

A Theological Basis for why the Ordination of Women and Men Need Not be Church Divisive

Preface

The 2015 General Convention of the LCA asked the CTICR to build on its earlier work regarding the ordination of women and men to develop a draft doctrinal statement for General Pastors Conference and the 19th Convention of Synod that presents:

- a theological basis for the ordination of women and men, and
- a theological basis for why the ordination of women and men need not be church divisive.

The following statement presents a response to the second part of the synodical proposal. It is predicated upon the conclusions of the draft doctrinal statement which provides the theological basis for the ordination of both men and women, as set out above.¹ In the following statement, the word Church means the LCA, and the term 'Church unity' relates specifically to the unity of the LCA.

A THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR WHY THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN AND MEN NEED NOT BE CHURCH DIVISIVE

The ordination of women and men need not be Church divisive, for the following reasons:

1. St. Paul urges us to make 'every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph. 4:3). Therefore, the Church strives to avoid division. When disagreement arises, the Church is called to 'bear with one another in love', in a spirit of 'humility and gentleness, with patience' (Eph. 4:2).
2. For more than 20 years the pastors and laity of the LCA have prayerfully examined the texts at the heart of the debate without reaching agreement on their interpretation and application. In such cases, the LCA's Theses of Agreement state that 'divergent views'

¹ Practical questions and pastoral concerns that would arise from a synodical decision to endorse the draft doctrinal statement should not cloud the discussion about the theological acceptability of the ordination of women.

arising from 'differences of interpretation are not divisive of church fellowship', subject to certain provisos.²

3. This is not the case, however, if the divergent views were to affect a foundational teaching of the Christian faith, such as the teaching of the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, or justification by grace through faith in Christ, as these teachings are articulated in the Book of Concord. Division may occur only when teachings that contradict such foundational teachings are held and openly taught. But the ongoing disagreement about the interpretation and application of the two texts that have been at the centre of the LCA debate (1 Cor 14:33b–36; 1 Tim 2:11–15) is a matter of exegetical opinion, does not affect such a key church teaching, and is therefore not church divisive.
4. The Lutheran doctrine of the ministry, clearly spelt out in Augsburg Confession 5 and 14, contains nothing that excludes women from entering the ranks of the ministry. On the contrary, the Lutheran teaching on the ministry undergirds and reaffirms the central teaching of the Scriptures, that we are justified by God's grace for Christ's sake by faith alone, the very teaching by which the Church lives and breathes.
5. The Theses of Agreement themselves make it clear that, as new issues and new questions arise, the Church has the liberty to examine its teachings afresh in the light of the Scriptures and the Confessions, 'and accordingly confirm them, or amend or repudiate them when further study of God's Word shows them to be inadequate or in error'.³
6. Pastors and lay members uphold the official teachings and practices of the LCA as a matter of good order and Church discipline, including those teachings with which they disagree. Their consciences are not bound to confess those teachings that they believe are at variance with the biblical witness.
7. If the LCA were to ordain women and men, some in the Church may remain conscience bound to the teaching that ordination is for men only. This would have implications for church polity and for people's reception of the means of grace within the worship life of the Church. These matters are at the very heart of the life of the Church. The Church has a responsibility to engage in the ongoing task of addressing this in such a way that the ministry of the gospel is not hindered, Christian love is upheld, and every effort is made 'to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph. 4:3).

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² Those provisos are: (i) that people be ready to submit to the authority of the Bible, (ii) that no clear word of scripture is denied, contradicted, or ignored, (iii) that such divergent views don't impair, infringe upon, or violate the central doctrine of holy scripture, justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, (iv) that nothing be taught contrary to the *publica doctrina* of the Lutheran church as laid down in its Confessions, and (v) that such divergent views are not propagated as the *publica doctrina* of the Church and in no way impair the doctrine of the Bible. (*Theses on Principles governing Church Fellowship*, TA 1.3.e)

³ 'The Permanent Status of Theses of Agreement', A26.