

Summary and Analysis of the Debate Regarding Women's Ordination in the Lutheran Church of Australia

Dr Michael Lockwood, May 2013 (revised May 2017)

Over the past two decades, as people in the LCA¹ have debated women's ordination, the supporters of the church's teaching regarding the male-only pastorate have consistently pointed to two passages in the New Testament that forbid women from taking on the authoritative preaching/teaching role within the worshipping congregation. On the basis of this explicit word from God they have concluded that if the church were to ordain women to this role this would be an act of disobedience against Christ and his word. They have sometimes brought in other supporting arguments, such as the precedent Christ set when he chose only men to be his Apostles,² or the parallel between the God-given headship of fathers in their families and the God-given headship of male pastors in the church.³ Yet their case stands and falls with these two passages.

Those who have opposed the church's teaching on the other hand have rarely agreed with each other on how to approach this question. Instead of presenting the church with a consistent rationale for why the church's teaching should be overturned, some have put forward one argument, others have put forward another, and so on, until a great variety of different arguments have been amassed without any of them being owned by everybody. What unites the proponents of women's ordination is simply the conviction that women must be ordained, not any consistent theological case for this conviction.

So what should we make of this situation? Does this great variety of different arguments mean that the case for women's ordination is strong? To the contrary, it means that it is weak, at least when measured against the Bible, since none of the individual arguments stand up to scrutiny from a biblical perspective. Two dozen fallacious arguments do not add up to one legitimate case, but merely fool those who do not take the time to examine each in turn.

In what follows I will summarise the great variety of arguments that have been used to oppose the church's teaching, and briefly indicate why each of these arguments fails—at least, if one holds to the LCA's position that Scripture is our supreme authority and unerring guide. First, I will briefly look at the scriptural basis for the male-only pastorate. After this I will look at the multitude of attempts to sidestep, relativise, or reinterpret what Scripture says on this matter.

The Case For the Male-Only Pastorate

The case for the male-only pastorate stands and falls with the following texts:

1 Corinthians 14:33b–38

As in all the churches of the saints,³⁴ the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the Law also says.³⁵ If there is anything they

¹ Lutheran Church of Australia.

² Some have argued that the New Testament gives us an example of a female Apostle, "Junia," in Romans 16:6. However, the evidence for this is weak. First, we do not know for sure that this person was a woman, since the particular Greek form of the name that is given in this verse makes it impossible to tell whether the name should be "Junia" (feminine) or "Junias" (masculine). Second, we do not know that this person was an Apostle, since the Greek phrase that is sometimes rendered "well known among the Apostles" can just as easily be translated "well known to the Apostles." For example, when the Greek playwright Euripides says in his play *Hippolytus* that "Aphrodite is well known to mortals," he uses the exact same Greek construction. In this case it is quite clear that Aphrodite is not one of the mortals.

³ Ephesians 5:22 – 6:4; Colossians 3:18–21; 1 Peter 3:1–7.

desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. ³⁶Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? ³⁷If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. ³⁸If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

1 Timothy 2:11–15

¹¹Let a woman learn quietly with all subordination. ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵Yet she will be saved through childbearing⁴—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

Both of these texts are set in the context of a discussion of what takes place within public worship. Therefore the natural conclusion is that this prohibition on women speaking/teaching applies to this context, and does not apply to other contexts where Scripture assumes that women will take a more active role. What is prohibited here is women getting up and doing the authoritative speaking/teaching/preaching within the divine service. While neither text specifically mentions ordination, if women cannot do this then they cannot be ordained.

