



THE FINAL REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND INTER-CHURCH RELATIONS ON THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

CTICR 2000

A. The process in brief

The 1997 General Convention of the LCA gave the CTICR the task of studying the issue of the ordination of women, reporting to pastors conferences and congregations, and presenting a Final Report with recommendations to the 2000 synod. This involved the CTICR working through four stages.

First, it was necessary to identify the theological issues involved and study them in depth. This procedure has in fact been in progress since at least 1991 with the release of Ordination of Women: Final Report of the Special Committee to the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, LCA, and then the study booklet in 1992, Women in Ministry. This has been a complicated task. Even as recently as September 1999, the commission revisited a number of issues raised as a result of the forums conducted throughout the church.

Secondly, Resolution 79.d of the 1997 Synod asked that the CTICR:

- finalise its study of the question of women being ordained as pastors,
- complete its study during 1998,
- during 1998 provide congregations with a range of appropriate study resources,
- report to district pastors conferences and to congregations early in 1999, and
- present a final report with recommendations to General Synod in 2000.

In response to that resolution, the CTICR released an Initial Report to the church in 1998. The main purpose of this paper was to present the issues to the church. The report outlined the areas of agreement as far as the doctrine of ministry and the understanding of scripture was concerned. It also included brief summaries of the case for the ordination of women and the case for the ordination of men only so that the whole church could also share in the process of evaluating arguments and weighing the evidence. The majority decision of the commission was that 'on balance, scripture and the Lutheran Confessions allow the ordination of women'.

The third stage was to serve the church and the College of Presidents by involvement in a series of forums throughout the church, both to outline the content of the Initial Report and also to receive feedback from the church. In addition, the issue was studied at pastors conferences throughout Australia and New Zealand. Feedback from individuals and groups was received, tabulated, studied, and considered.

The last stage was the presentation of this Final Report together with recommendations to the 2000 synod. At the meeting of 7-8 September 1999, most of the commission concluded that 'scripture and theology permit the ordination of women'. The commission agree, however, that it was not its place to recommend whether women's ordination be implemented. It therefore recommends that this report be received, and that the opinion of the majority be put to synod for a decision.

This has been an on-going struggle for the commission. It has become aware of the hurt of those who believe that the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry in our social and cultural context is contrary to the gospel, and the hurt also of those who believe that to ordain women would be to act contrary to God's word. Both women and men have strong convictions and experience pain over the issue. The commission has not been able to reach consensus on the main issue. Nevertheless it holds that it has complied with the synod's request and sought to serve the best interests of synod in forwarding this final report.

B. Summary of arguments for the ordination of women

The majority of the commission concluded that ‘scripture and theology permit the ordination of women in the LCA’. The reasons for the conclusion are those summarised in the Initial Report, as follows:

B.1 The relevance of the key texts

The two texts (1 Cor 14:33b-40 and 1 Tim 2:11-15) appealed to in opposing the ordination of women do not warrant the conclusions drawn from them. They are ambiguous and open to various interpretations. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14:34 it is not clear what kind of ‘silence’ Paul is commanding women to observe since women are praying and prophesying (1 Cor 11:5,13). Further, it is not clear to what the ‘command of the Lord’ (1 Cor 14:37) refers, e.g. to the silence of the women or to the necessity for good order in worship. In 1 Timothy 2 Paul is calling on women to adopt a quiet attitude which learns rather than seeks to teach. But it is unclear to whom or what they are ‘to be in subjection’ (v 11), or what it means to ‘have authority over’ a man (v 12). In both texts it is not entirely certain whether Paul is speaking of women in general or of wives in particular. Finally there is no clear indication that these commands are binding on the church outside their original context.

B.2 The mission imperative

The apostolic prohibition against women speaking in the worship assembly (1 Cor 14:33,34; 1 Tim 2:11,12) is based on a concern for the church’s mission to spread the gospel. Women questioning or debating matters in the church (1 Cor 14:35) or acting in a high handed manner would have caused offence especially to the predominantly Jewish converts and potential converts. Paul’s concern here is not for a male order of ministry but for orderliness in contrast to disorder, so as not to bring the church into disrepute (see 1 Cor 14:33,35,40).

