

Introduction: The meaning of ordination

Presbyterian Christians are the inheritors of a wonderful tradition: “the priesthood of all believers”. The sixteenth-century Reformers declared that Jesus Christ alone is our mediator; in Jesus God came, to cancel and forgive our sin. When we accept this grace of forgiveness, God in Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, comes at every moment, to be with us and for us in every situation.

In ancient Judaism, and in the pre-Reformation church (and still today, in churches other than those of the Reformation) a priest was necessary, each time a sacrifice was made. God accepted the sacrifice as an expiation of sin, and the offering of some animal was also a confirmation of the person’s relationship with God.

Presbyterian ministers, however, are not priests: they are not performers of sacrifices, but “ministers” - (that is, “servants”) - of the Word and sacraments”. The churches of the Reformation have recognised that God sovereignly calls some individuals to serve in this way, and gives the necessary gifts for this work - although every Christian has the responsibility to speak and act in witness to God’s saving love in Jesus. The Presbyterian Church of Australia has ordained men, and in this century women as well, to the eldership and the ministry, with this understanding, and in recognition that God has “called” these individuals to this particular service.

The testimony of Scripture

Throughout Biblical history both women and men have heard God’s call to use their gifts in God’s service. Even in patriarchal society, women like Miriam prophesied, while Deborah was a judge in Israel. Huldah, as a respected prophet, spoke

“the word of the Lord” to King Josiah. Certainly these women were unusual, but there is no hint that their being female could have automatically excluded them from these activities. Then in the young Christian church, Acts 21:9 records, without any comment on whether this was exceptional, that “Philip had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied.”

In the New Testament, Jesus showed in word and attitude that he fully recognised women’s gifts and service. As well, in St John’s gospel, it is women who make public some very important insights about the meaning of Jesus’ coming into the world. The Samaritan woman, John 4:7-42, though a person of low social position, ran back to the town and became the first missionary to her own people. She was called by God to tell them what Jesus had said - that he was “the one who was to come”. Later, in John 11:27, Martha declared that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of God”, even before the raising of her brother Lazarus. St Luke’s gospel also gives many examples of Jesus’ understanding and respect for women, and notes that women supported him and his travelling group “out of their own means” (8:2-3).

Most telling of all, though not often the subject of sermons, is the fact that three of the gospels state specifically that while the men fled, women followed Jesus to the cross, and saw where he was buried. All four gospels agree that the women were the first to hear the words “He is not here; he has been raised.” Mary Magdalene, according to St John, was the first person to see him after the resurrection. Would the Church ever have existed without the witness of women?

It is very difficult, also, to base the argument against women’s ordination on St Paul’s writings. The main text, in fact, on which the prohibition of

women’s leading and preaching role rests is 1 Timothy 2:12: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” The word translated as “to have authority over” is a very strong verb indeed, meaning at the very least “to have full power or authority over” and often with much more severe meanings. It most likely refers to a particular situation in the church. The prohibition is followed by some reasoning about the creation of Eve, and her sin. The section concludes with a very puzzling statement about childbearing as a means of salvation. It is hard to put the full weight of the ban on women on a passage which is so difficult to interpret.

Much more straightforward information on St Paul’s attitude comes in his letters to various churches. Most important of all is the fascinating last chapter of his letter to the Romans. He begins by commending the person who apparently carried the letter to Rome: Phoebe, a “deacon” (or “servant” - the word which he frequently uses of himself) of the church at Cenchreae. She is not only a deacon but also the leader, president or protector of this church (Romans 16:1-2). Then comes the long list of people he describes as his “dear friends”, those who “have worked very hard”, “fellow workers” and even “apostles”. The list includes many women. Here we have glimpses of the first-century churches, and the lively and devoted participation of women in the hard and dangerous work of establishing the church in a hostile world.

