant denominations (she focuses particularly on Episcopalians and Unitarians). It comes to the conclusion that the feminist-liberationist mentality of many in this first generation of ordained women conflicts with existing understandings of the pastoral office. She interprets this conflict purely in terms of an alleged patriarchal "right to dominance and control"⁹ embedded in traditional Protestant understandings of the office, and correspondingly speaks of rather dramatic possibilities of reconfiguring "religious leadership." She speaks, for example, of: "greater inclusivity with regard to sexual orientation"; a "more relational, interconnected understanding of religious authority and divine immanence, socially from women's experience on the margin of power and essentialistically from women's differing biological experience connected with menstruation and childbearing"; radically reconstituting "notions of purity or diminish[ing] their traditional importance"; "wider legitimation of socialization experiences"; new "paradigms of interdependency"; and so on. While there are ideas here worthy of consideration, it is not difficult to see that the traditional understanding of the ordained minister as ministering the word and sacraments of Christ to form and guide a flock of Christians could hardly survive the radical surgery required by Nesbitt's "liberationist ideal."¹⁰

A beautifully written and deeply moving account of such an experience

of conflict in ministry by a contemporary woman is provided in Barbara Brown Taylor's *Leaving Church*. It is an autobiographical account of Taylor's sense of the "mysterious presence" (a.k.a. God) in experiences of natural beauty,¹¹ her discovery of the Episcopal church, and her long, slow path to ordination as a priest. She lovingly portrays the trials and joys of a contemporary urban pastor in Atlanta and then of her move to a rural parish in the north of Georgia. She tells of a vibrant growing ministry there, truly a "love story"—yet then one of estrangement, separation, perhaps even divorce (not from her husband, but from the church).¹² *Leaving Church*, as the title indicates, is an important theological interpretation of a contemporary American woman's difficult experience in the ministry because ultimately it judges the ministerial office as an experience of false consciousness and inhumane separation. Painfully, Taylor's is a tale of pain, disillusionment, and finally renunciation.

Midway through the book, telling of the sad days after she had resigned her country call, Taylor recounts how she awkwardly attended a pool party in the town where she had been priest for five years. Things got rowdy and folks were getting tossed into the pool. Finally someone threw her in. She certainly wasn't the priest anymore. "I looked around at all of those shining people with makeup running down their cheeks, with hair plastered to their heads, and I was so happy to be one of them. If being ordained meant being set apart from them, then I did not want to be ordained anymore. I wanted to be human."¹³ The episode raises the question: what did Taylor think she was getting into in the first place? What inhumane thing had she imagined priesthood to be? This very question actually haunted her from the beginning. Earlier on in the story, Taylor asked: "If the purpose of the church were to equip all God's people for ministry in the world—as I was learning in seminary—then what

sense did it make to designate one of those people 'the minister' in a congregation? The minute you set someone apart like that, didn't you give everyone else license to say, 'Don't look at me—she's the minister?'"¹⁴ Over time it was to be exactly this sense of separation from others that defeated Taylor. How can we make sense of this?

Theologically, Taylor tells us, in words that could have come straight from Nesbitt, "my faith is far more relational than doctrinal... God is found in right relationships, not right ideas."¹⁵ It is popular nowadays to speak this way of "right" relationships

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instead of doctrine, but it actually begs the question of doctrine. For Lutherans, the chief "doctrine" is about the right "relationship" to God and others signified by justification of the sinner by faith alone in Christ alone known from the Scriptures alone—solely then on account of God's almighty, all-sufficing grace. Taylor's anti-doctrinal analysis (which actually degenerates into polemic, e.g., "defending the dried ink marks on the page becomes more vital than defending the neighbor"¹⁶) does not then penetrate to the heart of the matter. The heart of the matter is, as her story actually reveals, that she

burned herself out trying to be Christ to others ("compassion fatigue"¹⁷). In other words, she thought of her pastoral ministry as representing an *absent* Christ. A "priest," she expressly affirms, "is someone willing to stand between a God and a people who are longing for one another's love, turning back and forth between them with no hope of tending either as well as each deserves."¹⁸ Given this hopeless (!) task, Taylor felt it was up to her to be Christ in people's lives, apart from whom Christ would not be there for them. She, not He, then was the real operative priest, the mediator. Unsurprisingly, she finally realized that "the demands of parish ministry routinely cut me off from the resources that enabled me to do parish ministry."¹⁹ Intriguingly, she links this understanding of ordination with her gender identity: "I had such a strong instinct for rescue that my breasts fairly leaked when I came across those in need of rescuing. Mother Church gave me a way to bring this instinct under God's roof... Feeding others became my food."²⁰ Starving to death as a result, Taylor left the priesthood and her congregation to survive. Hence, *Leaving Church*.

