

What do biblical writers mean? Reading and interpreting the Bible.

Introduction

From the inception of the debate on women's ordination within the LCA in the late eighties, there has been a repeated plea for a biblical hermeneutic that would be acceptable to the great majority of the church's members. The general synod of 1987 adopted a document titled 'A consensus statement on holy scripture' which brought to an end – at least for the time being – a long running debate on a wide range of issues, such as the inspiration and authority of the Bible, the relationship between the Bible as divine word and human word, and the clarity of the Bible. After heaving a collective sigh of relief that this topic was finally off the agenda, the church was suddenly faced with the debate on the ordination of women, and hermeneutics landed back on the table, more forcibly and in a more focused manner than ever. It was soon apparent that people were coming to different conclusions on women's ordination. Not surprisingly, the conclusion was drawn that people decided the matter differently because they read the Bible differently, and that until such time as the church reached agreement on hermeneutics there would be no agreement on whether the Bible permitted the ordination of women. Neither the existing documentation ('a consensus statement') appeared to be of assistance, nor even the agreed statement on how we read and apply the scriptures, a mini-hermeneutics, that formed part of the preamble to the theology commission's initial report on women's ordination in 1998.

This is the wording of the statement:

1. Lutheran teaching on ordination is not a doctrine of the first order, as is, for example, the article on justification. Yet the question whether women are to be ordained or not is important for the church because it has to do with the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments which are vital to the life and mission of the church.
2. Whether or not women are to be ordained is to be established by a consistent theological argument based on the witness of the Scriptures, the creeds, and the Lutheran confessions, not simply by countering the opposing argument.
3. A doctrine must be based on scriptural teaching rather than merely on scriptural precedent. That something was the case in biblical and apostolic times is not proof that it must be the case today. However, precedent may be used to support scriptural teaching.
4. It is proper to argue by inference and so draw conclusions from biblical texts (as in the case of the argument for infant baptism where there is no explicit command to baptise children). The question is, on what basis the inferences are drawn, and whether the deductions are correct. In any case, principles formed by deduction cannot contradict the clear doctrinal content of particular texts.
5. It is legitimate to distinguish between the meaning of a biblical text and its application. There must, however, be a clear and coherent theological reason for holding that a biblical command is no longer binding, or is to be applied in a different way (see for example Paul's argument about women's headdress in 1 Corinthians 11).

Why has such an impasse arisen? And is an agreed hermeneutic the solution? It is my contention that a greater appreciation of hermeneutics will help answer those two questions, but it will not necessarily lead the church unerringly to the mind of God on the matter in hand.

What is meant by the word 'hermeneutics'?

Hermes was the messenger of the gods of ancient Greece. Hermes' task was to run errands for the other gods and communicate their will to humans. Based on the name Hermes (the equivalent Roman god was Mercury), the Greek verb *hermēneuein* means 'to translate', 'to interpret', or 'to explain'. The words of the Bible call for a twofold interpretation. First, a message originating from God in heaven needs to be interpreted so that it speaks clearly to humans on earth. Secondly, a message originating in the distant past and in remote societies needs to be interpreted so that it speaks clearly to the readers of today.

1. Hermeneutics as method of interpretation

When people use the word hermeneutics in connection with the Bible, sometimes they are referring to nothing more than the process by which readers make sense of a collection of texts written in ancient languages and in the context of a society and culture that have long since disappeared. In that case the word means virtually the same as exegesis, the methods employed to uncover:

- *the world behind the text* - history, society, geography, politics, authorship, audience, and the theological and pastoral issues affecting life in ancient Israel or the early church at the time of writing; in brief, the author and the world of the author.
- *the world of the text* - literary context, literary genre, text content, purpose of text, literary strategies, rhetorical devices; in brief, the text on its own, or the text in itself.
- *the world in front of the text* - contemporary appropriation and application; in brief, the world of the reader, or what the reader makes of the text today.

Understood as exegesis, hermeneutics is a methodical activity carried out by the reader. The reader is active subject, and the text is the passive object of scrutiny. The purpose of the exercise is threefold: to understand the text in its original historical context - what the text meant then (*subtilitas intelligendi*: precision in understanding), to explicate parallel situations in today's church and world - what the text means now (*subtilitas explicandi*: precision in unfolding), and to apply that text to hearts and lives by means of study, teaching and preaching – how to proclaim the text today (*subtilitas applicandi*: precision in applying).

2. Hermeneutics as process of transformation

In the final analysis, however, what the reader makes of the text always yields to what the text makes of us; or better still, what God makes of us by means of his word. After all, the Bible is God's loving address to us creatures of God. God's word to us focuses most fully and completely on God's incarnate word Jesus Christ and God's word as it is proclaimed in the gospel and administered through the sacraments.