What is particularly important for our current debate is that the New Testament not only gives us this prohibition, but it gives us reasons for it. It tells us that this prohibition is grounded in the headship God gave to men at creation, the consequences of the fall for women, and a command of the Lord. Furthermore, it tells us that this prohibition applies not only in one local context, but “in all the churches of the saints.” If Paul had given different reasons for this prohibition the case would be different. If he had said that he gave this prohibition so as not to offend cultural sensitivities, then it would be possible to argue that this prohibition no longer applies today now that culture has changed. But he did not. Instead, the Holy Spirit, speaking through the Apostle Paul, pointed to creation and the fall and a command of the Lord as the reasons for this prohibition. These reasons may be right, or they may be wrong, but they are not time bound or culturally relative. If they are right, then they apply just as much in our day as they did in Paul’s day, and we should attempt to understand and appreciate them, not dismiss them. If they are wrong, then they were just as wrong in Paul’s day, and the Holy Spirit should not have inspired him to use them. One cannot argue that this prohibition does not apply to us today unless one also argues that the reasons Paul gave for this prohibition are invalid. Yet that means arguing that Scripture is in error at this point. To do this is inconsistent with a confession of scriptural inerrancy, and inappropriate for those who claim that Scripture is their ultimate guide.

The Case Against the Male-Only Pastorate

As I mentioned above, opponents of the male-only pastorate are not united in their case, but espouse many different arguments to justify their position. These include the following:

1. The inner call argument: Many women feel in their hearts that God has called them to be ordained, and therefore they should be.

Response: What a person thinks God is saying directly to his or her heart must always be tested against what God has said to us all through his written word.⁵ If it contradicts this word, then we know it does not come from God, since God does not contradict himself. Even in the case of a man who feels an inward call to ministry, the church tests this call in the light of God’s word and the requirements it spells out for the pastors of the church.⁶ Only when

⁴ Or, “through the birth of the Child.” Cf. Galatians 4:4.

⁵ 1 John 4:1, 6; 1 Thessalonians 5:20–21; cf. Acts 17:11; Revelation 2:2.

⁶ 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9.

this process is complete and the church issues him an outward call do we say with confidence that he has a divine call. One of the chief requirements for a pastor is a willingness to hold faithfully to God's word.⁷ Therefore any woman who claims that she has a hotline to God in her heart that trumps what God has said in his written word is doubly disqualified from being a pastor, both by the scriptural prohibition against female pastors and by her unwillingness to submit to God's word at this point.

2. The image of God argument: Both men and women are made in God's image, and therefore we should ordain both men and women.

Response: My five-year-old son is made in the image of God. So are my unbelieving neighbours. So is my practicing homosexual friend. None of them are eligible to be ordained. Why not? Because Scripture gives other requirements for being eligible for the office of the ministry,⁸ and simply being made in the image of God is not sufficient.

3. The majority rules argument: A majority of people on CTICR⁹ in 2000 voted that Scripture permits us to overturn the church's teaching on the male-only pastorate. The majority of Lutherans around the world belong to churches that have already done so. Therefore it is OK for us to do so.

Response: People who push this argument are selective about which majority they choose. The vast majority of Christians in the world today belong to churches that teach that Scripture does not permit the ordination of women. Then, if we look back through history, we find an even greater majority that affirms the male-only pastorate. Yet even if this were not the case, we do not have the right to overturn God's word by vote. If the majority votes against God's word, then the majority is in error and needs to repent.

4. The cultural argument: The culture in the past was patriarchal, and therefore people readily accepted the male-only pastorate. The culture today grants an equal status to women and finds the male-only pastorate offensive. Therefore women should be ordained.

Response: As Christians we are called to heed God's word, which is always out-of-step with the culture in one way or another.¹⁰ We do not have the right to overturn God's word to suit what the world tells us we should do.

5. The active women in the Bible argument: The Bible records how God used women to do many great things. Most importantly, Scripture gives us examples of women whom God called to evangelise, to teach (in contexts other than the public worship service), and to prophesy.¹¹ Therefore women should be ordained.

Response: This argument implies a devaluation of all lay people. Surely God can use laypeople to do great things, and not just pastors? So yes, laywomen are called by God to evangelise and to teach in certain contexts, just as laymen are, and God can give both laymen and laywomen the gift of prophecy. It does not follow from this that women should be ordained.