In Luther's understanding, the ordained minister is the representative of the *present* Christ, not an absent one. The risen Christ entrusts His own priestly ministry to ordained human beings but does not abandon it to them. In turn, the ordained proceed in faith that the crucified and risen Christ by His Spirit causes the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6) by the faithful (1 Corinthians 2:2) preaching of the word and administering of the sacraments. Only God, so to say, can make the promise of grace come true. In this very faith, as Eberhard Jüngel has so rightly emphasized, the believer in general, and the ordained as the example and model of this faith for the community, is "set free from a sham existence"²¹—even, painfully enough, from the kind of religious sham that Taylor found herself living by trying to be Christ rather than believe Christ, to do Christ

rather than to share Christ.

So I return to the prior, genuinely theological question: to what do we ordain? What is the public office, the special ministry of the church? The tensions that Taylor records in her story, it seems to me, indicate deep confusion on this question in American Protestantism, compounded by the gender interests and “enthusiastic” theology she recounts.

What is the ministry of the all the baptized? It is a ministry from baptism to the world. What in contrast is ordained ministry? Is it a ministry from baptism to the church? Yes, but that is not precise enough. In the New Testament we see a variety of functions in the church ranging from diaconal service to the apostolate. We cannot derive a settled, normative doctrine of ministry from the New Testament, but by the second Christian century, a pattern of ordered diaconal service, presbyteral leadership, and episcopal oversight had evolved. This pattern is still useful to us. Certainly any vital church will feel the need to fulfill these three functions of organized charity in society, liturgical and pastoral leadership of the congregation, and the ministry of unity between local Christian communities.

My own answer to this question is, I believe, within the parameters of the Lutheran tradition. The preacher is to be pastor of a community, and the pastor pastors by the preaching of Christ and Him crucified when the community is the temple of the Holy Spirit. In these “right” relations, the special office of ordination to word and sacrament ministry denotes a calling by the Lord of the church to attend to His own word and sacraments and to “rule” the church (Augsburg Confession xxviii.5–18) with them (and only them!) in His name. That women are essentially capable of “ruling” like this (having brains and mouths like men), and are freed to do this (Galatians 3:26–28), seems to this contemporary American Lutheran sufficiently evident that the burden of proof falls on opponents. Having said that,

I am far more concerned that the “right relationships” just designated are actually maintained, encouraged, and enhanced in the life of my fragmenting denomination. I am in fact worried that the sort of theological misunderstanding of ministry we saw articulated by Taylor is progressively (no pun intended) eclipsing Luther’s in the ELCA.

Yet it is because of these doctrinal themes about pastoral ministry stemming from Luther that are deeply rooted in its tradition, I venture, that the ELCA has so far avoided the bitter controversies breaking up The Episcopal Church in the U.S.²² So it appears, in any case, from the “Thirty-Fifth Anniversary of Ordination of Women Rostered Leader Survey 2005,”²³ which drew responses from some 1,300 ordained women currently active on call or on temporary leave from call, i.e., those who have *not* left the ordained ministry (as did Taylor). The central hypothesis of the survey design was that “there are differences in ministerial experiences and that gender is the primary factor related to these differences.” Some such differences were in fact discovered, for example, that “male clergy are much more likely than female clergy to be married” and that female clergy are more likely “to be serving in a part-time or shared-time call.” Yet the survey disconfirmed the operating hypothesis in discovering that “gender is not the primary factor related” to differences in ministerial experience across a broad range of measurements of vocational satisfaction. Instead, other factors “are *statistically* more important, such as the date of ordination, or age, or race/ethnicity” (emphasis in the original). Some differences “are not related at all to gender.”

