

## ***The ordination of men and women: so say the Bible and the Confessions***

### ***Introduction***

After roughly 30 years' active involvement in the ordination debate in the Church, the time has come to summarise briefly the main reasons for my unchanging support for the ordination of women. The rationale that follows is divided into five main sections. The first is the conviction that the fresh outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, that has created the people of the new covenant, has transformed and reshaped every aspect of life among the people of God. Unlike circumcision, the distinguishing mark of the new covenant, baptism, is no respecter of persons. And the Holy Spirit has poured out gifts for ministry on those who are baptised irrespective of their ethnic origins, social standing, or gender. Therefore, the church perpetuates a grave disservice while it continues to shut the door to ordination on women who are gifted for ministry and are called to ministry. The second reason for my stance is that the driving force behind St Paul's worship regulations in 1 Corinthians, his insistence that love builds up the church, is totally irreconcilable with a prohibition that would exclude one half of the church's membership from access to the pastoral office for all generations. The third reason is that a simple, straightforward reading of the biblical evidence provides conclusive support for women's leadership in the worship life of the church, which means that texts have to be twisted out of recognisable shape to sustain the opposition to women's ordination. The fourth reason for my position is that the New Testament admonitions regarding subordination deal exclusively with mutual, or reciprocal, subordination, demonstrated in Christ-like service of one another. Therefore, far from urging that women adopt ministry roles subordinate to men, the admonitions are a resounding indictment of the patriarchal subordinationism of the Jewish and Hellenistic worldview of the New Testament era. And fifthly and finally, it's in the DNA of Lutherans to believe and teach that Christ has established the public ministry for no other reason than to ensure that the gospel is proclaimed purely and the sacraments are administered rightly, and that through these instruments of grace the Holy Spirit works saving faith in people's hearts when and where it pleases God.

### ***1. The gifts of the Spirit for ministry***

The ascended Christ poured out the Holy Spirit upon all flesh at Pentecost (Acts 2:17), to lead people to faith and to perpetuate the ministry of the gospel down through the ages. Through the Holy Spirit Christ measured out gifts of grace (*charismata*) for ministry on members of the body at God's good pleasure (Eph. 4:7; 1 Cor. 12:4,11). Christ did so initially at that founding moment in the life of the church, and he continues to do so to this day, for the sole purpose of promoting the growth of the church by building it up in love (Eph. 4:15,16). Sometimes those gracious gifts of the Spirit are defined in terms of the people in specific ministry positions, such as 'apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers' (Eph. 4:11), and sometimes in terms of the special gifts or qualities associated with ministry, such as the endowment of knowledge or wisdom, miracle working, healing, discernment of spirits, or more mundane gifts such as leadership or administrative skills (1 Cor. 12:4-11,27-31).

The random lists suggest two things very clearly. First, Paul's point is not to list them all, but to point out their sole purpose, expressed as serving the common good (1 Cor. 12:7), which is done by building up the church in love (1 Cor. 8:1; Eph. 4:15,16). The list could be expanded exponentially to include every form of ministry under the sun that serves the Spirit's purpose of growing the church in love. And secondly, not one of the Spirit's gifts for the ongoing ministry of the church is gender exclusive. The word 'men' appears in none of the lists, and in the only New Testament texts where the kind of ministry undertaken by the clergy today is reflected to some extent, they are invariably referred to with a generic plural noun: elders (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4), pastors (Eph. 4:11), and leaders (Heb. 13:7,17). Their tasks include spiritual oversight of their people, carried out eagerly and humbly rather than for financial gain; and in all things they are to serve as examples to their flock.

There is no requirement in these texts that elders, pastors or other clergy be male. That is a significant omission if the New Testament church had intended it to be the case. As said in the introduction, the church perpetuates a grave disservice while it continues to shut the door to ordination on women who are both gifted for ministry and called to ministry.

## **2. *Building up the church in love***

When Paul says that love builds up the church (1 Cor. 8:1; Eph. 4:15,16) he is already announcing the twin themes that will form the heartbeat of his worship guidelines for the church at Corinth, and for worship practices down through the ages. Worship is the setting above all where love comes to life in the Christian community. The worship guidelines of chapter 14 can only be understood when they are read in the clear light that is shone on them by St Paul's great hymn to love in the previous chapter, 1 Corinthians 13.

To leave the reader in no doubt about the intimate connection between the chapter on love and the chapter on worship, the apostle starts the chapter on worship with the crystal-clear command: 'Pursue love' (14:1). The apostle is not moving on to a new topic. He is drawing an unbroken line between the loveless attitudes and selfish behaviour that have reared their ugly head in the church at Corinth—such as insisting on one's own way and flaunting one's spiritual gifts (13:4,5)—and three specific manifestations of such self-promoting behaviour that were making a mockery of orderly worship at Corinth, in chapter 14.

