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The Status of Women in The Missouri Synod in The Twentieth Century*

JAMES WEIS

SCARCELY HALF A CENTURY has passed since women in the United States were given the right to vote. In Switzerland, that bastion of tradition and conservatism, women still have not gained the right to vote in federal elections. It should scarcely be surprising then that the role of women as leaders in the Lutheran Church remains a heatedly debated matter at the present day.

At its recent 1969 convention The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod adopted a resolution which broadened the scope of participation by women in synodical affairs. While holding that "... women ought not to hold the pastoral office or serve in any other capacity involving the distinctive functions of this office," the Synod decided that "... Scripture does not prohibit women from exercising the franchise in congregational or synodical assemblies" and that "... the Synod itself and the congregations of the Synod are at liberty to alter their policies and practices in regard to women's involvement in the work of the church . . . ; provided that the polity developed conforms to the general Scriptural principles that women neither hold the pastoral office nor exercise authority over men.'"¹

How did the Synod arrive at this position? How had this matter been discussed in the Synod before 1969?

The Traditional Views From Pieper to Mueller

As characteristic as any of the early positions on this matter within the Missouri Synod was that taken by Francis Pieper at the 1913 convention of the Missouri Synod's Southern Illinois District. In an essay on "The Laymen's Movement in the Light of God's Word," Pieper carefully distinguished lay involvement in evangelism and stewardship from the divinely ordained office of the public ministry.²

Against the background of this distinction, Pieper addressed himself to the matter of the *Preaching of God's Word by Christian Women*. On the one hand he asserted that "It is the clear teaching of Holy Scripture that Christian women should also (like men) teach God's Word."³ On the other hand, however, he insisted that "Holy Scripture excludes Christian women from all public teach-

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ing in the presence of men." Consistent with this position he further maintained:

Since woman's suffrage in the state implies participation in the rule over men, it is contrary to the natural order which God has established to govern the relation between man and woman. Just as invalid in this connection [as in the matter of the ordination of women] is the objection that women often are more prudent than men, more adroit at making election speeches, and more intelligent in the use of the ballot. We are bound to the order which God has instituted, Gen. 2, 18; 1 Tim. 2, 12, 13; and wherever this order is perverted, His punishments are sure to follow.⁵

From this it becomes clear that for Francis Pieper the rejection of the ordination of women, the rejection of suffrage for women in the church, and the rejection of suffrage for women in the state were all determined by the same Biblical principles.

Pieper noted in his essay that objections to his position might be raised on the basis of the cases of the Old Testament women, Miriam and Deborah. He disposed of the case of Miriam with the remark that "Miriam in this case (Exodus 15, 20.21) acted as the musical director of the Israelitish women, not of the men."⁶ The case of the judge and prophetess, Deborah, was more difficult. Of her case he remarked:

God Himself most certainly may grant exceptions to the rules which He has laid down for us; but it is not for us to do so. We are forever bound to observe His rules. To make exceptions is His business, never ours.⁷

Pieper's dire predictions about the effect of woman suffrage in the political sphere were not emphasized in the half century following the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. W. H. T. Dau, a younger contemporary of Pieper, in a pamphlet on *Woman Suffrage in the Church*, turned his attention to the impact that political suffrage was having on the church. He argued that "something that is a right in the state and in the world is not for that reason a right also in the Church."⁸ He did not, however, argue that there was anything wrong with woman suffrage in the state.

Pieper, in 1924, reemphasized his very general application of the principle of the subordination of women to men in all spheres of life in the first volume of his *Christian Dogmatics*. Though not as explicit here about political suffrage for women as he had been in his 1913 essay, he insisted that

It [Scripture] forbids the public speaking and teaching of women. . . . Women are not even to ask questions in the public assemblies and then start discussions, but they should ask their own men at home."