Consequently, the ELCA can safely be said to have achieved a significant level of equality among its ministers in the relatively short period since the inception of the ordination of women. 76% of the ELCA women reported (equal to the men questioned) that it is true or very true that “I am really

glad that I entered rostered ministry.” The survey contained a few other surprises. One is that support for changing the gendered language of the Bible in public liturgy with respect to God is not strong among the people of the ELCA, and that advocacy for it among female clergy is weaker than might be expected (no greater than among male clergy). Only one statistic indicated an ideological divergence between male and female ministers: 65% of women described themselves a liberal or very liberal politically, while only 46% of men did. We should emphasize that these results are based solely upon the feedback of women who have not “left church” like Taylor. The experience of ministry of those like Taylor who have left might have considerably altered the picture, were it included. Yet the survey provides no information at all on the question of how many women, once ordained, have left the ministry and why in these thirty-five years.

Ecumenically, the ordination of women is still a venture in faith, a holy experiment testing the Spirit’s guidance. The issues ecumenically, as I hope I have sufficiently indicated, are not in the first place about whether women are fit to be ordained, but rather what our theology of ordination is. If ordination to the church’s ministry descended from the apostolate is understood as the living tradition of the gospel message, and if cultural circumstances otherwise permit it in the eyes of local churches, the burden of proof falls upon those who find barriers to prevent women from presenting themselves for ordained service. In the interim, I can conclude with this much of an affirmation: where women undertake the ministry of the gospel as servants of the risen and present Lord Christ, then so far they fare as well as men according to the experience of the ELCA. Where women (or men), however, think of ministry as filling in for an absent Christ, not only is personal burn-out predictable. So finally is “leaving church.” For if Christ is absent, we sooner or later realize that there is no church at all. ✠

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Notes

1. Paul R. Hinlicky, "Women in the Church: A Theological Critique of the Missouri Synod Report," *Dialog* 25/4 (1986): 303–306; "Afterword" in *Different Voices/Shared Vision: Male and Female in the Trinitarian Community* (Delhi, New York: ALPB, 1992). In the interest of full disclosure, let me add that I am also the beaming father of the recently ordained ELCA pastor and editor of this journal, Sarah Hinlicky Wilson.
2. Paul R. Hinlicky, "Gospel and Ministry in the ELCA," *Lutheran Quarterly* 3/2 (1989): 183–208. "Exodus from Lutheranism: An Argument with John Tietjen's New Book," *Lutheran Forum* 25/3 (1991): 26–32. "War of Worlds: Re-Visioning the Abortion Dilemma," *Pro Ecclesia* 2/2 (1993): 187–207. "Secular and Eschatological Conceptions of Salvation in the Controversy over the Invocation of God,"

in *This Is My Name Forever: The Trinity and Gender Language for God*, ed. Alvin Kimmel, Jr. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 213–239.

3. Southern Baptists have generally taken such a position.
4. SA III.8.3–13.
5. See Paul R. Hinlicky, "Havens from the Heartless Home," *Dialog* 28/3 (1989): 175–182.
6. Islamic critics of American culture, particularly of feminism, see this clearly. Dinesh D'Souza, *The Enemy at Home: The Cultural Left and Its Responsibility for 9/11* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 137ff.
7. See Paul R. Hinlicky, "Luther against the Contempt of Women," *Lutheran Quarterly* 2/4 (1989): 515–530.
8. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of the Christian," in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 31:344. See also Eberhard Juengel, *The Freedom of a Christian: Luther's Significance for Contemporary Theology*, trans. R. A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988).
9. Paula D. Nesbitt, *Feminization of the Clergy in America: Occupational and Organizational Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford, 1997), 175.
10. *Ibid.*, 176.
11. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church:*

A Memoir of Faith (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2007), 22–25. I mention this to underscore, in Lutheran terms, the theological "enthusiasm" that motivated Taylor from the beginning of her journey: "If anyone had tried to tell me that creation was fallen or that I should care more for heaven than earth, I would have gone off to lie in the sweet grass by myself;" 23; cf. 80, 82.

12. *Ibid.*, 113.
13. *Ibid.*, 120.
14. *Ibid.*, 31.
15. *Ibid.*, 107.
16. *Ibid.*, 106.
17. *Ibid.*, 102.
18. *Ibid.*, 44.
19. *Ibid.*, 98.
20. *Ibid.*, 50.
21. Eberhard Juengel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 262ff.
22. Taylor acknowledges that her "leaving church" was precipitated by the outbreak of dissent in her congregation on matters of homosexuality. *Ibid.*, 106–112.
23. "Report 1," authored by Kenneth W. Inskeep and Victoria Flood (September 2006) is available from the ELCA's Research and Evaluation Department. See www.elca.org/gjaklsga, accessed October 15, 2008.

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