Puffed up with self-importance because of their spiritual giftedness, some among those who spoke in tongues and exercised the gift of prophecy were failing to wait patiently and silently for their utterances to be weighed by prophets with the gift of interpretation (vss. 27–33). They could scarcely wait for the previous speaker to finish before starting. They were speaking over one another so that worship was becoming shambolic. What's more, a handful of wives were bringing shame to the cause of the gospel by engaging in some unspecified form of disruptive conduct. They are told to take up their questions with their husbands when they get home (vss. 34,35). Taken together, these issues were undermining Christian instruction (vs. 19), placing a stumbling block in the path of unbelievers and outsiders (vss. 22,23), and preventing the clear proclamation of the gospel that alone leads to repentance and faith (vss. 24,25).

Worship is the setting in which the love of God comes to life most clearly and abundantly. Building up the church occurs when its members exercise their gifts lovingly, by teaching and nurturing one another in the faith, by proclaiming the gospel clearly, and by drawing outsiders into the believing community. The noun 'upbuilding' and the verb 'to build up' recur throughout chapter 14 (vss. 3,4,5,12,17,26). Having already signalled that nothing but love builds up the body of Christ (8:1), it follows that, when Paul speaks of 'the command of the Lord' (vs. 37), there can be little doubt that he has in mind the supreme commandment, to love God with all one's heart, soul, and mind, and the second, to love one's neighbour as oneself (Matt. 22:34-40), not an otherwise unknown prohibition of women leading in worship. There is no need for him to spell out the love command itself because he has already referred to it so frequently (4:21; 8:1; 13:1-8,13; 14:1) and will continue to do so (16:14,24). Besides, it was so deeply imprinted on the hearts and minds of early church believers that it would have been the first thing that came to mind when they read or heard the expression, 'the command of the Lord'.

Paul's call for orderly, edifying worship, his reference to the practice of the churches, the law, and the command of the Lord (vss. 33,37,40), all work hand in hand to support his exhortations regarding orderly and edifying worship practices at Corinth. However, by drawing on 1 Corinthians 14:34,35 to ban women from the pastoral office our Church has achieved precisely the opposite

effect to what Paul intends throughout the chapter, which is to desist from whatever worship practices inhibit the Spirit's vital work of building up the church in love.

### **3. The clear and simple text**

Those who oppose women's ordination repeatedly claim that supporters ignore the plain meaning of the biblical evidence. However, the closer one looks at the arguments used by opponents, the clearer it becomes that they are the ones who are obliged to play fast and loose with the Bible. Let some of the clearest examples suffice.

- (a) Opponents of women's ordination cannot reconcile the two main verses that they use to support their case (1 Cor. 14:34,35) with the fact that women did in fact prophesy in worship at Corinth (11:5), one of the chief ministry gifts of the church (12:28; Eph. 4:11). This is a failure to distinguish between the women who have the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 11:5) and the small group of disruptive wives at Corinth whom Paul calls to silence, in submission to his apostolic authority (14:34,35). Those who hold this view say that women prophets were restricted to giving voice to Spirit-inspired utterances, but only select male prophets were given the truly authoritative gift of weighing or interpreting such fervent but otherwise unintelligible outbursts. However, the Bible provides no support for this view. Rather, some women in the church at Corinth were in fact acknowledged as prophets in the full sense of the word (1 Cor. 11:5; see also Acts 2:16-18; 21:9), engaged in a ministry that involved the clear and thorough teaching of the word of God (1 Cor. 14:19). The verb from which 'catechesis' comes is used in this verse. By prophecy the Holy Spirit built people up in faith, hope and love, as it led those who heard the gospel clearly proclaimed to acknowledge their sin, place their faith in the triune God and bow the knee in worship (1 Cor. 14:19,24,25).
- (b) Deeply held convictions make it hard for those who oppose women's ordination to accept at face value Paul's description of Phoebe as the deacon of a local church (Rom. 16:1-3). So, it is said that Phoebe must have been a deaconess, with a lesser job description, maybe a ministry of pastoral care and social welfare. But this is not borne out by the text. The word deacon (*diakonos*) that describes Phoebe is precisely the term that Paul employs for his own ministry and the ministries of Apollos, Tychicus, Timothy, and Epaphras (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; Eph. 3:7; 6:21; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:7,23,25; 4:7; 1 Thess. 3:2; 1 Tim. 4:6). The other telling word used to describe Phoebe, at Romans 16:3 is inaccurately translated as 'benefactor' in the NRSV. In its form as a verb elsewhere in the New Testament the word refers to a person holding a major leadership position within a community (Rom. 12:8 [leader]; 1 Thess. 5:12 [those who have charge of you in the Lord]; 1 Tim. 3:4,5 [household manager]; 1 Tim. 5:17 [ruler]). In fact, many New Testament scholars propose that Paul respected Phoebe so highly that he asked her to serve as courier of his letter to the Romans, in which role she would have known its contents thoroughly and explained them carefully, not simply read the letter to the community.
- (c) Those who say the ministry of women doesn't enjoy biblical support are eager to point to Paul's advice that bishops be 'the husband of one wife' (1 Tim. 3:2). Surely this proves, they say, that the apostle only had men in mind when he wrote about the desirable qualities of church leaders. However, only a few verses later he writes that deacons too are to be 'the husband of one wife' (1 Tim. 3:12); yet we know that Phoebe was a deacon (Rom. 16:1), hardly the husband of one wife. The only way to make these texts line up is to acknowledge that different requirements applied in different locations. At Ephesus, the community for which 1 Timothy was written, male leadership was the norm; at Rome, fewer restrictions on women in leadership applied.
- (d) Opponents find it hard to accept that women could be numbered among the wider circle of apostles of the New Testament (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11), yet Paul writes that Junia

