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Regin Prenter on The Ordination of Women

A Feature Book Review by PROFESSOR PETER BRUNNER
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Editor's Note: The following book review of Regin Prenter's *Die Ordination der Frauen zu dem überlieferten Pfarramt der Lutherischen Kirche* appeared in the *Theologische Literaturzeitung* Vol. 95, No. 4, Cols. 304ff. (April, 1969), and it appears in *The Springfielder* with the express consent of that journal's editor, Professor Dr. Ernst Sommerlath of Leipzig. The translation was prepared by Vicar Wilhelm Torgerson. *The Springfielder* considers it both a pleasure and an honor to bring two prominent Lutheran voices, Professors Regin Prenter and Peter Brunner, to such a vital issue in American Lutheranism as the ordination of women. Professor Prenter is the author of *Creation and Redemption* (Fortress Press, 1967) and *Spiritus Creator* (Muhlenberg Press, 1953). The more exact bibliographical material will interest those readers in obtaining Professor Prenter's book on the ordination of women. *Die Ordination der Frauen zu dem überlieferten Pfarramt der Lutherischen Kirche.* (Berlin-Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1967. 18 p. Nr. 28 "Luthertum". Ed. W. Zimmerman, F. Lau, H. Schlyter, J. Pfeiffer. DM 3.20)

THE AARHUS DOGMATICIAN has had an influence far beyond the borders of Denmark and Europe through his ecumenical connections. Even though this pamphlet consists of only one address, it contains one of the most important contributions to the question of whether it is canonically (*kirchenrechtlich*) legitimate to allow women to be ordained to the public Office of the Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Prenter answers this question negatively. His reasons will be summarized here in thesis form. Obviously my summary in thesis form cannot perfectly represent the author's whole train of thought from which I have written my article. Whoever wishes to delve more deeply into the theses of the author must, of course, read the pamphlet.

1. Evangelical church or canon law (*evangelisches Kirchenrecht*) must be based on the Holy Scriptures and on the confession of the Church. Otherwise it would be "legalized injustice masquerading as canon law" (*maskiertes irchenunrecht*). In view of the fact that 1 Corinthians 14:34 is the decisive text, the exegetical question must receive some priority. Just to what extent the interpreted text has legal-canonical authority is a many sided dogmatic problem.

2. Any legalistic biblicism is un-Biblical and un-Lutheran. However, the commands (*Stiftungsgebote*) given in connection with

the institution of the Gospel, demanding simple obedience, must not be identified with what we have called the "Law". The salvation event (*Heilsgeschehen*) in Jesus Christ, to which the Gospel witnesses, will become Gospel for us only insofar as it is bestowed on us through Word and Sacrament. The application of the Gospel through the Means of Grace demands obedience to the commands of God in Jesus Christ connected with the institution of the Gospel. The application of how this salvation is bestowed upon us is determined not by our personal discretion but by the commands connected with the institution of the Gospel.

3. All the Apostle's commands in I Corinthians 11 (the eucharistic tradition) through 15 (the preaching tradition) have to do with the true preservation of the Gospel, which is passed on in the Lord's Supper and preaching. The Apostle's advice and direction is based not only on the insight of reason, but in connection with the command for women "to be silent," he specifically appeals to a command of the Lord. In view of I Corinthians 12:28, it becomes clear that here we are dealing with a command given when the service of Gospel proclamation was first being instituted. Apostles, prophets and teachers are, as bearers of an Office of Gospel Proclamation, male servants. This command shares in the same historical contingency to which the external form of the Means of Grace is subject.

4. *The Augsburg Confession (CA)* does not teach that only the institution of the Means of Grace is divine and that the function of the Means of Grace is left to the discretion and decision of the Christian community (*Gemeinde*). Rather the Augsburg Confession teaches that the content of the apostolic mission, which is the Gospel, and the office, instituted for the Gospel's application as outlined in CA XXVIII, are both instituted *iure divino* and fall under Christ's command. This is in accordance with the New Testament statement that apostles, prophets and teachers are appointed by God, even though it is the Christian community which does the calling of its teachers and shepherds. By calling them, the Christian community does not assign the office, but rather, in God's name, she enlists human beings to serve in that office which has been entrusted to her and was instituted by *mandatum Christi*. Those thus called to serve stand in their office as representatives of Christ (a representation according to Luke 10:16 in CA XXVIII) over against the Christian community. This office cannot be derived from the universal priesthood of all believers by circumventing the *mandatum Christi*.

