

Q&A 6, How is the biblical teaching of 'subordination' to be understood?

Introduction

When speaking of human relationships within the church and society the Bible sometimes uses a word we don't hear very much in contemporary language. And when we do hear it, it is often used in a negative way. That word is subordination. It is sometimes translated as submission in contemporary versions of the Bible. In either the form of a verb or a noun, it is used over forty times in the Bible, often when speaking about various relationships in the family, the church and the wider community and the way in which they receive God's blessings. That means that Christians have had to think carefully about what the word means and how it relates to life in community.

Even though we don't tend to use the word subordination, we live in communal settings where it is a reality in the relationships we have. Whether it is in the Church or in society in general, good community requires order and that applies equally to those who exercise authority in right and healthy ways and to those who willingly receive and respect such authority and work together with it. At the heart of the teaching on subordination in both the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions there lies a respect for the good order that God has given, which enables our lives together in community to flourish as we receive God's good gifts for that community.

The Bible and the Lutheran Confessions talk about this in the context of three 'communities': the family, the church and the state. Within each of these arenas of human relationships God calls on those who are in positions of authority to use their position to lovingly serve those in the community. He also calls on those who are being served to willingly cooperate with their leaders as an act of joyful service to himself (see Exodus 20:12; Matthew 22:15-21; Acts 20:28; Romans 13:1-7; Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9; Colossians 3:18 – 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 2:1-3, 11-12; Titus 2:1-10; 3:1-2; 1 Peter 2:13 – 3:7; 5:1-3; Hebrews 13:17; *Small Catechism*, fourth commandment and table of duties; *Large Catechism* I 104-66; *Augsburg Confession* XIV, XVI.)

This teaching about order and subordination can raise a number of difficult issues, especially when we begin to think about the unhealthy ways it is sometimes understood and lived out in marriage, in the church or in society. The Bible does not speak of subordination in terms of domination, and it doesn't sanction oppressive or abusive behaviour, especially in marriage. Rather, the Bible calls all leaders to emulate the godly leadership of Jesus Christ, who uses his authority to serve others, not himself. Domination and oppression are not expressions of God-given order and authority, but of sinful disorder and disobedience to God. At the same time, we don't guard against oppression by rejecting this teaching outright but by seeking to understand it and by exercising authority in humility and love for the good of all and for the upbuilding of the community as it receives God's good gifts.

While all of us, regardless of where we stand on the ordination debate, can agree with the above, we differ in the way we see the biblical teaching on subordination applying to the ordination of women. This Q&A does not explore the general teaching on subordination further but simply sets out two different views as to how this teaching relates to the question of the ordination of women, without attempting to integrate them. In fact, people may find themselves agreeing with various aspects of both cases. Even so, for the sake of clarity we present them together to promote discussion and dialogue.

Why subordination precludes women from the public ministry

When the New Testament speaks about the three orders of the family, the church, and the state, it makes it clear that many features of these orders are fixed for us by God. However, this does not mean that every feature of these orders is prescribed in God's word in such a way that it cannot change over time without us being disobedient to God. The New Testament tells us to obey the civic authorities, but never mandates a particular form of government for us (monarchy, democracy, etc.). It tells slaves to obey their masters, just as today we encourage workers to obey their employers, yet it never prescribes slavery as an enduring institution. Quite the opposite. It commands masters not to mistreat their slaves (Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1) and tells slaves that if they have the opportunity to gain their freedom they should do so (1 Corinthians 7:21-23). It includes those who force people into slavery in a list of those who are unholy and do not live according to sound doctrine (1 Timothy 1:10), and urges the slave owner Philemon to treat his slave Onesimus as a Christian brother and therefore grant him the freedom he desired (Philemon 8-20).

So how can we tell which features of these three orders are fixed and which we are free to change? By looking carefully at what the New Testament prescribes, what it prohibits, and the reasons it gives.

When it comes to the order of the church, and the public ministry of word and sacrament within it, the New Testament makes it clear that God has not chosen women for this role, since he prohibits them from doing the authoritative speaking/teaching/preaching within the divine service (1 Corinthians 14:33-38; 1 Timothy 2:11-14). Here the Bible gives us no indication that this is merely a temporary prohibition that pertains only to a certain local or cultural context. Quite the opposite. It grounds this prohibition in the order of creation (1 Timothy 2:13), the enduring consequences of the fall (1 Timothy 2:14), and a command of the Lord that pertains not merely to one context but 'to all the churches of the saints' (1 Corinthians 14:33,37). This places women into the same situation as lay men: no less valuable than pastors within the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 12:12-31), but called to be subordinate to the God-given pastoral ministry of teaching God's word.

