The Ordination of Women in the Lutheran Church
An Interview with Gloria Weber and Ralph W. Klein

Announcer: Is the ordination of women contrary to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions?

Weber: It is certainly my opinion that it is not contrary to Scripture or the Confessions. I feel Scripture and the Confessions really leave it an open question. God made people to serve, and their sexual identity is not the essential point, if we examine the texts closely. I, of course, do not feel the ordination of women is contrary to God's will because I have been serving as an ordained pastor of the American Lutheran Church for two years now and find that I am able to minister very effectively. My ministry has been well received.

Klein: I agree completely with Pastor Weber. I think one thing you have to remember is that while there are a number of passages in Scripture that are usually cited, none of them dealt with the question of women's ordination in its original context. I Corinthians 14:34-36 (the women should keep silent) would seem on the surface to rule out a role for women in the public ministry, but there are other passages in Paul's letters, particularly I Corinthians 11 and Galatians 3, which would seem to legitimate it every way. You've got to remember with these New Testament passages that they don't speak to the ordination of women directly, that one can line up passages on both sides of the argument, and that it is seriously questioned by scholars whether they deal with the role of women in general or whether they deal with the role of wives over against their husbands. If it's not women in general but women within a family structure, it puts the whole thing in a different context.

One other point, and we'll come back I'm sure to some of these things, it's often talked about as if these passages have reference to the so-called orders of creation, that is, God structured the world in a particular way so that men would be in a rulership position and women would be subordinate. I think that it's important to say that the term "orders of creation" is probably a misnomer, a bad name for something. They are really orders of the fall. Genesis 3 says that as a result of our sin we have crabgrass and we perspire a lot when we plow the soil or mow our grass; as a result of sin men rule women. Now, in almost every place in God's world today men and women are considered equal, with equal authority. It strikes me as very strange that the church should be the last place in all creation to maintain the orders of the fall. The church is to be the place where the new age of God is celebrated. To insist that men are to rule women in the church is to maintain the fallen order and just doesn't make any sense to me.

Announcer: I'd like to get back to those passages that you were talking about just briefly here. I Corinthians 14 and I Timothy 2 are the ones that are usually cited against the ordination of women, and the traditional Missouri Synod position on this would say that
these passages are pretty substantial proof that women should not be ordained.

Klein: I think it's important that we let the Scriptures speak for themselves here. If there is such a thing as a traditional Missouri Synod interpretation of these passages, which I somewhat doubt, I think it would be that these passages prohibit almost any role for women in the church. The United States passed the amendment giving women suffrage in 1919. It was 50 years later that the right of suffrage was granted within the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, and all during that time the reason for opposing women's suffrage was drawn from these passages.

1 Corinthians 14 says that women should not usurp authority, etc., but I Corinthians 11 says when women prophesy, which is the closest thing I can think of to preaching, they should wear a hat. Now I doubt whether we want to insist on our women preachers wearing a hat today, but Paul seems to imply that women can exercise a role in the church. And I think it is important to remember this built-in tension or contradiction between these two passages. The other interpretive questions I'd like to repeat — it's a real question whether these passages deal with women in general or with the role of wives over against husbands; the "orders of creation or fall," I think, argue as much for ordination as against it. And then you have to ask the question — what about then and now? Paul was living in a particular society where women had a very low role, but he says at one point in Galatians there's no longer any difference between Jew and Greek, between slave and free, between male and female because in Christ Jesus all are one. Krister Stendahl once wrote that, in respect to the difference between Jew and Greek, Paul really worked out the implications of his principle in some detail; in fact, that's really what the whole corpus of Pauline letters is about, how Jews and Greeks, that is Jewish and non-Jewish people, are equal in the sight of the Lord. Paul did not work out the implication of his own principle when it came to slavery, nor did he work out his own principle in detail when it came to women. Paul in essence gave a legitimation for equality of women and for their full participation in the church, but because of the constraints of his age his principles were not fully implemented.

Announcer: The argument could be shot back at you that Paul had a particular opinion on homosexuality, too, and does that mean that the church should ordain confessing homosexuals as well?

Klein: That's a whole other question that might be interesting to go into. There are a lot of passages, of course, where we have to ask what did Paul mean in the original context and what might that mean today. Paul lays it down very strictly that all women should wear hats in church, and yet if you'd go to any of our churches on a Sunday morning, you would see the women bare headed. We say, "He was obviously speaking to
his culture. "Genesis 1 says, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." It's rather easy to say what that meant in its original context. I don't think that means everybody should have twenty children today, and I don't know of anybody who argues that way. That is, the Bible has one meaning in its original context, and it may have a variety of applications today.