5. Only under the presupposition, falsely taken from the Scriptures and the Confessions, that the Office of the Ministry is only functional can it be held that ordination is merely a matter of order in the Church about which the Christian community can freely decide. Then it is possible to agree to the ordination of women to the Office of the Ministry. It must be recognized that according to the witness of the New Testament the office as described in CA

XXVIII has as its basis that *mandatum Christi* upon which also the apostolate is founded. Later the teaching or pastoral office has its origin in the apostolate. With this the ordination of women becomes extraordinarily problematical. The ordination of women destroys the external sign connected with the apostolicity of the pastor's office. According to the Scriptures and the Confessions there is to be "in the Christian community an office of leadership which makes the continuity with the original apostles, in the administration of the Means of Grace, in the execution of the mandate of Christ, visible by the fact that it is entrusted only to men."

6. If this external sign, analogous to the established contingency of the external form of the Means of Grace, is set aside by the ordination of women, then any sense of appreciation for the historical nature of revelation is weakened. Neglect of the historical aspects of the Gospel and neglect of the established contingency which is connected with the outward form of the Gospel's transmission, will eventually obscure the true Gospel.

7. The ordination of women to the Office of the Ministry prevents the renewal of the utterly necessary service of the woman in the Church. The fact that we have lost the services of the woman in recognized Church offices is a problem; but the introduction of the ordaining of women has made a genuine solution to this problem quite impossible.

Prenter is very much aware of the fact that he has not discussed all of the issues that deserve consideration in connection with the problem here raised. For him, too, it is quite obvious that between man and woman, as regards their status *coram Deo* and their membership in the Body of Christ, there is no difference. An evangelical doctrine of the Office of the Ministry cannot throw into question the fundamental and concrete practical significance of either Genesis 1:27 or Galatians 3:28. In addition to this the author makes it quite clear that he is very much concerned about a legitimate arrangement of woman's spiritual service in the Church. Furthermore, it must be beyond dispute that the social and legal standing of the woman in the realm of the political community (*polis*) was destined to undergo a change since the apostolic period and this change happened partly because of the influence of the Gospel. The dogmatic position of the author in no way contradicts the "equal-rights-status" of the woman in the realm of the legal and social order. But surely the Church of God is unanimous on this point: The norms for ordering the Office of the Ministry point up peculiarities which principles and regulations in the realm of the political community do not share. Therefore Prenter in his discussion limits himself to ecclesiastical considerations, eliminating political ones.

Already the title of his work points to that problem. The point of Prenter's whole discussion is not whether women should be entrusted with certain spiritual services in the Church of God. The author says that they do! Rather the point is whether women are

to be granted ordination "to the received Pastoral Office of the Lutheran Church." We are concerned fundamentally with the proper understanding of that office of which CA XXVIII speaks. If it is admitted that the charge which constitutes this office is based on the *mandatum Christi*, then we are faced with this pressing question: Is not the fact that God, according to the apostolic witness, has in His *ekklesia* appointed only men to be "apostles, prophets and teachers" part of the divinely established contingency of the Office of the Means of Grace which we may not call into question? It is well known generally that this question today is answered differently than Prenter's. As an example of the present prevalent opinion suggesting the ordination of women is the investigation by Ilse Bertinetti (cf. the discussion in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 92, col. 869 ff.), according to which, for instance, the command "to be silent" in I Corinthians 14 presupposes the "environmentally conditioned realities of the recipients of the letter", but not the institution by Christ. The reflections of Regin Prenter definitely call into question such a current opinion. It cannot be doubted that Paul's claim for his 'command-to-be-silent' was based on the authority of the Lord Himself. It is quite evident that in the conviction of the Lutheran Confessions this office, the content of which is set forth in CA XXVIII, is based on the mandate of Christ and thus in its very nature is supposed to stand in continuity with the apostolate. The fact that Evangelical Lutheran Churches, on the basis of church canons, ordain women to the Office of *pastor seu episcopus* as it is outlined in CA XXVIII is therefore anything but an *adiaphoron*. At the very least we can credit R. Prenter's work with showing this important point very clearly.

But if we are here not dealing with an *adiaphoron*, just then what are we dealing with?