

## Why ordain women?

Why ordain women? Because God calls them.

It's as simple and as complicated as that.

It's simple (or complicated) because God calls each person to serve God with the whole of their being and the entirety of their lives. When this call to service includes a call to vocation or life style or cause, it consequently involves a process of discernment of God's will in that call.

1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 both are clear that God calls to all kinds of service: "now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the call, we are all part of the "royal priesthood... God's own people" who "proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called [us] out of darkness into God's marvellous light."<sup>2</sup> For some, including women, it may be that their vocational call is a call to ministry as ordered by the church. The inward reality of a call may be witnessed by others in outward signs, including a coincidence of the person's gifts with the needs of the church. Often the call moves from a quiet inkling to a gentle nudge through the affirmation of family or friends, and from that nudge to clarity through the affirmation and - for some - a (capital-C) Call issued by groups, congregations, or denominations.

1 Corinthians 12 also makes it clear that no service is a higher calling than any other.<sup>3</sup> Statements to this effect are often made in order to placate those being excluded from ordained ministry, which rather misses the point when God calls.

The idea of ordination makes the conversation a little more complicated. Ultimately the question about ordaining women is the same as the question, "Why ordain men?"

Ordination is the granting of pastoral responsibility to those the church considers to be called, gifted for, and trained in a particular set of skills, particularly the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. We are still in a time when those who are ordained are often employed full time to attend to those tasks and a myriad others that we add to both the formal and unstated job description: locking the church, picking up any litter that has blown into the yard, knowing who is rostered on for what this week ... but it is likely that ministry structures will change over the next period of time.

I confess to being quite confused when I read in one of the LCA's doctrinal statements that the office of public ministry was established by Christ and not the Church<sup>4</sup>. I knew of nothing in the Gospels or Epistles that suggested that. When I asked, I was pointed to verses in John 20 where

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 2:9

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:22 (12-31)

<sup>4</sup> "Authority and Power in the Church" # 8

[www.lca.org.au/resources/cticr/cticr03authoritynpower.pdf](http://www.lca.org.au/resources/cticr/cticr03authoritynpower.pdf)

on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."<sup>5</sup>

Some commentators have thought these verses reflect an early Christian ordination rite.<sup>6</sup> Certainly here the gifting of the Spirit is seen to be very personal, and our ordination services reflect this. But biblical scholarship generally discusses these verses in relation to the mission of the whole church: peace given as a sign of the new life/new creation in Christ Jesus, the church charged with its mission, empowering for that mission, and continuity of Jesus' mission of grace, with the church having a responsibility to execute God's divine will of forgiveness. We all share in the ministry of reconciliation; we all play a part in seeing others come to believe in Jesus and what he discloses about God and God's grace.<sup>7</sup>

There seems little acknowledgement that the verses cited as the foundation for ordained ministry— Matthew 28 and John 20 – are not Christ's mandate for ordained ministry but are being used to justify existing practice based on tradition.

While the word ordination doesn't appear in the New Testament, people were selected for particular leadership roles. You will remember the casting of lots to replace Judas and the selection of the seven who were to serve at the tables. They were "commissioned" with prayer and the laying on of hands, reflecting an Old Testament ritual of ordination, where authority was passed from one to another. Following Saul's unique call and early ministry, Barnabas took him to the apostles and "after fasting and prayer they laid hands on them and sent them off."<sup>8</sup> There are many more examples of people being selected for service, and we can infer the idea of ordination from references like these in the New Testament.

The Lutheran Church continues to closely link ordination to the Call of the congregation, and the confessional documents highlight Call rather than ordination. The "ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments" exists so that people might come to faith (Augsburg Confession V) and for the sake of good order, "no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called."

The LCA's Theses of Agreement is the document signed between the two Synods that joined together in 1966 to become the Lutheran Church of Australia. Its' statement on the Office of the Ministry repeats this line from the Augsburg Confession, and goes on:

The Lord calls individuals into the office of the ministry through the Christian congregations, Acts 13:1-4, and the Christian congregation, either alone, or together with other congregations, or through properly appointed representatives, calls qualified persons (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9; 2 Tim 2:24,25; Acts 1:24) into the office of the ministry publicly to exercise the functions of this office.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John 20:21-23

<sup>6</sup> Anchor commentary on John, Vol 2.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=887](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=887)

<sup>8</sup> Acts 13:3

<sup>9</sup> "Theses on the Office of the Ministry", VI,7 in *Theses of Agreement*, DSTO Vol 1 A, Lutheran Church of Australia, adopted 1956/1959.

