

'By what authority...?'



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Authority and Power in the ELCA

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Oddly enough, I remember a sociological book assigned to us in one of my first classes in the field of Ethics and Society at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 1960. It was Paul Harrison's *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition: A Social Case Study of the American Baptist Church*, published in 1959. In that book Harrison distinguishes between formal authority—who or what officially has the warrant to guide the life of an institution or group—and power—who or what **actually** makes the key decisions for the institution or group. Harrison argued that while Baptists have a radically democratic ideology about how decisions are made, the truth is quite different. The Baptist ideology of formal authority dictated that authority rose from each congregation, but in actuality the headquarters bureaucracy covertly usurped the power to make decisions. Because the ideology masked what really happened, the central bureaucracy of the American Baptist Church actually exercised more power than churches that had a much more hierarchical system of formal authority!

I could now move into a lengthy and warranted discussion about how decisions are made in an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, in which formal authority is supposed to rest in the Churchwide Assembly, but in which the real power lies elsewhere. Anyone who has attended a Churchwide Assembly will sense that formal authority and actual power are two quite different realities.

But the governance problem is not my focus here. Rather, I would like to focus on the difference between the formal, authoritative principles of the ELCA and the actual emphases of the church. The formal authority so nicely articulated in the Constitution gets transformed by those in power into quite a different agenda. In short, if the ELCA really took its authoritative principles as the direct guide for its life we would have quite a different church. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I. The Principles of Formal Authority

If we look to the ELCA's Constitution, especially Chapters 2, 3, and 4 on the Confession of Faith, The Nature of the Church, and the Statement of Purpose, respectively, we find a fine statement of authoritative principles.

Chapter 2 begins with the confession of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and moves on to the confession of "Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe." It then locates the specific authority of the church in Jesus Christ as the "Word of God incarnate." It adds that the "the proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God," and that "the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God," which as the "inspired Word of God" are "**the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.**" (boldface added)

Further, since it is clear that we all stand in traditions of interpretation of the Word of God, the Confession of Faith accepts the three ecumenical creeds of the ancient church, as well as the confessional writings of the Lutheran church as authoritative articulations and interpretations of the Christian faith. The Statement con-

cludes with this bold commitment: “This church confesses the Gospel, recorded in the Holy Scriptures and confessed in the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessional writings, as the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God’s mission in the world.”

Chapter 3 clearly articulates the source of authority of this church. “All power in the Church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ, its head. **All actions of this church are to be carried out under his rule and authority.**” (boldface added)

Chapter 4’s Statement of Purpose authoritatively sets forth the priorities of the ELCA: “proclaim God’s saving Gospel...preserving and transmitting the Gospel faithfully to future generations;” “carry out Christ’s great Commission;” “serve in response to God’s love to meet human needs;” “worship God in the proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments;” “nurture its members in the Word of God;” and “manifest the unity given to the people of God.”

Except for the impoverished language about God (God, God’s, God, God’s) dictated by the ELCA’s “inclusive language” madness, one could hardly wish for a better statement of authoritative theological principles.

II. The Power Principles

The principles that actually have power in the ELCA are quite different than those that have formal authority. It is not that ELCA leaders have consciously decided to replace the formally authoritative principles for another set. Indeed, they would vociferously deny that any such thing has taken place. As proof of their fidelity to the formally authoritative principles, they can and will plunge into the traditional language of normative Lutheran theology. They do so repeatedly.

But if one would ask what really interests and excites the leadership, and what draws their resources and attention, and what is finally non-negotiable for them, another set of principles are pressed forward with real power. What really guides the ELCA are the principles of “diversity,” “inclusivity,” and a certain conception of “peace and justice.” Those are the phrases we have heard from the beginning of the ELCA. They are, as one student put it in a doctoral dissertation, the ELCA’s “god-words.” They have been the only “new” ideas in the “new” ELCA. They have increasingly displaced the formal authoritative principles of the church.

“Diversity” seems to have been pioneered by the ELCA. The church was ahead of American society in making diversity a mantra, which everyone must repeat and obey. “Diversity” is made up of what must be “included,” and in so doing making the church “inclusive.” But what is behind this intense commitment to “diversity” and “inclusivity?” In their most benign meaning these principles mean getting more people of color, women, and non-European background persons into the life of the church.