A slightly different position was taken by Paul Lindemann in 1920. In an article on "The Woman in the Church" Lindemann concluded that while women must be subject to men, there is no Bible passage that explicitly forbids women to vote. Such voting, according to Lindemann, would be contrary to Scripture only if women thereby exceeded their subordinate position to men.¹⁰ This position seems very similar to that mentioned above taken by the 1969 Missouri Synod convention. Lindemann nevertheless concluded:

We are happy to see that the women in the Lutheran Church have not yet been permeated to any great extent with the general modern spirit of female restlessness.¹¹

The special case of female school teachers—even on the high school level—was discussed by Paul Kretzmann in his *Popular Commentary*, published in 1922. Discussing I Corinthians 14: 36-40, he wrote:

Let women keep silence in the congregations; they shall take no part in the public teaching in the church, they shall not be given authoritative direction. . . . Here, as in parallel passages, the apostle refers to public teaching before the whole congregation; the work of women teachers in schools and high schools is here not condemned.¹²

In more positive terms Kretzmann, in his interpretation of I Timothy 3: 1-7, suggested that motherhood is the proper vocation for women.

Every normal woman should enter holy wedlock, become a mother, and rear her children, if God grants her babies of her own. That is woman's highest calling; for this God has given her physical and mental gifts. Unless God himself directs otherwise, a woman misses her purpose in life if she does not become a helpmeet of her husband and a mother of children.¹³

The family, according to Kretzmann, is the proper sphere for women's activity. Leadership in the church is inappropriate to her station or vocation. A few years later Kretzmann made his position on woman suffrage in the church even more explicit.

God has placed the business of the Church in the hands of men, and therefore any and every attempt of a woman publicly to influence these affairs is a usurpation of rights which cannot be squared with God's plain command and prohibition.¹⁴

John T. Mueller, in an essay written at about the same time Kretzmann's *Popular Commentary* was published, argued that women are evidently by nature amenable to fraud and deception and therefore likely to lead the church into heresy and confusion if they assume positions of ecclesiastical leadership.¹⁵

The View of the Finnish National Evangelical Lutheran Church

The problem of the definition of woman's proper place in the church was by no means purely academic during the early 1920's when men like Kretzmann, Mueller, Pieper and Dau addressed themselves to it. In 1922 the Finnish National Evangelical Lutheran Church authorized its Board of Directors to seek to establish closer relations with the Missouri Synod. At a meeting between representatives of the two synods held in Ironwood, Michigan in February, 1923, it became apparent that the two synods were quite close to each other in doctrine. After a second meeting in April of that same year the Finnish Church, at its twenty fifth anniversary convention established fraternal relations with the Missouri Synod based on pulpit and altar fellowship. Only one issue was unresolved. Many pastors and congregations of the Finnish Church favored woman suffrage in church government.¹⁶ This position was generally opposed, as already noted, by many leading figures in the Missouri Synod.

In the judgment of the Finnish Lutheran pastor J. E. Nopola, this issue was unresolved as late as 1958, only five years before the consummation of a merger between these two church bodies.¹⁷ In the resolution authorizing merger with the Finnish National Evangelical Lutheran Church adopted by the Missouri Synod at its 1959 convention, however, no mention was made of the matter of woman suffrage in the church.¹⁸

The last explicit reference to the matter in the published records of the National Evangelical Lutheran Church, in its 1962 *Yearbook*, concluded with the remark that "the practice of male suffrage only in the Missouri Synod is considered Scripture-sanctioned, but not Scripture-demanded, and time-tested, and as a satisfactory form of church government."¹⁹

Recent Missouri Synod Views

Within the Missouri Synod discussion of the place of women in the church was revived in the early 1950's. The traditional strictures against woman suffrage in the church and against the ordination of women were repeated in a study of *The Office of Women in the Church* by Fritz Zerbst. His book, written in German shortly after the end of World War II, was translated by Prof. Albert Merckens and published by Concordia Publishing House in 1955.

