

The Case for the Ordination of Women – A Summary

- 1 The Lutheran Church of Australia's understanding of what Scripture has to say about the service of women in the church has changed over recent decades. A few years ago we thought that God's will did not allow women to read lessons in church, to vote at congregational meetings and conventions, or to serve on the committees and councils of the church. Neither did we believe that God had given any women as gifts to serve the church by chairing congregations, being elders or assisting with the distribution of Communion. We did not accept God's gift of women in these areas because we believed that this was required for us to be faithful to biblical truth.
- 2 The LCA no longer believes that women are excluded from these roles. Now we thank God for the women who serve in so many different roles in our congregations and church. After re-examining the scriptures we found that they did not support the positions we previously held. We submitted to the authority of Scripture and welcomed the service of women in new areas. Faithfulness to God and his word demanded it.
- 3 If the LCA is going to remain faithful to God and his word in our time, we now need to take another step in this journey and recognise that, in spite of our previously held convictions, Scripture does allow the ordination of women. Those that support the ordination of women recognise that there is no biblical command to ordain women. In some eras and cultures the ordination of women would have been detrimental to the work of the gospel. But in our time and culture, faithfulness to Scripture leads us to support the ordination of women.
- 4 We begin with the current position of the church and say that the texts that have traditionally been used to exclude women from ever being pastors do not, on closer examination, say that. Secondly we need to recognise that Scripture as a whole allows women to be ordained. In this brief paper we can only summarise the arguments without developing them in any detail. This has been done elsewhere.
- 5 The foundational texts (1 Cor 14:33b-38 and 1 Tim 2:11-14), on which the church has previously based its position, do not warrant the conclusions drawn from them. The point of these texts is as binding now as it was then, that is, that worship must be orderly. There is no clear indication that the ways in which order is to be maintained are binding on the church beyond the congregations of that time. We no longer require that women wear head coverings or that men have short hair. In the same way Paul's statements in these texts are his pastoral response to the cultural situation in the 1st century and do not become laws for all times and places. In those days the behaviour of some women in worship caused offence and was a barrier to the proclamation of the gospel. Today our refusal to ordain women gives offence and is a barrier to that proclamation.
- 6 These two texts do not deal with the office of the ministry as it is understood today. They deal with the ordering of worship in the early church, which involved leadership by various people, including those directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, amongst whom were women. Thus women participated in leading worship. It was only later that essential functions of leading worship were confined to one office, an office that came to exclude women.
- 7 These two texts are to be interpreted in the light of the whole of the Scriptures, which is the inspired Word of God. Christ and the gospel he proclaimed are the heart and centre of the Scriptures. Their purpose and goal is that sinners be justified. For that reason Christ instituted the office of the ministry and calls people to serve as pastors in the church. To argue in this way is not to reduce Scripture to gospel alone, but to make the gospel and its proclamation the basis of the church's practice.
- 8 For the church to maintain its ban on the ordination of women in our day, it would need to clearly demonstrate that Scripture as a whole forbids women to be pastors. Anything less would not provide a sufficient basis for the church to refuse to receive suitably qualified women as gifts from God to serve as pastors of his church.
- 9 Christ chose twelve men to be apostles to testify to the resurrection and so represent the twelve tribes in the formation of the new Israel. But a precedent is not the same as a

command. The rest of Scripture shows women functioning in many roles in the church. For example Deborah judged Israel, Junia is an apostle (but not one of the twelve), Priscilla took the lead in teaching Apollos, and the daughters of Philip (the evangelist) were prophets. Women pray and prophesy in the worship services of the New Testament church.

- 10 Both men and women are created in the image of God. It is no more logical to suggest that only the male gender can represent God the Father and Christ as pastors in the church, than it would be to say that only Jews can be pastors because Jesus and the twelve were all Jews. Indeed, all such distinctions are irrelevant in the new creation, as Paul says,
for in Christ Jesus you are all the children [sons] of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. [Gal 3:26-28]
- 11 The Church is a model of the new creation for the world, demonstrating to the world what God intends for his creation and what will finally be revealed when God unveils the new heavens and the new earth. The old order of creation is transformed 'in the Lord' (1 Cor 11:11). The church gradually abolished from its community the discrimination based on these distinctions. In New Testament times it resolved the Jew/Greek divide. Then Christians worked for the abolition of slavery. Finally, the church is tackling the exclusion of women from various roles in the church, including the office of pastor.
- 12 The Lutheran Confessions are clear that the validity and efficacy of the office of the ministry is dependent on the word of God alone; not, we conclude, on the qualities or gender of the pastor. Those who have been baptised by a woman are not re-baptised, nor do those, who in good conscience commune at an altar presided over by a woman pastor, eat and drink to their judgment.
- 13 The central concern, of both the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions, is that the good news of salvation be brought to all people in the most effective way possible. The church lives under the gospel in Christian freedom and is 'gospel-centred' not 'law oriented'. That does not mean Christians are 'free' to disobey the law of God but that we are free to let our lives be shaped by the gospel and the missionary imperative so that all people may hear the good news. Today the effectiveness of the church's mission would be enhanced by having women serve as pastors. The LCA is therefore being urged to receive with thankfulness the gifted women that God is giving us to serve as pastors in our church.
- 14 The greatest concern is not that the LCA might cave in to the 'spirit of the age', but that we might allow non-essentials to stand in the way of the clear and effective communication of the gospel. Of course, we must be on our guard against the watering down of biblical doctrine through cultural pressure. The world does not define the gospel for the church. But it is also true that the church must be culturally sensitive and flexible in the way it communicates the gospel. Paul says
To the Jews I became a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel. [1 Cor 9:20-23]
- 15 The church is called to follow this example of Paul and be flexible in non-essentials for the sake of the gospel. The gender of the pastor is not essential to the message proclaimed, nor the validity and effectiveness of the ministry, and Scripture does not prohibit women from serving as pastors today. Our culture has moved on from the patriarchal societies of previous centuries to the extent that not having women pastors is now a barrier to mission.
- 16 In our time and in our society, faithfulness to Scripture requires the ordination of both women and men.

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