

THE ISSUE OF WOMEN LECTORS

A Theological Consideration

INTRODUCTION

The scope of this study is not to answer questions regarding women's "giftedness," value, equality to men, whether or not they should teach Bible Classes, sing in the choir, lead men in other areas of society, or even be ordained, per se. It is simply to address the question of whether or not it is appropriate, from our understanding of Scripture's treatment of the Pastoral Office and its duties, to have women serve as public readers (lectors) of Scripture during the Divine Service.

It needs to be said, at the outset, that if you are looking for a proof-text from the Bible that says: "Thou shalt" or "Thou shalt not permit a woman to serve as a lector in the Divine Service," you will not find it. Any position on this issue must be drawn from how we understand and apply what God's Word says in general about worship, who is called to lead God's people in worship, and what things are part of that calling, or Office.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Men and women are both:

- **Created by God** *"So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them"* (Gen. 1:27);
- **Redeemed by Christ** *"God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life"* (Jn. 3:16);
- **Given the Holy Spirit** *"Even on My servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days and they shall prophecy"* (Acts 2:18);
- **Share equally in the blessings of being baptized into Christ and heirs of eternal life** *"For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Gal. 3:27-28);
- **Part of the Church, which is Christ's body** *"For we were all baptized by the Spirit into one body...and were all given the one Spirit to drink...You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it"* (I Cor. 12:13,27); and are
- **God's priests and servants** *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light"* (I Pet. 2:9).

While we all share this common salvation and calling to be God's Christians, we are not all "interchangeable." As God has uniquely designed the individual parts of the human body to benefit the whole body, so He has done this for the Church, the body of Christ. As St. Paul says: *"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ...God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be"* (I Cor. 12:12, 18). In other words: for the sake of mobility, our hands could function as feet, but that's not the purpose for which God designed them. So in the Church: though one may be able to perform certain functions belonging to another, it doesn't necessarily mean that's what God designed or desired.

THE OFFICE OF PASTOR

Christ has given the Office of the Keys to His whole church, men and women alike. The public administration of the Keys on behalf of the congregation is carried out through its called ministers whom, according to Scripture, are to be men:

- *“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. . . Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Cor. 14:33-40).*
- *“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. . . ” (I Tim. 2:11-15).*
- *“The saying is sure: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer (pastor), he desires a noble task. Now an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife...” (I Tim. 3:1-2).*
- *“This is why I left you in Crete... That you might appoint elders (pastors) in every town as I directed you, if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife...” (Titus 1:5-6).*

The Pastoral Office is that divinely instituted office in the Church which has, at its core, Christ’s command that His Word be preached and taught purely, and His Sacraments administered rightly. This Office of Word and Sacrament serves as the hub of the wheel, from which all other offices in the church, like spokes of the wheel, are connected and supported.

The “distinctive” functions of the Pastoral Office entail the public exercise of the ministry of Word and Sacrament for the nurture, care and equipping of God’s people:

- *“It was He [Christ] who gave some to be . . . pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph. 4:11-12).*

The Augsburg Confession asserts:

- *“that according to the Gospel the power of the keys...is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the Sacraments” (A.C. XXVIII, 5), and*
- *“Our churches teach that no one should publicly teach, or administer the sacraments, without a rightly ordered call” (A.C. XIV).*

According to the 1994 CTCR document, “The Service of Women,” updated by the President’s Task Force in 2005 (pg. 20): *“Intrinsic to this office of overseeing and shepherding of the flock are the following functions:*

- *preaching in the services of the congregation;*
- *leading the formal public services of worship;*
- *the public administration of the sacraments; and*
- *the public administration of the office of the keys.”*

SOME SCRIPTURAL TERMS FOR THE PASTORAL OFFICE

- **Elders:** *“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (I Tim. 4:17); “That you . . . ordain elders in every town” (Titus 1:5); “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder . . .” (I Pet. 5:1).*

- **Overseers (Bishops):** *“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28); “The overseer must be blameless, the steward of God’s work” (Titus 1:7);*
- **Stewards/Caretakers:** *“So, then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God” (I Cor. 4:1).*
- **Shepherds/Undershepherds:** *“Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood” (Acts 20:28); “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care . . .” (I Pet. 5:2).*
- **Pastors:** *“He gave some to be . . . pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11).*

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PASTOR

- **Preaching and Teaching:** *“Do your best to present yourself to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (II Tim. 2:15); “The Lord’s servant must be . . . able to teach” (II Tim. 2:24); “Preach the Word” (II Tim. 4:2); “Contend for the faith . . .” (Jude 3);*
- **Administering the Sacraments:** *“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . .” (Matt. 28:19). “Feed My lambs – Feed My Sheep” (Jn. 21:15-17); “I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you . . . ‘Take eat, this is My body; take drink, this is My blood’” (I Cor. 11:23-25); “So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given” (A.C. V, 1-2).*
- **Admonishing and encouraging:** *“Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction” (II Tim. 4:2); “He (an overseer) must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9)*
- **Guarding the Flock:** *“Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care” (I Tim. 6:20); “Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us” (II Tim. 1:14); “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts. 20:28)*
- **Public Reading of the Scriptures:** *“Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” (I Tim. 4:13).*

Thus, the pastor serves the congregation “in the stead, and by the command” of Christ. When he preaches, absolves, speaks God’s Word, and administers the Supper, he is acting on behalf of Christ, as if Christ, the Bridegroom, was doing this for His Bride, the Church: “. . . from the pastor as from God Himself, and in no wise doubt, but firmly believe . . .” (*Small Catechism, Confession*). “He who hears you, hears Me” (*Lk. 10:16*).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE ISSUE OF WOMEN LECTORS?