One would think that the main effort toward reaching such diversity would be through evangelizing those diverse populations, but there seems to be relatively little effort at domestic evangelism. Rather, another agenda is at work.

Instead of an agenda devoted to evangelizing many sorts of persons and thus becoming more catholic, the real agenda is based on suspicion—the suspicion that white European-background, heterosexual males have distorted the message and mission of the church and must be dethroned from their hegemony. If we invite

the voices of those marginalized by the white male establishment into the central decision-making centers of the church and thus increase diversity, we will cleanse and strengthen the message and mission of the church.

This program is consonant with the agendas of the liberal Protestant churches that the ELCA has so long courted. We have so wanted to be accepted by the Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church (USA), and now we are “making it” with the mainline just at the time they are in precipitous decline. Our Presiding Bishop seems to be drawn to the likes of Episcopalian Presiding Bishop Jefferts Schori and United Church of Christ President Thomas. The ELCA takes on more and more of the contours of liberal Protestantism.

The general movement of liberal Protestantism can be clearly traced historically. It had its origin, of course, in the European efforts to “update” Christianity by emphasizing its ethics of love over against its retrograde dogmatic claims. Overwhelmed by the threat posed by the sciences to Christian theological claims, the great liberal thinkers—Kant, Ritschl, Harnack, Troeltsch—proposed that the dogmatic content of the faith be replaced by enlightened ethics, something that by its inwardness was protected from the reductionist claims of science. On American soil the Social Gospel picked up this ethical thrust, though its first generation—represented by Rauschenbusch—still maintained the classical theological themes of the faith. But its emphasis was focused on ethics. Indeed, Rauschenbusch remarked that “Thus far Lutheranism has buried its ten talents in a tablecloth of dogmatic theory and it has kept its people from that share in the social awakening which is their duty and right.” (Quoted in E. Clifford Nelson’s *The Lutherans in America*, 11)

For Lutherans there is no such thing as a Social Gospel, there is only the Gospel of Jesus Christ addressed to every person and people by the Church’s authoritative preaching, as the statement of faith of the ELCA so clearly states. As a response to the Gospel, Christians individually and corporately are led by the Spirit into the Church and the Christian life, which has both personal and social dimensions. So, while there may be a Christian social ethic, there is no such thing as a Social Gospel, strictly speaking. Likewise, while there may be a Christian ethical agenda that aims at liberating persons and groups from oppressive ideologies and structures, there is no liberation theology *per se*.

The elites of liberal Protestantism—those controlling its seminaries, ecumenical organizations, publishing houses, and headquarters bureaucracies—tend not to make those sorts of Lutheran distinctions. For many years now they seem to have either assumed or become uninterested in the proclamation of the Gospel itself. (What happens at the grass roots level is often quite different.) And they have paid little attention to personal ethics, except as such ethics need revision according to their enlightened agenda.

Their energies have been poured into the social, economic, and political ramifications of Christian teachings, not the central affirmations of the Christian faith itself nor in personal ethics. Not only does this miss the main thing that Christianity is about and therefore leads to membership losses as people look for the real thing, but it has serious divisive tendencies.

As one moves from the central affirmations of the Christian faith to its social and political ramifications, one passes through several stages of argument that involve different assessments of the current situation, different analytical judgments, different philosophical principles, different ordering of Christian principles, and very different applications of those normative principles. For example, arguments about whether or not we should have invaded Iraq involve all those complex steps, and Christians of good will and intelligence differ about them. But one would never come to that conclusion if one examined the social and political proclamations of liberal Protestantism. They move with utter confidence directly from the central affirmations—or from selected biblical passages or theological themes—to highly debatable public policy. They are joined in this “straight-line thinking” by some of their counterparts among religious conservatives. As this “straight-line thinking” becomes politically predictable over time, one gets the suspicion that political commitments are more dominant than those of a theological nature.

Internally, liberal Protestantism at the elite level spends its energies purging the life of the church from oppressive ideologies rather than focusing on the proclamation and extension of the Gospel and on Christian personal ethics. Those oppressive ideologies are sexism, heterosexism, racism, monoculturalism, and American imperialism. The manical movement toward “diversity” in liberal Protestantism and now in the ELCA is meant to shatter and overcome these oppressive ideologies and practices. (Generally, however, “diversity” does not include persons of conservative cultural and political convictions, especially if they are vocal.) So, for example, many catalogues of interdenominational and mainline Protestant seminaries will include pages and pages of rules to govern “inclusive language,” but nary a word commending orthodox Christian belief. Students studying in those divinity schools would find it far more dangerous publicly to use “non-inclusive language” than to deny the Trinity, or to support the Iraq war than to deny the divinity of Christ. Volunteering at a Crisis Pregnancy Center would make a student a pariah. Needless to say, the situation is quite different at the level of local parishes.