In one of our confessional documents<sup>10</sup> Melancthon reminds us that ordination came after people chose pastors and bishops, with the candidate being confirmed by the laying on of hands. Ordination was nothing other than such confirmation.”

Lutheran congregations have chosen to be part of the LCA, and this is a voluntary association, where the congregations have chosen to ask the church to attend to matters of appropriate qualification for ministry, and consequently for ordination. But the confessions which have a stronger hold on us than that voluntary association or the civil document that is the Constitution of the LCA emphasise that it is the right of congregations, not Bishops or Committees or even Seminaries, to call and subsequently ordain.

Over the past thirty-five years or more, the expectation has been that a decision regarding the ordination of women needs to be based on Scripture. One of the reasons that the debate has continued as long as it has is that the Bible is not a handbook on how to be church. The Bible is a library of books in different voices with different contexts and concerns, but together recording how people understood their encounter with the living God. It was crucial to Luther that “the Bible is a voice of revelation not to be confused with, encumbered by, or contained in any human categories of interpretation that make the voice more coherent, domesticated or palatable.”<sup>11</sup> Never-the-less, we persist. Another important thing we learned from Luther is that the words of the Bible become “Scripture” – our sacred document for guidance and inspiration – when the community gathers and discusses and acts in response to the claim that within those pages God is revealed and that Godself gifts us with the Spirit to help us see God so revealed.<sup>12</sup>

Much of the conversation within the LCA regarding the ordination of women has focussed on two New Testament texts. It has been framed this way because these two texts, 1 Cor. 14:34,35 and I Tim. 2:11-14 appear in the Theses of Agreement specifically excluding the ordination of women.

But that is not how Lutherans develop theology or doctrine or even church practice. Continuing to look at two verses is more like eisegesis or proof texting rather than the church seeking to be faithful to God in its action in the world. Eisegesis is using selected texts to support a pre-existing belief.

The core of Lutheran theology is God’s free gift of grace, and therefore a core element of a Lutheran approach to hermeneutics (interpretation) is to read and interpret the Bible in the light of God’s free gift of grace. Our emphasis on God’s grace keeps reminding us that none of us is capable of saving ourselves, none of us can do or be anything that makes us closer to God or God’s righteousness. A clear implication of this is that there is no Biblical reason for differentiate between categories or groups of people. We are reconciled with God through Christ and have all been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18).

Turning particularly to gender as a category, you may recall Acts 2, where Peter gives an interpretation of the Pentecost event: “this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my

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<sup>10</sup> The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope

<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, pg 2.

<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann, 1997, pg 3.

slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

The living out of Joel’s proleptic vision in Acts 2<sup>13</sup> is reinforced by Paul’s words: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”. Here the words of Genesis 1:27 are echoed and remind us that all of humanity is created in the image of God, and all of humanity is commissioned to care for the world. Being male or female is no advantage or disadvantage in relation to God and others. In other words, it’s spiritually neutral.

Gal 3:28 assists us to recognise that patriarchy is part of the sinful distortion of God’s creation. It is named as such in Gen 3:16, where one of the descriptive phrases of the damaging effects of sin on human life is that “he shall rule over you.”

The egalitarianism of Joel/Acts and Galatians is not odd, but part of a movement within the Biblical text towards inclusivity. The Hebrew Scriptures “take for granted the idea that a patriarchal society – where men are the visible authority structure – is how life is.”<sup>14</sup> However the creation accounts, particularly as seen through the lens of the New Testament theme of reconciliation (to which we will return), may be considered foundational when examining the relationship between men and women.

In the Priestly account, ‘adam is created “in the image of God ... male and female” (Gen 1:27).<sup>15</sup> Equal man and woman were called into being by the Creator.<sup>16</sup> Together they are blessed and together they are charged with stewardship of the earth (1:28).

The older Yahwist creation account situates the creation of the man and the woman in a relationship context. “It is not good that the man/human should be alone; I will make a helper as his partner” (Gen 2:18). There is no implication of power imbalance in the term “helper”.