Announcer: Pastor Weber, is the ordination of women an ecclesiastical extension of the entire question of women's liberation in our society today?

Weber: It's probably because our society has moved forward in women's liberation that the question of women's ordination has arisen today. I would like to take a moment to tell you how I first saw the Scripture many years ago, some ten years ago now, which led me to study in the seminary and want to be ordained. It seems to me that when we look at Scripture we have to ask three questions. What is the writer saying, what did it mean to the people who heard it or read it at that time, and what does it mean to us? Now if we miss that middle question and say only what did he say and what does it mean today, we've passed by something very important that we must consider.

When Paul wrote, women should keep silent, we know what he said. We have to ask, however, what did he mean at that time. It probably meant keeping good order in the church, being acceptable to society and following society's rules, so the gospel of Jesus Christ could be preached without hindering it by obstructing society or having people think that the Christians were anarchists. Paul today would say, "Fit in with the society so that your witness to Christ can be clear." Use society's rules, in other words, to speak to the world. One does not want to speak in a context where people will not listen, where words are not understood. Paul is probably saying something different to us today than he was in the first century. He's saying, "Use society to speak the Gospel in as clear, as forceful and meaningful a way as possible." And that probably means today: use women to speak. Use women, use anyone who is qualified, trained, called or who has the desire to serve God. We've never said organists must be male or female. We've said a person who was trained, has the ability and talent and the desire to do so, and who feels the call of God, may serve as a musician in the church. I think we are just now getting to the point where we are saying that a person who is trained, who has the call and who wants to do so may also speak God's word within the congregation.

Announcer: Somebody could say, "O.K., I can see the legitimate points that women's liberation brings up about equal pay for equal work, but when it comes to my Lutheran Church, I don't think the church is ready for the ordination of women yet."

Klein: That may or may not be true. I don't think very careful studies have been made about whether the church is
ready for it. What has to be said is that almost all Lutherans in the world ordain women: the church in Sweden, the church in Norway, the church of East and West Germany, and 2/3 of the Lutheran churches in the United States, not to mention the church in Czechoslovakia. All of these Lutheran churches ordain women. In 1970, a sociological study was made of Lutheran lay people, Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod lay people, in Detroit. Forty-seven per cent of those lay people favored the ordination of women. Only eight per cent of the clergy in that same area favored it. But I think one really has to ask the further question, "What do you mean, is the church ready?" I'm not sure that the church has had the opportunity to look at this in a free and impartial way. There are some people in the church who are not even willing to discuss openly what the Scriptures say. We started out this discussion today a little defensively, the assumption of the announcer being that the Scriptures speak against the ordination of women and that Pastor Weber and I are trying to get around that. I think what Pastor Weber and I have been pointing out is that the Scriptural evidence is by no means clear. And, in fact, one can find exhortations in Scripture that imply that we should, given our context, ordain women.

I'd like to add some positive reasons, before I yield here, on why I favor the ordination of women. First of all, I favor it because of the variety of gifts God is trying to give us through women. These women are going to be especially good with women and their problems. And I suspect they may help us men to be freer and wholer and fuller as well. Secondly, I think it is important to ordain women because it is a sign of God's in-breaking new age. The church should be a signal in the world that the curse is ending. We sing in the Christmas carol, "He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found," and the church should be the place where those barriers, those curses, are breaking down. And a third reason I favor the ordination of women is because it would give tremendous affirmation to all women in the church about their role and the church's need for them.

Announcer: The same question to you, Pastor Weber, the argument "I don't think the church is ready for it yet." Weber: I have found that this is not so. I have served in two congregations and have been well accepted in both of them. Two years ago when I was ordained I was only the second woman to be ordained in the American Lutheran Church. There are now ten ordained women in our denomination, and eight more just graduated and received assignments. So within just a few months there will be 18 in the American Lutheran Church, and there are 30 in the Lutheran Church in America. Many of these, probably more than half, have their own congregations, while many others serve as assistants as I do. Either way, they seem to be doing a fine job and they are received. So,
practical experience tells us the church is ready when given the opportunity. I guess that’s why I do as much guest preaching as I can. I think it is important for women to be seen in pastoral roles. And once seen, the great majority, the overwhelming majority of Lutheran people do accept them.

