CHURCH AND MINISTRY

The Office Is a Gift, Not a Rank

The pastor is given to the saints.

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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The question usually comes in one of two forms. “Does the Bible permit women to become pastors?” Or, a little more pointedly: “Can women exercise spiritual authority over men?”

Confessional Lutherans answer no to both, and they are right to. But a right answer to a badly framed question can still teach the wrong thing. A Lutheran “no” and a “no” from other traditions sound identical when spoken quickly. They rest on different foundations, and those foundations decide what the people in the pew believe the pastor is, what they think they are receiving from him, and whether the women among them believe they have been shut out of something.

So before answering the question, it is worth looking at what the question assumes.

The Wrong First Question

“Does the Bible permit women to become pastors?” treats the pastoral office like a job the church has created and now needs to fill. On that picture the church opens a position, writes a description, and then checks Scripture to see whether any applicants are ruled out. The debate becomes a hunt for permission slips and loopholes. One side points to a prohibition; the other side argues the prohibition was local, cultural, or temporary; and the office itself stays in the background as a neutral position anyone might occupy if only the rule were lifted.

That is not how the Lutheran Confessions speak about the ministry. The church did not invent the office and then ask God whether He minded. God instituted it. The Augsburg Confession says that so we may obtain saving faith, God instituted the office of preaching, giving the Gospel and the sacraments, through which as through means He gives the Holy Spirit (AC V). The office exists because faith needs something to hear, and Christ wills that someone be sent to speak it. The Confession then adds that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call (AC XIV).

The office, in other words, is a received thing. And a received thing comes with its shape already given. The Christian question is not “What does the Bible permit us to do with this office?” but “What has the Lord who instituted it said about it?”

Paul answers in exactly those terms. After giving the Corinthians instruction about order in the assembly, including that women are to keep silent in the churches, he refuses to let the matter be filed under local custom or apostolic preference:

> If anyone considers himself a prophet or spiritual person, let him acknowledge that what I am writing you is the Lord’s command. (1 Corinthians 14:37)

The church does not answer the question of who fills the office by weighing what it may permit. It answers by receiving what its Lord has commanded.

The Second Question Changes the Subject

The second form of the question is more interesting, because it quietly redefines the office while it seems only to restate the first. "Can women exercise spiritual authority over men?" turns the pastorate into a question of rank. The pastor sits above; the congregation sits below; and the whole issue is who is allowed to sit above whom.

It is true that Paul uses the language of authority. He writes:

> I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, and then Eve. (1 Timothy 2:12-13)

Confessional Lutherans take this seriously, and we should notice what Paul grounds it in. He does not appeal to the culture of Ephesus, to women's education, or to their competence. He appeals to creation. Before there was a fall, before there was a curse, before there was a church, God formed the man first and then the woman. The order Paul invokes is older than sin, which is why no change in culture can repeal it.

But the question still stands: what *is* the authority of the pastoral office? Here is where the usual vocabulary leads people astray.

The Augsburg Confession answers directly. The power of the keys, or the power of bishops, is God's command to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments (AC XXVIII.5-8). It is not the power of the sword. It does not govern bodies or property, and according to the Gospel it has no jurisdiction except to forgive sins, to judge doctrine, to reject doctrine contrary to the Gospel, and to exclude the openly ungodly from the fellowship of the church, without human force, simply by the Word (AC XXVIII.21).

That is an authority, and a real one. But it is not *his*. It is an authority of the Word over every hearer, the pastor included. The Apology says that ministers do not represent their own persons but the person of Christ, because of the church's call, and it cites the Lord's own words to the seventy-two (Ap VII/VIII.28):

> Whoever listens to you listens to Me; whoever rejects you rejects Me; and whoever rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me. (Luke 10:16)

The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope adds that the keys were given first and immediately to the whole church, which is why the church has the right to call and ordain ministers (Tr 24, 67-69). The pastor does not own the keys. He does not hold them by virtue of his sex, his intelligence, or his piety. He is a steward of something that belongs to Christ and has been entrusted to Christ's bride:

> So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. (1 Corinthians 4:1)

The phrase "spiritual authority over men" pictures a ladder: pastor at the top, men beneath him, women beneath them. Jesus saw that ladder too, and He told His disciples to get off it.

> So Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their superiors exercise authority over them. But it shall not be this way among you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant." (Mark 10:42-43)

Then He gave the reason:

> For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

Peter, writing to elders as a fellow elder, says the same thing: shepherd the flock, "not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3).

Why It Matters Which "No"

There are two ways to say no.

The first says: women may not be pastors because the pastorate is the chief leadership position in the church, and God has assigned leadership to men. This is the common answer in Reformed and broadly evangelical circles, and it usually comes with the vocabulary of headship, hierarchy, and spiritual leadership.

The second says: women may not be pastors because the pastoral office is Christ's own institution for speaking His Word and giving His gifts in His stead, and the Lord who instituted it has said who is to be sent, grounding His command in the order of creation.