The importance of the helper to the one helped may be gleaned from the fact that elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible God is presented as such a helper (‘ezer) of humans. The equality of the partners in this helping relationship is underscored. Male and female are ‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh’ (2:23), they have the same strengths and the same weaknesses.

Many feminist scholars declare that patriarchy so permeates the balance of the Hebrew Scriptures that they cannot speak to relationships between people today.

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<sup>13</sup> Acts 2:16-18

<sup>14</sup> Jenni Williams, *God Remembered Rachel* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge 2014), 128.

<sup>15</sup> Luther asserts that the in the original creation male and female were equal, but he draws on monastic and mystical tradition to claim that in the fall it was the nature of woman, not the system of relationships, that was corrupted. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. I, Luther’s Works (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 115. Gen 2:18

<sup>16</sup> The phrase “male and female” need not be seen to preclude from God’s imaging those whose bodies do not fit the binary proto-type, any more than other parts of the day are not precluded from the day by the phrase “and it was evening and it was morning”. This verse also assists the realisation that whatever noun or pronoun we have for God is metaphorical, and assigning human attributes, including gender, is only at the metaphorical level.

There are, however, scholars who believe that the Old Testament can point beyond patriarchy.

To apply the principal of interpretation of the Hebrew Scripture through the lens of the gospel means stepping back to take a larger view, in order to see the thread of God's liberating mission. Rather than looking at discrete stories or personalities, the overarching view gives us a clearer framework for how women can be viewed.<sup>17</sup> As one Old Testament scholar puts it, this metanarrative 'retains a place for the weakness and vulnerability of all humanity before God's unique mystery and power' God typically sides with the oppressed and against the powerful, there are frequent denunciations against oppressors, and statements of intended redemptive outcomes (even for oppression and suffering) that are global in scope.'<sup>18</sup>

Turning to the New Testament, Jesus is not recorded as saying anything specifically regarding women beyond his protests about the exploitation of widows.<sup>19</sup> It is the major themes of Jesus' message and actions rather than specific words that can be used to gain a picture of what the early church remembered or chose to pass on regarding Jesus and women. He joins the prophets in proclamation of vindication of the poor and oppressed in the coming reign of God. The inclusive graciousness and goodness of God is illustrated repeatedly in the parables. Jesus turns the Messianic image from that of a triumphant king to that of a servant. Jesus' tells us we should not use the same language for God and humanity in such a way as to risk endorsing human hierarchies and the oppression that goes with them.<sup>20</sup> Instead, our relationship to God removes the stratified relationships and brings us into family as brothers and sisters, serving each other.

In stories of Jesus' healing/saving interventions, women are often representative of people that have no honour within the society. That he notices, listens to and speaks to them and responds to their needs demonstrates the challenge to societal privilege and domination.

It is clear that Jesus included women in his apostolic community. Multiple sources attest to women who, unchaperoned, follow Jesus, witness key events in his life and provide for Jesus and his followers.<sup>21</sup> The women are both married and single, from a range of life stations.<sup>22</sup> While no individual woman is named as a disciple, 'the most probable conclusion is that Jesus viewed and treated these women as disciples.'<sup>23</sup> We are told of the depth of relationship Jesus had with both women and men.<sup>24</sup> According to Matthew, Mark and John, women were the ones to

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<sup>17</sup> Junia Pokrifka, 'Patriarchy, Biblical authority, and the grand narrative of the Old Testament,' 275.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47.

<sup>20</sup> Alan J. Torrance, "'Call no man father!'" The Trinity, patriarchy and God-talk,' in *Gospel and gender: A trinitarian engagement with being male and female in Christ*, ed. Douglas A. Campbell (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 192-3.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Mark 15:40-41; Matthew 27:55-56; Luke 23:49 in conjunction with 8:2-3.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 8:3; Luke 7:37.

<sup>23</sup> John P. Meier, *A marginal Jew volume 3: Companions and competitors* (New York: ABRL Doubleday, 2001), 80.

<sup>24</sup> John 11:5.

whom Jesus first appeared after the resurrection<sup>25</sup> and in Luke 24 they are among those charged by Jesus to be witnesses to the resurrection and forgiveness of sins.<sup>26</sup>

Together these bits and pieces build a picture of Jesus respect and regard for women as well as for men.

