

Hermeneutics and the ordination question

This paper highlights the main principles of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) that have governed the extensive discussion on the ordination of women in our circles for the past two decades.

Hermeneutics is another word for interpretation. You can see hermeneutics at work when the church uses the scriptures to formulate and evaluate different teachings and practices. In this Q&A we will be addressing questions regarding hermeneutics from a Lutheran point of view.

What is the role of the scriptures in the life of the church? As Lutherans we confess that the scriptures are the sure standard that we—bishops, pastors, and lay people—can use to evaluate teachings and practices in the church. Other standards, including tradition and reason, have a subordinate but indispensable role to play, but the scriptures are the sure standard that we can rely on before God.

In the church we have practices that were handed on to us before the books of the New Testament were written. So, for example, practices such as Baptism and the Lord's Supper were instituted by the Lord Jesus before any of the books of the New Testament came into being. However, as the church receives and hands on these practices, the church uses the scriptures as a sure guide to evaluate whether these practices are indeed instituted by Christ and are done in a God-pleasing way.

As Lutherans we also confess that the office of the ministry was instituted by the Lord Jesus, and so in the church we use the scriptures as the sure standard to evaluate whether our teaching and practice concerning the ministry has God's approval.

How does the church use the scriptures in its teaching? When we use the scriptures to formulate teachings and to evaluate practices in the church, we look first of all to passages that speak most clearly on the teaching or practice in question. These passages become what can be called 'foundational texts' in dealing with particular teachings or practices.

So, for example, in teaching and evaluating the church's practice of Baptism, the church uses texts such as Matthew 28:19, Romans 6:4, Titus 3:5–8 and Mark 16:16, as these texts have been seen—in such important teaching documents as the Small and Large Catechisms—to speak directly to the topic. Likewise, the church uses passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, Matthew 26:26–28, Mark 14:22–24 and Luke 22:19,20 in relation to teaching and practice concerning the Lord's Supper, as these passages have been seen—again, in such documents as the Small and Large Catechisms—to speak directly to the topic.

In the LCA, 1 Timothy 2:11–14 and 1 Corinthians 14:34,35 have been used for teaching about the LCA's practice of excluding women from the office of the ministry. This is because these two texts have been seen to speak most directly to the received practice.

Are 'foundational texts' used in isolation from the rest of the Bible? One of the principles of interpretation used by theologians (a principle that is useful for all who hear and read scripture) is that 'scripture interprets scripture'. This principle includes the understanding that particular passages of Scripture are best understood in the context of the books of which they are part, and of the Bible as a whole.

This principle 'scripture interprets scripture' means that when the church uses 'foundational texts' in relation to different teachings and practices, it does so with the understanding of the bigger picture of Christian teaching, and of the church's mission to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name (Luke 24:36–47).

Does the biblical teaching on justification by faith play a special role? As Lutheran Christians we are especially sensitive to ensure that our teaching and practice conforms to our confession that God justifies us by grace, on account of Christ, through faith (Ephesians 2:8,9).

This teaching about how God justifies us does not establish church practices such as Baptism or the Lord's Supper. The Lord Jesus instituted these practices, and in the church we receive and hand them on as ways through which God gives us the Holy Spirit. So the fact that we use bread and wine in Holy Communion, or water in Holy Baptism, is because of the Lord's command to us, and not because of our teaching on justification.

Yet when we practise and teach about Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper in our congregations, we do so in a way that makes clear that our obedience is not the central point of these sacraments. The central point is that God's Spirit-filled word of grace in Christ Jesus comes to us through them.

The office of the ministry was also instituted by the Lord Jesus, and in the church we receive and hand on this office in obedience to the commands of our Lord. Yet as Lutheran Christians we want to make clear that our teaching and practice on the office of the ministry highlights the fact that the Lord instituted the office so that pastors would serve people with the gospel and the sacraments, so that they would be brought to, and kept in, faith.

Can 'foundational texts' be read in different ways? We can agree that the scriptures are the true standard in evaluating teachings and practices in the church, and can also agree on such principles as 'scripture interprets scripture', and the centrality of the doctrine of justification, while coming to different conclusions about which texts speak most clearly on specific issues.

While there is fundamental agreement in the LCA on which texts speak most clearly about church practices such as Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper—an agreement that is most clearly seen in the wholehearted reception of the Small Catechism as a basic teaching document and confession of faith of the church—there is disagreement on whether the two texts used in the LCA to teach on the practice of excluding women from the office of the ministry speak directly to the issue. In fact, the LCA has been involved in a decades-long re-evaluation of the two texts used in teaching on the received practice of excluding women from the office of the ministry.

Within the LCA to what extent are the two texts seen to undergird the church's received practice? Some hold that the two texts clearly state the Lord's command for Christians in the church today, and conclude that the texts are rightly used to uphold the received teaching and practice of the LCA.

Others hold that the two texts speak into particular historical contexts and, while the various commands in the texts still apply in the church today, the way they applied then and the way they apply now do not prohibit women from serving as pastors.

Others on both sides of the discussion are uncertain whether the two texts alone speak directly to the teaching and practice of the ordination of men only. Those in this 'uncertain' group draw on further texts in arguing their stance either for or against the ordination of women.

What conclusion can be drawn from the preceding? It has become apparent that the consensus among us regarding Lutheran hermeneutics has not led to a corresponding consensus on the interpretation and application of the two texts that underpin the church's official teaching that women may not be ordained as pastors. Lengthy discussions, several papers, and even a symposium with Lutheran guests from overseas as main speakers, have not served to resolve the issue. In the course of the discussion in our circles it has

become increasingly apparent that the differences that have emerged revolve around different exegetical conclusions about the precise nature and extent of St Paul's prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, not differences in hermeneutical principles. Therefore the dialogue and debate at the forthcoming general convention will best be served by a close exegetical study of the two decisive texts, in order to ascertain how they are relevant to the current debate in the church.