In short, the grounding of the church’s mission in the Gospel has been practically supplanted by a debatable liberal social and political agenda. There is uninterest in or squishiness at the Christian center, dogmatism at its periphery. Such is the Social Gospel of liberal Protestantism.

It is my judgment that the elites of the ELCA are moving rapidly toward this liberal Protestant consensus. The ELCA will increasingly take as its major preoccupation the struggle against the oppressive ideologies and structures they believe are contaminating the church and world. That struggle will inevitably beg many questions and tip toward social and political liberalism, so confidently that no other interpretations will be allowed.

Many signs of this elite movement are evident. The highest of our elite—our Presiding Bishop—seems to understand his central calling as making “prophetic” pronouncements on every political issue that looms before us. Most of his pronouncements are uninformed by Lutheran themes. He has taken on the mantle of leader of liberal Protestantism. Meanwhile, efforts to stem the steady loss of membership by increased home missions and disciplined lay theological education seem far down his list of priorities.

The ELCA's priorities seem to fit those of liberal Protestantism. Its actual commitments reflect the liberationist thrust of the older denominations. Once one understands this, it becomes clear what is non-negotiable to the elites of the ELCA and what is adiaphora. The former they fight for tooth and nail. Thus, they stand firmly for: quotas (to fight racism and monoculturalism); unqualified abortion rights (to fight sexism); the homosexual agenda (to fight heterosexism); centralization of power (to fight the benighted masses of the church who are infected with all the "isms"); a relentless purging of masculine language from worship materials (to fight sexism); and a strong commitment to insistently left-wing foreign policy positions on Iraq and Israel (to fight against imperialism).

Thus, we have a church with authoritative Gospel articulations in its formal principles but its exercise of power moves along quite different lines, one that is gradually bringing disaffection from the church on the part of many of its participants. The disaffected answer by keeping more money at home and being totally uninterested, if not hostile, to the ELCA's initiatives. The principles bearing formal authority for the ELCA have increasingly been displaced by a powerful bureaucracy's agenda.

III. What, then, can be done?

I once thought that by mid-century the declining liberal Protestant churches will have merged into one large generic church. I still think that is a possibility but it now seems more likely that institutional inertia will keep the denominations going in smaller and weaker, but yet identifiable, communions. The ELCA will continue, as will the Methodists and others as discrete bodies. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod will also continue, but at increasing distance from the ELCA.

Is there any chance of renewal of confessional Lutheranism in the ELCA? Anything is possible with God, so we should not give up hope. Even completely dead bones were once brought to life. Since the ELCA is a good-sized body, there are many pastors and laypeople who share a similar analysis as that outlined above, so not every one supports the route to decline. But some of those pastors and laypersons are too isolated and unorganized to act in concert for renewal. The sad truth is that many ELCA members are either uninterested in what happens beyond the congregation and/or have been taken in by the informational monopoly of the national church. (Just observe the full court press to promote and sell the new hymnal! No criticisms allowed.) While there is no great affection for, or allegiance to, the ELCA, neither is there any groundswell of discontent—just steady decline in mission support for the churchwide organization and loss of members.

Given this situation, it is very important that independent, confessional Lutheran organizations continue and expand their work. They are the "conscience" of the ELCA and, for that matter, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The WordAlone Network, Lutheran CORE - Coalition for Reform, Lutheran Churches of the Common Confession, Youth Encounter, the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, The Society of the Holy Trinity, the many regional groups devoted to reform and renewal, Lutheran Quarterly, and Lutheran Forum (and its newsletter) are crucial instruments for raising the awareness of clergy and laity and for organizing initiatives for constructive change. Above all, they are important for stimulating the thinking of a rising new generation of Lutherans, who may not be intrigued by the

weakening liberal Protestant agenda, and who may be captured by the allure of authentic Lutheranism.

It is my hope and prayer that among that new generation of Lutherans there will be strong leaders who are stirred by the Lutheran construal of the Christian faith and who will move into the leadership positions of the ELCA and its many institutions. God still holds the future open!

