

FORUM

The Gospel and Women in the Ministry

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The Lutheran Church of Australia [LCA] is in the process of re-examining the grounds for its teaching on the ordination of women. Part of the process involves listening carefully to arguments both old and new. To facilitate responsible and informed discussion we shall from time to time publish material which has a direct bearing on the subject. The paper which is published here is, we believe, a clear presentation of a version of an argument which has been influential in Lutheran circles in other lands, but only rarely has been articulated publicly in the LCA. The argument needs to be stated openly so that it can be discussed openly.

We publish this presentation, not to promote the argument per se, but to promote informed study and debate.

Editor

Introduction

The role of women in the ministry is currently under discussion within the Lutheran Church of Australia; the church's document, *Women in the Ministry*, was produced to facilitate study and discussion. This statement is intended as a constructive contribution to a candid and prayerful exploration of women's role in ministry of the LCA in the late twentieth century.

The Gospel Principle

The gospel principle is a long-standing Lutheran principle governing both how we 'do theology' and how we interpret the Scriptures. It can be summarised in Luther's expression, *Was Christum treibet* (what promotes Christ). In other words, every solution to any issue relating to our faith and life together should exalt Christ as our Saviour and the gospel message: Christ is our redeemer.² Adopting the gospel principle ensures we promote the gospel in our theological statements and in our interpretation of the Scriptures.

Traditionally when Lutherans do theology and interpret the Scriptures, this principle has functioned in two ways.

1. The gospel is the centre of the Scriptures for Lutherans; it is also at the heart of all Lutheran theology. When we do theology, and when we interpret the Scriptures, we strive to maintain this gospel focus. Maintaining a gospel focus involves asking a series of questions. Do our discoveries clarify and highlight the gospel? Are they consistent with the

gospel as central to our faith? Are they consistent with the Lutheran understanding of the gospel's essence: justification by grace alone through faith in Christ alone?³

2. Lutherans recognise that it is vital to distinguish between the law and the gospel. The law and the gospel must never be confused, as their roles are quite different: the law accuses us, confronts us with our sin, and condemns us, but the gospel saves us from the condemnation explicit in the law and frees us from the power of sin. Both the law and the gospel are enhanced when the distinction between them is preserved.

Whenever the gospel is bounded by rules, regulations, and conditions, it is diminished and changed. Bounded in this way, the gospel is no longer gospel — it has become the law. Lutherans dare not turn the gospel into the law.

Paul faced precisely this situation in Galatia. Some Jewish Christians insisted that circumcision was necessary to be a genuine Christian, acceptable before God. Paul insisted that circumcision belonged to the law, and to require circumcision was '*not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel*'.⁴

The gospel is an essential Lutheran starting point for considering the role of women in ministry in the Lutheran church.

The Gospel

The gospel is the good news that God, through Jesus Christ, has freed us from sin, death, the demands of the law, and the power of evil.

Four central facets of the gospel as the heart of our faith are:

- this gospel is the message of our salvation, to be proclaimed to all human beings as good news;
- this gospel is the reality and totality of God's saving work through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ — namely, our complete liberation from the power of sin, death, and the demands of the law;
- this gospel is the assurance that, through Jesus Christ, we are justified before God, and that our salvation does not depend on our keeping the law, nor does the gospel need to be supplemented by any rules, regulations, or conditions;
- this gospel is God's power, working through the message, and bringing people to faith in Christ.

Applying the gospel principle involves exploring the role of women in all facets of ministry so that the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is promoted and enriched.

Women and the Gospel

The gospel is that power of God which frees, redeems, and reconciles all people to be God's own. Everyone is included: women and men, slave and free, Gentile and Jew. As Paul emphasises in Galatians 3:28:

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Before God there is no distinction between those who are in Christ, for all become free and equal members of the same body, the body of Christ. Preferential treatment for any group before God — blacks, whites, males, females — promotes the law and diminishes the gospel.

