

Hermeneutics and the Ordination of Women

Introduction

This paper is not intended to be a general discussion of hermeneutics, although we will begin with some general remarks about the nature and problem of hermeneutics. The main purpose of the paper is to investigate the specific hermeneutical issues connected with the debate on the ordination of women. After a general introduction, we will examine the hermeneutical assumptions and rules for exegesis and then concentrate particularly on the hermeneutical issues involved in the question of male headship and female subordination and how this relates to the order of ministry in the church.

The paper will discuss the topic from the angle of the two positions that are currently being debated in the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) on the question of the ordination of women. It will highlight areas of agreement as well as disagreement and at the same time clarify the hermeneutical issues involved on both sides of the debate. The arguments reflect the opinions and positions of the members of the LCA's Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations (CTICR) rather than those of the church more broadly. Both sides have changed and developed their arguments in the light of the ongoing discussion. Therefore, there may well be differences in argumentation between the members of the commission and other members of the church on the same side of the debate. It would be a fallacy to think that positions over the last five years have simply been maintained and entrenched. While the bottom line may not have changed, several of the arguments used by members of the CTICR on both sides have been abandoned, changed or refined.

Although the paper's major focus is hermeneutics, this can never be separated from questions of exegesis. Therefore, we will need to look at the various assumptions and rules of exegesis. But first we will briefly discuss the nature and problem of modern hermeneutics and contrast this with biblical hermeneutics. The discussion is meant to form a bridge from the general hermeneutics used in academic circles to the biblical hermeneutics used in the church.

What is hermeneutics?

The word 'hermeneutics' is derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuein* which means 'to interpret'.¹ Biblical hermeneutics, therefore, is the study of the interpretation of the Bible. Traditionally, biblical hermeneutics (or theological hermeneutics) has involved the task of formulating rules for the interpretation of the Scriptures. These rules have guided the church in its understanding of what an author or speaker intended to communicate.

Hermeneutics today, however, has been broadened to include not only the rules, methods and techniques used to interpret written texts, but also the conditions that make understanding possible. Either way it is very much bound up with the theory of knowledge (epistemology).² In sum, it is the theory of interpretation and deals with the question of understanding and the process by which understanding takes place.³

¹ Hermeneutics is also related to the ancient Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the gods. It was his task to communicate or translate the message of the gods to humans. This illustrates the point that 'translation' is a vital aspect of hermeneutics: the translation of God's word, given to us through the medium of ancient tongues and cultures, into the language of our day. Here we can all learn from Luther.

² For six modern definitions of hermeneutics, see Palmer, pages 33-45.

³ Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey are regarded as the founders of modern hermeneutics. Ringma observes that 'with Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834) traditional

Modern hermeneutics, which is a child of the Enlightenment, often makes a distinction between 1) what a text says and what is intended with it; 2) what various writers and books say; and 3) what a text said then and what it means now.⁴ To this end it uses various critical tools or approaches.⁵ These tools operate with various methodologies that contain certain philosophical assumptions. Consequently, they are a mixed bag. If used judiciously, they can yield helpful results for exegesis (though not all are of equal value). However, since these tools may contain underlying assumptions that are in conflict with the inspiration and authority of Scripture, they themselves need to be used critically if they are to serve the confessional scholarship of the church. For confessional or ecclesial hermeneutics should be seen as the handmaid of Scripture and therefore be subjected to Scripture's scrutiny and critique.⁶

Hermeneutics deals with the interaction between the text (for our purposes we take the text and the author as one) and the reader. In the pre-modern period, the emphasis was almost exclusively on the text, as an objective, stable entity. In the extremes of the postmodern (or hypermodern) period of our own day, the emphasis has switched the other way round and is now almost exclusively on the reader and the reading (or interpretative) community. We take our position somewhere in the centre for two reasons: first, we recognise the independence of the text and do not hold that the meaning of a text is constructed by the reader. This constructivist approach is largely adopted by those who accept the major tenets of the reader-response theories together with their

hermeneutics moved from its primary philological methodology to become a general hermeneutic involving the science and art of understanding and with Dilthey (1833 – 1911) it becomes the methodological foundations for the *Geisteswissenschaften* [human sciences], (9,10). In academic circles hermeneutics seeks the truth of everything without 'resorting to metaphysical realism and objectivism with its idea that there is "some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal"' (Bernstein: 3). Hermeneutics thus acknowledges that understanding is situationally conditioned. Put in Gadamerian terms, understanding involves a recognition that *Wirkungs-geschichte* [the effect of past history] is operative in all understanding and that one can only arrive at an adequate understanding through achieving a *Horizontverschmelzung* [fusion of horizons], (Ringma: 10,11).

⁴ The new sense of human autonomy and of historical consciousness produced by the Enlightenment led to the eclipse of the normative and critical function of Scripture. The historical nature of the Bible was understood in a thoroughly historicist way so that the Scriptures became no more than a collection of time-bound, culturally-specific documents, subject to the canons of historical inquiry. The historicist approach to the Bible also destroyed Luther's understanding of the unity of the Scriptures, since the books of the Bible were simply seen as a collection of discordant voices rather than as variations on the one central theme of God's grace and mercy in the face of human sin. The Bible was seen purely as a human book belonging to a past age rather than as the living voice of God in the church and authoritative for the church in all ages.

⁵ In the interpretation of written documents, hermeneutics makes use of various approaches, most of which are called 'criticisms'. Criticism here is a technical term which refers to a form of literary analysis. In terms of New Testament hermeneutics, for instance, variant readings in Greek manuscripts are compared (*textual criticism*); the literal sense is detected (*historical criticism*); the antecedents from which the New Testament writers drew their information are studied (*source criticism*); the literary genre is diagnosed (*form criticism*); the theological emphases of New Testament writers are analysed (*redaction criticism*); passages are examined in the context of the entire New Testament or Bible (*canonical criticism*); the structure of New Testament works are analysed (*structural criticism*); the real author is distinguished from the implied author and the real audience is distinguished from the implied audience (*narrative criticism*); the strategies used by the New Testament authors to make what was recounted effective are analysed (*rhetorical criticism*); and the text is studied as a reflection on the social and cultural settings in which it was produced (*social criticism*). If any one approach is used exclusively, the intended meaning of the biblical authors will be obscured (see Brown: 21-27).

