

How is the gospel at stake in the ordination question?

To begin to understand why this is a significant question we need first to reflect on the following:

- The word gospel is used in different ways in the Lutheran Confessions. It is used in a narrow sense to mean primarily the righteousness of Christ which is given by grace through faith. It is also used in a broad sense as a synonym for the Word of God and in this sense it includes what we usually think of as law, gospel, command and exhortation (FC SD 5.3-6, see also Apology 4.62). In the Augsburg Confession the two thoughts are both present. In article five for example, we read:

in order to obtain this faith the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given (Ac 5.1-2).

We see this again in articles seven and eight which speak about the church as being the assembly of believers amongst whom the gospel is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered according to the gospel. In article seven we read the phrase, *gospel and sacraments*, whereas in article eight we read the phrase *the sacraments and the Word*.

- Similarly, the *gospel* and the *ministry of the gospel* can be distinguished but not separated when we think about the way God works in the church. The Lutheran Confessions have a clear description of the gospel in article four on justification. Immediately the confessions go on to say that in order for people to believe the gospel, Christ instituted the office of the ministry, providing the gospel and the sacraments to the people of God.

The way we respond to the issue, 'How is the gospel at stake in the ordination question?' will be largely determined by the way we answer these questions: What is the gospel? What do we mean when we say it is to be preached purely and administered rightly? In what way does the ministry of the Gospel impinge on the reception of the gospel itself?

Amongst the arguments for the ordination of women there are probably at least three views that are prominent with respect to the *gospel at stake* question. The views are not necessarily of the same order of priority.

- The church is not to cloud or lose the fact that the central factor in the life of the church is the pure teaching of the good news that 'we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us' (AC 4). Many in the LCA believe that 1 Corinthians 14:34,35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 do not prohibit the ordination of women, but they have accepted male only ordination as an inherited teaching of the Church that has not been absolutised by synodical resolution. However, each time that the proposal for the ordination of women fails to receive the majority necessary for a change in LCA teaching, the teaching of the Church inevitably shifts from being a traditional teaching to a fixed teaching. For supporters of women's ordination that means that a stipulation without biblical warrant has been added to the ministry of the gospel; it runs the risk of adding a condition to the gospel. In Galatians 1:6,7 for example, Paul spoke out strongly against adding the observance of certain Jewish laws and customs, circumcision in particular, to the message of the gospel. The gospel would be at stake if certain Jewish laws and customs still needed to be observed. In a similar way, for supporters of women's ordination, the gospel is at stake when the church excludes women from the office of the ministry because that is to add a condition to the gospel and the ministry of the gospel. In Lutheran language Word and sacrament are recognised as 'marks of the church', and these two alone are 'sufficient for the true unity of the church' (AC 7). When the gender of the pastor is seen to be a factor in the ministry of the gospel, and that is

understood to have no biblical warrant, then in that case male ordination has become a virtual 'third mark' of the true church.

- The gospel, in the broader sense, includes our baptismal identity and what that implies for our understanding of ministry. In our baptism we have been clothed in Christ. In him we have become a new creation (Gal 3:23–28; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:9–11). This means that 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female' (Gal 3:28). Our equal status before God has implications for our lives in the church and in the community. As the impact of this new reality sank in during the New Testament era it led to the breakdown of the barrier between Jews and gentiles. In subsequent church history it has led to the widespread realisation within the church that slavery is inconsistent with our new identity in Christ. And in the 20th and 21st centuries it has resulted in the conclusion that the equal status of men and women before God in baptism means that women too may be included in the ministry. Those who have drawn this conclusion believe that the inclusion of women in the ministry is a vital expression of their full participation in the new creation.
- The non-inclusion of women in the ministry has further implications for the gospel in its broader sense. Among us are some women who feel that God is calling them to be faithful pastors of word and sacrament in the Lutheran church, but thus far the public ministry has not been open to them. When people believe they are being called to the office of the ministry and that the Holy Spirit is guiding the church in that direction, then to exclude women from the pastoral ministry puts the gospel at stake because those who could be faithful servants of the Word are silenced. In addition, such exclusion is making it hard for some women and also some men to hear the gospel proclaimed in our church. For them, the gospel is at stake in a personal way. Furthermore, the proclamation of the gospel, in both senses of the word, would be enhanced greatly through the complementary giftings of men and women in the ministry of the Church.

Amongst the arguments in support of the church's current teaching there are also probably at least three views that are prominent with respect to the 'gospel at stake' question.

- While the gospel and the ministry of the gospel can be distinguished, they cannot be separated when we think about the way God works in the life of the church. The ministry is the ministry of the gospel. It is based on and given its power by Christ's commands and his promises (e.g. Matthew 28:18–20; Luke 22:19; John 20:21–23). The gospel needs to be brought to people and so how it is brought and who brings it are issues which are in focus when we think of the gospel being at stake. To uphold the church's teaching about the ordination of men only is not to add a 'third mark' of the church (in which case the church was in error at the time of union, and the wider church throughout history). Rather, it is to be faithful to the Word of God, which is actually a mark of the church. It is to live out the conviction of preaching of the Gospel and administering the sacraments in accordance with the divine Word. It means that we cannot ignore Christ's institution of the office, and his word concerning who is to occupy that office, when we think of the ministry of the Gospel. A question in view at the time of the Confessions was about the ministry of wicked priests who were ordained according to the Word and command of Christ. It is a different question with the ordination of women. In that case it is not the holiness or wickedness of the pastor that is in view, but whether women are to be pastors according to the Word of God. 1 Corinthians 14:33b–37 refers to the fact that women are not to publicly preach and teach the Gospel in the liturgical assembly, and so the Gospel could in fact be at stake if the church acts contrary to that Word.
- When the Confessions speak about the gospel being purely proclaimed and the sacraments being rightly administered they have in mind that this is in accord with the teaching of the Word of God. In our church the Gospel in the narrow sense and the Word of God in the wider sense are distinguished but are not to be brought into opposition to each other, 'for the scriptures are the Word of Christ and they testify to him' (DSTO 1.5). Since the gospel is to be enacted in accord with the Word of God, the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:37,38 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14 are significant at this point. If the Lord's

command is taken to refer to the fact women are not to publicly teach and preach, then the gospel is at stake when a church affirms that practice as consistent with a true understanding of the Word of God. For some, the ministry of the gospel would be happening in contradiction to the Word of God and therefore there is no certainty that it is being enacted as Christ instituted. The church as a whole would be seen to depart from the Word at this point.

- The right distinction between law and gospel is a necessary task in the ministry of preaching and teaching in order to keep the proclamation of the gospel pure. However, the gospel is at stake when the impression is given that it is inconsistent with the gospel of grace to base a teaching or a theological argument on the law of God or, in this case, the Lord's command. The gospel frees us from the condemnation of the law, but not from the law itself or from the Lord's commands. Rather it frees and empowers the church and individual Christians to live in step with the will of God and with the commands of the Lord.

Summary

The question of the ordination of women is one we need to wrestle with earnestly, in faithfulness to God's word, in diligent study of the Scriptures and with much prayer, because people on both sides of the question believe that in some matters the gospel is at stake. We as a church are called to work through this issue in a spirit of Christian love and to seek to avoid division and schism if possible. If we fail to 'make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3), then in that case too the gospel is at stake.