

## **Why both men and women should be called and ordained to the office of the public ministry**

The case for the call and ordination of women in the LCA is solidly based on the teaching of Scripture. As we will see, even the two disputed texts (1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-14), properly understood, do not oppose it. We can no longer ignore the role that culture plays in both the writing and the interpretation of these texts. When we recognise this, many of the traditional objections to the ordination of women fall away. However, the main concern of the argument for the ordination of women is not the issue of gender but the teaching of Scripture. The gender of the pastor is a peripheral matter and should not be central to the Church's teaching on the office of the public ministry.

This conviction is grounded in a Lutheran understanding of the office of the holy ministry which puts the emphasis on Christ who established this office in the first place and now calls pastors to serve his church through the ministry of word and sacrament. The fact that Jesus first called and commissioned men, not women, to preach his word was necessary in order to show that the New Testament church, represented by the twelve apostles, was the fulfilment of Old Testament Israel, represented by the twelve patriarchs. But a precedent is not the same as a command. The fact that the first disciples were male is descriptive of the office at that time, but not prescriptive of the office for all time.

The Lutheran Confessions do not address the specific question of the ordination of women but speak only about the office of the ministry as such. However, we hold that no distinction should be made at this point between men and women. The doctrinal basis for calling and ordaining women to the public ministry is no different from that for men. In both cases, the ministry is grounded in Christ's command to preach the gospel, to baptise, to administer the sacrament, and to absolve the penitent. Consequently, the teaching that women may be ordained as well as men is based on the same doctrine of the ministry as taught in the LCA since its beginning 50 years ago—but with one vital difference: the gender of the pastor is now said to have no doctrinal consequences. This needs to be carefully nuanced. We can all agree that the ordained ministry depends solely on the word of Christ which established it in the first place and which continues to be heard through the pastors called to serve in that office today. However, those who argue for the ordination of women understand the word of Christ here in such a way that it has no consequences for the doctrine of the ministry and so does not prohibit women from becoming pastors. Therefore, in our opinion, the decision to ordain women in the LCA need not be church dividing because it would not entail a change to the doctrine of the ministry, but only to its practice.

However, as it stands, the call and ordination of women to the ministry is contrary to LCA's *Theses of Agreement*, which the two former Lutheran Churches in Australia adopted in 1956 as the basis for the union ten years later. Since thesis 11 of the 'Theses on the Office of the Ministry' prohibits women from becoming pastors in the LCA on scriptural grounds, it means that the call and ordination of women in the LCA is a doctrinal issue and not just a matter of practice. Therefore, if women are to be ordained, this thesis would first have to be rescinded by the Church according to the procedures laid down in the constitution.

It is entirely understandable that the two former Lutheran churches in the 1950s agreed that women should be prohibited from the pastoral office. At that time, a woman's place by and large was in the home. They could not vote at congregational meetings, they could not

be elected as delegates to synod, they could not serve on the boards or councils of the Church, nor could they serve as elders or pastoral assistants. They were excluded from these roles then on the basis of the same two texts that are now said to exclude them from the public ministry. However, times have changed and the way in which we now understand these texts has changed too. A fresh look at these texts in the light of cultural changes has led to new understandings and in particular to the conviction that they do not prohibit women from becoming pastors today.

Here we must respectfully part ways with our Lutheran forefathers who, in the 1950s, concluded that Scripture prohibited women from being pastors. Clearly, there is a link between church and culture. The way in which we hear Scripture is influenced to some degree by our culture. So when Paul says that ‘it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church’ (1 Cor 14:35), he is speaking out of a very different social context than our own, for in our day it is not at all disgraceful for a woman to speak in church (ie, take a leading role in public worship). On the other hand, the case to ordain women is not built on culture but on Scripture. While Paul’s words that ‘women should remain silent in the churches; they are not allowed to speak but must be subordinate, as the Law says’ may well sound strange to twenty-first century ears, we do not simply dismiss them, as some might, as oppressive ‘law’ in the name of the ‘gospel’ of freedom (which would set up a very dangerous precedent), but we argue, biblically, that they do not apply in our case because they address a different issue than that facing the LCA.

The connection between church and culture is much debated and can go in two directions. The church is not only influenced by culture but is also called to be a positive influence on culture through the light of Christ. The church has to determine what it can receive from culture as God’s good gift (for God is also at work creatively in and through culture in all its forms) and what it has to oppose or even reject, on the basis of agreed criteria drawn from Scripture. The church cannot take on board everything from culture and must often read Scripture against culture. But in relation to women and the church, we can be thankful to God for the way in which culture has taken the lead in giving women opportunities and recognition in the workplace (despite lingering inequalities and discriminations) and a voice in public life. This fits perfectly with the LCA’s own growing recognition of the important roles that women are playing in the life of the Church today, and it is now time to recognise that there is nothing in Scripture to prevent the LCA from taking the next step and allowing women to serve as pastors—not even those two controverted passages that have been at the centre of the ordination debate for the past two decades.