Authority

by Lou Hesse, farmer, Moses Lake, Washington

Sez who?

My thirtieth high school reunion in 2002 was an interesting gathering. Held at a local country club near the old home town, it was a chance to reconnect with people that we had lost sight of and remember some of the things we had in common. Old friends whose lives had taken a turn for the better or worse ... a chance to show off photos of children and even grandchildren ... an opportunity to remember those who had died or had problems so severe with drugs or whatever that, sadly, they had been institutionalized.

Near the end of the evening I spotted an old classmate I hadn't seen in years coming towards me. "Hi, Lou, remember me?" Sharon asked as she approached. "Of course I do, Sharon, what's new with you?" I responded as I remembered how we had had a social studies course together our senior year called American Problems. We had spent most of that senior year in a mostly friendly contest of arguing about the nature of man and human problems. She was a secularist who believed a just society would result by good education, teaching people to do the right thing. I was and still am a Christian arguing from a belief in original sin, the innate fall-
-ness of man, and the inability of people to do the good without Jesus Christ. It was a strong discussion that tested both of us.

"I just wanted to let you know the Lord found me."

With these words Sharon simply left me speechless (a very rare thing for me as anyone who knows me can testify). This was an electrifying moment. I knew immediately I was talking to a sister in the faith. She smiled and said, "Yes, I know—who would have thought?" We talked awhile about all the mundane things but we also have a connection now that can't be broken.

Authority in the church is like Sharon's statement, "The Lord found me." You know it when you hear it, and a number of assumptions are immediately in play. Authority has some things in common with unity. You know when it's present and you know when it's absent. Sharon and I have unity in the faith because Jesus speaks to us—that is also authority. Just as the surest sign of disunity is scheduling a vote on unity, so also the surest sign of a lack of authority is debating what is authoritative.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," (John 14:6) and "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Matt. 28:18) "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1) At the baptism of Jesus, a voice from heaven declared, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17); at the transfiguration of Jesus, a voice from a cloud declared, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." (Matt. 17:5). If you have ears to hear, this is authoritative; if you don't have ears, no amount of cajoling, debating, or haranguing can change that. Only one person can change that—as my sister Sharon said, "The Lord found me."

Women's Ordination in ELCA Predecessor Churches: A Case Study in Scriptural Authority and Denominational Discernment

by Pastor Frederick W. Baltz, Galena, Illinois

For nearly forty years the majority of Lutherans in the United States have ordained women to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. In 1970 decisions were reached by conventions of The Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and The American Lutheran Church (ALC) to change the previous policies of the respective bodies. Lutheran state churches in Europe had already begun ordaining women years before this, but in North America no such change could take place without the affirmative votes of a majority of representatives from the churches gathered in their respective conventions.

A survey of the process leading to these votes is enlightening and instructive for all concerned with the question of whether Scripture is truly considered the final authority among ELCA Lutherans today. A review of the events of that time will show that the decision to ordain women to the ministry was not made primarily on the basis of Scripture, but rather to keep pace with secular, societal changes. The decision to ordain women was the right decision, but a decision not reached with the Scriptures as the primary voice. A flawed method with its underlying assumptions was carried forward and remains in use. The potential consequences of that method now threaten to lead to decisions that are neither correct, nor scriptural.

It is sometimes said that the church has decided rightly in the past to go against the teaching of Scripture on matters including slavery, the ordination of women, and divorce. This generalization has no basis in fact, but falsely presupposes that the Scriptures really do support the institution of slavery, prohibit the full inclusion of women in the church, and consign all troubled marriages to unceasing misery and even at times violence. This serious misunderstanding of the Scriptures, I submit, is a direct result of the flawed method described above.

The Biblical Texts

The student of Scripture who pursues the general question of what leadership role rightly belongs to women in the church encounters texts that seem to be in conflict. The fact is this: those specific texts that seem to prohibit women from any role that would require authority over men, therefore precluding the later concept of ordination, constitute a minority over against a majority of texts that require women's full inclusion in leadership.

Texts interpreted as against the ordination of women...

The following texts are cited by those who believe women should not hold positions in church leadership that make them equal to men. To these we might also add statements like Ephesians 5:22 and 1 Peter 3:1, which state that women should be subordinate to men, or subject to men. While not directly addressing the authority question as far as leadership is concerned, the latter do reflect a culture in which male leadership is considered normative.