⁶ For a good critical discussion of modern hermeneutical theory, see Thiselton (1992).

implied philosophy of language.⁷ Secondly, we take a middle position because we also hold that the reader contributes to the interpretative process. The reader belongs to a community that is characterised by a particular use of language and specific traditions. This context conditions the reader to read or hear the message of the text in a particular way. Applied to the church, this means that the community of faith (in our case, the Lutheran confessional community) forms us to be responsible readers and hearers of God's word so that, illuminated by the Spirit, we can discern its intended meaning.

When authors refer to a person's hermeneutic,⁸ they are usually referring to the lens or grid through which that person reads the biblical texts. Luther's hermeneutic, for instance, is his law–gospel approach to Scripture which is based on the conviction that God speaks to the church in judgment and grace through his word. This is linked with his belief that Christ is the centre of Scripture and that all Scripture must be understood in the light of Christ.⁹

In modern liberation theologies (eg Latin American, Asian, Hispanic, black, womanist, and feminist), Christ is seen primarily as a liberator from political and cultural oppression, rather than from the oppression of sin and death. Ecological theology works to liberate the oppressed earth. It therefore tends to privilege texts that speak from the perspective of the earth. This approach is sometimes called an eco-justice hermeneutic, implying that we should identify as far as possible with the earth or the earth community in our analysis of the text.¹⁰ Simplified, it means treating the earth as a subject rather than as an object in the text.

At the other end of the spectrum, Christian fundamentalism, common in some evangelical circles, bypasses Christ altogether; here a literalist and futurist hermeneutic is employed to interpret certain unfulfilled prophecies relating to the Jewish people that supports both Dispensationalism and Christian Zionism. Fundamentalism does not see Christ as the centre of the Scriptures but rather makes a doctrine of every word of the Bible and sees all Scripture as equally authoritative. According to this view, the dimensions of Noah's ark (Gen 6:14-22) or Ezekiel's prophecy against Gog (Ezek 38) are just as important as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount or the doctrine of baptism. Furthermore, its belief that a text must be understood literalistically unless clear

⁷ This typically postmodern approach to hermeneutics holds that the text itself has no single given meaning. Rather, the meaning is indeterminate. Hence, readers do not discover meaning in the text but they give meaning to the text by their interpretative practices. In a word, readers create the text and make their own meaning. This reader-response approach is exemplified by literary theorist Stanley Fish in his book *Is there a text in this class?* (1982). Fish maintains that the meaning of a text is the reading *experience*. There is no objective meaning. This radically deconstructive approach has been carefully analysed and refuted by Vanhoozer. He argues, in the vale of the shadow of Derrida (the master of deconstruction), that 'there *is* meaning in the text, that it can be known, and that readers should strive to do so' (26). Thus, he rejects the nonrealist position that the world (or the meaning of a text) is a construct of the mind.

⁸ The term 'hermeneutics' refers to the theory behind the different methods of interpreting literary texts, while 'hermeneutic' refers to the application of a particular method.

⁹ We will say more on this when we discuss the christocentricity of Scripture as one of the rules for exegesis. Suffice it to say here that Luke makes it clear that Jesus interprets the Old Testament for the church in the light of his death and resurrection. Therefore, the centre of Scripture is Christ. This by extension includes the New Testament, for Christ speaks to the church in the Spirit through the inspired writers. Luther argues that he does not impose the christocentric lens on Scripture but rather finds it in Scripture and that this is the only lens that enables us to properly understand its message.

¹⁰ Scholars working on the Earth Bible series, under the direction of Norman Habel, have formulated a new approach to reading the Bible: 'Rather than reflecting about the Earth as we analyze a text, we are seeking to reflect with Earth and see things from the perspective of Earth' (Habel 2000: 33,34).

indication of a figurative intent is to be found is predicated on a view of inerrancy that is not shared by the Lutheran reformers.¹¹

It is agreed that while the Lutheran reformers took it as axiomatic that God's intended meaning is the literal or intended sense (*sensus literalis* or *sensus litterarum*) of a passage, they did not hold that the literal meaning of a text excludes a figurative understanding. It is only modern hermeneutics that forces readers to choose between a literal and a figurative interpretation. However, this is a false antithesis. The Reformers knew that the figurative meaning of a text can be its literal or intended sense. Bohlmann rightly points out that many contemporary Lutherans fail to discern the traditional distinction between the literal meaning and the literalistic meaning of a text (1979: 195).

One of the approaches to reading employed by modern hermeneutics, the so-called hermeneutical circle, has benefits for theology. According to Schleiermacher,¹² the meaning of a particular passage can only be understood in the context of the whole, and the meaning of the whole can only be understood in light of the particular passage. Applied to exegesis, it means that individual words and parts of a sentence cannot be understood fully without reference to the sentence as a whole, the paragraph as a whole, the chapter as a whole, and the work as a whole. The opposite also applies, in that the work as a whole cannot be understood without due attention to the meaning of individual words and sentences.

The hermeneutical circle also has implications for the relationship between the reader and the text. We come to the text with all kinds of presuppositions and biases which must be corrected by the text. Our reading is necessarily coloured by our assumptions. However, as these assumptions are modified by the text, our interpretation also changes accordingly. Our new understanding of the text in turn modifies our presuppositions so that we arrive at yet another new understanding of the text, and so the process continues; each new approach to the text brings us a step closer to the mind of the author than the previous one. The hermeneutical *circle* reminds us that the interpretative process involves a continual interchange, an ongoing dialogue between the reader and the text in which the whole can only be interpreted in the light of the part and the part can only be understood properly in the light of the whole.¹³ Some prefer to talk about the hermeneutical *spiral* because it emphasises the dynamic of progress rather than the idea of circularity.¹⁴ Others talk about the world of the reader and the world of the text, or the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the text—the goal of interpretation being the bridging of the gulf between these two worlds, or what Gadamer calls the *fusion of horizons*.

