

Is the Ordination of Women an *Adiaphoron*?

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The debate in the LCA about whether women may be pastors hinges on whether that is permitted in the New Testament. The question is whether the ordination of women is an *adiaphoron* or not.

What Christ and his apostles allow to be done is called an *adiaphoron*. That technical liturgical term comes from **the Formula of Concord**, Article 10, on “Ecclesiastical Practices That Are Called *Adiaphora* or Indifferent Things.” There *adiaphora* are defined as “ceremonies and ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word”. Thus we do not decide whether to celebrate the Lord’s Supper or not. It is not an *adiaphoron*, because it has been commanded by Christ. But we may use musical instruments to accompany our songs even though we have not been instructed to do so. That is an *adiaphoron*. Thus what God has given for us to do in the divine service is distinguished from what we decide to do there. Whatever He institutes by His word He empowers by his Holy Spirit. If a practice is not instituted by God or consistent with His Word, we cannot be sure that it pleases Him, nor can we be certain that Holy Spirit is at work in it.

A key issue for us as Lutherans has been the teaching that by His Word the triune God has not only instituted the preaching of the gospel and the enactment of baptism and Holy Communion in the divine service but also the office of ministry for their right administration in the church. Those divinely instituted things provide what is absolutely essential to our worship. Wherever they are faithfully done we can be sure that the triune God delivers His blessings to us. Wherever they are replaced by what God has not commanded we cannot be sure that we receive His good gifts.

Both sides in the debate agree that Christ has instituted the ministry of the gospel. They also agree that He appointed men to that ministry, beginning with the apostles and continuing with their successors in ministry. But they disagree on whether he now too appoints women to serve as pastors.

On the one hand, those who oppose the ordination of women argue that this is not an *adiaphoron*, an open question, since it is forbidden by the Lord Jesus and his apostles in 1 Corinthians 14:33^b-38 and I Timothy 2:11-14. It is therefore not a matter for the church to determine as it seems best in a particular time and place. It has been decided by Christ; it is his command (1 Cor 14:37). That settles the matter. No compromises can be made on that issue without disobeying Christ’s command and so violating the conscience. The conscience of God’s people is bound by that command.

On the other hand, those who advocate the ordination of women argue that it is an *adiaphoron*, something permitted by God, something that has not been forbidden or only temporally forbidden in those two passages. Yet that clearly contradicts what is said in them, since Paul claims that “it is not permitted for them (women) to speak” (1 Cor 14:34) and adds: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man” (1 Tim 2:12). What’s more, even if those texts did not forbid the ordination of women, there are no texts that actually instruct the church to ordain women. That is what would be needed to trump the traditional teaching and ecumenical practice of the whole church on this until modern times. An uncertain and disputed teaching based on human authority cannot provide a certain foundation for such a radical change. Without a certain scriptural foundation, a clear divine mandate, we could never be sure that God was pleased with the ministry of women as pastors in the LCA. We, therefore, like the man in Matthew 7:24-27 who built his house on a rock, would be wise to base our teaching and practice on Christ’s word rather than our own opinions.