

On the Commissioned Lay Preacher

The provisions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for the Commissioned Lay Preacher (*Book of Order*, G-14.0516, a-f), to be used in circumstances of extraordinary difficulty in obtaining a pastor, may soon be expanded into what amounts to an additional ordinary office of ministry. Proposals before this year's General Assembly would authorize the Commissioned Lay Preacher to perform baptisms and marriages, moderate sessions, and speak and vote at presbytery meetings. And yet, certain practical, historical, theological, and pastoral considerations would urge us not to approve these.

First, despite the difficulties some small or remote congregations may have in obtaining a pastor, the Commissioned Lay Preacher is unnecessary. The Presbyterian Church has about 20,000 ministers to serve 11,000 congregations. Some of these ministers have other jobs and can serve part time at smaller churches. Moreover, we have provisions for elders to "supply places which are without the regular ministry of the Word and Sacrament" (G-6.0304). So, while the Commissioned Lay Preacher may be convenient, it is not necessary.

Second, Reformed and Presbyterian churches especially have taken very seriously that part of the Great Commandment which says: "You shall love the Lord your God...with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). Historically, as a matter of obedience, we have emphasized and insisted upon a learned ministry, even when difficult or impractical from a human perspective. Only in extraordinary circumstances have exceptions been allowed. The establishment and expansion of the Commissioned Lay Preacher as an ordinary office of ministry is a destructive aberration from this heritage, suggesting that congregations can instead be well served by uneducated enthusiasts.

Third, official Presbyterian doctrine, as stated in the *Book of Confessions*, stands against the Commissioned Lay Preacher. Of course we believe in "the priesthood of all believers," but this "priesthood and the ministry are very different from one another" (The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.153). "Therefore for this purpose are the ministers of the Church called—namely, to preach the Gospel of Christ to the faithful, and to administer the sacraments" (5.156; cf. 5.163). That is, these duties do not belong to the general priesthood of members. More pointedly: "There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel, that is to say, baptism and the supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any but a minister of the Word, lawfully ordained" (The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.152). The *Book of Order* itself acknowledges the confessions as authorities secondary to the scriptures (G-2.0200). How can the *Book of Order* then, as a lesser authority than the confessions, contradict them and allow the Commissioned Lay Preacher—not a minister at all, and not even necessarily an elder—to administer the Lord's Supper?

Fourth, there is a danger that some people who do not want to submit themselves to the theological, intellectual, spiritual, and financial discipline of going to seminary will be attracted by the easy access to a pulpit offered to the Commissioned Lay Preacher. At the same time, some congregations may seek out a Commissioned Lay Preacher because they do not want a minister. We do not help individuals or congregations by encouraging or supporting either of these situations.

For these practical, historical, theological, and pastoral reasons, we would do well not to have the Commissioned Lay Preacher at all. Instead of expanding the provisions for it into an ordinary office of pastoral ministry, we need to remove all provisions for the Commissioned Lay Preacher from the *Book of Order* and discontinue the practice in the church altogether.

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