6. The anti-law argument: It is the gospel that counts, not the law. Since we are saved by grace and not by works, and live in the freedom of the gospel, we do not need to heed the commands of God. Therefore we can ignore God's command not to ordain women.

⁷ Titus 1:5.

⁸ Titus 1:5–9; 1 Corinthians 14:33b–38; 1 Timothy 2:11 – 3:7.

⁹ The Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations of the Lutheran Church of Australia.

¹⁰ Every culture has many areas where it is in conflict with the Christian faith. While it is true that the points of conflict change from one culture to another, and that people in the first century were less likely to be offended by the male-only pastorate than people are today, we should note that even in Paul's day the male-only pastorate was somewhat out-of-step with the culture, since there were many priestesses in the Greco-Roman world.

¹¹ 2 Kings 22:14–20; John 4:39; 20:11–18; Acts 18:26; 21:8–9; Titus 2:3–5.

Response: The Scriptures consistently teach the opposite, that as people who have been saved by grace through faith we should now strive to do the will of God and keep his commandments.¹² Both Luther and the Lutheran Confessions echo the Scriptures in this matter.¹³

7. The Christ alone argument: As a church we should stand on Christ alone, not on a bunch of rules given by the Apostle Paul. Therefore women can be ordained.

Response: This is just another version of the anti-law argument. It presents to us a Christ who is not concerned about God's will for us as taught in Holy Scripture. By separating Christ from his word in this way, it actually proclaims a false Christ, one that people have dreamed up to suit themselves in place of the true Christ presented to us in Holy Scripture. The Christ of Scripture says, "If you remain in my word, you are truly my disciples,"¹⁴ and "If you love me you will keep my commandments."¹⁵ Likewise, Luther writes, "we do not separate, or differentiate between, God and His Word or ministry, given to us through Christ; ... By no means should we become so foolish as to sever and separate God, Christ, and His Word from one another."¹⁶

8. The gospel of inclusivity argument: The gospel is a message of acceptance and inclusion for all people. Therefore we can include women in the office of the ministry.

Response: This is still another version of the anti-law argument. Yes, the gospel is a message that goes out to all the world, inviting all people to come into God's kingdom through repentance and faith in Christ. Yet the gospel is a message of acceptance for sinners, not acceptance of sin. It does not invite anyone to deliberately sin by setting aside God's word.

9. The power of the word argument: It is the power of God's word that is effective for salvation, not the person who speaks it. Therefore it does not matter if this person is male or female, and we can ordain women.

Response: This argument boils down to saying that because it is the power of the word that ultimately matters, therefore we can overturn what the word has to say about the male-only pastorate. It should be evident to all that we can't take our stand on the power of the word while at the same time ignoring what it has to say.

10. The efficacy = validity argument: Since the word of God spoken by a woman can be effective in bringing about repentance and faith and other good things, it is valid for us to ordain women.

Response: This argument is another version of the previous one, and confuses two things: validity and efficacy. Just because something is effective doesn't necessarily mean that it is valid. To give an example: just because adultery can be effective in producing the wonderful gift of a child does not make this act morally or theologically valid. An act can be effective, yet still contrary to God's good order.

11. The Galatians 3:28 argument: Galatians 3:28 states, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Since there is "no male and female," therefore women can be ordained.

Response: This argument fails to observe the context of the passage. The passage is talking about our status before God, and asserting that we are all equally heirs of salvation. It is not addressing the question of what callings God

¹² E.g. John 14:15, 21; Romans 12:1ff; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Ephesians 4:1ff; Colossians 3:1ff; 1 Thessalonians 4:1ff; 1 Peter 1:13 – 5:11; 1 John 2:3–4; 3:24.