B.3 Roles played by women in the early church

Women laboured with Paul ‘in the gospel’ (Phil 4:3); Priscilla taught Apollos (Acts 18:26); women prayed and prophesied in public worship (1 Cor 11:5,10; see also Acts 2:17); Phoebe is called ‘deacon’ and ‘patron’ of the church at Cenchreae (Rom 16:1,2). That Paul allows a woman to learn (1 Tim 2:11) is already a revolutionary step away from Jewish practice since it implies that they can then teach. It is therefore questionable whether 1 Timothy 2:12 (a woman is not to teach or have authority over a man) must be read as a principle without qualifications.

B.4 Equality of men and women in Christ

The baptismal formula of Galatians 3:28 (cf 1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11) gives to women a position in the church not known within contemporary Judaism. The new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) confirms the equal standing of women with men before God (cf Gen 1:26-28). So, within marriage, husbands and wives are to complement one another (1 Cor 7:4) and to be subject to one another out of love (Eph 5:21). Within the church’s ministry, the ordination of women is an appropriate application of this principle of equality.

B.5 The inclusivity of the gospel

The inclusivity of the gospel should come to expression also in the public ministry of the church. This inclusivity which embraced Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, found tangible expression in the early church (Eph 2:11-22; Philem 16). It is fittingly modelled by a public office which includes women.

B.6 The representation of Christ

The first Adam embraces the whole of sinful humanity, both men and women (Rom 5:12,15). In the person of the new Adam, Jesus Christ, God redeems and restores fallen humanity, both men and women (Rom 5:15-19; 1 Cor 15:45-49). The representation of Christ by women is made possible by their incorporation into him. All those redeemed by Christ are members of his body and are thus able to represent Christ to that body once they have been ‘rightly called’ to the public office.

B.7 A legitimate conclusion

The fact that many Lutheran churches have begun to ordain women in this century, against the tradition of the church, does not necessarily imply that the church has been in error and must repent of false teaching. It means that some Lutherans have come to learn from Scripture possibilities for the life of the church which would not have been culturally acceptable in earlier ages.

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C. Summary of arguments for the ordination of men only

Some commission members disagree both with the conclusion and with some of the arguments. The reasons for their disagreement are summarised in the Initial Report under the case for the ordination of men only.

C.1 The Lord's command

1 Corinthians 14:33b and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 are foundational texts for the case against the ordination of women because they speak about the leadership of women in public worship. These passages clearly assert that God does not allow women to preach and teach in the divine service. This holds true even if it could be shown that the meaning of particular words and phrases is uncertain. The prohibition against speaking is not a demand for absolute silence but prevents women from preaching and teaching in public worship. The church therefore has no authority to ordain women. The apostle Paul states that this prohibition is a command from the Lord which applies to all churches (1 Cor 14:33b, 37; cf 1 Tim 3:15) and warns that those who disregard it will not be recognised by God in his church (1 Cor 14:38).

C.2 The relevance of Galatians 3:28

Galatians 3:28 should not be used to support the ordination of women because it does not deal with the doctrine of the public office. Rather, it asserts that both men and women have the same status before God the Father as his adopted children, and that they have the same access to his grace through baptism. Their equality before God does not change their distinctiveness and calling as men and women with sexually differentiated and yet complementary roles in marriage, family, and the church. Their sexuality is not abolished or disregarded, but sanctified for service according to their role in the family and the church.

C.3 The practice of Jesus and the apostles

The exclusion of women from the public office is confirmed by the precedent of Jesus appointing only male apostles (Matt 10:24; Mark 3:14-19; Luke 6:12-16) and entrusting the administration of his holy supper to them (Luke 22:14-30), as well as by the practice of the apostles in appointing a man as a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:21) and men only as pastors of the congregations which they established (2 Tim 2:12; cf 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:5). Although women laboured with Paul in the gospel, they were never appointed as pastors.

C.4 The practice of the universal church

The ordination of women, which was already advocated by some sects in the second and third centuries AD, was rejected for scriptural reasons by the bishops and councils of the early church, as well as by all orthodox churches until modern times. Luther and other Reformers rejected the ordination of women. This unanimous teaching should be changed only if we have clear scriptural authorisation to ordain women.