As the word is proclaimed and administered, Jesus the incarnate word is present in the worshipping community today, building it up by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus continually speaks to human hearts, leads people to repentance and faith, teaches, warns, encourages and comforts, and in doing so transforms believers stage by stage into his own glorious image. Far more than object of scrutiny, then, the Bible is the cradle for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, this world's life and salvation.

3. Hermeneutics as specific theories of understanding

Thirdly, the term biblical hermeneutics denotes a theory of understanding, specifically a theory of how to understand the Bible. At this point we are delving again into the world in front of the text, the world of the reader. As a theory of understanding, hermeneutics refers to the theological stance of a given community of faith. So, for example, we speak of a *Lutheran hermeneutic* whose main principles have always included the centrality of Christ, justification by faith alone, the proper distinction between law and gospel, the theology of the cross, scripture interprets scripture, the clarity of the scriptures, and the inspiration of the scriptures so that they are authoritative for the faith, worship and service of the church. Arguably, none of these items could be called exclusively Lutheran. But as a package they determine the mindset of mainstream Lutheranism. Necessarily, such principles have been devised within the church by people of faith, from a specific social and religious location, as the members of that community of faith reflect on the issues of the day and what they regard as the enduring issues of the Christian faith.

Hermeneutical agendas, such as a Lutheran hermeneutic, are devised because of the difficulty of understanding the ancient biblical text (*the hermeneutical problem*). After developing a hermeneutic, the next step is to put it into practice. This is done by converting the hermeneutical principles into a set of questions, which when addressed to the text provide the key (*the hermeneutical key*) that is needed to unlock the text and gain access to a world both strange and remote.

Other agendas include the fourfold mediaeval schema, fundamentalism, historical-criticism, liberation theology, feminism, ecojustice, canonical criticism, the newer literary criticism, sociological criticism, structuralism, and deconstructionism.

4. Hermeneutics as interpretative assumptions common to the churches

4.1 The clarity of the scriptures

Gaining absolute certainty in matters historical (the world behind the text) and matters literary (the world of the text) is often out of the question when it comes to biblical studies. The biblical languages are not our own. The biblical authors are dead. Today's reader cannot interrogate them regarding debated passages to find out precisely what they meant and how their words might apply in a different setting. The tone of voice is not always apparent, and today's reader cannot always tell if the author, or the character of a story, is angry, distressed, despairing, surprised, or sarcastic. Sometimes it is not clear whether a sentence should be read as a statement, a command, a promise, a piece of irony or even some biting satire. As for the world of the author, archaeology, history and sociology are inexact sciences. Scholars differ; findings have to remain provisional.

That is not meant as a counsel of despair. We confess the clarity of the Scriptures. In the middle of a church-wide debate about women's ordination it is easy to conclude that the Scriptures are dark and mysterious. That is not so. For the most part they are clear and easy to understand. They make sense, objectively. Better still, there is a subjective clarity to the Scriptures. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, God's word makes the lights go on in human hearts by leading them to saving faith in Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1:19). The psalmist writes, 'Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path' (Ps 119:105). In the clear light of the gospel, unresolved issues in the text pale into insignificance.

4.2 The total witness of the Scriptures

In the formulation of doctrine, the church draws on the total witness of the Bible. Doctrines are based on the clear teachings of the Old Testament, Christ and the apostles; they are developed and refined as inferences are drawn from agreed theological and pastoral foundations.

Care must be taken against basing church teaching and practice on individual texts isolated from their historical and textual context. Texts are readily found that appear to contradict each other on the topic of the day, such as infant baptism, universalism or women's ordination. Proponents of opposing positions parade their favourite texts, confident that they will overwhelm the texts their opponents have mustered. This is what has been called 'text poker'. When such a game is played, one team's trump card is invariably beaten by the other team's joker. But that cannot be, so the first team waits anxiously for the next hand to be dealt when the victory will finally be theirs. The only outcome possible when the game is played that way is victory for one side, defeat for the other, at the expense of vast tracts of biblical data, to say nothing for the human fallout.

In formulating and reformulating doctrine, from the outset the church has always read widely, listened carefully, allowed scripture to inform scripture, and prayed that the Spirit would lead the church beyond the tensions to the underlying theological, liturgical, pastoral and evangelistic concerns of the biblical witness regarding the matter under review.

4.3 The hermeneutical circle

Thought processes trace a fascinating path as readers try to determine the meaning of the biblical text. That path has been called the hermeneutical circle. In order to make sense of a text, a reader works back and forth between the parts of a sentence and the sentence as a whole, and then between the sentence – or verse – and the larger text segment in which it is located. This process continues in ever radiating circles, on the assumption that individual words and parts of a sentence cannot be understood fully without reference to the sentence as a whole, the paragraph as a whole, the chapter as a whole, and the work as a whole. That larger 'whole' includes both the literary context and the historical context of the verse or words under review. The opposite also applies, in that the work as a whole (and its component parts) cannot be understood without due attention to the meaning of individual words.