Hermeneutics and interpretation

There is a close engagement between the reader of a text and the text itself (again, for the sake of simplicity, we are identifying the author with the text). If the text in question is from the Bible, then the triune God is also somehow involved in the human process

¹¹ For a Lutheran critique of fundamentalism, see Hamann.

¹² Schleiermacher, a theologian of the Reformed church, is often called the father of modern Protestant theology. He is the single most influential person between Martin Luther and Karl Barth.

¹³ In a similar way Franzmann says that 'the process by which a genuine understanding of a text is gained is therefore "circular"; from *verba* to *res* to *verba*, in continual and lively interaction' (1969: 2). He quotes Luther's dictum on *res* (subject matter) and *verba* (words): 'Unless one understands the things under discussion, one cannot make sense of the words.' In this circular process 'the *res* is of crucial importance, since the question addressed to the text helps determine the answer to be gotten from the text' (2).

¹⁴ Osborne contends that hermeneutics is fundamentally a spiral from text to context, from the original meaning of texts to their significance for the church today (1991).

of reading, understanding, and assimilation. One of the goals of reading is that the biblical text, and the Spirit through the text, in some way transforms the reader, for the Spirit of God is given through the word of God (Smalcald Articles, III/8:3).

Under the influence of post-Enlightenment rationalism, the human subject as reader has always been in the centre. Modern readers in their subjectivity either interrogate the text to extract information from it, or they go beyond the text in their search for God (Hegel and Barth) or else they go behind the text to explain what produced it (Schleiermacher and Bultmann). Here the human subject or agent is active and the text passive. Reason is the main tool the reader uses in trying to appropriate the text. With this approach, God has no role in the transaction between reader and text other than illuminating the reader's understanding.

More recently this hermeneutical model has come under increasing attack by those who wish to retrieve a pre-Enlightenment, evangelical catholic approach to biblical interpretation.¹⁵ This approach takes the emphasis off the human interpreter. It is rather the triune God who is the active subject in communicating and interpreting his Spirit-filled word, while humans are primarily receptive in appropriating the word. Furthermore, this approach correctly sees the word as a speech act in which God the creator does what he says and says what he does, for his speech acts and his acts speak.¹⁶ Oswald Bayer holds that Christian theology is essentially *hermeneutical* theology because God through his word interprets his own self-communication with humans in Christ (Bayer: 131,147). On the basis of Luther's approach to meditation, which he sees as an intimate engagement between the reader and the text, where humans are receptive rather than active, Bayer says that 'the crucial question is therefore not: "How do I understand the given biblical text?" but "How does the given biblical text give itself to me to understand it—so that I am understood?" (Bayer: 131)¹⁷

While this approach stresses very much the role of language and divine utterance in God's communicative action, it has nothing to do with the New Hermeneutic, identified with Fuchs and Ebeling, which understands revelation as a language event or word event.¹⁸ This is still very much a product of the Enlightenment. Apart from anything else, the New Hermeneutic still sees the human subject firmly in control of the interpretative process. The goal of interpretation here is not the interpretation of the text by means of grammatical and historical exegesis, but rather the existentialist self-understanding of the interpreter *through* the text. The text is merely the means to an

¹⁵ Bayer, who is representative of the frontal attack against modernity, draws on Luther's understanding of 'meditation' in constructing a hermeneutical theology. For him the chief hallmark of modernity is the anthropocentric self-reference of the active human subject (the 'modern Narcissus'). In place of this, he advocates the receptivity of the human reader who receives the transformation that God works in us through the Spirit by the word (2003). For a fuller discussion, see *Theologie*, vol 1 (1994: 55-105).

¹⁶ See Bayer (1994: 438-53), Hütter (1997: 82-86), Vanhoozer (1998: 209-214, 226-227).

¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur's ultimate concern also is not that we interpret the text but that the text interprets us. The eschatological dimension to this is brought out by the apostle Paul in Corinthians 13:12: 'For now we see in a mirror dimly . . . Now I know in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known'.

¹⁸ See Robinson and Cobb Jr. For a trenchant critique of the New Hermeneutic, see the articles by Krabbendam, James I Packer and Royce G Gruenler, in Radmacher and Preus (1984). The responses are too onesidedly critical. They show no understanding of the performative nature of God's word as law and gospel, or the significance of that word as a speech act, although they do recognise its instrumentality. They fail to appreciate what is true and useful about the idea of the hermeneutical circle or, better, the hermeneutical spiral; and they consistently reject Bultmann's claim that presuppositionless exegesis is impossible.

end. However, Lutheran theology makes the word central so that the text is not just a pretext but the message through which the triune God works on me and in me.¹⁹

Analytical methods of interpretation (textual criticism, form analysis, historical analysis, literary analysis, discourse analysis, sociological analysis, and rhetorical analysis) have their place in exegesis as we try to uncover as accurately as possible the intended meaning of the author. We are free to use these instruments as long as human reason is not allowed to be the judge of what is true and false in Scripture.

Hermeneutical presuppositions

Both parties to the debate in the LCA agree on the following hermeneutical rules, even if there are differences in the way in which they are understood or applied. However, as we know, general agreement at the level of presuppositions does not guarantee agreement in exegesis or application.

Before discussing the rules for exegesis we begin with three assumptions to which we are all bound by the Lutheran confessions.

First, we confess that all our interpretation is guided and controlled by the rule of faith (*regula fidei*), which is summarised by the two ecumenical creeds, the Nicene and the Apostles, in which the church confesses its faith in the triune God. The rule, like the creeds, sums up the one true teaching of the church (*traditio*). The rule of faith also exposes heresies and determines true and false doctrine.²⁰

Secondly, we confess the full inspiration and authority of Scripture as the word of God. However, we come to different conclusions in regard to the ordination of women. This not only indicates differences in exegesis but it also points to the fact that there may be differences in theology. At issue is not the authority of God's word, but how it is to be interpreted and applied today. Here we need to remember that it is the Scriptures that are inspired and authoritative, not the interpreter. The Reformation has taught us that neither the church nor any individual within the church can claim the role of infallible interpreter.