The early church remembered the proclamation of the resurrection by women, and in the early congregations we see the active ministry of women such as Phillip's daughters, Priscilla and Junia.<sup>27</sup> Unlike the Gospels, Acts uses 'disciples' for both men and women.<sup>28</sup> It is apparent that Paul supported the leadership of women. Women prayed and prophesied in public worship. Phoebe is called a deacon and patron of the church.

Clearly gender is not an issue in bearing God's image, in being baptised and receiving the Holy Spirit, in discipleship, prophecy or proclamation.

Using a gospel lens for interpreting the New Testament means taking a forward-looking proleptic perspective.<sup>29</sup> The new heart and new Spirit promised in the Hebrew scriptures<sup>30</sup> is consummated in the Christ event. Paul writes, in 2 Corinthians, 'From now on ... we regard no one from a human point of view... If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!'<sup>31</sup> The passage goes on to speak of our ministry of reconciliation in the light of the reconciliation God offers through Christ. In the Epistles:

Paul critiques his culture's patriarchal worldview because it does not support or reflect the gospel message of new life in Christ, of forgiveness of sins and fullness of life through the Holy Spirit. Pauline scholar Lynne Cohick summarises his gospel message like this: Because of his great love, God, in Christ, renews and restores all creation, including humanity. God shows no favouritism, and Paul's understanding of being "in Christ," relativizes all human cultures. God makes every believer a new person in Christ, and together they make a new community we call the church or the Body of Christ. Believers should think and act today in line with the values of God's promises and truth. These theological truths challenge the social hierarchy that assigned people positions of worth and value.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew 28:9-10; Mark 16:9-11; John 20:11-18.

<sup>26</sup> Luke 24:33b, 47-53.

<sup>27</sup> Acts 21:9; Romans 16:5; Romans 16:7.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Acts 9:1-2.

<sup>29</sup> Campbell suggests that the eschatological discussion in 'chapters 5-8 in Romans can legitimately be viewed as an extended discussion of the theological programme that Paul pithily summarises in Galatians 3:26-28.' Douglas A. Campbell, 'The logic of eschatology: The implications of Paul's gospel for gender as suggested by Galatians 3.28a in context,' in *Gospel and gender: A trinitarian engagement with being male and female in Christ*, ed. Douglas A. Campbell (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 77.

<sup>30</sup> E.g. Ezekiel 36:26.

<sup>31</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:16, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Lynn Cohick, 'Inside the mind of a misogynist?,' lecture given for *Annual lecture*, Tabor, Adelaide SA 2017, 1, 2.

So what about those troublesome texts? In the interpretation of any Scriptural text for what it might say regarding our life together, we are seeking to be faithful to God and God's mission and we can best do this when we view specific texts in the light of related contextual themes within the sweep of Scripture. A Lutheran hermeneutic will take the texts and look at them against the background of the larger themes of Scripture and particularly through a Gospel lens.

All of the texts used against the ordination of women were by reference to the subordinate position of women in creation. The God that we worship and acknowledge as the creator of all remains engaged deeply and relationally in the continuing creation of the world; God's promised future is the reconciliation and transformation of all creation. While the transformed and redeemed world is not yet fully realised, as far as is possible we live the values of this promised future.

There is no room within this transformed creation for one gender to be excluded from particular types of service within the church.

It is a strange thing that in acknowledging the equality of all people, society is leading the church, when according to the New Testament that change in relationship was inherent in our baptism. To exclude women from the altar and pulpit is a scandal in a society that is moving towards acceptance of humanity in its diversity. It is a reason for people to reject the Gospel we seek to share. It harms the faith of those who know a God who cherishes all of humanity. Many have been marginalised within and others have left the church over this scandal. It brings confusion to women and girls about whether they are truly created in God's image. Because metaphor works both ways, when we don't challenge the maleness of the language we use about God, it has implications for an imbalance of power between men and women in the church and the society it seeks to influence, and its impact in the sin of domestic violence.

Why ordain women? For good order within the church. That the church may live out Christianity's inclusiveness. That the range of gifts God gives find their appropriate expression. That the culture of the institution might be healed.

God has gifted the church with leaders, so that the Gospel may be preached. The wellbeing of the church and the wellbeing of the faithful will be enhanced when the barriers to full inclusion in the church crumble.

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