¹³ FC VI; LW 14:295–98, 300; 22:141–46; 35:366–67, 375–76; Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, trans. Henry Cole (2 vols.; London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826), 2.407–410 [sic]; 2.416–19 [sic].

¹⁴ John 8:31; cf. 2 John 7–9.

¹⁵ John 14:15; cf. John 14:23–24.

¹⁶ *Sermons on John* (1537), LW 24:67 = WA 45:522.3–5, 20–21; cf. Matthew 24:23–24; 1 John 4:1–6.

might give us here in the world. Therefore it does not overturn what Scripture says in other places about these various callings. To use this passage to say that women can be ordained, despite what Scripture says when it talks specifically about the public ministry, is an abuse of this passage. It is logically equivalent to saying that since “there is no male and female” two men or two women could get married, despite what Scripture says when it specifically addresses the question of marriage.

12. The mission argument: Since the male-only pastorate is an offence to many people in our society, if we ordain women it will help the mission of the church.

Response: This has not been borne out in the experience of those churches that have ordained women. In most cases in the western world the ordination of women has been followed by a swift and steady decline in numbers. In fact, leading sociologists of religion, on the basis of data from right around the world, have observed that churches that refuse to compromise their message to bring it into line with the thinking of the modern secular world fare significantly better in terms of retaining and gaining members than churches that are happy to accommodate their message to the spirit of the age.¹⁷ Two reasons why the ordination of women could hasten a decline in numbers are obvious. First, churches that ordain women always end up alienating and marginalising those who object, and lose both numbers and strength in this way. Second, the great commission is to “make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to keep everything I have commanded you.”¹⁸ By setting aside one of Christ’s commands and ordaining women the church sends the message that the commands of Christ can be ignored. It therefore directly undermines the great commission.

13. The shortage of pastors argument: Our church is currently experiencing a shortage of pastors. If we ordain women we will have twice as many people to choose from and this will help to fix the pastor shortage.

Response: Churches that have ordained women have not found this to be the case. For instance, the Uniting Church of Australia, despite the fact that it ordains women, has a greater pastor shortage than we do. Evidently when a church ordains women it ends up with fewer men to choose from. One can only speculate as to all the reasons for this. Yet one reason is obvious: when a church ordains women, men who object to this stance will gradually be forced out of the ministry. No church can tolerate for long a situation in which one group of its pastors refuses to acknowledge that another group of its pastors is validly ordained.

14. The spiritual gifts argument: Women are just as spiritually gifted as men, and therefore they can be ordained.

Response: It is not us and our spiritual giftedness that is of ultimate importance, but God’s word and its power, and our spiritual giftedness cannot be used as a reason to overturn this word. Spiritually gifted women have many avenues for using their gifts without being ordained, and if they are truly led by the Holy Spirit they will not oppose what the Spirit has spoken in his word.¹⁹

15. The lack of clarity argument: The key texts that have been used to support the male-only pastorate are unclear, and therefore we do not have to heed what they say.

Response: There is nothing difficult about the grammar or the vocabulary or the context of these passages. The reason why there is disagreement over their interpretation is because they are offensive to modern sensibilities, not because they are unclear. When theologians say that Scripture permits the ordination of women, what they mean is that they think they can find a way to get around these passages. The main way they do this is by taking an

¹⁷ Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the Word*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 4, 6.

¹⁸ Matthew 28:19–20.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 14:37.

historical-critical approach to them. That is, they speculate about the history behind the text, and use this to critique the text and its relevance for today. For instance, they say things like, “Paul was still blinkered by the cultural assumptions of his day,” or “Paul was trying not to cause offense in his patriarchal culture,” or “Paul was only trying to deal with a local situation where the women were disrupting the service.” They then use these speculations to trump the actual arguments that Paul uses in the text, namely, that the prohibition on women teaching in the public worship service is not merely a matter of the culture of the day but is grounded in God’s plan in creation, the consequences of the fall, and a command of the Lord that applies to all churches and not merely to one local situation. When our historical speculations can be used in this way to trump what the text of Scripture actually says, then we are not abiding by our public confession that Scripture “as a whole and in all its parts” is the “divinely inspired, written and inerrant word of God.”²⁰

16. The whole of Scripture argument: Instead of just looking at two passages to determine our stance on women’s ordination, we should look at the whole of Scripture. In the rest of Scripture we see a God who values and welcomes women. The general thrust of Scripture is one of inclusion. Therefore women should be ordained.