Two years later a much different approach was taken by the Missouri Synod pastor, Russell Prohl. Not only did Prohl argue for the right of women to participate in the government of the church, but he also concluded that

... it is time for the Lutheran Church to support the 1955 resolution of the Presbyterians (*Minutes of the General Assembly*, p. 97) that "there is no theological ground for denying ordination to women, simply because they are women."²⁰

It is hardly surprising that the Missouri Synod Committee on Woman Suffrage, established at the 1953 convention of the Synod, took note of Prohl's book. In its 1959 report the committee reported that it had discussed with Pastor Prohl the conclusions drawn in his book. Noting that his book might "confuse and mislead the reader who is not able to check carefully the quotations and Scripture interpretation," the committee urged that "every reader also study the book, *The Office of Woman in the Church*, written by Dr. Fritz Zerbst."²¹

In both the 1956 and 1959 conventions of the Missouri Synod the place of women in the church was discussed primarily with reference to the question of their right to vote in congregational meetings. Reflecting the advisory character of synodical conventions when dealing with such issues, the 1959 convention satisfied itself with the mild admonition:

Resolved, That we urge all congregations which grant woman suffrage, whether now members of Synod or applying for membership, to recognize the validity of Synod's historic position and to reconsider their practice with the view to bringing it into harmony with this position.²²

It was only a short step from the mediating position taken by the Synod in its 1959 convention (the same convention that approved merger with the Finnish National Evangelical Lutheran Church without settlement of the issue of woman suffrage in the church) to its somewhat broader position taken in 1969 and mentioned at the beginning of this article. Since the matter was not discussed by the Synod in the 1950's as a matter on which it could speak with sure finality, the Synod in 1969 did not in reality make a radical change when it altered its position on woman suffrage.²³

Prospects for the Future

In a separate action, the 1969 convention of the Missouri Synod referred to its president for action a resolution "that the Commission on Mission and Ministry in the Church be directed to conduct a study of the ministry of women in church and society, including any areas where prejudices because of sex may be in evidence" and "that the decision as to the scope and the involvement of personnel in this study be left to the Commission on Ministry and Mission."²⁴ If this proposal is acted on, future conventions of the synod will likely be faced with the task of considering the question of the ordination of women into the parish ministry.

It is without question that the position of the Synod and its leaders on the place of women in the church has changed a number of times during the first two thirds of the twentieth century. Using the same Bible passages cited against woman suffrage and the ordination of women, Pieper argued against suffrage in the political realm for women in 1913. That position was not rejected. It was

simply ignored by Missouri Synod writers after the enfranchisement of American women in 1920. The old restrictions on woman suffrage in the congregations and in the synod have now been lifted. It remains to be seen what decisions the Synod will arrive at in the future in the matter of the ordination of women into the parish ministry.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Convention Proceedings*, 1969, p. 88.
2. F[ran]cis Pieper, *What Is Christianity? And Other Essays*, translated by John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1933), pp. 104 ff.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
7. *Loc. cit.*
8. W. H. T. Dau, *Woman Suffrage in the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n. d.), p. 14.
9. F[ran]cis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 525-526.
10. P[aul] Lindemann, "The Woman in the Church," *Theological Quarterly*, XXIV (January, 1920), 121.
11. *Loc. cit.*
12. Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible. New Testament*, Vol. II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), 159.
13. *Ibid.*, 378.
14. P. E. Kretzmann, "The Position of the Christian Woman, Especially as a Worker in the Church," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, I (May, 1930), 356.
15. J. T. Mueller, "Are I Cor. 11:3-16 and I Cor. 14:33-40 Parallel Ordinances?" *Theological Monthly*, III (August-September, 1923), 244 ff.
Mueller argued that "... woman, when speaking in the congregation, not only revolts against the clear command of God, but also usurps authority over man, subverts the divine rule of order, and entails upon the Church the perils of false doctrine and general disorder and confusion, through her amenability to fraud and deception. It is for these reasons that Paul forbids women to speak in the churches—an injunction to remain in force at all times." (p. 248)
16. J. E. Nopola, *Our Threescore Years: A Brief History of the National Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Ironwood, Michigan: National Publishing Company, 1958), pp. 25-27.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
18. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Proceedings*, 1959, p. 187.
19. National Evangelical Lutheran Church, *Yearbook*, 1962, p. 73.
20. Russell C. Prohl, *Woman in the Church: A Restudy of Woman's Place in Building the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Michigan: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 80.
21. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Reports and Memorials*, 1959, p. 495.
22. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Proceedings*, 1959, pp. 190-191.
23. A good historical review of the Missouri Synod's positions on woman suffrage is contained in the 1969 Missouri Synod *Reports and Memorials*, pp. 514-518.
24. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Proceedings*, 1969, p. 93.