In light of everything said above, how did the practice of using women lectors in some congregations find its way into the LCMS? Citations below of fairly recent official LCMS actions and documents show the tension between the historic Scriptural and Confessional understanding of appropriate involvement of women in the public service, and the desire to more fully involve them in all aspects of the church:

- The 1994 CTCR document “Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices (with guidelines for congregations prepared by the President’s Task Force, 2005)” says this on pg. 20, #5: *“The Synod, based on its understanding of what the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach, has adopted resolution[s] which permit women . . . to read the Scriptures in public worship services, indicating that [this] activit[y is not a] distinctive function of the pastoral office . . .”* Footnote referenced: *“See 1989 Resolution 3-14 “To Address Appropriate Roles for Women and Men in Worship.”*

This document gives no Scriptural or Confessional references for permitting women lectors, neither does it actually quote 1989 Resolution 3-14. The President’s Task Force simply asserts that this is so. Going back to the 1989 Convention Proceedings book (pg. 118), the 3rd and 4th “Whereas” statements of Resolution 3-14 are strikingly contradictory:

- #3) *Whereas, the CTCR has also stated in its report “Women in the Church” (1985, pg 42): ‘There is no ceremonial law in the New Testament regarding the reading of Scripture in the context of public worship. Nor is there explicit apostolic prohibition of such reading by women. Nevertheless, it is the opinion of the CTCR that the reading of the Scriptures is most properly the function of the pastoral office and should therefore not ordinarily be delegated to a lay person, woman or man [my emphasis]’*
- #4) *Whereas, the use of lay assisting ministers, both male and female, is permitted within the rubrics of Lutheran Worship for the reading of the lessons,[my emphasis] except the Gospel and the leading of the prayers of the people . . .*

While not expressly calling for the use of *women* readers in any of the “Resolved” statements, this Resolution asserts two things that laid the foundation for the practice: the CTCR’s concession that there is no “explicit apostolic prohibition” against women readers; and that the rubrics (instructions) in Lutheran Worship permit women readers. But since the writers of this Resolution ignored the CTCR’s own opinion against this practice, we need to examine whether or not the second assertion concerning the rubrics in Lutheran Worship is accurate.

In the Altar Book for Lutheran Worship, pg. 25, under the heading “The Divine Services: General” we read:

- *“The liturgy is the celebration of all who gather. Together with the pastor who presides, the entire congregation is involved. It is appropriate, therefore, that where it is considered necessary or desirable or both, **laypersons** [my emphasis] fulfill certain functions within the service. Portions reserved for pastors are marked “P” = presiding minister. Portions appropriate for either those ordained or non-ordained are marked “A” = assisting minister.”*

While this rubric in the Altar Book uses the term “laypersons,” one cannot automatically assume that males and females are referred to here, especially at the time it was written when, culturally, words with masculine gender were being avoided as much as possible. Nowhere in the Altar Book do we find any direct reference to females acting as “assisting ministers.” In fact, the term “assisting *minister*,” as applied to a woman, would blur the doctrine of the pastoral office.

In examining the book that's considered an authoritative commentary on our worship, "Lutheran Worship: History and Practice," the section entitled "The Leaders of Worship," by John Pless, has the sub-category, "Leadership in Worship" (pg. 234 – 236). In it, he quotes the above statement from pg. 25 of the Lutheran Worship Altar Book, and then goes on to comment:

- *"The rationale for using **laymen** [my emphasis] in this way is, in one sense, to restore the ancient office of deacon to the liturgy . . . As the office of deacon developed in post-New Testament times, several functions were attached to this office, **including the reading of Scripture . . .**" [my emphasis].*

Footnote 84 (pg. 241) quotes from both the 1983 CTCR document, "The Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper," and the 1985 document, "Women in the Church," saying:

- *"The [CTCR] strongly recommends that, to avoid confusion regarding the office of the public ministry and to avoid giving offense to the church, **such assistance be limited to men**" [my emphasis].*

IN CONCLUSION

Though still controversial, and likely to be challenged in future conventions, the Synod has taken the position that the public reading of Scripture in the Divine Service is not a distinctive function of the pastoral office, and that it is permissible for both laymen and laywomen to be lectors.

A congregation, in answering for itself the question as to whether or not women will serve as readers of Scripture during the Divine Service, must weigh the current official position of the Synod in light of the body of evidence from Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions and the Church's historic practice regarding the involvement of women in the Divine Service.

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