Response: I call this the Dennis Denuto argument, “It’s the vibe of the thing, your Honour.”²¹ You can only demonstrate what a book “as a whole” says by citing specific passages, not by vaguely appealing to a subjective impression regarding its overall thrust. Furthermore, the best way to find out what it says on a specific topic is to look at those places where it specifically addresses that topic. If my car has a problem with its muffler, I don’t go and read those parts of the manual that talk about the fuel injection or transmission. Or I don’t say, “the general purpose of a car is to go, not stop,” and on this basis ignore what the manual says about the brakes. Likewise, if we want to know what Scripture says about the office of the ministry, we go to those passages that talk about the office of the ministry.

17. The “only two passages” argument: There are only two passages in the New Testament that prohibit women from carrying out the functions of the ordained ministry. Therefore the biblical case against women’s ordination is not sufficiently weighty to still bind us today.

Response: What parent, when faced with a disobedient child, is going to be impressed by the answer, “But you only told me twice”? So why would we think that God should accept this kind of response to his word?

Furthermore, we should note the following: 1) the church has many teachings and practices that are only established by one or two biblical texts, including many of the statements in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds; 2) not even one biblical text authorises us to ordain women; and 3) 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 are backed up by Christ’s choice of only men as apostles, the nomination of two “men” by the church in Jerusalem in Acts 1:21 as candidates to replace Judas, wider biblical teaching regarding headship and subordination, and the practice of the Early Church.

18. The fear argument: Proponents of the male only pastorate are fearful of change, and if they were only more courageous they would embrace women’s ordination.

Response: Scripture talks about two kinds of fear: fear of the Lord, which it advocates, and fear of human beings or anything else apart from the Lord, which it warns us against.²² As a proponent of the male-only pastorate I

²⁰ This confession is contained in the LCA constitution and in the constitution of every LCA congregation. Every pastor makes this confession when he is ordained, and every synodical delegate affirms this confession at every synodical convention. Synod therefore cannot abandon this confession with integrity.

²¹ In the Australian movie *The Castle* an incompetent lawyer by the name of Dennis Denuto tried to save his friend’s house from compulsory acquisition by appealing in court to the Australian Constitution. When the judge asked him, “Which part of the Constitution,” he was unable to cite any specific part, but merely answered, “It’s the vibe.” Understandably, the judge was not impressed by his argument.

²² Matthew 10:28; Isaiah 66:2b; Proverbs 1:7.

experience both kinds of fear. I have no fear of change per se, but I do have a fear of people. I know that my stand is unpopular in our church and our society, and I am fearful that people won't like me and will discriminate against me for taking such an unpopular stand. Yet I have a greater fear of the Lord that casts out this fear and compels me to stand on his word.

19. The equality argument: Since women and men are equal, therefore women should be ordained.

Response: Both sides in this debate agree that women and men are equal. The Bible clearly teaches that both men and women were created in the image of God. Furthermore, they are both born sinful, and are equally heirs of salvation through Christ. The question at stake is, "What follows from this?" Can people only be equal when they are the same? Or is it possible for God to assign different callings and different gifts to different people in such a way that they all complement each other within the body of Christ, without compromising their equal share of his favour and his kingdom?²³ My son is an equal member of the body of Christ with me, yet God says to him, "Obey your father." I was created in the image of God just as much as our Prime Minister, yet God says to me, "Obey the governing authorities" (including Julia Gillard while she was still in office). Does a layman have to be ordained before he is equal to an ordained man? I hope we would all say "no," since the office of the ministry is not about lording it over the flock,²⁴ but is simply one avenue of service within the body of Christ. So why must a woman be ordained before she can be equal to a man?