The implication is twofold. First, individual words and verses cannot be applied without further ado in the church today without due regard to their setting within the work in which they are found and without due regard to the historical setting to which the words were addressed. Secondly, close attention must be paid to fine exegetical detail (e.g. translation, word studies, genre analysis, progression of argument) in determining the meaning of individual words that take on special significance as a result of controversies current in the church today.

Scholars speak of the hermeneutical circle in another sense as well, referring to the relationship that is established between the text and the interpreter (the reader). The two poles that enter into dialogue with one another are the world of the text and the world of the reader, or the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader. Separated from the reader by a large gulf, the text is initially regarded as strange, or remote, or foreign. The goal of interpretation is to bridge the gulf, a process called *the fusion of horizons*. The method that is employed is that of mutual interrogation, of asking questions and receiving answers. The more questions a reader addresses to the text, the more the text reveals of its endless supply of divine wisdom. The more questions asked, the more the text loses its quality of strangeness and unfamiliarity.

In addition to the hermeneutical circle, people also speak of the hermeneutical spiral. The hermeneutical spiral refers to the understanding that the Bible never ceases to call forth new readings, while the church also revisits and builds on the readings of all previous generations that have become buried beneath the sands of time. This fact stands in stark contrast to the notion that it is possible to discover the one fixed meaning of every biblical text. Every text may well have a predetermined meaning, fixed in the mind of God, but to assert that my reading or the reading of a respected church figure represents that single fixed meaning is to make of such an interpretation a prisoner of my mind or the prisoner of one specific appropriation of that particular text.

The hermeneutical spiral is a delightful function of the Bible's inspiration, rather than a function of its lack of clarity as some assert. Many people have written about and spoken of the joy of discovery. The biblical reader always remains tip toe with excitement as he or she approaches the text. Such expectant readers will never cease to be delighted, amazed, surprised, over-awed, confused, challenged, confronted, warmed and encouraged, by a God who is always full of surprises.

4.4 Presuppositions of readers

No reader of the Bible is free of personal presuppositions which harden into the shape of personal biases. Beliefs and attitudes, values and principles are shaped by family upbringing, type of education received, level of education achieved, nationality, social class, and the spirit of the age. Views are shaped as people evaluate the words of wisdom emanating from leading figures in such fields as politics, gender relations, and social justice, and within the church as parishioners reflect on the pronouncements of those teachers and pastors who inspire love and respect.

Some of the more common starting points for interpreting the Bible can be listed.

- The Bible gives a voice to the poor, the powerless and the dispossessed; in other words, the Bible reveals God's 'preferential option' for the poor.
- When kings rule justly, all levels of society will benefit.
- The Bible is consistently sensitive to the groaning of creation and looks forward to the day when creation will be liberated from human exploitation. The earth has a voice, it suffers, it has rights, and it asserts itself against the violence done to it by humans.
- The earth is the transient stage on which the drama of human redemption, the Bible's central concern, is played out.
- The Bible not only reflects the androcentrism and patriarchy of the biblical era but also promotes it as God's way of ordering church and society.
- Whereas male headship is inevitably present, the Bible challenges it and anticipates the day when it gives way to the mutual servanthood of men and women.
- Unless all dates, places, people and events (except those portions that are clearly symbolic, parabolic or poetic) reflect the episodes portrayed in precise historical detail, the Bible cannot be trusted when it comes to the central message of the gospel.
- Biblical stories have been written and handed down primarily in order to inculcate doctrinal truths, church practices and moral precepts.
- All else in the Bible recedes into the wings as Jesus Christ takes centre stage. Preaching God's law exposes the sinful condition of the human heart; preaching the gospel brings peace and joy as God's forgiveness is revealed, and believers are clothed in Christ and increasingly conform to his image.

It is now agreed that personal biases are natural and normal. It is agreed that nobody can discard his or her biases, as if they were baggage to be tossed away. Personal preferences and presuppositions provide the reader with a rich repertoire of questions to address to the biblical text. The more

agendas the more questions, and consequently the more the Bible reveals of its endless store of treasures.

Presuppositions are not to be discarded or disparaged, but owned, identified, and articulated, as long as they are also constantly being re-examined and re-assessed in the light of the Bible. It is agreed that readers cannot abandon their world-view and occupy an ideological free zone, armed with an exegetical method, neutral and unbiased, perfectly poised to uncover the unassailable claims of the objective text.

Commitment to the Enlightenment's subject-object dichotomy has long been given up. Reader-neutrality is not possible. Given that nobody occupies a values free zone, it is vital that readers of the Bible lay their biases on the table. Those who fail to do so either end up standing dumb before the text, thereby rendering the text speechless, or they will constantly project their own ideas onto the text, albeit unconsciously, and behave as textual tyrants, always shaping the text according to their own lights. Rather than seeking and finding understanding, such a reader already knows all the answers and exercises manipulation and control.