Christ's entire ministry demonstrates God's love for all groups in society; the gospels specifically mention Jesus' table fellowship with prostitutes and tax collectors, and his public ministry to people considered to be outside the people of God: Samaritans, Canaanites, and people with leprosy.

When members of the body of Christ assert that one sex has priority over another before God, they fail to discern between law and gospel and diminish both the law and the gospel.

In the body of Christ, the church (instituted by Christ after the resurrection), old social distinctions and divisions no longer apply: we are all reconciled to each other, and are one in Christ. All believers are equal as children of God, and equal heirs to the kingdom.⁵

Women and Gifts of the Spirit

The gifts of the Spirit are living expressions of the power of the gospel operating within the church as the body of Christ. The Spirit of God is a gift from Christ to all God's people — to woman and man, slave and free, Gentile and Jew. The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost fulfilled the promise, recorded in the prophecies of Joel,⁶ that all individuals — young and old, sons and daughters, male and female servants — could prophesy.⁷

The gift of prophecy is the gift of proclaiming God's word — in modern terms, this includes the gift of preaching. The Old Testament records that both male and female prophets proclaimed God's word of judgment and grace.⁸ The New Testament tells us that in the early church, both men and women preached judgment and gospel.⁹

Paul lists many of the gifts of the Spirit: teaching, preaching, leading worship, speaking in tongues, and singing.¹⁰ It is both presumptuous, and totally foreign to the gospel's gracious bounty and open acceptance of all, to claim that Christ limits certain gifts of the Spirit to either men or women.

Any doctrine or practice which attempts to limit any of the gifts of the Spirit to people of either sex is a human law that diminishes the gospel by seeking to limit the power of the Spirit working through the gospel.

Women and Ministry

Ministry is a gift of Christ's Spirit and an expression of the gospel in action. Ministry assumes many forms and individual members of the body of Christ are called to minister to each other and to those still outside the body in various ways.¹¹ The call to service is not confined to members of one group or one sex. The Spirit of God is not limited or constrained: as Jesus says, God's Spirit is free to work where and how the Spirit chooses.¹²

To limit the call to ministry to individuals of any particular group or sex is to attempt to define and limit the field of the Spirit's activity.

To minister is to serve. Christ's ministry provided the quintessential model for service. Christ's ministry healed people, and freed them to be the people of God.

Jesus did not crush people — he affirmed them, empowering them to change their lives and minister to others.¹³ Those involved in ministry serve Christ by proclaiming, celebrating, and affirming the gospel.¹⁴ The Spirit of Christ enables the people of God to 'serve' each other. To seek to minister by 'dominating' others is the antithesis of the gospel at work in the body of Christ.

Ministry in the name of Christ is affirming, empowering service, not authoritative control.

The model of such service is Christ's self-giving for the church, his bride. Paul, in Ephesians 5:21-6:9, demonstrates that all ministering involves mutual service and sacrifice, because:

you were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self. . . and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. . . Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.¹⁵

Any ministry where one group 'dominates' another is acting contrary to the model of the Good Shepherd, whether the dominators are men or women.¹⁶ The issue in Paul's letters is not whether women could teach or prophesy — they obviously did¹⁷ — but whether their actions led to 'dominating' others.

Reducing Paul's words to a law preventing women's full participation in the ministry not only diminishes the ministry of the gospel of Christ, but also seeks to control the operation of the Spirit, and limits the gospel.

Women and the New Creation

A central message of the gospel is that, with the coming of Christ, a new dispensation has dawned, and a new creation has begun:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.¹⁸

In the body of Christ, that new reality is to be reflected and promoted; the old dispensation of the law has been superseded.¹⁹ The new creation is informed by the gospel, which frees us all to serve Christ.

This new creation is under the lordship of Christ and is not governed by a body of laws, like the laws of Moses.

