

HISTORICAL USE OF LAYMEN WITHIN THE WORSHIP SERVICE

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Thank you for your invitation to speak to you today on a topic which you have discussed among yourselves as is evident by the August, 1996 issue of KYRIOS which includes a proposed memorial for your 1997 district convention which would ask Synod in convention to reject as unbiblical the practice of women lectors. Pastor Hunsicker was also kind enough to send me a very instructive paper written by Pastor Leslie Lanier entitled, "On the Public Reading of the Scriptures." Since you are all undoubtedly familiar with the biblical texts that exclude the option of having women lectors in the Divine Service, I won't spend much time on them. And since Pastor Lanier's paper gives a good summary of the ancient practice of having lay readers in the Divine Service, I won't spend much time on the history of this practice in the ancient church. The body of my presentation today will deal with the wisdom of having laymen read the Scriptures in the Divine Services held today, in 1996, in our churches. In addressing this issue, I will appeal to the spirit of Article X of the Formula of Concord. We need to consider very seriously just what we are saying by the things we do.

THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR PROHIBITING WOMEN READERS

It is really too bad that the clear words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 are not considered sufficiently clear to close all debate on the subject of women publicly reading the Scriptures to the congregation during the Divine Service. One need not analyze to death the meaning of *laleoo* as opposed to *legoo* (demonstrating the theological nature of the speech identified by the former) to see that the silence enjoined by the Apostle is a direct application of the Law of God that does not permit a woman publicly to speak authoritatively for God. It was bad enough that the church in Corinth conducted their services in a disorderly way; the confusion was compounded into a disgrace by their blatant defiance of God's law. This law, in its original bestowal, gave to Adam a responsibility for Eve which, when he abdicated it, thrust the entire human race into sin. That the authority denied to women in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 includes pastoral authority is obvious. That it denies to women the reading of the authoritative word of God to God's people during the public service of the Word and Sacrament ought to be equally obvious.

LAY READERS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

I agree with Pastor Lanier's observation that Paul's command to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:13) that he attend to the public reading of the Scriptures did not necessarily require Timothy to do the actual reading. A recently proposed memorial from the South Wisconsin District did appeal to this passage to oppose lay readers in the Divine Service. This blanket prohibition of lay readers is difficult to reconcile with the very early practice of having lay readers in the Divine Service as is evidenced by writings from Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and the Apostolic Constitutions (Vol. VII p 493). Produced in the East, that is, in Syria, the Apostolic Constitutions were, for the most part, probably compiled in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, and present a clear rubric on the bestowal of this responsibility to qualified men by the laying on of hands. (Although I must add that there are variant readings on this, with some ancient texts stating simply: "*A reader is appointed when the bishop gives him a book; for there is no imposition of hands.*") Whether or not there was a laying on of hands, there were three elements never excluded from the ancient practice of appointing lay readers.

First of all, the readers were trained. They were competent to read. In the East, they usually sang the Scriptures, presumably to be better heard. Secondly, they were appointed by the bishop, or pastor. They did not volunteer. They were not elected by a worship committee. They were carrying out that for which the pastor was responsible and were directly under his care and supervision in the performance of their responsibilities. Thirdly, they held an office, albeit not ordained, but a sub-office of the divinely instituted office of the ministry and they were publicly recognized as the readers. How this ancient practice, still retained by the Eastern Orthodox Churches, compares with today's means of choosing lay readers whether by following a round robin method or having volunteer sign up sheets I will leave for you to decide.

WHAT ARE WE SAYING WHEN WE HAVE LAY READERS IN THE DIVINE SERVICE?

It is, as I said, difficult to conclude that one may, on the basis of Scripture, prohibit lay readers of the Scriptures during the Divine Service. Does this necessarily mean that we may not oppose such a practice? At first glance, yes, for who are we to forbid that which God does not forbid? When one sees that this is indeed a very ancient tradition, going all the way back to the second century, still practiced by the churches of the East, it might well seem that any opposition to this practice is invalid. We must, however, consider the ecclesiastical and theological climate in which we live in order to understand how our practice will

be interpreted. We didn't create this climate, and, in all humility we must admit we can do little to change it, but I would suggest that we be sensitive to what it is, so that we do not say something we don't wish to say by changing our tradition.