Both answers reach the same practice, at least for now. But the first answer carries four problems that the second does not.

First, it hands the other side its strongest argument. If the office is fundamentally a leadership position, then the egalitarian reply is obvious: women lead companies, hospitals, legislatures, and nations, and they do it well. Why not churches? Once the office is defined by leadership, the debate becomes a contest over competence, and the competence argument will eventually win in the minds of most people, because it is true that many women are competent. The first "no" loses the argument by accepting its premise.

Second, it makes the line impossible to draw. If the issue is authority in general, then every role in the congregation that involves any authority becomes a question. Can a woman chair a committee? Read a lesson? Teach an adult class with men in the room? Serve as an usher, a treasurer, a voting member? Some of these are real questions that deserve careful answers. But the authority framing forces all of them onto one sliding scale, and congregations end up arguing about inches. Tying the line to the office of Word and Sacrament gives a clear principle: who is called to preach publicly, forgive sins in Christ's stead, and administer the sacraments.

Third, it changes what people think the pastor is. If he is the man at the top of the ladder, then the congregation will tend to get one of two kinds of pastor: a ruler who confuses his opinions with God's Word, or a manager who confuses running the church with feeding it. Neither is the steward of the mysteries Paul describes.

Fourth, it makes the women in the congregation feel demoted. If the office is a rank, then being excluded from it means being ranked lower. Many women who have heard only the first "no" carry that wound, and it is no surprise when some of them conclude that the church thinks less of them.

A Gift Runs in One Direction

The Lutheran "no" is different because the office is different. The office is not a possession that men hold and women lack. It is a gift that Christ gives to His whole church, men and women alike, through the men He sends.

> And it was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for works of ministry and to build up the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-12)

Notice whom the gift is *for*. The pastor is given to the saints. A gift moves in one direction: from the giver, through the hands that carry it, to the one who receives it. The man in the pulpit is not the recipient of the office as a prize; he is the hand that carries it. And most men in the pew will never stand in that pulpit either. They have no more claim on the office than their wives, daughters, and mothers do. The question is never whether a man is good enough to hold it. No man is. The question is whom Christ has sent.

Why does Christ send men? Because the office does not stand in its own person. It stands in the person of Christ, the Bridegroom who gave Himself up for His bride "to sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word" (Ephesians 5:26). What happens in the Divine Service is the Bridegroom speaking to His bride, washing her, forgiving her, feeding her. The order of creation that Paul appeals to in 1 Timothy 2 and the marriage of Christ and His church that he describes in Ephesians 5 belong together. The man in the office is not more valuable, more spiritual, or more capable than the woman in the pew. He is placed where he is because of what the office pictures and because the Lord who instituted it said so.

That is also why the Lutheran "no" carries no insult. A woman who is not called to the office has lost nothing that the office exists to give. She receives the same Baptism, into the same Christ. She hears the same absolution, spoken with the same authority. She receives the same body and blood, given and shed for her. Paul's great sentence about there being neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28) is a sentence about Baptism: all who are baptized into Christ have clothed themselves with Christ (3:27). It describes the standing of every believer before God, and in that standing there is no rank at all. The office does not create a higher class of Christian. It serves the one class there is.

Nor does the Lutheran "no" silence women in the life of faith. Timothy, the pastor to whom Paul wrote the very words this debate turns on, learned the Scriptures from childhood (2 Timothy 3:15) and inherited a sincere faith that lived first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5). The first catechists of the church's future pastors are very often their mothers. Priscilla, with her husband Aquila, took Apollos aside and explained the way of God more accurately (Acts 18:26). Phoebe served the church at Cenchreae and carried Paul's letter to Rome (Romans 16:1-2). These are vocations, and they are not consolation prizes. They are the ordinary means by which God hands down the faith from one generation to the next.

A Better Pair of Questions

If the usual questions are the wrong ones, what would the right ones be?

The first might be: *Whom has Christ sent to speak His forgiveness in His stead?* The answer is men who are rightly called and ordained, according to the Lord's command and the order He established in creation. That answer does not rest on who leads best. It rests on what Christ instituted.

The second might be: *What does Christ give His church through that office?* And the answer is everything. Through preaching and the sacraments He gives the Holy Spirit, who creates and sustains faith (AC V). The Apology is willing to call ordination a sacrament if it is understood as the ministry of the Word, because God has instituted it, commanded it, and attached glorious promises to it (Ap XIII.11-12). The office is where Christ keeps His promise to be present and to forgive.

Asked that way, the conversation stops being about who is allowed to sit above whom. It becomes a conversation about where the gifts are, and how they get from Christ's hands to ours.

The pastor at the altar is not standing over you. He is standing there with his hands full, and his whole calling is to empty them into yours.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), dedicated to the public domain. Identified translation and textual-variant comparisons retain the readings discussed.