20. The social justice argument: Justice demands that we accord equal rights to all people, and not discriminate on the basis of gender. Therefore women should have the right to be ordained.

Response: This is not a matter of human rights, since none of us have the right to be ordained. Instead, only God can call someone into the public ministry of word and sacrament. This call is a privilege, a responsibility, and a gift of grace that he bestows on those whom he chooses, not something that any of us can choose for ourselves. Just as God chose the Jews as his unique instrument to bring salvation into the world,²⁵ chose only Levites to serve him in the temple and the tabernacle, chose only the descendants of Aaron to serve him as Old Testament priests, chose only the sons of David to sit on the throne in Jerusalem, chose only Mary to be the mother of our Lord, and chose only women to give birth to children, so if he chooses only men to serve in the public ministry of word and sacrament then that is his right, and we have no right to argue.

21. The "we break other rules" argument: The Bible contains many commands that we no longer obey. Therefore we do not have to obey the commands in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 either, and women can be ordained.

Response: This argument fails to acknowledge the Old Testament/New Testament distinction. As Christians we are people of the new covenant, not the old covenant. The New Testament tells us that the Law of Moses, which stands at the heart of the Old Testament, is now obsolete, since it has been fulfilled by Christ and superseded by God's new covenant with us through Christ.²⁶ Therefore we are no longer bound to keep the Law of Moses, except to the extent that portions of it are reiterated in the New Testament. The same is not true for the commands in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2. These are both New Testament texts, and therefore part of the new covenant.

It is true that in addition to the Old Testament law there are also some New Testament commands that we no longer keep. Yet this is never done willy-nilly, but only when the New Testament itself gives us an indication that

²³ Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12–31.

²⁴ 1 Peter 5:3; Mark 10:42–45

²⁵ Genesis 12:3; John 4:22.

²⁶ The passage that says this most clearly is Hebrews 8:6–13, though it is also mentioned in Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 7:22; 9:1 – 10:18; 12:24. In addition, see the way the New Testament treats things like circumcision, the Sabbath, the temple, dietary laws, and cleanliness rituals, which were all key elements of the old covenant.

these commands were only intended for a specific context.²⁷ The key passages in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 give us the opposite indication. They tell us that the prohibition against women teaching/preaching in the divine service applies “to all the churches of the saints.” Furthermore, it is grounded in God’s purposes in creation and the consequences of the fall, not merely in certain local or temporal circumstances.

22. The “we can’t read the Bible literally” argument: The Bible is full of non-literal elements like poetry, metaphors, hyperbole, and symbolism, which cannot be read literally. Therefore we should not take the passages in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 literally, and women can be ordained.

Response: 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 are straightforward prose. The natural way to read any text is to read poetry as poetry, metaphors as metaphors, hyperbole as hyperbole, parables as parables, and prose as prose. Since these passages are prose, and contain no obvious figures of speech, the natural way to read them is literally.²⁸

23. The slavery argument: Paul told slaves to obey their masters,²⁹ and never commanded Christian masters to free their slaves. Therefore the institution of slavery is just as well established in Scripture as the male-only pastorate. Since we no longer accept the institution of slavery we should not accept the male-only pastorate either.