The Lutherans don't have a long tradition of having lay readers. The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod had never heard of the practice until recently. Is it possible for us to jump over centuries and connect with the practice of the early church? Can we duplicate their circumstances and their concept of the ministry? Is it possible for us to introduce lay readers into our services and to do so with the assurance that the people will still understand that the teaching of the Word of God in the congregation is the pastor's responsibility? Perhaps. But there are other possibilities as well. It is possible, in fact, quite likely, that the introduction of such a practice, unless accompanied by serious and thorough instruction, will feed certain popular misconceptions both about the nature of the pastoral office and the nature of the Divine Service.

The authority of the bishop was paramount in the early church for obvious reasons. The question of authority - who had it, why, how is it to be exercised, who must submit to it, etc. - was one of the first issues the church had to face. The popular notion of our day, encouraged, I must say, by the rather unfortunate way that our friends in the Wisconsin Synod frame the doctrine of church and ministry, is that the people, the priesthood, simply delegate to various individuals various portions of the office of the ministry as seems fit to a majority of the people at any given time. Lacking an office which can call itself the office of God's own institution which is actually held by specific men, having replaced it with various ministerial functions floating around among the priesthood, the church cannot seriously question the propriety of anyone doing anything in the church except, of course, among conservatives such as ourselves who know that women should be excluded from certain functions which deal with authority.

Now this is an entirely different religious climate than that which obtained when lay readers were introduced in the early church. The popular notion (commonly attributed to the 19th century Lutheran, Hoefling) that the priesthood of all believers creates offices according to its will and that the divinely established office of the ministry is no more than the authority of the priesthood to establish various offices is diametrically opposed to the early church's understanding. The sub-offices which proliferated in the early church, many of which still survive today among the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches were directly under the authority of the bishop deriving their authority from his. Today we are faced with the sad influence of the Church Growth Movement with its

preoccupation with identifying alleged spiritual gifts whereby every Christian can find his true place in the life of the church by plugging his so called spiritual gift into the program of the church. If he discovers that his gift is speaking in public, why then he might want to sign up as a lay reader.

But is this what the pastor is doing on Sunday morning when he reads the Bible to the congregation? Is he doing what he is doing because of some interior spiritual gift to do so? Or is he acting according to an office that God has entrusted to him? An office, I might add, that was instituted by Christ for the purpose of giving salvation to sinners. Now if we agree that the reason it is wrong for a woman to be a lector is that she is thereby exercising an authority that God has forbidden of her, on what grounds do people reject our argument? They claim that the reading of the Scriptures in the Divine Service is no exercise of authority at all. It is a sharing. It is sharing the word of God, they say, in the same way that the female vocalist is sharing God's word with us when she sings a Christian hymn or song. We don't always listen carefully to this argument because it is so clearly wrong (at least if the historic understanding of the liturgy still obtains). No, we say, reading the Scriptures in the Divine Service is not the same thing as singing a hymn. That's right, it's not. But don't think that those who make this claim don't make it sincerely. They most certainly do, and that is the problem.

Is the man who reads the Scriptures to us during the Divine Service speaking as a representative of God, authoritatively instructing the people of God? Is this what is happening? Or, is he sharing with us? Do we proclaim the Scriptures in the stead and by the command of Christ, or do we share them with one another, as we would pass around pictures from the family vacation? Now I would suggest that the common defense of women lectors is sincerely given by people who simply don't understand that the meaning of this part of the service has little to do with us sharing things with ourselves and everything to do with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, feeding his flock with the words which come out of the minister's mouth. And I would also suggest that this misunderstanding would not be corrected simply by putting a man behind the lectern instead of a woman. Unless the people understand that what that man is doing he is doing as an extension of the pastoral office, the introduction of lay readers would likely undermine a proper understanding of what is going on.

