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# A Statement on the Ordination of Women

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# DOCUMENTATION

## A STATEMENT ON THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

Out of the many discussions and papers on the subject of the ministry and ordination of women we have come down to two basic interpretations which apparently cannot be reconciled. The proponents of both these interpretations have shown ample evidence that they have submitted themselves to the Lordship of Christ and to the authority of His Word, and insofar as is humanly possible have used interpretive (hermeneutical) principles in keeping with the Lutheran Confessions. They have sought in utmost seriousness to find His message for the church today in Holy Scripture. Yet the differences in interpretation remain.

Essentially, the one interpretation is that the subordination of women to men is part of the order of creation, “male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:27). Though this subordination was given negative aspects because of the Fall, when God told Eve, “he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16), it remains part of the divine order established for all time. The denial of the subordination of women to men is detrimental to the wellbeing of the family, society and the church.

The guidelines for husbands and wives in both Peter’s and Paul’s epistles are laid down according to the order of creation. That same principle underlies the commands concerning women’s participation in the worship and leadership roles of the congregations. In 1 Cor. 11:3, Paul stated the order of headship: “The head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” Head coverings and shaving, customs of the day, were proper or improper according to whether or not they upheld the principle that “(man) is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man” (1 Cor. 11:7).

Paul also laid down binding principles, not just for Corinth, when he wrote, “The women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as even the law says” (1 Cor. 14:34).

Paul further united his instructions to the will of God expressed in his creation when he gave Timothy instruction concerning the supervision of the churches: “Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim. 2:11-13).

In summary, the ordination of women to the pastoral office is not to be permitted because the exercise of the pastoral responsibilities of teaching or

proclamation in the public ministry of the church is contrary to the established relationship between man and woman in creation, and the public functioning of a woman in the pastoral role would be a contradiction to the Word (the Gospel in wider sense) which that office is to proclaim.

The other interpretation is that the subordination of women to men came about as judgement through the Fall into sin when humanity lost the image of God. But Christ came to restore that image and to save humankind through the Gospel. It is this Gospel which sets us free to live our lives in Christ in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for we are all *one* in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

But this freedom does not mean licence to live our lives for ourselves but for Him who for our sake died and was raised (2 Cor. 5:15). It is in the context of still bearing evidences of the fallen state and of giving offence that Paul rightly calls on women to be silent in the church in 1 Cor. 11 and 14. This is what is also echoed in 1 Tim. 2. However, “we all, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18) so that in Christ we become “a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

On the basis of this, at the right moment in history the institution of slavery was abolished. So also as we move from one degree of glory to another, the subordination of women must also be abolished and we come into the fulness of that oneness in Christ. In this context the opportunity for women to function in ministry and to be ordained is not only permitted but desirable.

These two differing interpretations must be understood and accepted in the conviction that they are arrived at in good faith under the Lordship of Christ and are therefore not church divisive. (1) Nowhere does Scripture argue that we must deny our fellowship in Christ over a matter of interpretation but, rather, we should continue to discuss our differences as we teach and admonish each other in all wisdom. To deny fellowship would be to place our own interpretation above Christ who reconciled us to Himself not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19).

The New Testament speaks of a problem that in many respects was quite similar to the one that troubles us. This was the controversy over the eating of meat that came from animals which had been sacrificed to idols. Some had strong convictions that a Christian could not eat such meat; to do so meant joining in the sacrifice to the idol. Therefore, they not only did not eat such meat, but questioned the faith of others who did. Others had equally strong convictions that it was entirely proper to use such meat for food, “for the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (1 Cor. 10:26). They were tempted to despise as weak in faith those who, because of scruples of conscience, would not eat such meat.

Paul insists in Romans 14:1 to 15:13 and 1 Cor. 8-10 that this difference of conviction should not be divisive of fellowship. Rather, “let everyone be fully

1. It should be noted that the Lutheran Confessions do not deal with the matter of the ordination of women. Consequently, this issue has to be regarded as a matter of interpretation and not one of a difference of doctrine on the basis of the Confessions.

convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5b). He challenged the one group, "Why do you pass judgement on your brother?" (Rom. 14:10a). He challenged the other group, "Why do you despise your brother?" (Rom. 14:10b). He exhorted both, "Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7).

We believe that in the same church there can be differences of opinion about the ordination of women. We believe that the unity of one Canadian Lutheran Church can be maintained by granting each congregation the freedom to decide whom to call as its pastor. We recommend this guarantee of congregational freedom as the present solution to the controversy over the ordination of women.

If this difference of view and practice is permitted by congregations whose members are committed to the authority of Scripture, and who accordingly walk in love and through love seek to be servants of one another, we will together "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom. 14:19) under the continual guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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*Adopted by the Division of Theology, Lutheran Council in Canada, October 25, 1977 as guidance for the Lutherans in Canada. One member of the Division dissented from the majority view that differing views on this subject are not church divisive.*

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