Thirdly, we confess that Scripture is the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm 1). The LCA holds that the normative authority of Scripture has a twofold basis. On the one hand, Scripture is authoritative because God is its author. On the other hand, Scripture is authoritative because it bears witness to Christ. To use the language of Aristotelian scholasticism, the former states the formal authority of Scripture, while the latter states its material authority. These two sides to the authority of Scripture must not be played off against each other but held together in tension.²¹ Scripture is the norm of doctrine because it is God's inspired word and because it points to Christ.²² The Lutheran confessions teach that Scripture *is* God's

¹⁹ For a range of interpretative methods from a Lutheran perspective, see Reumann.

²⁰ See Bengt Häggglund, 'Die Bedeutung der "*regula fidei*" als Grundlage theologischer Aussagen', *Studia theologica*, Lund 12 (1958), page 39. Häggglund further points out (40,41) that the rule of faith (as church doctrine), together with theological doctrine (dogmatics), is oriented back to God's revealed economy of salvation: 'The prepositioning of a *regula fidei* before the statements of our dogmatics means that both derive their unity and their context from the concrete order of the salvific event, in the *oikonomia*. Ultimately, every true statement about this order must be grounded in the concrete event itself; . . . for the fathers of the early church this *regula fidei* refers to the fact of revelation' (cited in Hütter: 179).

²¹ See 'Consensus statement on holy Scripture', *Doctrinal statements and theological opinions of the Lutheran Church of Australia*, vol 1, 1989, B 9-14.

²² For a formal treatment of the topic, in particular the matter of Scripture and confession, see Schlink, pages 1-36.

word. We therefore reject the Barthian view that Scripture as written word is not yet God's word but only becomes that when the Spirit breathes life into the dead letters and applies the words of the Bible to me existentially so that I know, through the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, that this is word of God *for me*. This is wrong because it separates the Spirit from the word or letter of the Bible.

Under hermeneutical presuppositions we also need to add four theological axioms which were developed by Luther in his struggles with the Roman church over the doctrine of justification. They are commonly referred to as the Reformation *solas* because of their Latin tags: by grace alone (*sola gratia*), by Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), and by faith alone (*sola fide*). These three are all summed up in the axiom Christ alone (*solus Christus*).²³ Any interpretation of Scripture that is in conflict with these fundamental axioms cannot be scriptural for they safeguard the fundamental article, the article on justification, which is the sum and essence of Scripture.

Hermeneutical rules for exegesis

The first rule is that the Scriptures can only be properly understood christocentrically: Christ is the centre of the Scriptures and therefore all Scripture, including the Old Testament, must be understood in the light of Christ (Luke 24:27,44; John 5:39; 20:31). Another way of stating this is to say that because Christ is the centre of Scripture, the explication of the gospel, and the law in the light of the gospel, is the goal of a Lutheran interpretation of the Bible.²⁴ This is summed up in Luther's maxim that the true criterion by which we judge the canonical authority of all books of sacred Scripture is whether or not they promote Christ (LW 35: 395). All Scripture is ultimately seen in the light of Christ who preaches both law (his alien work) and gospel (his proper work). While as a preacher of the law he outdoes Moses, his proper task is to preach the gospel of the forgiveness of sins. This is consistent with the Lutheran emphasis on the centrality of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. It reminds us that the christocentric focus of Scripture must never be separated from its soteriological purpose.

Luther asserted that Christ is the Lord of the Scriptures over against the Roman church of his day who held that 'the church was the master of the Scriptures and in contrast to the Enthusiasts' assertion that the internal Spirit was the Lord of all the Scriptures' (Schroeder: 87).

When the article of justification by faith came under attack, Luther made some daring statements. If his opponents, in their denial of the gospel, pit the Scriptures against Christ, Luther in turn pitted Christ against the Scriptures—such was his supreme confidence that Christ is the king of Scripture and that Scripture is the servant. However, it would be a misuse of this axiom to turn it into a general principle and to play off Christ against the Scriptures in an arbitrary fashion. Christ can only be used against the Scriptures when they are used against Christ, contrary to the analogy of faith, or in an attempt to rob the troubled conscience of the certainty that we have through faith in Christ alone.²⁵

The christocentricity of Scripture is first of all a homiletical and pedagogical rule and must not be turned into a critical principle in order to determine which parts of the Bible are authoritative and which are not. Luther's use of this rule to relegate the epistle of

²³ For a discussion of these axioms within the context of Reformation theology, see Bornkamm, pages 15–44.

²⁴ For the view that the kingdom of God and biblical eschatology is the key to understanding the christocentricity of the Scriptures, see James Voelz, pages 244–62.

²⁵ See also the theses (on faith and the law) that Luther wrote for defence at the doctoral examination of Hieronymus Weller and Nikolaus Medler on 11 September 1535, where he takes up the same theme (LW 34:112). On this topic generally, see Thomas (141–50).

James to the edge of the canon cannot be used to relativise the key texts in the debate on the grounds that they do not proclaim Christ but instead introduce the demands of the law. This rule has often been called Luther's canon within the canon; it is a variation on the common dictum that the doctrine of justification is the Lutheran canon within the canon. While we cannot discuss this further, we need to remember that for Luther all books in the canon are still holy Scripture, even if Luther ranked them according to the criterion of how clearly they proclaimed Christ.

The second hermeneutical rule is that Scripture is its own interpreter (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*). This rule comes out of Luther's controversy with the Roman church which held that Scripture is a closed book until it is authoritatively interpreted by the church (ultimately by the Roman pontiff). Rome argued that because the Bible is unclear it needs an interpreter. Luther's counterargument was that Scripture is clear, simple, and transparent. In a word, Scripture interprets itself.