What happens in the Divine Service? What is the pastor doing? Is he sharing or is he giving? Do Christians go to church to share or to receive? Consider conversations you have had on how to encourage delinquent members to come to church. Are they encouraged to come because they need to receive the word of

God and to receive the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins? Or, are they encouraged to come because they have talents that could benefit the entire congregation? No doubt, most folks do have talents that can indeed benefit the congregation in some way, and the use of these talents should be welcomed and appreciated. Some of these talents may be used in the Divine Service itself. But why do we go to church? What makes us the church? Is it what we share with one another or is it what we receive from God?

Consider every argument you have heard for having lay readers. Or, better yet, go around asking people, without expressing any opinion of your own, whether they would like to have lay readers and if they say yes, ask why. I think you will find that the answer will be something like this: if we made people feel more important, more a part of the service, more needed, why then they would find in church something which they're not finding now. The church has become an equal opportunity volunteer society so that people will find true meaning in what they can do for the church.

The traditional service is predicated on an entirely different view of what we, as church are. We come with nothing. We are beggars. We have nothing to give except our sins. We come as supplicants, because we know the God who gives, and that is what the Divine Service is, God giving to us. He sees us, not as talented people who, if only they knew what gifts reside within them and learned to share them, could begin to feel closer to one another. No, he sees us as children gone astray who desperately need him, that is, his mercy, his grace. And he gives it to us. We don't share it with ourselves, he gives it to us through the ministers he has appointed to administer the means of salvation which he has appointed, his saving gospel and holy sacraments.

If a pastor inherits a congregation that has lay readers, should he put a stop to the practice? Maybe not. If he could, by patient instruction and careful training, appoint certain men who are able to speak publicly, read well, comport themselves with dignity, and be publicly acknowledged by the whole church as men appointed to assist the pastor in this pastoral function, well and good. Such a practice does indeed have ancient precedent and cannot be prohibited by the express teaching of the Scriptures. On the other hand, to introduce such a practice under pressure from folks who may be sincere, but sincerely confused about the nature of the church service, the ministry, and the church itself, would be a mistake. A serious study of Article X of the Formula of Concord would be very helpful as we consider introducing this practice in our churches. What will we be saying? How will it be interpreted? Will we be conceding a false point?

Our Lutheran fathers did not conclude the adiaphoristic controversy by saying that when matters are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God we may simply do as we wish. They concluded that what in itself might be an indifferent matter becomes a matter of confession when a concession is given that would encourage doctrinal error. And this is what we must ask ourselves.

We don't need a rule. I know that Missouri Synod Lutherans love their rules. We don't need another CTCR document. A little candor and a lot of study are far more beneficial. What we need to do is to listen to our people to see how they interpret the various things we say and do in the Divine Service and then respond by ordering matters in the church in such a way that only the truth is proclaimed. If having lay readers would contribute to confusion as to the nature of the divinely established office of the ministry or change the focus of the Divine Service from God giving salvation to us to our sharing with one another, the spirit of our Confessions would caution us not to introduce the practice. Taking an ancient tradition which, as far as the Lutheran Church is concerned, has fallen into disuse for centuries, and reintroducing it, is not an easy task, as I hope I have shown. It might well send messages we don't want to send. The heirs of what has been called the Conservative Reformation deal with the ecclesiastical climate into which God has placed them with a seriousness of purpose which causes them to think carefully and act slowly before introducing changes which may effect how people will receive the word of God. What happens on Sunday morning is far too important for us to offer wholly unnecessary changes for the sake of appeasing people caught up in a trend and wanting to imitate their neighbors. Perhaps we tire of having to say no so often that when faced with requests that don't seem to be unreasonable, we quickly acquiesce. But we don't need so much to please the popular appetite for something new as we need to serve our people from the office that Christ has ordained. Pastors don't have to feel guilty about making pastoral decisions. As to the decision to have lay readers, let us consider as carefully as we can what implications this will have for our people. Their proper understanding of God's revealed truth is far more precious than conforming to the latest ecclesiastical fashion.

Amen

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