

New Testament support for women pastors

By Rev Dr Peter Lockwood

Two texts (1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-14) have been drawn on to undergird the prohibition of women's ordination in the LCANZ (*Theses of Agreement* 6.11). However, close study of these texts has led most biblical scholars to the view that such a conclusion is insupportable. Unfortunately, however, it is repeatedly said that those who support women's ordination have adopted a cavalier approach to biblical exegesis, have fallen prey to the women's liberation movement, or have succumbed more generally to the spirit of the age to make the gospel more palatable in today's society.

These charges also run counter to the acknowledgment within the CTICR a number of years ago, repeated in the preamble to the General Pastors Conference advice to the February 2023 synod, that all serious participants in the ordination debate have been and remain fully committed to the authority and inspiration of the scriptures, no matter what conclusion they finally draw on the ordination issue.

In support of the majority decision (11-5) of the CTICR in 2000 that the Bible supports the ordination of women, the following pages give the reasons for my deeply held conviction that the two texts that have been central to the debate in our Church simply do not prohibit women's ordination. But while supporters of a male only pastorate continue to insist that theirs is the only stance that is faithful to New Testament teaching, it is important to continue to challenge that view, drawing on the scriptural witness. That being said, however, it is far more important to show that the New Testament provides sound theological foundations for women's ordination. All the major ministry positions referred to in the New Testament were occupied by women and men alike, symptomatic of the radical implications of the equality of women and men through the gospel. That is the note on which the discussion ends.

In what follows, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is not regarded as the opinion of Paul's opponents that he is refuting, nor as an insertion from a different hand; furthermore, Paul is here regarded as the author of 1 Timothy.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Read without consideration of the context, it is all too easy to conclude that in these verses Paul is calling on all Christian women of all times to refrain from the public proclamation of the gospel. After all, the command of the Lord in verse 37 is supported by additional testimonies: the widespread practice of the churches, the subordination of women, the shame that some women are causing by speaking at church, and the law (14:33-37).

It simply cannot be said, however, that Jesus forbade women from being pastors. It is unacceptable exegetical practice to claim special insight into the mind of Jesus apart from the record of his actual words in the New Testament. It is unacceptable to support one's theological opinions by arguing from silence, in this case an otherwise unknown secret message. The argument goes that in private conversation with the disciples Jesus imparted the strict message that women were to be banned from the public ministry.

Apart from the fact that Jesus says nothing that could be interpreted as a ban on women's ministry — quite the contrary — and the fact that Paul honours so many women as his co-workers in the gospel (see esp. Rom. 16:1-3,6-7,12; Phil. 4:2-3), it is also eminently clear from the context that 'the

command of the Lord' (1 Cor 14:37) refers to nothing but the command that ranks above all others, the command to love.

Paul's wonderful hymn to love in the previous chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, is by no means the sole appearance of the love motif in Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. Rather, Paul draws on love as the launch-pad for all his words of encouragement and correction throughout the letter (4:21; 8:1; 13:1-8,13; 14:1; 16:14,24).

This applies in particular to the worship guidelines of chapter 14, which begin with the rousing call to 'pursue love' (vs 1). When Paul writes 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 Corinthian church, and for worship practices down through the ages. Worship is the setting above all where love comes to life and flourishes in the Christian community.

Having already signalled that nothing but love builds up the body of Christ (8:1), and then having sung love's praises so glowingly in chapter 13, it surely follows that when Paul speaks of 'the command (commandment) of the Lord' (14:37) he has in mind the pre-eminent commandment, the commandment to love God with all one's heart and soul and mind, and the follow-up, to love one's neighbour as oneself (Matt 22:34-40).

'The command of the Lord' is shorthand for the entire command to love God and the neighbour. Paul doesn't have to spell it out because he has already referred to love so frequently (4:21; 8:1; 13:1-8,13; 14:1) and will continue to do so (16:14,24). Besides, the command 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'.

This becomes even clearer when the concerns of the whole chapter are considered. Self-centred, loveless practices were having a devastating impact on worship life at Corinth. Puffed up with self-importance because of their supposed 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. 26–33). 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 on the cause of the gospel by engaging in disruptive conduct, possibly by challenging the speakers with their questions. 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).

It is little wonder that Paul starts the chapter on worship with the crystal-clear command: 'Pursue love' (14:1). He 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 the three specific manifestations of such self-promoting behaviour that were making a mockery of orderly worship at Corinth, that are addressed in chapter 14.