Luther, of course, did not mean that there are no difficult passages in the Bible.²⁶ He meant that the Scriptures are clear in their central message: the message of salvation, the gospel of God's forgiving mercy in Christ (the doctrine of justification by faith). That is what is meant by the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture (*claritas scripturae*). To put it another way, the overall message of Scripture as law and gospel is clear and it clearly speaks the will of God to us while at the same time it illuminates our understanding. However, this rule does not mean to imply that there are no dark passages in Scripture that are either obscure or hard to understand.²⁷ Luther holds that when it comes to passages dealing with the main doctrines of Scripture, any passage that is dark or unclear should be interpreted in the light of a clear passage dealing with the same subject matter.²⁸

In the current debate, it would be a misuse of this rule to declare the two key passages unclear and then interpret them in the light of the gospel, concluding that women may be ordained because the gospel trumps the dominical and apostolic prohibitions. This would be wrong because the rule presupposes that the passages in question deal with the same or similar topic (*res*).²⁹

For Luther, the rule that Scripture interprets Scripture means the reversal of the normal subject—object order of life: it means that Scripture poses the question rather than we. The Scriptures become the subject and we become the object. But Luther also held that although the Bible is the word of God, it does not mean that everything in the Bible

²⁶ He says in his treatise on the enslaved will (*de servo arbitrio*) that there are many passages in Scripture that are 'obscure and abstruse', not because of the exalted nature of the subject, 'but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar' (LW 33:25, The Bondage of the Will, 1525). Luther refers to the subject matter of Scripture in the plural and includes the incarnation of Christ, his atoning death, his resurrection and heavenly reign. He also says that the christological and trinitarian doctrines are clear from Scripture; 'but *how* these things can be, Scripture does not say' (LW 33:28). The matters essential to faith are clear, if not in one place than in another.

²⁷ Luther speaks of external clarity (the text itself) as well as of internal clarity (the illumination of the Holy Spirit). The words of a passage may be clear, but its spiritual meaning will be hidden without the illumination of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:12-16). See LW 33:24-28, 89-99.

²⁸ This rule, incidentally, should not be taken to mean that Luther supports the private interpretation of Scripture in isolation from the church. While he always upholds the primacy of Scripture, he never played Scripture off against the church unless he was convinced by Scripture and plain reason, as he confessed at the Diet of Worms, that the church was wrong. And the church was wrong in its teaching on justification, as we know from the controversy over indulgences.

²⁹ For more, see Bayer, *Hermeneutics*, 46 n 43. See also notes 44 and 45 in Bayer. (Editor's note: I don't see any mention of a book by Bayer, called *Hermeneutics*.)

is addressed to me, is God's word for me.³⁰ Some words of God are specifically addressed to certain people (eg Old Testament prophets and kings) and not to us. However, it is equally true that there are many words of God that while they are addressed to specific people are also addressed generally to the church (eg Jesus' call to follow him and the words of institution at the Last Supper, to name but two). For Luther, the entire Bible is God's word, including those words that are not directly addressed to him (eg God's command to Jeremiah to wear a yoke), but he also knows that not every passage has the same authority.

The third rule has to do with the proper distinction between law and gospel. However, this is not so much a rule for the interpretation of Scripture as for its application in preaching and teaching. It teaches that when the doctrine of justification is at stake, the law, in its second use, should be clearly distinguished from the gospel and should finally serve the gospel (Gal 3:24: the law was our guardian to lead us to Christ). It also teaches that when justification is not at stake, the law, in its third use, is to be proclaimed on the basis of the gospel, as Paul does in the paraenetic chapters of Romans (Rom 12-15).

The distinction between law and gospel ensures that the gospel functions as gospel in preaching and teaching and that all commands are understood and taught in the light of the gospel without discounting or absolutising them. The claim is made that some of those who support the ordination of women use an inference drawn from the gospel (the equality of all in Christ) to override an apostolic command. They are said to lump the apostolic commands in the two key texts under the category of law and then trump them with the gospel. However, argumentation by means of general 'gospel principles' may be a strategy used by some in the church, but it is renounced by members of the CTICR on both sides of the debate. Such a method of interpretation is not supported by either Luther or the Lutheran confessions, for it amounts to using the distinction between law and gospel as a critical hermeneutical principle rather than as a rule for exegesis and an aid to application. Those who argue for the ordination of both men and women claim to be able to demonstrate on exegetical grounds that the prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12 are purely local restrictions limited to the churches of Paul's day. Hence, they argue that it is not a matter of trumping the command of the apostle with the gospel, but of understanding the true intent of that command.

The fourth rule is closely related to the third and addresses the relationship between the Scriptures and the doctrine of justification. For Luther, Christ is the essential content of the Scriptures: 'Take Christ out of the Scriptures and what do you have left?' (LW 33:26; *The Bondage of the Will*, 1525). Because Christ is the incarnate Word, the Scriptures of both testaments bear witness to him. While the Bible also contains the law and Christ himself also preaches the law, the heart of the Scriptures and the proper work of Christ is to proclaim the gospel, the message of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake. For this reason the doctrine of justification is the key to the whole Bible because only the person who understands the gospel as the message of the sinner's justification for Christ's sake can comprehend the central message of the Scriptures (Sasse: 115-117). However, for reasons already given we cannot use the doctrine of justification in the current debate to set aside the dominical and apostolic commands.

³⁰ In 'How Christians should regard Moses' (1525) Luther says: 'The word in Scripture is of two kinds: the first does not concern or apply to me, the other kind does. And I can boldly trust and rely on that word which does concern me, just as I can rely on a strong rock. But if it does not concern me, then I should stand still. The false prophets pitch in and say: "Dear people, this is the word of God". That is true; we cannot deny it. But we are not the people to whom it speaks'. (LW 35:170, translation slightly altered)

Those who claim that the prohibitions are only temporary must argue their case exegetically.