1 Corinthians 14:33b-35...*"As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church."*

1 Timothy 2:11-12...*"Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent."*

In the case of the 1 Corinthians passage scholars have long noted that the oldest manuscripts give these words in two different places, and that in neither setting do they relate directly to the subject being discussed by Paul. This raises the question of whether they were ever part of Paul's Corinthian correspondence, a question made more cogent by the widely-held opinion that 1 and 2 Corinthians is really not a straightforward set of two letters, but rather includes at least part of a third letter within the second. In other words, we already have reason to suspect that the Corinthian correspondence is not just as Paul wrote it. Thus, many who have devoted their lives to the in-depth study of Paul and his writings believe 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 is an interpolation into Paul's actual letter, made by someone who did not share Paul's views on the extent to which women should participate in leadership. Scholars reach this conclusion precisely because of what Paul himself says about women elsewhere. If these words are not an interpolation, they may have been written due to practices among the followers of the Eleusian mystery religion or the Delphi cult. Both these religions existed in the region of Corinth. There is reason to believe that women practiced ecstatic speech in these religions, and Paul may have meant to draw a line of demarcation between that behavior and Christian worship. That would explain, at least to some extent, the apparent conflict between the directive in 1 Corinthians against women speaking in church and the clear openness to women's full participation elsewhere.

In the 1 Timothy passage, it should be noted, Paul writes, "I permit..." While male-led home and marriage was indeed the norm for Jews through centuries before and after Paul, his words here bring to mind what he writes in 1 Corinthians 7:12: "To the rest I say—I and not the Lord—..." Paul can distinguish his opinion which he might strongly urge a church to accept, while still not claiming to speak for the Lord. It is what Paul says in favor of women at other places that requires us to consider that possibility here. We shall not even open the subject of whether Paul is really the author, or whether someone has written the letter in his name. The letter has been accepted as part of the canon of the New Testament. However, for some this will be an additional issue. In summary, Paul's, "I permit no..." may mean, "I Paul, but not the Lord, permit no..." Even that is hard to understand from Paul who is so affirming of women's ministry, as we shall see.

Texts used in support of the ordination of women...

All must admit that women's contribution in the early churches was major indeed, as the greetings at the ends of Paul's letters demonstrate (C.f. Romans 16; Philipians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Timothy 5:3-16; 2 Timothy 4:19-21). But does any of this require their having "authority over men?" The answer is: without question.

Acts 2:16-18...*"No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your*

sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my servants, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

The setting here is Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost immediately following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The 120 waiting believers are all together in one place when the Spirit falls upon them. They are presumably in or near the Temple, because a crowd of Jews and proselytes from all over the world hears the supernatural wind and converges where the 120 are. It is noteworthy that the major entrance to the Temple was through two sets of gates on the southern wall, the double and triple gate. These were known as the Huldah gates, in memory of a little-known prophetess from centuries before. Our Old Testament provides stories of remarkable women whom God appointed to positions of leadership, women like Miriam and the Judge Deborah. In Deborah’s case her status as a woman contributed to her victory over Sisera. The Scriptures used by Peter and the other Apostles already made provision for women under some circumstances to be bearers of the Spirit and exercise authority over men.

Not only does the Joel prophecy, related by Peter as now fulfilled, say of women that they will receive God’s Spirit as men will. It specifically states that they will prophesy. That requires speaking the Word of the Lord in public. It would be preposterous to think that women’s prophecy could only happen before other women, and that if a man should appear she would have to stop!

The Pentecost episode presents paradigms for believers. Certainly the most important is Acts 2:37, 38, which gives the pattern for receiving salvation itself. Equally, we must understand the incorporated words of Joel as paradigmatic: the role of women was to be equal in function and importance to that of men from the first. We must also point out that Luke presents us with other women who have borne the Spirit and taught men: the prophetess Anna and the daughters of Philip the evangelist.

1 Corinthians 11:4-5...*“Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonors her head.”*

Here is another case of women exercising the spiritual gift of prophecy. It is assumed to be happening at Corinth, assumed this time by Paul himself. But isn’t this the Paul who said women must keep silent? Indeed, there are statements from Paul that make it impossible for some serious scholars to believe he truly wrote the passage cited above, 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35!