Announcer: I’d like to take a quote out of the civil law, or actually a quote from the Declaration of Independence, that says all men are created equal. Now, it’s very obvious from the way that this particular passage has been interpreted in the civil law that we are talking about women and all people when we talk about "all men" in this context. Does this passage from the Declaration of Independence express a theological truth, too? Are all people equal in every regard?

Klein: The expression, “all men are created equal”, was not really meant literally, as you are well aware. It did not originally include black people, for example, and one of the things that came up in the Dred Scott Decision was that the Supreme Court ruled that it clearly could not mean black people were equal since people like Jefferson owned slaves. I think that now everybody would say, "Well, of course it includes everybody who is black, red, white or whatever." But that is a good example, I think, of the difference between what something meant in its original context and what it has come to mean today. "All men" clearly did not mean women because women were not granted the right to vote until 1919.

As to the substance of your question, there are obviously a variety of gifts that are given to people: there are people who are intelligent or there are people who are athletic in a greater degree than other people are, so that one should not become so fuzzy minded that he or she acts as if there are no differences at all. But the access to rights, privileges, and opportunities should be open to all men and women. And given a variety of gifts, God will use men and women in ways that he sees fit. I think that often women may be more apt for ministry than men.

Weber: Well, it’s obvious when you talk about equality in persons that there are differences in the sexes. Women bear and nurse children; because of their socialization, they may have more desire to care for children. However, God gives each person abilities and a personality, characteristics, which are individually his or hers. None of us should be limited to certain roles. We should be allowed to develop whatever God-given abilities and talents we have to their fullest. Equality means the opportunity to use what God has given you and to develop it the fullest point possible. And as we all enjoy equal opportunity in our civil context, we would certainly want to have it within the church also so that we will use all the gifts and abilities of all of God’s people. It seems at this point that the ordination of women is one way we could do that. It is certainly not the only way, but it is a beginning.
Announcer: One of the most central terms in the term "ordination of women" is the word "ordination." Does ordination change the ministry of a Christian's life or should ordination be any kind of a change at all?

Klein: You have a whole talk show right there. One question that's involved in all of this is what kind of authority the pastor exercises. Some cite passages in Scripture which say women should not usurp authority over men or rule over them. I view the minister much more as a playing coach, as a person, man or woman, who gets in there with the brothers and sisters in Christ, who has particular training, who has particular spiritual gifts, who has particular leadership ability, and who has had the church lay hands on that person as a sign of their support, their prayers, etc. The ordained minister is not the "professional Christian" to who* the lay people hand over the tasks of ministry. Ephesians 4 says that we are to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. Sure, there's a difference between an ordained and an unordained person. Ordination presupposes a person's training, spirituality, public profession of the faith, and commitment to the church. In turn the church offers fidelity and support to the one ordained. We usually have connected ordination with the right to administer the sacraments and preach publicly. All these things make an ordained person different, and yet, at the same time, he or she ministers much the same as everybody else.

Weber: Some American Lutheran Church documents speak of ordination as ordination to a function. We know that the word ordination is not used in Scripture, so that the church itself has given meaning to the word. Our denomination has said we ministers are set aside for a function — working with the congregations, equipping the saints for their ministry. In other words, helping others to do ministry rather than doing it all ourselves. Our authority is only that of service, of giving ourselves in a way that enables others to receive the faith, to pray, to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and to pass the faith on. I am ordained to a function of service which puts me right in the fight with the people in their fight against evil, sin and death, with Christ working on our side. So it's not an authority type of thing, a hierarchy, where one stands as a minister above others, but right with them.

Announcer: My final question is more a summary question than anything else, what finally is the role of the woman in the church?

Klein: Paul says that if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. I think that's important to keep in mind. When we are talking about women in the church, or men in the church, we're not really talking about power. I think that's probably where in a sense the renewal of women's roles in the church differs from the secular struggle for women's rights. We're talking about the struggle, strange as that may seem, for the right to serve. One is our master,
even Christ, and all the rest of us are brothers and sisters. I think that's the role for women — and men — in the church.

Weber: I think it’s important to note also that in our Lord’s life on earth, as recorded in the Gospels, he always gave women, every woman he spoke with, full recognition as a person who could hear the faith and who could pass it on. It was not in the mores of his time to speak to women. A rabbi did not speak to a woman in public ever, not even his wife, but Jesus did on many occasions. In fact, his longest known discourse is with the woman at the well, and it’s known that after his resurrection he first appeared to a woman and told her to pass on the good news. So we see in the Scripture that women were certainly given every right, right from the start.