

The Use of Tractate 26 to Promote the Ordination of Women

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1. In par 26 of the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* Melanchthon says:

‘Besides, the ministry of the New Testament is not bound to places and persons, as the Levitical priesthood is, but is spread through the whole world and exists wherever God gives his gifts; apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers. Nor is this ministry valid because of any individual’s authority but because of the word given by Christ’.

2. This passage has been misused by those who advocate the ordination of women to the public ministry of the gospel.

a. They assume that, when Melanchthon speaks about ‘the word given by Christ’, he refers to the gospel which preached by the minister. The validity of the ministry is therefore held to depend on the proclamation of the gospel rather than the person who proclaims the gospel. The authority of the person is derived from that proclamation.

b. They back up this functional interpretation of these words by the German addition to par 26:

‘The person adds nothing to this Word and office (Ampt) commanded by Christ. No matter who it is who preaches and teaches (the Word), if there are hearts that hear and adhere to it, something will happen to them according (sic) as they hear and believe because Christ commanded such preaching and demanded that his promises be believed’.

c. Since it does not matter who the person is that preaches, as long as the word is preached and received in faith, they conclude that a person of either sex can be a minister of the gospel. What’s more, those who exclude women from the ministry err in basing the authority and power of the ministry on the sexual nature and masculine qualities of the pastor as a male person.

3. This interpretation cannot be sustained for two reasons.

a. It misunderstands what is meant by ‘the word given in Christ’, in par 26. There Melanchthon argues that Christ instituted the office of the ministry. Neither the person nor the pope through the bishops in fellowship with him create this office and give it its authority. The authority of the ministry rests on ‘the word of Christ’ (par 10). Its mandate is from Christ (par 31). Hence when Christ promised to Peter that he would build his church ‘on this rock’ in Matthew 16:18, he did not refer to Peter as a

private person, nor to his personal confession of faith, but to Peter as ‘a public person’ (Latin *persona communis*) who represented all the apostles (par 23, 24), and as a ‘minister’ whose ‘ministry’ it was to preach, teach and confess that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God (par 25). This passage does not then distinguish between the person of the pastor and the ministerial function performed by that pastor, but distinguished between the divinely instituted office of the ministry and those who occupy that office and perform its tasks. No human person, whether he be an apostle or the pope, gives that office its authority and power. The office lends its authority to the person in it. Thus, when the German text maintains that it does not matter ‘who preaches and teaches’, it does not open the office of the ministry to all comers. It does not promote a purely functional understanding of the ministry which could be performed by anybody, but rather champions the authority of divinely instituted office of the ministry which Christ has instituted and empowered for the proclamation of the gospel and for the creation of faith in its hearers. The validity of the office does not depend on the minister nor on the ministry done by that person, but on Christ’s institution (which has traditionally been taken to include 1 Cor 14:34-37) and the faithfulness of the church to his mandate.

- b. The use of Tr 26 to argue for the ordination of women from a functional understanding of the public ministry ignores the context and purpose of this passage. It is part of a larger argument against the power of the pope. It not only attacks the pretensions of the papacy but also defends the right of the evangelical churches to ordain pastors without episcopal and papal involvement. The purpose of the treatise is to argue that, whereas the office of the papacy had not been instituted by Christ, the ministry of the gospel had been instituted as an office by Christ. He had conferred this office equally on all the twelve apostles and confers it equally on all pastors through the church. Neither the church nor the apostles nor Peter as the first pope created this office. Nor did they determine its function. Rather ‘the office of the ministry derives from the common call of the apostles’ (par 10, German). Unlike the ministry of the gospel, the papacy had no divine mandate, for the words of Christ to Peter in Matthew 16:18,19 and John 21:17 apply to the public ministry of the word which is given to all the apostles and to all properly called and ordained pastors. If Melancthon were truly arguing for the functional view of the ministry ascribed to him by some advocates for the ordination of women, he could easily have jettisoned these arguments about the nature and purpose of the divinely instituted office. Instead, he could have argued that the authority of the evangelical pastors did not rest on their office and its institution by Christ but on their zeal in preaching the gospel and their faithfulness in administering the sacraments.

4. *The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* cannot therefore legitimately be used to promote the ordination of women. In fact, if its line of argument is correct, it could even be used to maintain that, like the papacy, the ordination of women has no mandate from Christ but is based on dubious theological inferences from passages in the Scriptures which have little or nothing to do with it. Like the papacy, it is not valid because it rests on human authority rather than on divine commission.

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