Now, before faith came we were imprisoned and guarded under the Law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the Law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Jesus Christ you are all children of God through faith.²⁰

In the new creation, there is no longer a priesthood consisting of males without a blemish. Now there is a priesthood of all believers, male and female, baptised and cleansed in Christ; all believers have the privilege of standing before God in the name of Christ, whether in private or public.²¹

Any regulation that permits only men to stand before God and lead worship diminishes the gospel and belongs to the old dispensation of the law. Any interpretation of Christ's will for his church which reasserts the subordination of women in accordance with the old dispensation diminishes the gospel and the new creation, and revives the old order, and the curse, of the law.

In the new dispensation the binding power of the law has been superseded by the action of God in Christ Jesus. This applies to women's subordination to men in the law code of Moses. This also applies to the subordinating of women described in Genesis 3:16. The gospel frees all people from the curse and the power of the law; men and women are free in Christ to be full members of the new dispensation.²²

Women and Ordination

Christ calls people to serve in the public ministry of word and sacrament. Ordination is a special rite the church has instituted to formalise a call to the public ministry. It confirms that, in the eyes of the church, the person is ready to assume the office of ministry. Ordination is not a rite which confirms a level of ministry which is somehow superior to other forms of ministry. The ministerial functions performed by those ordained are all to be 'serving' functions in Christ.²³

Women have all the gifts of the Spirit which enable them to perform these functions in the service of the gospel. To exclude them from this service limits the ministry of the gospel.

In the Confessions, ordination as *ordinatio* does not mean 'creature and ordinance' but a 'calling through the word of God'²⁴; this means ordination is really only an extension of the call. The later church developed a rite called ordination to confirm those called to the public ministry.

We now have a situation where Christ calls all people, men and women, to proclaim the gospel, but a church body which limits this service to men, and ratifies this restriction through the 'man-made' rite of ordination. Reumann observes in his study of the practice in the early church that the rite as such, however, is not a New Testament command of Christ.²⁵

In other words, women whom Christ has called to serve in all aspects of the gospel ministry have been denied that right by regulations and rites which reflect life under the old order, the law, rather than a readiness to promote life under the new creation promised in the gospel.

References

- 1 This document was written by Dr Norman Habel, and edited by Shirley Wurst, following discussions with the following members of the Women's Ministry Network: Ruth Beach, Christine Dolling, Merla Garrett, Philippa Goodbourn, Margaret Hunt, Helen Lockwood, Heather Smith, Heidi Smith, Erica Walker.
- 2 Lutheran Confessions, Apology iv 2
- 3 Lutheran Confessions, Apology iv 5,6
- 4 Gal 2:1-14, especially verse 14; see also Acts 15 (all quotations from New RSV)
- 5 Gal 3:26-4:7
- 6 2:28,29; 3:1 in the Hebrew Bible
- 7 Acts 2:17-18
- 8 Judg 4:4-10; 2 Kings 22:14-20
- 9 Luke 24:1-10; Mark 16:6-8{9,10}; Matt 28:1-10; John 4:39-42; 20:11-18; Rom 16:1-7,12; Luke 2:36; 1 Cor 11:5; 14:1,24-33; Acts 21:8,9
- 10 1 Cor 12:4-13,28; Rom 12:4-8; Eph 4:11-16
- 11 1 Cor 12:4-30; Rom 12:4-8
- 12 John 3:5-8; 1 Cor 12:11
- 13 Matt 11:4-5,28-30; 12:15-21, quoting Isa 42:1-4
- 14 Mark 10:42-45
- 15 Eph 4:22-24; 5:1,2
- 16 1 Tim 2:12; 1 Pet 5:1-5
- 17 1 Cor 11:5
- 18 2 Cor 5:17; see also 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 3:27,28; Rom 8:29; Col 3:9-11; Eph 4:22-24; Rev 21:5
- 19 Gal 2:16,18-21; Eph 2:15
- 20 Gal 3:23-26; see also Rom 3:20,21
- 21 1 Pet 2:9; 1 Cor 12:4-28; Col 3:9-17; Gal 3:27,28; Heb 10:19-22
- 22 Gal 5:1
- 23 Mark 10:42-45; John 12:26
- 24 Apology xvi 1
- 25 *Ministries Examined* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), 78,79