It is true that Paul told slaves to obey their masters, just as we tell servants and employees to obey their employers today.³⁰ This does not mean he was sanctioning the institution of slavery or forbidding its abolition. He also commanded masters not to mistreat their slaves,³¹ told slaves that if they had the opportunity to gain their freedom they should do so,³² included those who force people into slavery in a list of those who are unholy and do not live according to sound doctrine,³³ and urged the slave owner Philemon to treat his slave Onesimus as a

²⁷ For instance, in Acts 15 the Jerusalem council issued a command to abstain from meat that had previously been sacrificed to idols and meat that contains blood. Yet the rest of the New Testament makes it clear that the consumption of such meat is not a problem in and of itself, but only when it offends someone’s weak conscience (Mark 7:14–19; Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8; 1 Corinthians 10:23–33). When German Lutherans today eat Blutwurst, this is not an example of arbitrarily setting aside a command of God. Instead, the New Testament itself gives us permission to set aside this command, provided that we do not offend anyone’s conscience or cause them to stumble.

²⁸ This argument also fails to acknowledge the history of debate within the church regarding the “literal sense” of Scripture. Down through the ages there has been a long running debate regarding “literal” readings of Scripture versus “spiritual” or “allegorical” readings of it. In this debate, the assumption is that everyone knows how to read and understands how language works, and therefore has an understanding of such things as poetry, figures of speech, parables, and symbolic genres like the apocalyptic literature in Daniel and Revelation. Therefore a “literal” reading of Scripture—or as the Lutheran reformers were more likely to say, a “plain, natural” reading of it—is not opposed to such things, but instead contains them. The Lutheran Confessions, the ecumenical creeds, and orthodox theology in general are all based on a literal reading of Scripture, when “literal” is understood in this way. In addition to this “literal sense” many biblical commentators throughout history have contended that the Bible also contains various “spiritual” or “allegorical” senses. That is, they contend that it is replete with multiple layers of meaning, and contains extended metaphors and parables and symbols that go beyond what the words say at face value. Luther, as well as later reformers like Martin Chemnitz, did not entirely discount allegory. Yet they argued that the literal sense was the most important sense of Scripture and must take priority over allegorical interpretations, which cannot by themselves establish doctrine, and can never contradict the literal sense. Therefore they focused almost exclusively on the literal sense in their work. In contrast, theologians in the early and medieval church were often given to extensive allegorizing. Nevertheless, they still agreed in principle that allegorical interpretations must not trump the literal sense, but must be in harmony with it, and ideally should be based on it. It is only modern critical scholars, who reject the truth of the plain, obvious meaning of Scripture, who have advocated “spiritual” readings as a replacement for literal readings rather than a complement to them.

²⁹ Ephesians 6:5–8; Colossians 3:22–25.

³⁰ See Luther’s explanation of the fourth commandment in his Small and Large Catechisms.

³¹ Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1.

³² 1 Corinthians 7:21–23.

³³ 1 Timothy 1:10.

Christian brother and therefore grant him the freedom he desired.³⁴ It makes good sense that Paul did not command all Christian masters to free all their slaves, since in many cases the slaves would have ended up destitute, and therefore it would not have been an act of kindness. For instance, one of the cruellest things a slave owner in the Greco-Roman world could do was to renege on his obligation to provide for his slaves by freeing them once they got too old to work anymore. It would be completely wrong to conclude from any of Paul's writings that he was saying that slavery is a natural state, that it is OK to force people into slavery against their will, or that it is OK to treat people like property, instead of with the dignity the Bible tells us we must accord to all whom God created in his image. Therefore the abolition of slavery, which contravenes no biblical commands and fits well with biblical teaching, cannot be compared with the ordination of women, which Scripture expressly prohibits.

24. The "practice, not doctrine" argument: If we choose to ordain women we will not be changing any doctrine of the church, merely changing church practice. Therefore we can rest assured that this will not affect our doctrine. Furthermore, it should only require a simple majority at Synod to bring this in, not the two-thirds majority that is required for doctrinal matters.