The most important requirement of any pastor is a willingness to submit to God and to his word (Titus 1:9). This includes respecting God's right to choose who he wants to serve him as pastors. God chose the Jews as his unique instrument to bring salvation into the world (Genesis 12:3; John 4:22). He chose only Levites to serve him in the temple and the tabernacle and chose only the descendants of Aaron to serve him as Old Testament priests. He chose only the sons of David to sit on the throne in Jerusalem. He chose only Mary to be the mother of our Lord, and chose only women to give birth to children. So if he chooses only men to serve in the public ministry of word and sacrament then that is his prerogative as God. Since God has made this choice clear to us in his word, any church that disregards this and decides to ordain women not only acts contrary to a scriptural command but also shows itself to be unwilling to submit to God's word at this point.

Why subordination does not preclude women from the public ministry

God has given parents enduring authority over their children (Ephesians 6:1-3), governments enduring authority over the citizens (Romans 13:1), and church leaders enduring authority over the laity (Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:7,17). Subordination has to do with willing obedience to people whom God has placed over us in positions of authority. More profoundly within the body of Christ, subordination also has to do with an attitude of deference and willing surrender to others and their needs (Ephesians 5:21). It has to do with renouncing self-will and giving precedence to others in true humility. All Christians are called to be subordinate. Husbands are to demonstrate subordination to their wives by modelling Christ's self-giving love (Ephesians 5:21), and wives are to demonstrate subordination to their husbands (1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1) by their modesty, silence and humble deference (1 Timothy 2:11-14). While the ideal is full

reciprocity, the New Testament texts that explicitly call for the subordination of wives to their husbands in the domestic realm reflect sensitivity to the laws and customs of the patriarchal Greco-Roman society of the day, and to the traditions of the church's Jewish forebears. As with other inherited traditions, the fragile fledgling church initially retained this one too, to avoid offence so that the gospel might have unimpeded spread in the wider community.

Paul's command that women save their questions till they get home (1 Corinthians 14:35) and his mention of childbirth (1 Timothy 2:15) seem to indicate that Paul has wives in mind also in the texts that have been the focus of LCA studies on women's ordination (1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:11), and not just women in general. However, when the words for subordination appear in these two texts, they don't specifically connect subordination with the relationship between husbands and wives. The words stand on their own, indicating that here they refer more to the decorum and humility expected of women in the society of that time, extending to Christian worship settings. The New Testament understanding of the subordination of wives to their husbands has to do with the domestic realm. It is not readily transferred to the relationship between clergy and laity.

Paul did not call for the total silence of women in worship. Rather he told certain disruptive women to keep quiet, not women in general. After all, women served as prophets, one of the primary leadership positions in the worship life of ancient Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:5; see 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 2:20), and this most likely included the weighing of prophecies (1 Corinthians 14:29). Paul could hardly have spoken of their public ministry in one chapter (1 Corinthians 11) and then called for their total silence in another (1 Corinthians 14). The ministry of prophets was certainly not carried out in silence, or only in private. Prophets proclaimed the gospel clearly, and thereby built up the church; and they thoroughly catechised both the faithful and those new to the faith (1 Corinthians 14:3–5, 19–25).

Those who comply with the Bible's calls for subordination do so as an act of voluntary service motivated by the gospel. All are to be subordinate 'out of reverence for Christ' (Ephesians 5:21): wives 'as is fitting in the Lord' (Colossians 3:18), children as 'your acceptable duty in the Lord' (Colossians 3:20), and slaves 'out of godly fear' (Colossians 3:22). This humble service of others flows out of Christ's ultimate service to the church, his work of salvation (Colossians 3:23, 24; Titus 2:9–14; 3:1–7). As for its impact, the voluntary subordination of wives—as opposed to raising questions in self-willed assertion—is urged for the sake of good order and the building up of the church. Social role confusion and worship disorder hindered the upbuilding of the church. Furthermore, the humble subordination of Christian wives may well lead to the conversion of their non-Christian husbands (1 Peter 3:1–7). How could it not be said that the same would apply if Christian husbands were to live in humble subordination to their pagan wives? Such loving behavior serves as an effective witness to the gospel and its power to change lives (1 Peter 2:12; 3:1–6).

This understanding of subordination is consistent with the doctrine and practice of ministry. Christ was adamant that he 'came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). Having 'come among [us] as one who serves', he calls his followers to turn their backs on the ways of gentile kings and others in positions of authority who love the titles and perks of their office (Luke 22:24–27; see also 1 Peter 5:3). If anyone should be dissuaded from seeking ordination it is those who are unwilling to give their lives in willing subordinate service, not women by way of a blanket prohibition.

Summary

As you have read this short paper you may have resonated with different parts of both ways of approaching the topic of subordination. The case against the ordination of women interprets 1

Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2: 11-14 to mean that in the divine service all women, like all unordained men, are to be subordinate to Christ and his spokesmen and not to assume teaching authority in the church. The case for the ordination of women interprets those passages in light of Ephesians 5:21 which call all Christians, men and women, to mutual submission, and holds that the orders of creation are transformed in the Lord.