

Hermeneutics and the ordination dialogue

Two recurring questions during the debate on ordination in the LCA have been: Why have our leading theologians come to opposing positions on the ordination of women, despite their common allegiance to the Bible and the Confessions? And, can biblical hermeneutics, which has to do with the principles by which people seek to interpret and explain the biblical text, lead the Church through the maze of uncertainty to a clear vision of what God would have us understand and practise concerning this vexed issue?

The basic principles of hermeneutics for the LCA are as follows:

1. The Bible is the inspired and inerrant word of God and therefore the final authority for the teaching and worship of the church and for the life of Christian discipleship (2 Tim 3:16).
2. The central message of the Bible is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore the key to biblical interpretation is to view the Bible, in all its parts, as pointing to the good news of God, that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. As our heavenly Father's loving address to his children, the Bible is not to be understood first and foremost as an object of scrutiny but as the cradle for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, this world's life and salvation.
3. The church confesses that the Bible is the word of God in all its parts, and is the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged. The Bible's objective meaning can be understood through careful study and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
4. It is also taught among us that through his word God lovingly addresses the church in a two-fold manner—with the word of the law, which holds everybody accountable for sin, and above all with the word of the gospel, which delivers people from eternal judgment by conferring forgiveness and peace, life and salvation, as a gift of sheer grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The LCA confesses that the Trinitarian creeds of the early church and the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century are faithful interpretations of the Bible that have been established by clear scriptural testimony. They serve as summaries of scriptural teaching to guide us in our biblical interpretation.
5. Since the Bible is the final determinant of what the church teaches and practises, it is imperative that the whole Bible be drawn upon to determine God's will in any matter of theology and practice. This is expressed in the maxim: sacred scripture is its own interpreter.
6. We also confess the clarity of the Bible. There is the clarity of the Bible as a whole. There is the clarity of the Bible's doctrinal content. And there is the clarity of faith. In other words, by means of the word of God the Holy Spirit leads people to place their faith in Jesus Christ, to their true and lasting enlightenment. In view of these latter expressions of the Bible's clarity, unresolved issues of interpretation need not trouble the believer's conscience or divide a confessional church.
7. Careful application of the rules of exegesis—discerning what the text meant in its original languages and historical context (what the text meant then) and discerning

parallel situations in the church and the world today and applying the text accurately to those situations (what the text means now)—is an essential component of hermeneutics, especially in view of the temptation to jump to hasty conclusions about the meaning of texts.

8. It is also widely acknowledged that no interpreter of the Bible approaches the task as a neutral observer, as an empty vessel. Significant events and life experiences, and such things as family upbringing, type and level of education, nationality, social location and the spirit of the age predispose people to interpret the Bible in general, and contested issues in particular, in a certain way, even before they start studying the biblical data seriously, and then also as their studies continue. World views are formed and reshaped through reflection on the opinions of respected parents, pastors, teachers, colleagues, and people with expertise in such areas as politics and public morality, gender relations and social justice.

Implications

It is now understood that such presuppositions, whether implicit or explicit, have more influence on the way we interpret biblical texts than was once thought. This helps to explain why our theologians have reached diametrically opposed positions on the ordination of women despite their common allegiance to the Bible and the Confessions. The truism that there is no biblical hermeneutics that is free of presuppositions is never more in evidence when the church is compelled to address a hotly disputed topic. The problem is exacerbated when it becomes apparent after a lengthy period of time that opinion remains evenly divided. And opinion is evenly divided because proponents of both sides in the debate have produced what strikes most church members as an equal volume of information and equally persuasive arguments—biblical, confessional, historical, and practical. For each participant in the debate the balance may tip one way or the other depending to some extent on that reader's pre-understandings, pre-commitments or present context.

This must be highlighted, but it by no means says everything that needs to be said. Conscientious students of the word are never bound by their repertoire of pre-understandings, as important as they are. They are important, because as readers acknowledge them, they provide readers with a rich resource of questions to address to the biblical text, opening God's word to ever new insights. In fact, without the questions readers stand dumb before the text, and the text remains closed. The answers God gives through his word constantly challenge the reader's pre-understandings, given the word's final authority, so that he or she re-affirms, modifies or even rejects them in the light of an ongoing process of re-evaluation and re-assessment.

The discipline of hermeneutics offers some important cautions in the matter of biblical interpretation. It has identified a tendency among some people to mistake their deeply held convictions for the infallible word of God itself. They assign to their interpretation, or even a long-standing church tradition, the authoritative backing of the Bible. Symptoms of this approach are seen when people say that those who hold a position

contrary to their own fail to uphold the authority of the Bible, or are teaching false theology, or when they preface their convictions with words such as 'Thus says the Lord'. At the other end of the spectrum hermeneutics calls for caution in relation to the claim, made by those who subscribe to the so-called reader-response hermeneutic, that the Bible has no objective meaning at all and the task of interpretation is to construct its meaning. The text then virtually becomes a wax nose to be manipulated according to the taste of the interpreter.

The church will not avoid the hard work that is involved in biblical interpretation. It includes studying the Bible communally and confessionally, reading widely, drawing deeply on traditional interpretations, engaging with healthy developments in contemporary biblical scholarship, allowing scripture to inform scripture, and listening carefully to all the voices in the conversation. Such an approach will go a long way towards removing an inherent tendency to minimise the significance of opposing arguments, to miss their point, to make light of them, or even to ignore them. Such study will always be accompanied by prayer that the Spirit would lead the church beyond any tensions it may be facing to the basic theological, liturgical, pastoral and evangelistic concerns of the biblical witness concerning the matter under review.

This short statement began with two questions: Why have our leading theologians come to opposing positions on the ordination of women, and can biblical hermeneutics lead the church through to a clear vision of what God would have us understand and practise concerning this matter? It is proposed that hermeneutics offers invaluable help in understanding the dynamics of a church-wide debate on a difficult question. But it is the essential ingredient of hermeneutics—thorough biblical exegesis, implying also prayerful waiting on the guidance of the Holy Spirit—that is required as the church seeks to achieve theological consensus on this controverted matter.