Response: Doctrine and practice belong together, and cannot be separated so easily. At least two doctrines are at stake in this matter. First, our practice of ordination is determined by our doctrine of the ministry, and cannot be changed without modifying this doctrine. This is an important doctrine, since God himself instituted the ministry for the purpose of bringing his Word, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the forgiveness of sins to people, and thereby creating saving faith through the power of his Holy Spirit. The ministry therefore plays a significant part in God's plan of salvation. Second, we cannot ordain women without ignoring what the Bible has to say about it, and thereby undermining our doctrine of Scripture. This means undermining the foundation for the Church and the Christian life,³⁵ and destroying the basis for all our doctrine. As has become evident in the lives of churches that have already ordained women, if we change our practice on this issue in defiance of God's word, it will be extremely difficult for us to stand on God's Word when it comes to other issues in the future.

25. The "it's all about love" argument: When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:37, "the things [plural] I am writing to you are a command of the Lord," this does not refer to what he says in the immediately preceding verses, but to the command to "pursue love" [singular] that comes 36 verses earlier. Therefore we are not breaking a command of the Lord if we ordain women.

Response1: Not only is this grammatically implausible, it means violating the usual rules of interpretation by wrenching verse 37 out of its immediate context.

Response 2: This also plays into a human prejudice that goes like this: "We know what love is, so if God is love then his love must be like our love. Since we think it is unloving to deny ordination to women, God must agree with us, despite what the Bible says. Therefore we can dismiss 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 as unloving, at least if it is applied to the church today." Such thinking reflects empty human pride. The reality is that our sinful human hearts frequently do not have a clear understanding of love, and God gives us his commands (including 1 Corinthians 14:34–35) because we need him to teach us what is truly loving in his sight (John 14:15, 21).

26. The "inadequate instruction" argument: The reason why Paul prohibited women from teaching in 1 Timothy 2:12 was because the women in his day had not been instructed well enough to take on this role. This is what Paul means when he says, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was

³⁴ Philemon 8–20.

In the Old Testament the people of Israel were forbidden to enslave their fellow Israelites against their will. They did practice a form of indentured service, but this was always voluntary (Exodus 21:1–6; Leviticus 25:35–46; Deuteronomy 15:12–18). Now that Christ has come, and Gentiles have been grafted into Israel (Ephesians 2:11 – 3:6; Romans 11:11–24), it is natural to extend this prohibition further.

³⁵ Matthew 7:24–27; Ephesians 2:20.

deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Timothy 2:13–14). Since Adam was formed first, he understood God’s prohibition against eating the forbidden fruit better than Eve did, who had not been created yet when this is first mentioned in the Bible (Genesis 2:17). It is because of this lack of instruction that she succumbed to the devil’s deception. Therefore, as long as we instruct women well enough, we can ordain them today.

Response: Paul says nothing about women being inadequately instructed. If that had been his concern, there would have been no need for him to single out women. He could simply have said, “No one should teach until they have been thoroughly instructed themselves.” Yet he didn’t. Therefore this argument assumes that Paul was a bad communicator, and that we need to read between the lines to work out what he meant rather than focusing on what he actually said. Even if (God forbid) we accept speculative attempts to read between the lines as a sound approach to biblical interpretation, this is not even plausible speculation. Eve’s response to the serpent in Genesis 3:2 shows that she was fully aware of God’s prohibition. In addition, we know that there were well instructed women in Paul’s day, from Mary who sat at Jesus feet (Luke 10:38–42), to Priscilla, who, as a member of the congregation in Ephesus to which 1 Timothy was addressed, helped to instruct Apollos more accurately in the way (Acts 18:18–28). If lack of instruction was the key issue, it should have been Apollos who was forbidden to teach in the public assembly, not Priscilla.

Conclusion

The church’s teaching on the male-only pastorate is based on a clear word from God recorded in two places in the New Testament. Those who oppose this teaching have amassed a great variety of different arguments to justify their contention that these texts should not prevent the church from ordaining women. At first glance this great multitude of arguments may give the impression of strength. Yet appearances are deceptive, since none of these arguments stand up to scrutiny—unless we want to abandon the Scriptures as our ultimate authority and say that the New Testament has erred.