Elsewhere in his letters, St Paul gives a ruling on what a woman should wear, when she “prays or prophesies” (in 1 Corinthians 11:4-16). These instructions would hardly have survived if the situation did not arise. Last and certainly not least is his famous declaration in Galatians 3:28 that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free,

male nor female” among the baptised, for “you are all one in Christ Jesus.” We should not deduce from his various statements on the role of women that St Paul was not sure what he thought, but instead should remember that the “letters” span a long period, and were written for particular purposes, sometimes to deal with difficult situations.

Those who claim that God does not call women to “teach” in a congregation need for their part to remember that the Spirit is not bound by human rules. God does not call all males to teach, nor all females, but those who are called know that they must heed that voice.

The full meaning of ministry

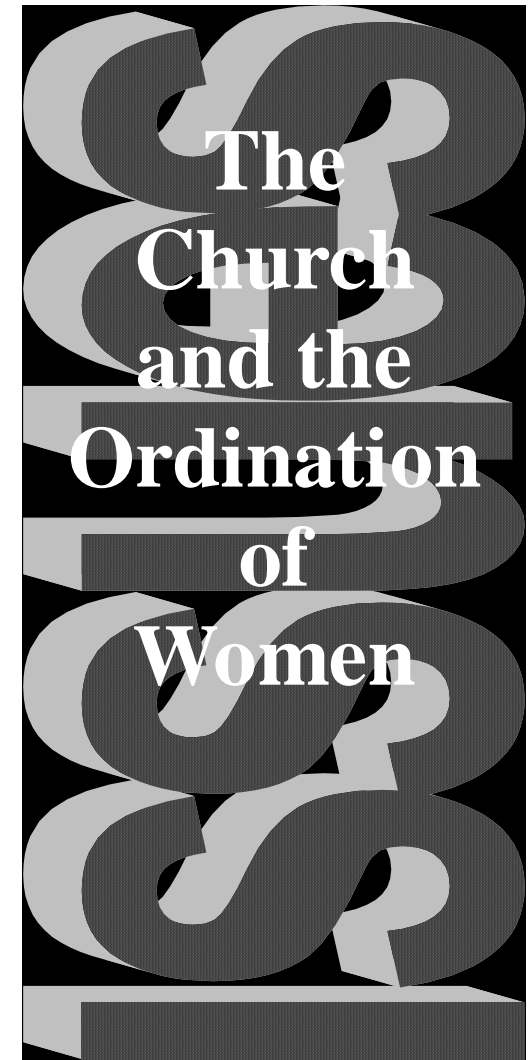
Teaching and preaching are only part of ministry. Caring and helping, “being there” for others, and the celebration of the very important milestones in people’s lives are also important. The gifts of caring have often been “women’s work”, not just in the church but in society as a whole. Many women still serve in these ways, but limiting the task of caring for others to women (which often happens by default) could discriminate against men who have these qualities.

Most important of all for some Christians are the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper. Women, through their experiences in life, may have a distinctive spiritual gift in the celebration of the sacraments, which are the “outward and visible signs” of God’s saving love. In baptism, particularly infant baptism, women, in whose lives infants and young children are often very important, can identify with those who bring their children for baptism. Similarly, the considerable knowledge which many women have of the preparation and serving the food which will nourish their families - and the happiness which

they feel at seeing the family united around the table - may enrich the spiritual joy of the sacrament of communion, the meal to which our Lord invites us.

In three places in the gospel accounts, (Matthew 20:25-28, Mark 10:42-45, Luke 22:25-27), Jesus made it clear that his followers were to be “the least of all, and servant of all”. As well, he often told these followers to “take up their cross” (Matthew 10:38, Mark 8:34-35 etc.). There is no hint of “headship” here.

Women do not seek the status of “minister” through pride, but through a true desire to serve. In asking for a return to the situation which existed until 1992, in which the Presbyterian Church of Australia ordained women, we appeal to the principles of the Reformation, to the Scriptures of both Old and New Testaments and to a full understanding of what our Lord sought and seeks in those who are to be his “servants”.



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