

Note to Michele Bachmann: Choose Your Church Well

Michele Bachmann has a church problem—or maybe two.

For a decade, the Bachmanns were members at the Salem Lutheran Church in Stillwater, MN, a congregation of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS).

On July 13, an on-line [article](#) in *The Atlantic* broke the news that WELS teaches that the Pope is the Antichrist. Other news outlets picked up the story. They made it sound like they had uncovered some deep, dark secret and implied that Michele Bachmann might be anti-Catholic and had some explaining to do.

This is old news. The issue first came to light during a debate in her 2006 Congressional campaign. She took great offense at the assertion: “It’s abhorrent, it’s religious bigotry. I love Catholics, I’m a Christian, and my church does not believe that the Pope is the Antichrist, that’s just absolutely false.”

As it turned out, WELS teaches exactly that. A nine-page statement on its website asserts that “the Pope is the very Antichrist” and that all 16th century Lutheran Confessions said so, thanks to Martin Luther, the German monk who challenged papal authority and started the Protestant Reformation.

Luther reasoned from the Bible that salvation was based on faith in Christ alone, not on piling up good works. Pope Leo X tried to stop Luther’s reform efforts. Push came to shove until Luther damned the Pope as the Antichrist of Bible prophecy; and the Pope damned Luther as a heretic and put a price on his head, a medieval Christian *fatwa* if there ever was one. Eventually there were religious wars, political revolutions, the permanent division of Christendom, and people executed by both sides.

Virtually all 16th century Protestants agreed with Luther about the Pope.

Have things changed? Sure, some. Though differences remain, tempers have definitely cooled. Most of today’s Lutherans understand Luther’s condemnation of the Pope as historically-conditioned and classify Antichrist’s identity as an “open question.” But not WELS. As a “confessional” Lutheran denomination, it is sticking with Luther and the 16th century confessions.

The term “Antichrist” is a potent term in the history of Christianity. In the 16th century, Protestants believed that the Pope-as-Antichrist promoted heresy and unleashed torture and

mayhem. He was the enemy of the Gospel and responsible for leading the faithful astray. Such a deceiver and his defenders had to be opposed, by force if necessary.

Does WELS advocate similar armed resistance? In comparison to the 16th century, WELS has gone soft. It does not consider its teachings about the Antichrist a “fundamental article of faith” or condemn all Catholics. It does not “deny the Christianity of a person who cannot see the truth that the Pope is the Antichrist,” and makes no “blanket condemnation of all members of the Roman Catholic Church, for despite all the errors taught in that church, the Word of God is still heard there” (website).

If this is anti-Catholicism, WELS is not trying very hard. The anti-Catholicism of the 19th century included invective and sometimes fire-bombings and riots in the streets. In comparison, WELS comes off as rather wimpy.

What about Michele Bachmann? A week before she launched her presidential campaign, she announced that the Bachmanns were no longer members of Salem Lutheran. Some months before, Pastor Marcus Birkholz asked her to clarify her family’s relationship to the church since none of them had attended for two years.

Why did the Bachmanns leave? Was it to avoid embarrassing questions about the Antichrist? Who knows? She did not say; and the pastor is no longer taking calls from the press. It is possible that before the subject came up in that debate, she did not know what her church taught about the Antichrist.

According to Joel Hochmuth, the director of communications at WELS headquarters, the doctrine “is not something you’re going to hear preached from our pulpits every Sunday.” A WELS pastor told me that in his congregation’s 11-week membership class, he mentions the doctrine, but only briefly and in passing. Even if the doctrine is officially “on the books,” that doesn’t mean that all pastors are going to give it the same attention or that it is going to register among the people in the pew. Many people approach their church’s doctrines like guests at a smorgasbord, taking this and that, but passing other dishes by.

Whatever the doctrine’s status in Stillwater—clearly taught or stashed on the doctrinal “top-shelf”—Bachmann made it clear in her 2006 statement that she did not believe it. She called it “abhorrent” and “bigotry.”

Bill Donahue, the mince-no-words president of the Catholic League, knows anti-Catholicism when he sees it. He does not think she is anti-Catholic. “We find no evidence of any bigotry on the part of Rep. Michele Bachmann.” Candidates should be judged by *their* beliefs, not their churches.’

It looks like the Antichrist story has no legs. But there is another church issue that has received little if any attention by the media: *her church’s teachings about women.*

Churches affiliated with WELS believe that “women should not exercise authority over men.” Many denominations use this principle to restrict ordination to men only and exclude women from other authoritative positions. But WELS uses it to prohibit women from even *voting* on substantive church matters, which most other Lutheran and conservative evangelical churches allow. Women in WELS may provide input on many issues, but they cannot vote in official business at the local or Synod levels. Such views derive from a particular biblical interpretation of “male headship” and female subordination in the home and the church.

WELS also sets itself apart by denying there is any biblical basis for a woman’s “right to vote” in political elections. According to an explanation on WELS’ website, “The principle is not ‘don’t vote.’ The principle is ‘don’t exercise authority over men.’”

Christian women must judge their motives before voting. If they are not trying to usurp male authority, they may vote “to oppose the voice of women who are advocating abortion or other causes contrary to Scripture.”

When I asked a WELS pastor if a woman could serve in Congress or the White House without breaking the “male headship” principle, he told me he did not see how. Imagine a woman Commander-in-Chief not exercising authority over men.

Given the day-in, day-out practices of WELS congregations, there is no way that Rep. Bachmann could have missed her church’s beliefs about male authority and female submission. How could she stay so long in a place where she and other women figuratively had to leave the room when important decisions were to be made?

Many conservative evangelical women find themselves in similar circumstances. How do they do it? They learn to live in parallel universes. In one the men are in charge, and the women are excluded from exercising authority. While men and women are equal in their spiritual status, God made their roles different. Advocates call such role differences “complementary” to avoid implications of “superior” and “inferior.”

In the other universe, evangelical women take advantage of the opportunities available to them. They go to school, earn credentials, get hired in good jobs, work their way up the ladder, and become successful as managers and executives. Some marry and have children and work out the logistics with supportive husbands who are proud of their accomplishments.

Living in both universes at the same time must not be easy. How does it work for someone in Congress who now has developed an itch to become President of the United States?

Rep. Bachmann calls herself an evangelical and seeks support from that community in Iowa and elsewhere. Since she makes her personal faith an important part of her campaign, she should be prepared to explain what she believes and how it shapes her ideas and actions. Such transparency should include her church affiliation as well. Her family is now attending Eagle Brook Church which has 13,000 members on four campuses and is affiliated with the Baptist General Conference. It should be prepared to be scrutinized too.

I checked: there is nothing on the congregation's or its denomination's website about the Antichrist, male headship, or denying women voting rights at any level.

As a result, Michele Bachmann might feel more supported there. For her sake, one can only hope she has chosen well.