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Announcement	81
Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross.....	John T. Pless 83
Theological Observer.....	103
Homiletical Studies.....	107
Book Reviews.....	191

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Theological Observer

A LUTHERAN RESPONSE TO EVANGELICALISM: ORDINATION OF WOMEN

A number of years ago a survey found that *Christianity Today* was one of the more widely read periodicals among LCMS pastors. An October 1986 issue contained as an insert a supplement entitled "The Changing Role of Women," which for all practical purposes finds the ordination of women as pastors acceptable. Since the 1960's, when *Christianity Today* was founded, an unwritten alliance existed between the LCMS and the editors and writers of the evangelical journal, since the journal was taking similar stands toward contemporary theologies which were making inroads into the LCMS. Evangelicals and Lutherans shared many of the same concerns, although LCMS pastors may have been more dependent on Evangelicalism, especially as it was expressed in the pages of *Christianity Today*, than the reverse. Still, some LCMS clergy became associated with the Evangelicals as writers for the evangelical journal and through participation in other groups. Since the ordination of women pastors became the one decisively recognizable question leading to the break of fellowship with the American Lutheran Church, *Christianity Today's* endorsement or, at least, allowance of the ordination of women is not without problems for confessional Lutherans who may have felt a degree of kinship with the Evangelicals, especially for their strong commitment to biblical inspiration and inerrancy.

Outside of the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod is perhaps the only major American Christian denomination which has consistently opposed the ordination of women as pastors. From reading the special supplement in *Christianity Today* one can only conclude that the LCMS will have to continue its opposition without the aid of the Evangelicals. In spite of Bruce Waltke's valiant attempt to offer an opposing view in the supplement, the impression given is that *Christianity Today* endorses the ordination of women as pastors. In "Proceed with Care" Kenneth Kantzer drags his feet a little, but not enough to say a clear no to the practice as unbiblical.

Though several voices express themselves in the special *Christianity Today* supplement, one general attitude characterizes all the approaches to the question. The pastoral office is viewed purely from a functional perspective, and thus an easy equation between "ministry" and "leadership" is made. Bringing up the example of Margaret Thatcher is hardly appropriate or germane. To argue from the role of a prominent woman statesman in a matter of church practice is hardly an endorsement of *sola scriptura*. The question is not whether the Scriptures allow women to carry out responsible functions and occupy particular offices in the church, but whether they in the stead of Christ may occupy the office of pastor and carry out all of its functions, especially the public proclamation of the Gospel, the consecration and distribution of the Sacrament, and the care of the congregation. To this distinction between prominent and responsible roles in church for both men and women and the uniqueness of the pastoral office there is no allusion by any of the *Christianity Today* contributors. Mary became the mother of the Lord, but this role has nothing to do with whether she would qualify as a pastor. It is beyond debate that women served as vehicles of God's revelation. The highest honor ever given to a human being was given to the Virgin Mary in her being chosen as the

mother of God. Women are described as more faithful than the fickle disciples; but it was not to them the apostleship and the office of pastor were given. Jesus stands in the place of the Father, and pastors stand in the place of Jesus. Where this understanding is lacking, then it is not surprising that opposition to women pastors becomes a historical relic of the past, which can be changed according to either "the Spirit's guiding" or contemporary circumstances.

The late Peter Brunner, professor in the University of Heidelberg, predicted that ordaining women as pastors would inevitably lead to a feminist or non-sexist understanding of God. He did not live to see his prophecy come true in the non-sexist language of the lectionary sponsored by the NCC, in which all the masculine references to God are neutered or "democratized." Though the *Christianity Today* contributors are firm in their insistence on the unchangableness of the masculine references to God because of a shared commitment to biblical infallibility, they have, in effect, contravened that principle in excusing themselves from the Pauline prohibition of women pastors. "Evangelicalism," at least in its contemporary understanding, was an attempt to form an alliance across denominations to withstand an advancing front of a "liberalism" which questioned the historical quality of the Bible and its authority for the church. The "evangelical" alliance had to overlook the traditional sixteenth-century differences on baptism and the Lord's Supper and concentrate on what united its members (as I remember Dr. Carl Henry telling me in Springfield, Illinois, sometime in the late 1960's). The ability of Evangelicals, especially of their scholars, to tolerate women pastors may indicate that an alliance built on common attitudes to Christian theology was never really as solid as the impression it gave. Scriptural infallibility is meaningless where the Holy Spirit is seen as speaking outside the Scriptures. Anything then becomes possible. As the *Christianity Today* supplement has shown, the Church of Rome (at least in its official pronouncements) may, in fact, be more biblical in its theology than the Evangelicals, at least on this point.

Tradition, though never the finally determinative factor in church belief, should not be dismissed as having nothing or little to offer. Until just recently mainline Protestant denominations had no ordination of women as pastors. It sprung up in the holiness and pentecostal bodies where everyone in the worshipping congregation is seen as a potential vehicle of the Holy Spirit. This situation was not unlike the Corinthian church, where an unbridled charismatic movement accompanied the rise of women preachers. Tradition by itself is never determinative of doctrine, but it does provide those churches who value it an opportunity to reevaluate any innovations. Protestants do have a tradition opposed to women pastors, but this tradition was not sufficiently strong to provide any support in this issue. Apart from what is for some the debatable value of post-apostolic tradition, the tradition of the early church, as it was set down in the Pauline corpus, simply does not know of woman pastors. Outside of Corinth their first appearance was in the heretical gnostic movements.

The real crux of the problem with Evangelicalism is that the office of the ministry is viewed not as an office held by Christ and the apostles, but rather as an

extension of the life of Christians. The ministry and sanctification are confused. Wherever we see the Holy Spirit doing all sorts of marvelous works, there He must be speaking authoritatively to us, whether it is through a man or a woman — so it is reasoned. An office of the ministry built on the life of the believer has no certain foundation. Only the command of Christ establishes this ministry among us. Those who can exempt themselves from St. Paul's prohibition have to ask themselves to what extent they are entitled to be called apostolic.

David P. Scaer

Dr. Scaer serves as a *Christianity Today* Resource Scholar. This contribution to the *CTQ* is a revised form of a response requested by the *Christianity Today* Institute. Dr. Robert Preus, president of Concordia Theological Seminary, is a Fellow of the Institute.