

Consensus

Volume 3 | Issue 4

Article 4

10-1-1977

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Recommended Citation

Ritter, Walter A. (1977) "The Perpetual Aim of the Gospel," *Consensus*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol3/iss4/4>

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THE PERPETUAL AIM OF THE GOSPEL

Walter A. Ritter

The problem with some of the current studies on the ordination of women is that a mode of interpreting Scripture is used which is not truly Lutheran because it isn't confessional. The proper Lutheran mode of interpreting the Scriptures is illustrated in the Augsburg Confession. There we have the statement with reference to the Apostolic Decree in Acts 15: "The apostles directed that one should abstain from blood, etc. Who observes this prohibition now? Those who do not observe it commit no sin, for the apostles did not wish to burden consciences with such bondage, but forbade such eating for a time to avoid offence. One must pay attention to the chief article of Christian doctrine, and this is not abrogated by the decree" (Article XXVIII, Par. 65).¹

The Latin is even clearer when it reads: "In connection with the decree one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is" (*perpetua voluntas evangelii*). Here is the key to the problem in the question of the ordination of women. The tendency often has been to quote Scripture flatly in reference to this question and without reference to the Gospel. The result has been failure to find the solution.

LUTHER AND WOMEN'S ORDINATION

Martin Luther's very own stance on this question is significant. In 1523 Luther wrote an essay, "Concerning the Ministry." The context is an address to

1. Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959.

the Bohemian brethren who are struggling with the problem of an ordained ministry and who belongs to it. In the essay Luther says: "The second function, to baptize, they themselves (the Romanists) have by usage allowed, in cases of necessity, even to ordinary women, so that it is hardly regarded anymore as a sacramental function. . . . When women baptize, they exercise the function of priesthood legitimately, and do it not as a private act but as a part of the public ministry of the church which belongs only to the priesthood."²

He goes on to indicate that not only baptism but also the Lord's Supper belongs to all and therefore women are not excluded. "The third function is to consecrate or to administer the sacred bread and wine We hold that this function, too, like the priesthood belongs to all Those who oppose this have no foundation on which to stand, except the father, the councils, tradition, and that strongest article of their faith, namely, 'We are many and this we hold and, therefore, it is true.' A further witness is that of Paul in 1 Cor. 11:23: 'For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.' Here Paul addresses all the Corinthians, making each of them, as he himself was -- consecrators A woman can baptize and administer the word of life by which sin is taken away."³

In contrast to the above is Luther's argument in 1532 about "Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers." Here the problem is that some have imposed themselves into the office of the ministry. Thus his argument can run quite differently: "I am astonished that in their spiritual wisdom they haven't learned to adduce examples of how women have prophesied and thereby attained rule over men, land, and people. There was Deborah, Hulda, Sarah, Anna, and the Virgin Mary. Here they might deck themselves out and find authority for women to preach in the churches. We shall for the present not be concerned about the right of these women of the Old Testament to teach and rule. But surely, they did not act as the infiltrators do, unauthorized Paul ordained that women should be silent in the churches yet he knew that previously Joel had proclaimed that God would pour out his spirit also on handmaidens. Furthermore, the four daughters of Philip prophesied in Acts 21. But in the congregations or churches where there is a ministry, women are to be silent and not preach (1 Timothy 2:12). Otherwise they may pray, sing, praise, and say "Amen," and read at home, teach each other, exhort, comfort and interpret the Scriptures as best they can. Now, in sum, St. Paul would not tolerate the wickedness and arrogance of someone interfering with the office of another."⁴

Luther then shows what he does with an apostolic command in interpreting the Scriptures. Regarding tongue speaking, which is very closely related to women in public office, he says: "Who then are those who are to build up the church? Is it not the prophets and (as he says) those speaking with tongues, that is who read or sing the lesson, to whom the congregation listens as the nuns read the (Latin) psalter. St. Paul indeed does not condemn such

2. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Volume 40, p. 23.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 390-91.

speaking in tongues in itself, but he neither commands nor praises it in the churches, when unaccompanied by explanation . . . But I would not be in favour of restoring this custom and doing away with the pulpit. Rather, I would oppose it, for the people are at present too untamed and forward.”⁵ There is no mood to say he would try to oppose it by quoting some Scripture on this occasion.

Then, “On The Councils and The Church,” written in 1539, Luther cited the passages that the present-day opponents of the ordination of women cite. “It is, however, true that the Holy Spirit has excepted women, children and incompetent people from this function (of the keys). But he chooses, except in emergencies, only competent males to fill this office as one reads here and there in the epistles of Paul . . . In summary, it must be a competent and chosen man; children, women and other persons are not qualified for this office . . . Even nature and God’s creation make this distinction, implying that women, (much less children or fools) cannot and shall not occupy positions of sovereignty . . . The Gospel, however, does not abrogate this natural law, but confirms it, as the ordinance and creation of God.”⁶

The reason for quoting the above passages is to demonstrate that the argument cannot run on the simple quotation of Scripture. One can quote the Scriptures on both sides of the question and Luther comes out at various times in support of either position. The Scriptures are diverse! Luther is diverse in his writings. You can cite Luther for women in the ministry; you can cite him against.

THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE

What then is the principle involved in understanding these Scriptures? The richest resource is the problem faced by the Apostolic Council. It is important to note how Luther deals with the prohibitions listed there.

Why is the prohibition of blood no longer valid as is the prohibition of fornication? Why is the latter continually valid and the prohibition of blood no longer valid, when both are listed together as apostolic New Testament prohibitions? Luther answers: “I shall give my opinion about this. May someone else improve on it. It has now often been said that one should view and also keep the councils according to the chief article which has given the council its purpose. For that is, and in that consists the real essence of the council, the true body of the council to which everything else must be adjusted and fitted, like a garment is fitted to the person who wears it . . . So here, St. James’ articles (on the prohibitions) come up after the chief article of St. Peter. Thus, St. James and his article must now be interpreted without

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 394-95.

6. *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Volume 41, pp. 154-55.

prejudice to St. Peter's article concerning grace without law, which must remain pure and constant, and must rule alone without law."⁷

Then Luther goes on to demonstrate how Paul, who was at that council, and the Paul who heard that apostolic decree repeated in Acts 21, first submitted to Jewish ritual when he was purified in the Temple with other Jews. But later on, Paul preaches vigorously against those injunctions which that apostolic council had approved. Luther says that the problem here is "the logic of Nestorius and Eutychus,"⁸ ancient heretics that were condemned by the first ecumenical councils. They walked into those councils toting and quoting Scriptures. And all they could do to make their point was to flatly quote the Scriptures. It is that mode of logic that creates the problem here, says Luther. He comments: "There are many passages in the Holy Scriptures that are contradictory according to the letters, but when that which motivates them is pointed out, everything is alright," and "heretics always like to boast of possessing Scripture."⁹

Why did the apostolic decree fall? Luther didn't cite the injunction of Paul we hear in Colossians: "Let no man, therefore, judge you in meat or drink," and say, "Now, that came later, so that supersedes." Paul was at that council! Luther concludes: "It fell of itself with no change by the church. That is why we do not have to keep it anymore."¹⁰

Luther had previously noted: "(In the very first council of the apostles) we hear that the Holy Spirit commands that we eat nothing that has been sacrificed to idols, no blood, and nothing that is strangled. Now if we want to have a church that conforms to this council (as is right, since it is the first and foremost council and was held by the apostles themselves), we must teach and insist that henceforth no prince . . . or peasant eat geese or, . . . pork cooked in blood . . . and peasants must abstain especially from their blood sausage . . . Should we, in obedience to this council refrain from blood, then we shall let the Jews become our masters in our churches and kitchens. It is certainly true that one should teach nothing outside of Scripture for change in divine matters, which means only that one should teach nothing that is at variance with the Scriptures."¹¹

What do you do when you claim that someone's stand (like favouring the ordination of women) is at variance with Scripture? Luther said at the Leipzig Disputation: "This is not the right way to interpret Scripture, to collect statements from different parts of the Bible without any regard for logical order or contents. But that is the way it is commonly done and it leads to nothing but errors. In order not to go wrong the theologian must, therefore, keep in mind the whole of the Scriptures, compare the contradicting passages, and as the two cherubim facing one another, find the harmony of their mutual

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

diversity in the centre of the *propitiatorium*, that is, in the true understanding of Christ.” (12)

Although we cannot be bound by Luther, the Confessions pick up that very principle of his in their “*schrift-princip*,” i.e., that you read the Scripture through the “fish-eye lens” of the Gospel. This way of reading pushes many things into the periphery. It even pushes many things out of the line of application to the Christian today. In that light, we can say that the third commandment *en toto* doesn’t apply to us! It is written for the Jews, Luther observes (LC 1, 80-82). Moses said this to the Jews, but I am not a Jew, Luther says in effect. It should be noted that Luther is concerned not only about ceremonial law; the ceremonial law is not his point at this place.

As Lutherans we are bound to the Confessions and the extremely unique, clear light of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, and the doctrine of the Gospel. That doesn’t mean simply the doctrine about the Scriptures.

The Confessions have no article on the Scriptures by intent and design. Karlstadt, a friend of Luther for two years and then his greatest enemy, thought that they should have an article on the Scriptures. That seems to be our problem! Luther, Bugenhagen and Justus Jonas insisted that there be no article on the Scriptures. For one says what the Scriptures mean by the interpretative principle which one demonstrates.

We are bound to this beautiful way of looking at the Scriptures: “In connection with the decree one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is” (AC 28, 65 Latin). This means that some things which are stated in the Scriptures can fall in the course of time without being a violation of Christ or of the Gospel.

12. Quoted in M. Reu, “Luther and The Scriptures,” *Springfielder* (August, 1960), pp. 10-11.