was 'prominent among the apostles' (Rom. 16:7), and on sound biblical grounds (John 20:11-18) Mary Magdalene has been regarded as 'the apostle to the apostles' throughout the history of the church. Another ministry that ranks among the foremost in the New Testament is that of teachers (1 Cor. 12:28,29; Eph. 4:11); Priscilla is credited as taking the lead over her husband Aquila in taking the apostle Apollos aside in order to explain to him 'the way of God more accurately' (Acts 18:26). Priscilla was far more than a teacher of women and children.

- (e) A blanket ban on women in ministry leadership makes a mockery of the depiction of various women as Paul's co-workers in ministry (Rom. 16:3,6,12; Phil. 4:3), not his subordinates.
- (f) To complete this brief listing, opponents claim that the creation and fall accounts of Genesis 1-3 support their view that women are subordinate to men according to God's eternal plan and original design. This is the view of those who adhere to the ideology of complementarianism. In summary, it argues that Eve usurped Adam's spiritual headship by failing to heed his teaching regarding the forbidden fruit, and Adam failed in his responsibility as Eve's head by failing to prevent her from committing the original sin and in fact following her into disobedience. For this reason, women are not to be teachers in the church, and men are not to fail in their responsibility to lead and teach. This reconstruction is a fictitious castle built in the air, which diverts the reader's gaze from the theological riches of these founding stories.

This is a small sampling of the distortions that occur when the biblical text is interpreted through a lens shaped by prior convictions about male-female relations and divinely ordained roles. Texts that clearly say otherwise than certain people would have them say have to be ignored, downplayed or reinterpreted, in order to deal with the inconsistencies that necessarily arise at every turn. The result is that women who are called to the ministry continue to suffer unnecessary pain and anguish, and the rest of us are denied the benefits and blessings of their ministry.

#### **4. Mutual subordination**

A highly problematical theological opinion is held by opponents of women's ordination to bolster their stance, namely that the creation and fall accounts of Genesis 1-3 show that women are subordinate to men by God's design. They say that the way these stories are told (above [f]) reveals that male headship and women's subordination are God's irrevocable will, and this ordering of creation remains unaffected by the new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 3:26-28). This view regarding the hierarchical ordering of male-female relations is then claimed to have flow on effects in the doctrine of the ministry, whereby the pastoral office represents headship and the exercise of authority; therefore, it has to be reserved for men.

This reconstruction of the biblical witness is the product of a pre-set agenda. It is not borne out by the witness of the Bible, as I have shown elsewhere (LTJ, May 2021). The writers of the New Testament totally rejected the hierarchical subordinationism that was in force during the Christian era, among Greeks, Romans and Jews alike. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, in his *Politics*, and the Jewish scholars Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus, for example, reflected the common view that men represented the ideal human being with their traits of physical strength, political aptitude, rationality, spirituality and activity, whereas women were typified by such characteristics as weakness, irrationality, fleshliness and passivity. It was believed that God had assigned men the role of *paterfamilias*, head of the household, so that they were to exercise total authority over all other members of the household and be given unquestioning obedience. Wives were required to live in subordination to their husbands and fulfil their domestic duties with the piety, industry, modesty, chastity and devout submission that would bring honour and glory to their husbands in the public arena.