Galatians 3:28...*“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.”*

In Paul’s world there were profound differences between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. His point was that for those in Christ this has changed. Within the company of believers the outsider’s status and value systems were not to be permitted to stand. To assert as some do that these words of Paul refer to the principal of equality, but stop short of equality in paths of serving, is to create a dichotomy in the text. To those who would hold that view we would simply ask: What would this equality have meant in the community if there were no real signs of it?

Romans 16:7...*“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.”*

Not until recent years has the importance of this sentence come to light. It is not fair to expect that Lutherans in the late 1960’s should have included it in their deliberations. We include it here because it is part of Scripture’s witness to the equal role of women in the early church, and for Paul as well.

It is now recognized that Junia is a woman’s name. Here we have Paul saying of a woman that she was not only an apostle, but an apostle before he was! Given a date for Paul’s call to apostleship between eighteen months and three years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Junia must have been an eyewitness to Jesus from Judea, Samaria, or Galilee. Ben Witherington III presents the fascinating possibility that she was actually Joanna, the wife of Herod’s chief steward, Chuza, whom Luke says followed Jesus along with Mary Magdalene and helped fund the cost of the Kingdom campaign.

And that brings us to other Scripture references we have not yet cited, because they do not specifically relate to what women were or were not doing in the early church. Before the early church there were Mary Magdalene and other women who became the first witnesses to the Resurrection itself. It was the report of women to men that in God’s design first brought the Gospel to men, and thus to the world.

1 Corinthians 9:20-22...*“To the Jews I became a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.”*

Here was Paul at his apostolic finest! He articulated the principle for mission that he had followed himself. Educated in Jewish tradition and well-versed in Hellenistic culture as well, he met the people he hoped to be saved on their own ground, in their own setting, speaking their own language, aware of their own customs, having read their own authors. For them to be saved was not to make them replace their culture with a new one, though radical changes were probably necessary in their own. Paul knew that culture should not be ignored in the evangelistic work to which he had been called.

So he accommodated his listeners in all possible ways as long as they remained within the bounds of the ethical and moral. To be true to this mission principle the church must call women to the preaching of the Gospel as well as men in a society where women have access to countless other avenues for determining what they will do with their lives. To do otherwise jeopardizes the message. Paul’s words to the Romans (2:24) about sinful conduct on the part of Jews resulting in the blaspheming of God’s name by Gentiles has a corollary here. Paul’s mission principle makes us ask: What will the world think if we do not give equality to women in the church?

The Texts and a Lutheran Context

In the late 1960's discussions on inter-Lutheran cooperation continued. From 1932 to 1962 the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) had relaxed some of its doctrinal rigidity and became the leader in seeking closer relations with other Lutherans! In the 1950's the Missouri Synod had been charged with "unionism" for this by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Missouri Synod-Joint Lutheran Committee (ALC predecessors) discussions led to "pulpit and altar fellowship" between the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the new American Lutheran Church in 1964. Invited to participate in negotiations, the also-new LCA declined, citing the Seventh Article of the Augsburg Confession. A "Joint Statement and Declaration" adopted by the LCMS in 1967 and the ALC in 1968 meant doctrinal agreement had been reached by the two church bodies. The LCA continued to assert from a distance that Augsburg VII was the proper framework for inter-Lutheran discussion and cooperation, rather than attempts to forge agreements that did not rise to the importance of the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments.

With the election of Jacob A. O. Preus, Jr. in 1969 as President of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, radical decisions and actions reversed the direction of LC-MS. The 1973 convention has been called the second battle of New Orleans. The winning faction insisted that only those who believed in the complete inerrancy of the Bible could hold any teaching position in the church.

It was just prior to this that the American Lutheran Church had studied the issue of women's ordination. The idea was certainly considered unbiblical by LCMS, and by some within the ALC. This would have been the kairos time for thorough biblical study on this issue for all in the church. This would have been the kairos time to declare that the ordination of women is not simply biblically permissible, but a biblically required idea that the church must accept if it considers the Scriptures to be the written Word of God.

What Actually Happened

According to sociologist Mark Chaves, (*Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations*) the decision to ordain women has never really been a decision based on the Scriptures, but based on other considerations instead. This is true not only for Lutherans, but for basically all American churches.