Divine institution or adiaphoron?

The debate over the ordination of women has already raised the question of whether their prohibition from the office is a matter of divine institution or an adiaphoron. Although there is a difference of opinion on this question, theologians on both sides of the debate agree that it is not the issue of divine institution that is in contention but its application. Therefore, we begin with a consensus statement on the doctrine of the ministry and the nature of adiaphora before discussing our differences.³¹

We agree that by his word Christ has instituted the office of the ministry (Matt 16:18f; 28:18-20; John 20:21-23). That word provides the mandate for ministry. It empowers the office and consecrates the pastors who occupy it. If the ministry of the gospel faithfully enacts that mandate, both the pastors and the church can be sure that their work is the work of God and therefore pleasing to God. It therefore provides the basis for confidence that the ministry is Christ's ministry, and that pastors are Christ's mouth and Christ's hands as they shepherd God's flock.

The Lutheran confessions define adiaphora liturgically. The Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration, Article 10) says that the adiaphora are 'ceremonies and church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the word of God'. Therefore, the office of the ministry is not an adiaphoron because it is divinely instituted. It is not simply a human ordinance introduced for the well-being (*bene esse*) of the church, but it is constitutive of the church. However, that is where the agreement ends.

Those who support the church's traditional practice of ordaining males only hold that the prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12 apply to the office of the ministry and need to be considered together with the foundational texts in order to enact what Christ has instituted for it. They insist that the same Christ who established the office gave no mandate to ordain women but in fact prohibited it. They further insist that without a clear mandate the church cannot bind consciences to a new practice because practice must enact Christ's prohibitions as well as his commands.

Those who support the ordination of women as well as men hold that the prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12 do not exclude women from the office because they are temporary local restrictions. Supporters of this position do not just distinguish between person and office but also between office and gender. They hold to the dominical institution of the office but do not accept that the prohibitions form part of its institution. In other words, they argue that while the office is not an adiaphoron the gender of the person who occupies it is an adiaphoron.

Headship and subordination

A major difference between the two sides of the debate in the exegesis of the key passages lies in the way in which they interpret those passages that deal with the headship of the male and the subordination of the female in marriage and in the church. This also involves the vexed question of the relation of the so-called order(s) of creation to the order of redemption. The term 'order of creation' (and its counterpart 'order of redemption'), which is not a biblical term but a theological construct, has been the subject of considerable debate.³²

³¹ For a discussion on adiaphora, see the LCA's Commission on Worship statement 35: 'Solidarity in worship: The Lutheran understanding of adiaphora'.

³² Schroeder (1972: 165-78) attempts to trace the 'orders of creation' back to Calvin rather than Luther. He argues against the nineteenth century distortion that tended to see the orders as fixed and static. The headship of the male and the subordination of the female, in marriage and

Rather than talk about the concept 'order of creation', it is better to follow the Augsburg Confession and speak of the divinely instituted orders. Article 16 teaches that 'the gospel does not overthrow secular government (*weltlich Regiment*), public order (*Polizei*), and marriage (*Ehestand*), but instead intends that a person keep all this as a true order of God (*Wahrhaftige Gottesordnung*) and demonstrate in these stations (*Stände*) [examples listed earlier] Christian love and true good works according to each person's vocation' (Kolb and Wengert: 48.5). There are three divinely instituted orders: the church, government, and the home,³³ but Article 16 does not mention the church because it is dealing with the topic of civic affairs (marriage and secular government).

There is consensus among the members of the church's CTICR on both sides of the debate that it is not helpful to operate with general principles or concepts. More specifically, those who support the ordination of men and women on the CTICR do not argue from the order of redemption, although it has at times appeared in that side's arguments in the past, and those who uphold male only ordination do not presuppose a universal order of creation. We agree that the Old Testament does not teach a general order of creation, nor does the New Testament teach a general order of redemption. Both sides are committed to working with specific texts. That is especially important in the area of headship and subordination.

Many of those who support the ordination of women no longer use Galatians 3:28 to counterbalance Paul's words in the two key texts and to argue that the order of redemption, marked as it is by equality in Christ and mutual submission, takes priority in the church over the order of creation. On the basis of the fundamental hermeneutical principle that all Scripture must be read in the light of Christ and the gospel, it was argued (and still is in some circles) that Paul's words about unity and equality in Christ trump what he said in the two key texts about women not having authority over men and needing to be subordinate. However, the majority of those who support the ordination of women on the CTICR no longer use that line of argument.

The reason they have pulled back is exegetical. The three contrasting pairs Paul mentions (Jew and Greek; slave and free; male and female) cannot simply be lumped together as descriptions of the inequality and division in the order of creation. Rather, they must be carefully distinguished. The distinction between Jew and Greek (or gentile) is covenantal and goes back to the Old Testament; the distinction between slave and free is social and goes back to the fall; and the distinction between male and

in the church, was seen as divinely given at creation and hence belonging to these orders. He points out that Ewert argues against this fixed understanding of the order of creation. He holds that it refers not to what God created at the beginning, but to what he continues to create (*creatio continua*) and to his continuing act of ordering human life. Theologians in the LCA, who are sympathetic to the ordination of women, have often used Ewert's argument to support their case. However, those who hold to the ordination of males only point out, *contra* Ewert, that it is not a case of 'either—or' but of 'both—and'. They argue that the order of creation is not only established by God prior to the fall as something fixed and immutable, but it is also a part of God's ongoing regulative activity and open to change and growth. However, Ewert also says that 'the order of creation is not a product of the creative but the regulative activity of God. . . As the product of his governing activity, it is a process in time' (1957: 78).