How then are we to understand these two texts (1 Cor 14:34 and 1 Tim 2:12) that are said to prohibit women from the public ministry? First, we need to distinguish between what Paul was saying to the church of his day and what these same texts mean for us today. This two step process is not as simple as saying first comes interpretation and then application, since interpretation is involved at both stages: first in the task of discerning what the text said to its first readers and then what it is saying to the church today.

For reasons that we can’t go into here but are set out elsewhere ([The case for the ordination of women - a summary](#)), Paul’s command that women are to remain silent in the churches (1 Cor 14:34) should not be taken as a universal command that is binding on the church for all time. Rather, it should be understood as a restriction limited to Paul’s day and time

which he imposed for the sake of good order. He can even say that it is a command of the Lord—although we should note that this refers not only to the command that women be silent but also to all those disruptive practices at Corinth mentioned earlier in the chapter which prevented the kind of orderly worship that built up the church in love. It is not that the apostle is against women speaking in church as such, for elsewhere he permits them to pray and prophesy in public worship (1 Cor 11:5,13). As we consider Paul’s command that women remain silent in the worship service, it is good for us then to remember that Paul does not prohibit women altogether from speaking authoritatively in the worship service, for that is precisely what they were doing both as prophets themselves and then as those called to weigh the message of other prophets (1 Cor 14:29). What he does prohibit is disorderly speaking (as was obviously the case in connection with tongue-speaking), for God is a God of order and peace (1 Cor 14:33).

What are we to make of the other disputed passage where the apostle teaches that women must not exercise authority over men (1 Tim 2:12)? It is important to note here that the Greek verb translated as ‘to exercise authority’ only appears once in the New Testament so that its meaning is all the more difficult to determine. From its uses in non-biblical texts of the time it appears to imply a domineering approach to the exercise of authority which is completely out of step with the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5) and the love and humility that is to pervade his church. The situation that the apostle has to deal with in the congregation at Ephesus is much the same as Paul faced in Corinth when he commanded the women to be silent. A close reading of First Timothy will show that the congregation at Ephesus was troubled by certain women who, in their new found zeal for the gospel, were taking upon themselves the role of teacher for which they were neither equipped nor authorised. These women no doubt included some of the widows whom the apostle calls ‘gossips and busybodies’ (1 Tim 5:13). Although we don’t know the precise circumstances, this problem was obviously disruptive enough for Paul to impose a ban on women and to forbid them from teaching and exercising authority over men. Once again, this is not to be understood as a universal command binding on the church for all time, but as a local restriction limited to the churches of Asia Minor at that particular time.

The role culture plays in the composition and interpretation of Scripture can be seen from the way in which the apostle uses Genesis 2 to support his ban on women teaching and exercising authority. He argues that the reason they are not to exercise authority over men is that Adam was made first and Eve second. He also says that Eve was deceived by the serpent, not Adam, and that therefore women cannot be trusted as teachers. These are the two ‘scriptural’ reasons he gives in 1 Timothy 2:13,14 for why women are not permitted to teach and exercise authority over men. But it should be pointed out that this way of reading Genesis 2 belongs to the cultural background of the New Testament and is therefore non-binding or prescriptive on the later church. At the very least, we would have to say that the apostle’s use of the Old Testament here to support his argument only compounds the difficulty in understanding the text and, in the opinion of many, makes it unsuitable as a ‘seat’ of doctrine. For if we read Genesis 2 ourselves as a piece of Scripture on its own terms, instead of reading it through the lens of 1 Timothy 2:11-14, everything is clear. There is no trace there of male headship or female subordination. Rather, we read that even though Eve was formed from Adam, God made her as a “shoulder companion” for the man, his equal in every respect. The subordination of women to their husbands and pastors (and all the misunderstanding and abuse that has come with it) is the result of sin, not God’s

creation. The way commended by the apostle Paul is rather that of mutual submission out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21). This should be our way too in both church and family, without qualification.

In summary, when the two key passages (1 Cor 14:34 and 1 Tim 2:12) that have been used to prohibit women from the public ministry are seen in the light of their historical and social context, we see that their specific prohibitions do not speak to the LCA's situation today but are limited in application to the early apostolic church. When they are properly understood, these texts, which in the 1950s seemed so clearly to prohibit the ordination of women, are today seen in a very different light. Biblical studies have shown that the apostolic command for women to remain silent and not to exercise authority over men is all about the need to maintain order in the public worship life of the church and so does not directly address the issue of the ordination of women.