The command to love God and love the neighbour, the command that Jesus says summarises the whole law, is the chief motivating force behind Paul's worship guidelines in 1 Corinthians 14. 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 welcoming outsiders into the believing community (vss. 3,4,5,12,17,26).

Yes, testimonies in support of Paul's words abound in chapter 14. But they are not testimonies in support of a ban on women proclaiming the gospel. Rather, they are testimonies that bolster his authoritative appeal, that God's peace at worship replace human disorder (vs. 33a). The practice of the churches and subordination to Paul's authority, or to the authority of local worship leaders, are two such testimonies (vss. 32,33b,34). Another is the public shame caused specifically by some women's disruptive behaviour (vs. 35). But the overarching testimony that Paul adduces is the Lord's love command, the ultimate summary of the law, so that the church can truly be built up and the gospel proclaimed without let or hindrance.

By continuing to draw on 1 Corinthians 14:33–37 to ban women from the pastoral office, our Church has achieved precisely the opposite of what Paul intends throughout the chapter, which is to call on the church to refrain from whatever worship practices inhibit the Spirit's vital work of building up the church in love. The ongoing prohibition of women's ordination in the LCANZ has surely been a major contributing factor to the rapid decline of church affiliation among our people, young and old, especially women who bear the brunt of its negative impact.

1 Timothy 2:11-14

Our Church's traditional ban on women pastors draws on St Paul's words at 1 Timothy 2:11-15 to add weight to his words at 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. And once again a surface reading of the verses from 1 Timothy might appear to indicate as much, until the context of the apostle's advice is considered carefully and some common mistakes in translation are identified and corrected.

In this chapter Paul is exhorting the Christians in Ephesus to pray for the public authorities, to lead quiet and godly lives, and so enhance the peace of the broader community and enable the unhindered propagation of the gospel (2:1-7).

However, the behaviour of some of the worshippers in Ephesus was adversely affecting the purposes of God, 'who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (vs. 4). Instead of shaking their fists at opponents, the men of the church were to lift their hands to God in prayer 'without anger or argument' (vs 8), and instead of dressing flamboyantly and wearing expensive jewellery, the women were to show their devotion to God by a life of good works and modest decorum (vss. 9-10).

In verses 11 and 12 Paul twice calls on a woman to quieten down, using the same word as in verse 2 where he has already called on the whole church in Ephesus to lead 'a *quiet* life in all godliness and dignity' as a clear witness to the way the Christian faith should lead people beyond strife and conflict to peace and quietness (see also 1 Thess. 4:11-12; 2 Thess. 3:11-12).

Three words in verses 11 and 12 require special attention. The first is the word that is translated 'silence' in most Bibles (vs. 11). The word actually means 'quietness', and in this case something like 'toning the volume down', thereby avoiding the raucous conduct that creates a stumbling block to the gospel. The word 'quietness' that Paul uses in these two verses simply does not mean absolute silence. It is not the word that Paul uses to call to account the three groups that are proving noisy and disruptive during worship times in Corinth (1 Cor. 14:28,30,34).

Furthermore, the move from plural nouns for men and women in the previous verses to the singular noun for a woman in verses 11 and 12 suggests that Paul may have a specific woman in mind rather

than the Ephesian women in general. She may be one of the women who have been led astray by Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim. 2:17) and are spreading their false teachings (2 Tim. 3:6-7).

The second word to note carefully is 'permit' (vs. 12). Paul says that he doesn't permit a woman, possibly meaning the aforementioned woman, well known in the community, to teach or exercise authority over a man (possibly her husband). But here's the point. The word used here for 'permit' is elsewhere used in the New Testament only for a temporary command applying to a specific situation, never to a permanent prohibition (Matt. 8:21; 19:8; Mark 5:13; John 19:38; Acts 21:39,40; 26:1; 27:3; 28:16). And it should be noted that Paul's use of the same word at 1 Corinthians 14:34 also implies a situation-specific ban. This is another indication that Paul doesn't intend imposing a blanket ban on women teaching and leading in worship. He is simply telling the woman (or women) in question to stop spruiking her (or their) erroneous and unsettling views.

The third word requiring special attention is the word that is translated 'to have authority' (vs. 12). Paul has drawn on a word that is found in the literature of the time to indicate a way of exercising authority that is inherently domineering, aggressive, self-assertive and bullying. This is the only occurrence of the word in the New Testament. And it is not one of the words that are used elsewhere for the regular exercise of God-pleasing authority by church leaders (as at 2 Cor. 10:8-9; 13:10; Tit. 2:15; Heb. 13:7). Appropriate leadership of that kind is not forbidden to this woman, if one woman is meant, or women more broadly, as long as she first learns, or they first learn, the message of the gospel thoroughly and then proclaim it winsomely.

