

Q&A 7, Why is the ordination of women a doctrinal issue for the LCA?

Perhaps you are wondering about the title of this Q&A. It asks a significant question because according to the Constitution of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) at least a two thirds majority of delegates registered at a synodical convention is required to change the doctrine of the LCA. It is important to be clear about the reasons why an issue is a matter of doctrine and what follows seeks to explore and explain the question further.

What determines whether an issue is a doctrinal issue?

The Christian church seeks to ensure that what it teaches publicly is true and in accord with the Word of God (Luke 1:1-4; John 8:31-32; 2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; 1 Timothy 4:6-16). Doctrine, the public teaching of the church, is not based on human wisdom. All theologians, pastors and members of the church seek to confess the true and faithful teaching of the Word of God which builds up the church and gives a clear witness to the world.

The Word of God establishes and determines the public teaching (doctrine) of the LCA. The Creeds and Confessions contained in the Book of Concord are the doctrinal standard of the Church because they summarise the doctrine (right teaching) of the Word of God, especially the Gospel, and they are in that sense normative.

Over time issues have arisen in the life of the Church that have required further study, explanation of true teaching and response to false teaching. The LCA always seeks to confess what the Word of God says for the sake of the unity, witness and practice of the Church. During the history of the LCA, doctrinal statements that have been accepted by the Church have been gathered together with a variety of theological opinions in the volume known as *The Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions of the LCA* (DSTO). The status of the documents in DSTO varies and is made clear at the beginning of each document.

At their ordination and installation pastors commit themselves to the public teaching and practice of the LCA. The question arises as to what makes the ordination of women important enough to become a doctrinal matter in the life of the Church, to become part of its public teaching?

Reasons why the ordination of women is considered to be a doctrinal matter

The question of the ordination of women to the office of the public ministry has been regarded as a doctrinal matter in the LCA because the Theses of Agreement say that the Word of God prohibits a woman from being called into the office of the public ministry. The Theses of Agreement were adopted by the two former Lutheran synods in Australia as they progressed towards union in the 1950s and 60s.

Thesis 6.11 of the *Theses of Agreement* states that women are to be excluded from filling the office of the public ministry. It cites two scripture texts and concludes that they 'prohibit a woman from being called into the office of the public ministry for the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments'. It further teaches that '[t]his apostolic rule is binding on all Christendom'. This is a doctrinal issue for the LCA because the teaching claims to clearly represent the position of scripture and to be ecumenical in nature. The Theses are part of the [Document of Union](#) of the LCA and therefore are foundational. To say that scripture does not prohibit the ordination of women appears to go against a clear command of the Lord in scripture, and hence is a matter of confession and doctrine.

The question of ordination is part of the doctrine of the ministry. The Augsburg Confession teaches that God has instituted this ministry so that faith might be created through the means of grace.

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 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. They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Spirit comes to human beings without the external Word through their own preparations and works. (Augsburg Confession V, 'Concerning ministry in the church', *The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J Wengert, editors, Augsburg-Fortress, Minneapolis, 2000, page 41)

This article follows straight on from the article on justification. No doctrinal matter sits in isolation from others.

Some who support the ordination of women regard the issue as a doctrinal matter for different reasons. They say that while AC 5 is certainly a doctrinal issue, the question of the gender of the pastor is not part of that teaching. In support they would say that 'the command of the Lord' prohibits a wide range of disorderly practices in Corinth that prevent worshippers from hearing and taking to heart the proclamation of the gospel, a command arising from the love command of 1 Corinthians 13. It doesn't have to do with the public ministry as we know it. The counter argument has been that if it is indeed the Lord's command that only some men are to be public ministers of the gospel, then that cannot be set aside by human decision.

Some have also seen Galatians 3:26-28 as providing scriptural warrant for exploring the question of equality in Christ, and the implications of the gospel which could allow for both men and women to be ordained. Since the LCA declares that scripture is 'the only infallible source and norm for all matters of faith, doctrine and life', then in order to be faithful to scripture in our time and context we need to ordain both women and men. From this perspective, to be consistent and have integrity the Church must deal with the issue doctrinally, and the ordination of both men and women should become part of our public teaching and practice. This means that the teaching of the Theses on the Ministry is upheld, except for the final thesis (6.11).

For some who support the ordination of women, to continue to insist on male only ordination is to place a stumbling block in the path of the gospel because they are persuaded that the Bible and the Confessions do not mandate male only ordination. Hence it becomes a doctrinal issue for them also as a matter of confession.

What about the issue of adiaphora?

One position taken with respect to the ordination of women is that it needs to be seen in the category of adiaphora. Adiaphora refer to things that are neither commanded nor forbidden in scripture. While the Theses of Agreement claim scripture prohibits the ordination of women, those who see the issue as an adiaphoron do not believe the ordination of women is either commanded or forbidden in the scriptures. The main argument is that the texts cited do not warrant the conclusion that has been drawn in the Theses of Agreement. According to this reasoning, the LCA would then be free to determine the issue in whatever way it wants, in order to best order its ministry. This does not necessarily equate to a frivolous attitude to the public teaching of the Church but simply a conviction that the issue is neither commanded nor forbidden in scripture.

Summary

The question of the ordination of women to the office of the public ministry in the LCA has been regarded as a doctrinal matter in the life of the LCA. Some would challenge this, but since our conviction is that the church's doctrine must be grounded in the scriptures and guided by the Confessions, all arguments either to maintain the teaching of the Church or to change it, need to work within the LCA's own attitude towards the Theses of Agreement and the process outlined there for changing the public teaching of the church ([The Status of the Theses of Agreement](#) and [The Permanent Status of the Theses of Agreement](#)).