C.5 The representation of Christ's headship

The ordination of women contradicts the reality of male headship in the church and the family which was established by God in the creation of Adam and fulfilled by the incarnation of God's Son as a male person (1 Cor 11:3,8,9; Eph 5:22-24; 1 Tim 2:13). It therefore involves disobedience to Christ, the head of the church, and disrespect for his gift of order in the church (1 Cor 14:34; 1 Tim 2:11).

C.6 Pastors as spiritual fathers

Jesus chose males to represent both him and his heavenly Father in the ministry of word and sacrament (John 20:21-23). Since pastors not only speak for Christ, but also speak the word of God the Father (Luke 10:16; cf Matt 10:40; John 13:20), they are to be men so that they can serve as spiritual fathers to God's family (1 Cor 4:14,15).

D. Implications of the commission's conclusion

Normally, the LCA would expect consensus from its theology commission for any change in doctrine. Though all members are committed to the scriptural and confessional basis of the church, we have not been able to reach consensus. However, a majority of commission members believe that the conclusion is consistent with the scriptures and the church's confessions.

It is clear that the conclusion would introduce a change in the doctrine as stated in the Theses of Agreement (6.11). If this conclusion were adopted by Synod, it would not be merely a change in practice; it would change the public teaching of the LCA from prohibiting women from the public office to allowing them to be ordained as pastors. The commission fully understands that this would involve a major shift for the LCA, and therefore wishes to help members work through the implications. Difficulties encountered in doing this should not deter us from acting if scripture allows us to ordain women as pastors.

The proposal to ordain women has theological and pastoral implications. The College of Presidents is primarily responsible for the pastoral issues, though they are also of concern to the commission. The commission, however, is concerned that, in reaching and implementing a decision, the LCA give due weight to the following three theological questions.

D.1 The question of truth

Christians are called to hold fast to their confession and to the truth which they have received (Heb 4:14; 2 Tim 1:13,14; Phil 2:16; Jude 3). It is equally clear that those who confess the truth given by God must reject all error that would negate the truth that has been revealed.

At the same time we believe, confess, and understand 'in part' (1 Cor 13:12), and will perceive fully only when we share our Lord's glory. We are called to grow in Christian knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). Increase in knowledge comes not from going beyond Scripture, but from being led by the Spirit to deeper understanding of God's written revelation. Jesus promised that the Spirit would lead the disciples in all the truth (John 16:13). If a change in the teaching of the LCA is to occur, it must be consistent with what is confessed as the clear teaching of scripture. It must also be consistent with all other parts of Christian teaching and the gospel. Due consideration must also be given to the teaching and practice of the whole church, past and present.

The commission affirms its consensus on the way we interpret scripture and on the doctrine of the ministry, as outlined in the Initial Report (pages 1-3).

D.2 The question of unity

Unity in faith is a gift that is to be preserved (John 17:20,21). Christians are called eagerly to 'maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3). Divine judgement must fall on those who destroy the unity of the church, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, by their false teaching (1 Cor 3:17). Yet St Paul also acknowledges that divisions may result from faithfulness to the truth (1 Cor 11:18,19).

The commission has been sensitive to the issue of church unity. We share with all members of the church a deep desire to promote the unity of the LCA. We have experienced the pain of disagreement as we have debated among ourselves. We have also become keenly aware of the pain of many in the church as we have listened to responses of those who hold views with passion and conviction both for and against the ordination of women.

There are those who feel unsure whether they can stay in the church if it does not ordain women; others are unsure they can stay if it does. However, the first question to be determined is this: What is the will of God in this matter? If we avoid the issue simply out of fear of division, we do not act in a theologically responsible way. It would be equally irresponsible to reach agreement by means of compromise formulations and attempting to live with differences. Unity at any cost that surrenders truth and places a veneer over decisive differences will not lead to or preserve true unity.

D.3 The question of love

We are called to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). In debating this issue we have not allowed our differences to destroy the bonds of love that exist between us. We have consciously tried to avoid misrepresenting each other, and we have rejected unethical arguments which denigrate the brother or sister with whom we disagree. We would appeal to all members of the church to do the same.

Aware of God's grace and praying for the leading of the Holy Spirit, we submit this report and commend the outcome to almighty God.

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