³³ See SA Preface 14, Kolb and Wengert: 300.14; and SC; Kolb and Wengert: 365-67. In addition to these references, perhaps Luther's most representative treatment of the three orders is in his 1528 'Confession concerning Christ's supper' (LW 37:363-5). See also Bayer (1998: 139), and Wannewetsch (2003: 130-33). Wannewetsch rightly points out, in his discussion of the three estates (orders), that 'sanctification for Luther is not just a matter of faith, but a matter of faith *and* created orders, or more precisely of *faith that is exercised in love within the divinely assigned spheres of social life, politics, economics, and religion*' (132). See AC 16 [Latin]: 'the exercise of love in these orders'.

female is creational and therefore ontological. In Christ the distinction between Jew and Greek is set aside as is the distinction between slave and free.³⁴ But being in Christ does not remove the distinction between male and female. However, at this point the two sides go in different directions.

Those who reserve ordination to men argue that the equality of the male and the female before God does not abolish the headship of the husband in marriage and of the male in the church. Redemption does not negate creation—or to use the language of the confessions: the order of the church does not negate the order of marriage—but it sanctifies the relationship between husband and wife in marriage, as well as the interaction between men and women in the church.

The relation between God the Father and his eternal Son has at times been invoked by those who support male only ordination to illustrate the point that subordination does not negate equality. Christ is equal in being with the Father in respect to his divinity, yet subordinate to the Father with respect to his origin and office, for he proceeds from the Father. Those who affirm the ordination of women, however, cannot so easily accept the christological analogy. Generally, they speak only of his subordination in the sense of his obedience to the Father in his earthly ministry, not in his exalted state as Lord of the church.

One of the main sticking points in the debate is the interpretation of Genesis 2:18-25. This has implications for the interpretation of the two keys texts, on both sides of the debate, as well as for Paul's words regarding husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:21-32.

Those who uphold the church's traditional practice argue that the apostle supports his prohibition against women in the public ministry by appealing to a divinely instituted order for the church with its ministry of the word which corresponds to the order of marriage as given by God in his law (1 Cor 14:34). In both these orders God has established male headship and subordination to male headship (1 Tim 2:13,14). Paul stresses that his call for women to be subordinate to their male pastors is not his personal opinion but a command of the Lord (1 Cor 14:37). Therefore, the apostolic command is not temporary or limited to the churches of Paul's day but is applicable to all the congregations of the saints (1 Cor 14:33b).

On the other hand, the exegetical paper written in support of the ordination of men and women³⁵ argues that the apostle's command is limited and temporary. It points to a parallel situation in the churches at Corinth and Ephesus that explains why Paul issued this command. At Corinth, the women, whom Paul permitted to pray and prophesy (1 Cor 11:5,13), were disturbing the order in the church through their interjections (1 Cor 14:32,33) while at Ephesus they wanted to teach others before they themselves had been properly instructed in the faith (1 Tim 2:11). In both cases Paul commands the women to be submissive. However, there is nothing in the text to indicate that this is a binding law applicable to the church for all time. Rather, the apostle is issuing a pastoral directive to meet a local crisis.

Those who uphold male only ordination hold that the headship of the male was divinely ordained prior to the fall (Gen 2:18-25). They further hold that this is consistent with Paul's understanding of the creation narrative in 1 Timothy 2:13,14 and his command that women not exercise authority over male pastors. The consistency between Paul's

³⁴ Compare Paul's argument in his letter to Philemon regarding his slave Onesimus, who since leaving his master has become a Christian. Paul appeals to Philemon to take him back, not just as a slave but as a brother in the Lord (Philem 15,16).

³⁵ '1 Corinthians 14:33b-38 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 permit the ordination of women'.

command and the divinely ordained headship of the male given at creation (Gen 2) reflects the unity of the Scriptures grounded in their divine authorship.

Both sides know and confess that the unity of Scripture is a unity in diversity. Those who argue for the ordination of women emphasise the diversity of Scripture in pointing to the difference between Paul's interpretation of Genesis 2:18-25, in light of the specific problem at Ephesus, and the original meaning of the text. They hold that the order of marriage instituted by God before the fall is a partnership and does not imply the headship of the husband and the subordination of the wife. The headship of the husband came about as a result of human sin after the fall. However, the counterargument is that it is not male headship that came after the fall but male dominance. Biblical headship always takes a servant form; it can never be enforced but can only be received. But it is sin that causes men to use their God-given headship in marriage to dominate their wives. Again, those who favour the ordination of women can agree that it is sin that causes male domination, but they cannot find any trace of male headship in the creation narratives before the fall.

Those who argue for the ordination of women hold that Genesis 2 offers an egalitarian teaching on marriage,³⁶ and this in turn colours their interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-32. In their view this passage does not teach the subordination of wives to husbands, but calls both husbands and wives to submit to each other in love (Eph 5:21). They hold that Paul's teaching on headship reflects the patriarchal structure of society in his day rather than the divinely ordained order of marriage and the church. Their understanding of Ephesians 5:21-32 is based on the fact that Genesis 2:18-25 does not teach Eve's subordination to Adam. Rather, the language of the creation narrative is testament to the equality of men and women. In fact, those who advocate the ordination of women argue that anyone who reads Genesis 1-3 on its own terms will be hard-pressed to find the teaching of the headship of Adam and the subordination of Eve, unless they read it back into the text in the light of Paul's interpretation. The divine intent was not male rule but partnership, a co-dominion over the world. If there is any submission at all, it is the submission of both Adam and Eve under God. Therefore, they hold that it is entirely consistent to understand Paul's words in Ephesians 5: 21-32 as an appeal for mutual submission between wives and husbands (5:21).³⁷

Those who reserve ordination to men argue that the divinely instituted order of marriage, and the headship of the husband and the subordination of the wife within it, has not been set aside by the order of the church. However, they do not hold, as they are sometimes said to, that the order of the family determines eligibility for ordination within the order of the church. Rather, for them the sole criterion for eligibility to the office of the ministry is the command of the Lord and of his apostle. The counterargument to this is that the command of the apostle is a local restriction to meet a specific problem and not a universal rule binding on the church for all time. The same applies to the command of the Lord (1 Cor 14:37): those who promote the ordination of women hold that it does not refer to Paul's call for women to be silent in the church, but in fact refers to the whole preceding section of the chapter in which he has been calling for orderly worship.