The following verses (vss. 13-15) have given rise to countless mutually exclusive interpretations over the years, making it impossible to draw any definitive conclusions about their meaning or application.

What can be said conclusively, however, is that like the men who should lead 'without anger or argument' (vs. 8), and like the women who should not make a display of their wealth or status at worship (vss. 9-10), Paul calls on a certain woman, or certain women, to stop 'lording it over' her husband (as Luther puts it), or their husbands, and also over the other church members, but to adopt a true Christian spirit of calm moderation, deferring 'with full submission', either to Paul's request, or to the local worship leader (vs. 11). The command is situation-specific, but with the important universal application of ruling out the authoritarian exercise of power that seeks to control those on whom it is imposed and causes nothing but harm.

Elsewhere in the New Testament

The ascended Christ continually pours out the Spirit on people, irrespective of their social class, nationality, or gender, to lead them to faith in him and to sustain them in the Christian faith (Acts 2:17-21). To ensure that the gospel is proclaimed down through the ages, Christ measures out the gifts of grace (*charismata*) for ministry on men and women alike, as the Spirit determines (Eph. 4:7; 1 Cor. 12:4,11). The fresh outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost has transformed every aspect of life among the people of God. From that founding moment in the life of the church to this day Christ continues to bestow ministry gifts for the sole purpose of promoting the growth of the church by building it up in faith and love (Eph. 4:15,16).

Unlike the gender specific mark of the old covenant, circumcision, the distinguishing mark of the new covenant, baptism, shows clearly that the life-renewing Spirit makes no distinction between men and women, with radical implications for the conferring of gifts for ministry and exercising them. St Paul writes that in Christ there is 'no male and female', just as there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free (Gal. 3:27,28). St Paul challenges head on the top-down subordinationism of the Greco-Roman world in New Testament times, where husbands were regarded as the head of their

household (*paterfamilias*), including their wife. St Paul is at pains to show that Christians are to 'be subject to another out of reverence for Christ' (Eph. 5:21; Phil. 2:3-4).

The New Testament gives evidence of an array of ministries. Paul set Timothy aside for his ministry at Ephesus by laying hands on him and conferring on him 'the gift of God' (2 Tim. 1:6; see also 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22). It is also highly likely that the first apostles were responsible for 'ordaining' people who were suitably gifted for and called to a range of ministry positions, such as 'prophets, evangelists, pastors (shepherds) and teachers' (Eph. 4:11; Acts 21:28), and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1,8; see also Acts 6:6; 13:3).

Not one of the Spirit's gifts for the ongoing ministry of the church is gender exclusive. Women were among the apostles (Junia, Rom. 16:7, and according to church tradition, Mary Magdalene, John 20:16-18); women were among the prophets (the daughters of Philip, Acts 21:9; see also Acts 2:17; 1 Cor. 11:5). And apostles and prophets were the ascended Christ's foremost 'gifts' to the church (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11). Women were among the evangelists (the woman at the well, John 4:39-42); women were among the deacons (Phoebe had charge of the church at Cenchreae, Rom. 16:1-3); and women were among the theological teachers of the New Testament church (Priscilla, Acts 18:26).

The word 'men' does not appear in the texts where the kind of ministry undertaken by the clergy today is most closely reflected. Instead, generic plural nouns are used: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors (shepherds), teachers (Eph. 4:11; Acts 20:28), elders (1 Pet. 5:1-4), leaders (Heb. 13:7,17), pastors (shepherds) and bishops (literally, overseers, Acts 20:28). Like today's pastors, their tasks were to exercise spiritual oversight among their people, carried out eagerly and humbly rather than for financial gain; and in all things they were to serve as examples to their flock. There is no requirement in these texts that elders, pastors, or any other clergy be male. That is a significant omission if the New Testament church had intended it to be the case.

Summary and conclusion

Our Church perpetuates a grave disservice while it continues to shut the door to ordination on women who are gifted for the pastoral office and are called to it. Christ bestows a wide variety of spiritual gifts on his followers irrespective of their gender. Ministry gifts are not given to all women nor to all men, but if women have been blessed with them and have been encouraged to exercise them, it is essential that the Church recognise the gifts, provide the education and formation required, and authorise the women to serve in the ministry to which they have been called. What a joy it will be when the Spirit's reforming and renewing work in the wider church starts to take effect in our own Church and the first women are included in the pastoral office alongside men.

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