"From this perspective, rules about women's ordination largely serve as symbolic display to the outside world, and they point to (or away from) a broader liberal agenda associated with modernity and religious accommodation to the spirit of the age." (Chaves, p. 192)

The ordination of women has always been an issue strongly identified with liberalism. The new leadership of LCMS in 1969 was concerned for several reasons that the path toward greater cooperation with the ALC would result in a liberal church, and so it resisted with church politics at its bloodiest. It was the matter of women's ordination more than any other that severed the so-called pulpit and altar fellowship with the ALC. In 1971 the LCMS asked the ALC to reconsider its action to admit women to the ordained ministry. The ALC reaffirmed its decision in 1972. In 1981 the LCMS' state of fellowship with the ALC, which had been under protest since 1977, came to its formal end.

So in the history of that time the LCMS claimed to speak for the Bible, and the ALC was seen as speaking for equality and modernity with only a secondary appeal to the Bible as not actually barring the ordination of women. The tragedy as far as this observer is concerned is that the ALC did not insist that its position was in fact the Scriptural one, not conceding on this point through failure to insist on what the Scriptures actually say. If one had asked an LCMS member about women's ordination then, the answer would have been: the Bible forbids it. If one had asked an ALC member the same question, the answer would have been: we believe we should now allow it. The ALC member's answer should have been: We have carefully read the Bible, and the Bible requires it.

But this was not the response of the ALC, or the LCA, either. The LCA printed report for its 1970 convention is quite interesting, given Mark Chaves' conclusion. While a very small amount of space is given to the Scriptures in both LCA documents and ALC documents, the LCA's official report entitled, "The Role of Women in the Life of the Church," begins by saying that it is "imperative to make three basic statements." (LCA Fifth Meeting, p. 441) The first statement—really a paragraph—speaks of "the effects and implications for women of the world-wide revolution in the economic, political, and social structures of secular society..." The second statement begins: "It is already too late for the church to exercise its genius for the role of pioneer, but not too late to provide creative responses..." (p. 441) The third statement begins by saying that the liberation movement for women must be considered by the church in light of "the church's teaching on creation, redemption, baptism, rite as over against sacrament, the concept of vocation, the freedom of the Christian, sacredness of individuality, ecumenism, and a new and dynamic concept of the ministries of the church." (p. 441) Nowhere in this list did the Scriptures appear independently as God's Word to which the church must listen. Nowhere was Scripture named in the three imperative basic statements about the ordination of women.

Thus, the predecessor bodies of the ELCA established the practice of making decisions on the basis of what modernity expects, rather than on the basis of the Bible itself, though all branches of the Lutheran family would maintain in their constitutions that the Scriptures were their final authority. In time it became possible to assume that the Bible would often stand in the way of progress, and people who quoted the Bible were not to be trusted as leaders.

It has been through the effective surrender of the Bible in this way that the Bible has actually lost the trust of church members. The "Enthusiasts" of Luther's time claimed direct revelation from God over against the Bible. We have their equivalent today. The following statement was made by an ordained pastor on the floor of a synod assembly in 2005 with respect to the sexuality study under discussion in the church at that time: "Don't listen to the Bible; listen to your heart!" A pastor with the Enthusiasts' view of Scripture can complete the candidacy process in the ELCA and go unchallenged in his or her synod today. One suspects that this pastor and many others are closer in their thinking to Henry David Thoreau than to the Apostle Paul or Martin Luther.

This worldview holds that the spirit of the times (*Zeitgeist*) will always be in agreement with the Holy Spirit, and no other source or norm need be appealed to than conscience. A large, or at least influential, part of the ELCA now seems to

hold this worldview that assumes we are moving beyond the Bible to some better way of knowing God's will. The Scriptures have even come to be seen as the weapon of conservatives against what is good and just.

Yet it was the Scriptures that called for gender equality in the church long before it became secular reality through the two women's movements of the 20th Century. It was Scripture where one found Paul calling on Philemon to consider freeing his slave Onesimus, more than a thousand years before anyone in the world first considered the concept of human rights. It was Scripture where one found Jesus uttering a standard for marriage which, if respected fully and with proper understanding, still proves to be superior for spouses and their children to the often-harmful, lesser standard of the secular world.

“There has been a virtual silencing of the Bible in many churches today,” says Karl Donfried (*Who Owns the Bible? Toward the Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic*, New York: Crossroad, 2006. p. 3.) This sad state needs to be reformed. Those who understand what has happened, and how it happened, must make their voices heard.

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