

A Blessed Paradigm Shift.

As a church we are wrestling with the important issue of whether it's good and right to ordain women as well as men to Word and sacrament Ministry. Some say yes, some say no, and many are confused. As far as I can tell, we're all being completely honest and serious, although sometimes we have lacked in respect for each other. The current project encourages us to hear and understand each other.

What I would like to suggest, at least as it covers my own position, is that people who support the ordination of women have experienced a paradigm shift. That is, they have been led (I will even be as bold as to say that it's by the working of the holy Spirit) to a new point of view.

Paradigm shifts themselves are nothing new. They have happened throughout history. Today we would be tempted to mock anyone who holds to some previous points of view, so obvious has the new become. That's not to say that people can't live happy and fulfilled lives holding any and all of these view points. It's just that we no longer agree that they are as categorically true as people thought. For example, try these old views on for size. I'm pretty sure that very few, if any, will fit you.

The earth is flat.

The earth is the centre of the universe and the sun rotates around the earth.

All swans are white.

The atom is the smallest particle of matter.

Only the bread in holy communion should be given to the people.

Ordained ministers of the church must be unmarried, childless and celibate.

Only male voices are permitted to be heard in church.

Women must have their heads covered in church.

Holy Communion should only be celebrated 4 times a year.

Yet moving from many of these previously accepted views was often very painful.

When people are locked into one way of seeing things, everything seems to support that view and it can often be incredibly difficult to see things another way. Evidence to the contrary is often casually dismissed or vehemently denied.

However paradigm shifts do occur. We learn to see things a new way. That can result in embarrassment, anger and frustration, but also joy and delight, as it often brings new wonders, opportunities, understanding and blessings.

When we talk of the ordained clergy of the church, we are talking about gifts that Jesus Christ, our Lord, gives to his Church. In Ephesians we read that "It was he [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."(Eph 4:11-13 NIV) Our confessional documents pick this up when they talk about saving faith in Christ. (Augsburg Confession Article V):

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel, that is to say, in those who hear that God, not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ, justifies those who believe that they are received into

grace on account of Christ. Galatians 3[:14b]: “So that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.”

The ordained ministry is the province of God's gracious activity, where the power and authority lies in God's word, as the following words from our confessional documents make clear. (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XIII).

But if ordination is understood with reference to the ministry of the Word, we have no objection to calling ordination a sacrament. For the ministry of the Word has the command of God and has magnificent promises like Romans 1[:16]: the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” Likewise, Isaiah 55[:11], “... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose...” If ordination is understood in this way, we will not object to calling the laying on of hands a sacrament. For the church has the mandate to appoint ministers, which ought to please us greatly because we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it.

At the moment our church, the Lutheran Church of Australia, holds firmly to the position that the gift of pastors to the Church can only be humans of the male sex. We have inherited this position from the tradition of the Church, and have drawn on two texts, one from 1 Corinthians 14 and one from 1 Timothy 2 to support this position. We need to seriously consider whether these texts bear the weight that we currently put on them.

There are already papers on the various ways that these texts have been understood by scholars who take the Bible very seriously. At present we understand the prohibition of women speaking in the church to refer only to the specific role of the ordained clergy, Pastors as we call them. Is this a clear and consistent reading of the text? For instance, young people in a Norwegian church movement recently moved to prevent women from voting, basing their view on the clear word of God.

It seems clear to me that we are well past silencing the women in our church. Perhaps we are well on the way to a blessed paradigm shift. Perhaps we will soon see that the gifts that Christ has for his Church, also in our context, is greater than we have been able to imagine and accept, and includes ordained women as ministers of the Word and sacraments.

We might even come to see that 1 Corinthians 14 can support the ordination of women also. How is that possible? The broader context (chapters 11 – 14) is that of St Paul addressing good order around the gifts Christ has given to the congregation and the loving use of these gifts in building up the body. Women are clearly prophesying and praying in the churches(1 Cor 11:5), so it's not a question of total silence for women in the congregation. When we get to 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 it is possible to make sense of these verses as St Paul quoting the refrain of some who are mistaken about the role of women in worship. It makes a difference to how we see things if we see that St Paul is taking issue with some who are very earnest, yet in error, and rebuking them quite firmly.

I look forward to the day when we will embrace all the gifts that Christ is providing for the building up of his body, the Church.

To God alone be the glory.

Pastor Boyd Briese

The feast of St Bartholomew, August 24, 2014.