The first readers of the New Testament household codes (Eph. 5:21 – 6:9; Col. 3:18 – 4:1; 1 Tim. 2:8–15; Tit. 2:1–10; 1 Pet. 2:11 – 3:22) would have immediately noticed that Paul and Peter have extensively reworked the traditional Greco-Roman and Jewish codes, and even subverted them in significant places. Paul in particular makes ground-breaking changes. First and foremost, he places the Lord Jesus at the centre as the one who sets all people free through the gospel and the one whose conduct provides the example for all members of the household to emulate. By making Jesus the focus of his admonitions Paul replaces the top-down and unilateral subordinationism of the contemporary codes with the Christian ethic of mutual, or reciprocal, subordination.

The way of the world is not to be the way of the church. From the outset Jesus distanced himself entirely from the mindset of his age, where leaders were free to lord it over others. Jesus said, 'it is not so among you' (see Mark 10:42-45; Matt. 20:25-28). He shocked his disciples by washing their feet, the role of the household slave (John 13:3-5), and when James and John demanded that Jesus seat them at his right and left hand when he came in glory, he replied that 'whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). Paul constantly shows that the practice of mutual subordination is based on the model that Christ provides. It reflects 'reverence for Christ' (Eph. 5:21). In the same vein, Paul writes: 'Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus' (Phil. 2:4,5). Notions of authority over others in worldly terms have no place in a biblical understanding of ministry.

Mutual subordination defines life within the household (Eph. 5:21-31). First, Paul shows what this means for wives (vss. 22–24), and then far more extensively and tellingly for husbands (vss. 25–31). The words for subordination and headship certainly appear in verses 22–24, a clear indication that Paul is taking care not to make such radical changes with the terms associated with the codes of the day that their fresh expression would be scarcely recognisable to his readers, and if implemented pre-emptively would have a negative impact on the cause of the gospel. It is also important to note that Paul's view that Christ's coming in glory was imminent (1 Thess. 4:15) led him to caution the church against making all the changes that might otherwise result from the conviction that Christ's ministry had initiated the new creation in such a way that all the traditional barriers of race, religion and gender had to be dismantled immediately (1 Cor. 7:17–24).

Paul's call for mutual subordination culminates with his instructions to husbands (Eph. 5:25–31), that is, to those who, as *paterfamilias*, were traditionally regarded as subordinate to few others. Here the New Testament household codes are at their most radical. This is where Paul places the weight, because this is where the problems lay. This is where radical change is called for. This is where a totally counter-cultural role reversal is required in Christian communities. The husband's traditional totalitarian control is to give way to selfless love for his wife. Rather than prioritising his own interests and practising his freedom to the maximum extent at home and in the community, he is called to prioritise his wife's interests; in fact, he is asked to reflect Christ's willingness to give his life for the church in his relationship with his wife.

Ironically, but surely intentionally, Paul alludes to a suite of duties associated with the supposedly lower status domestic realm to show how the believing husband's spousal love should model Christ's lifesaving and life-renewing work in the church. The husband is to cleanse his wife, wash her, beautify her, remove her stains, wrinkles and blemishes, and he is to feed and nourish her (vss. 25–29). These are hardly the duties that occupied the *paterfamilias* on a daily basis. Sadly, the portrayal of men by analogy with Christ has led opponents of women's ordination to draw the false conclusion that Paul is thereby showing that only men can serve as Christ's representatives in ministry. Such an inference misses the point entirely; namely, that the way of Christ is diametrically opposed to the notions and practices of male privilege so prevalent in the biblical era. Not for a moment do these

verses endorse the idea that men are the only ones who may be authorised to serve as ministers in the church of Jesus Christ.

### **5. *The Lutheran doctrine of the ministry***

The Lutheran Confessions teach that the ministry has to do with nothing but the propagation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments by duly called and ordained pastors, so that saving faith is created and sustained in people's hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit (Augsburg Confession 5 and 14). Likewise, the three texts used in the LCANZ's rite of ordination make no mention of gender but focus instead on the heart and soul of pastoral ministry: Christ's command to make disciples of all nations by baptising and teaching (Matt. 28:18–20), the absolution (John 20:21–23), and the administration of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–26). No set form is prescribed for the ordained ministry. The Bible, the Lutheran Confessions, and the LCANZ's rite of ordination do not mandate a male ministry. Continuing to inject a non-scriptural and non-confessional prohibition into the heart of the teaching of the office of the ministry runs counter to everything that matters for Lutherans. Just as the gospel has been shown to tear down the walls that divide Jews from Gentiles and masters from slaves, within the body of Christ, the time has well and truly come to throw off the shackles of an increasingly crippling tradition and allow the testimony of the scriptures and the impulse of the gospel to be reflected in the shared ministry of men and women. Only then will the pulsating heartbeat of Lutheran theology take full effect in our circles.

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