Those who advocate the ordination of women claim that ultimately, in the view of those who uphold the church's traditional practice, women are disqualified from holding the pastoral office on the basis of their gender—some would even say because of their supposed inferiority or male superiority. Those on the opposite side of the debate,

³⁶ They can also, like their colleagues on the other side of the debate, understand Genesis 2 as teaching a complementarian view of marriage. They do not see these two views as being mutually exclusive.

³⁷ For more details, see Keener, pages 157-83.

however, reply that it is not on account of any universal principle such as male headship or female subordination that women are disqualified but solely on the basis of the dominical and apostolic command, which, they hold, is consistent with the headship of the male in the church and in marriage. Again, it needs to be made clear that what is at stake for them is no single order in which all women are subordinate to all men, but headship and subordination within two concrete orders: the order of marriage and the order of the church.

We need to sum up where the two sides agree and where they differ. We agree that we will not argue from general principles, such as of the order of creation and the order of redemption. We agree that in the church and in marriage, men and women are equal. However, those who argue that men only should be ordained hold that in the church women are subordinate to male pastors just as in marriage wives are subordinate to their husbands. Both sides also agree that marriage, as divinely instituted (Gen 2), is a partnership in which husband and wife are equal and each submits in love to the other. Furthermore, both sides lay claim to a complementarian view of marriage, but they explain it in different ways.³⁸

Those who uphold the church's traditional practice ask those on the opposite side of the debate to understand their position. They do not hold that the headship of the male implies the inferiority of the female. On the contrary, they argue that headship does not negate equality, but by the same token they also hold that equality does not mean sameness and uniformity, but embraces bipolarity in marriage. They hold that men and women in the church and husbands and wives in marriage are equal before God, but this equality does not negate the divinely ordained order of church and marriage where women are subordinate to male pastors in the church and to their husbands in marriage.

Church and culture

Closely related to the issues of male headship and female subordination in the church and in marriage is the issue of culture and the role it plays in the interpretation of Scripture. Although we will not discuss this in detail, we need to draw attention to a few key points. While these points highlight some of the problems in the debate, both sides agree that the matter of culture is not the critical issue.

The case for the ordination of women highlights the issue of church and culture. Culture shares in the same ambiguity that stamps all institutions in the fallen world. On the one hand, it is God's good gift, while on the other, it has been corrupted by sinful human beings. God's revelation, and therefore Scripture, is always tied to a particular culture, its language and traditions. By the same token, it also transcends and critiques culture. At the same time, every interpretation of Scripture is influenced by culture since we bring to the text our presuppositions and cultural biases which in turn need to be judged by the text to ensure that they are appropriate, for there is no exegesis without presuppositions. Therefore, the need to scrutinise our own cultural (and ideological) pre-commitments is as critical as the need to identify cultural factors in the Scriptures themselves.

Part of the difficulty in the current debate is determining whether the key texts merely reflect the culture of their day or whether they are also trans-cultural and binding on the church at all times and in all places. One case in point is the word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 14:35 *aischros*, which is translated either as 'shameful' or 'disgraceful'. Is

³⁸ In evangelical circles there is a clearer line of demarcation between the two sides: those who advocate the ordination of women are commonly said to adopt an egalitarian view of the male—female relationship in marriage, whereas those who hold to the traditional position are said to adopt a complementarian view. See Beck and Blomberg, pages 139-48.

this to be understood culturally or theologically? (see Fee 1987: 708). That is to say, when Paul says that it is 'disgraceful for a woman to speak in church' (14:35), does he mean that it is culturally inappropriate and brings shame to the church or does he mean more? Those who uphold the ordination of men only understand *aischros* theologically. Therefore, they hold that it is disgraceful in God's eyes for a woman to publicly preach and teach in the church. Those on the other side of the debate, however, argue that the sense of *aischros* is purely cultural and so poses no impediment to the ordination of women. What was 'disgraceful' in Paul's day (women speaking authoritatively in the public worship assembly) is not necessarily so today.

Conclusion

The case *against* the ordination of women is based principally on the apostolic prohibition against women preaching and teaching in the divine service and publicly exercising authority over men in the church (1 Cor 14:33b-38 and 1 Tim 2:11-14). The case is built on the plain meaning of the words in the two key texts. Even if it could be shown that the meaning of particular words and phrases is uncertain or unclear, this would in no way alter the argument or weaken the case of those who hold to the church's traditional practice. The church, therefore, has no authority to ordain women. The apostle Paul says that this is a command from the Lord which applies to all churches (1 Cor 14:33b,37; cf 1 Tim 3:15). There is nothing in the text to suggest that this command was limited to the churches of the apostolic era.

The case *for* the ordination of women is based principally on three convictions. 1) There is no contradiction between the texts that mandate and institute the office and the ordination of women to that office, because the gender of the office-holder is an adiaphoron. 2) It is ultimately the word that institutes the office and that is proclaimed by the office that is paramount, not the gender of the person who occupies the office. Even though the person who holds the office must not be divorced from office itself, it is ultimately the word that is constitutive for the ministry and not the person, or the gender of the person, who holds the office. 3) Paul's command that the women be silent in the worship service is not a general command binding on the church for all times but a specific local restriction that he imposed on the churches of his day to avoid unnecessary offence.

Despite their many differences, both sides in the debate confess that the public ministry of the church is based on our Lord's mandate and institution (John 20:21-23; Matt 16:19). We agree that the word that institutes the office cannot be separated from the word proclaimed by the office. The difference is that those who support the church's traditional practice hold that the prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 form part of the dominical institution of the office, whereas the opposing side says that these prohibitions are purely local and temporary and do not apply to the office of the ordained ministry today.

Both sides submit to the authority of Scripture. However, in the present debate, the burden of proof rests on those who wish to depart from the church's traditional practice and ordain women. But, by the same token, those who hold to the church's traditional teaching need to show clearly, in the face of arguments to the contrary, why it should continue to be upheld.