The quest for a stable text

The proposals made to this point could well undermine confidence in a stable and authoritative biblical text. I have proposed that it is impossible to gain unerring access to the mind of the biblical author. It is improbable that the best historical, sociological and archaeological brains in the business could ever confidently assert that they had described in perfect detail all the contexts into which the biblical authors wrote. Those who claim a degree of neutrality, because they prefer to read 'the text as it stands', still differ from one another in literary skill, they ask different questions of the text, and they cannot help imposing their intuitions and biases onto the text. And finally, the sheer number of interpretations of any biblical text throughout church history, especially the interpretations of controversial texts, clearly demonstrates the broad spectrum of readers' presuppositions and sets of questions. In the face of such uncertainty how can we still confess that the biblical text is stable and authoritative?

The stability and authoritative status of the Bible as the inspired word of God (2 Tim 3:16,17), and hence the only sure foundation for all matters pertaining to the faith and practice of the church, is nothing more and nothing less than a matter of confession. This confession remains the chief safeguard against interpretative mayhem. The inspiration of the Bible cannot be demonstrated by science or reason or historical proof. And it need not be demonstrated by claiming that our interpretative community has found the single reliable reading of each biblical text; or worse, that we ourselves are capable of discovering it.

The second safeguard against interpretative mayhem, as I see it, is thorough exegesis. That involves the painstaking tasks of studying the background issues that relate to the text under consideration (the world behind the text) and completing an extensive literary reading of the text (the world of the text). At the same time, our concern for reading the text accurately will see us constantly checking our findings so that we are not wandering off into side alleys (*Irrwege*, Erich Renner called them; more colloquially, we could speak of barking up the wrong tree).

Further safeguards are provided by attending to the following items:

- Church tradition
- Reason and experience
- Prioritizing pastoral care in one's reading of the Bible, so that one's interpretation isn't going to create major unease in the hearts of the faithful
- Ensuring that no stumbling block be placed in the way of the clear communication of the gospel
- Recognising that legal prescriptions within the Bible keep on changing and adapting to new circumstances, within the Old Testament, between the Old and New Testaments, and then beyond the pages of the Bible throughout the history of the church.
- Discerning principles drawn from the Bible as a whole, rather than using texts in isolation.

Apart from the confession that the Bible is the authoritative word of God, the best way for us to guard against hermeneutical mayhem is to know our interpretative community and operate within it quite intentionally. Communal faith forges our thought patterns. For us that communal faith means primarily the Confessions of the Lutheran church and the basic hermeneutical principles that Lutherans have always operated with.

These include:

- The central message of the Bible is that God justifies sinners by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.
- Christ crucified and risen is heart and core of the Bible, and the cross of Christ provides the focus of the church's proclamation.
- Lutherans make a proper distinction between law and gospel.
- Scripture interprets scripture (*sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpretres*).
- The scriptures are clear, objectively in that their content is not hard to understand, and subjectively in that the Holy Spirit has shone in human hearts to implant and to make clear the prophetic and apostolic message (2 Pet 1:19).
- The scriptures are inspired by God and authoritative for the faith and practice of the church (2 Tim 3:16).

The principles usually included in a standard Lutheran hermeneutical agenda are not self evident. There should be no surprise to find that other faith communities operate with different starting points, and some that are common, such as the last three listed above. At its best, one would hope, a Lutheran hermeneutic does not concern itself with preserving doctrinal purity as an end in itself. Narrowly understood in terms of its christological centre, its theology of the cross, and its concern to distinguish properly between law and gospel, a Lutheran hermeneutic, as with Lutheran theology, will be forged first and foremost with pastoral intent, to ensure that the text that is proclaimed disturbs the comfortable, comforts the disturbed, while all the time presenting and commending Christ and him crucified.

Knowing ourselves as readers

It is important that people know themselves as readers of the Bible. That involves laying one's hermeneutical agenda(s) out on the table, but at the same time never regarding them as baggage that clouds interpretation. The principles and related questions inherent within each agenda provide the handle for grabbing hold of the scriptures, for prompting and probing. Standing dumb before the text fails to call forth its voice, the voice of God. In the same way, Moses probed God and found out far more about God than he would have by remaining quietly submissive to his call (Exodus 3-6). Readers' questions, unless arising from inflexibility, continue to open up the Bible's boundless revelatory capacity.

In holding on to their presuppositions, readers will be firm without being dogged, because authority finally rests with the Bible, not the reader of the Bible. Readers stand under the text in order to understand the text. When readers absolutise their ideological stance(s) they become tyrants of the text. Textual tyrants are like chefs who use the same method of preparation and the same herbs, spices and garnishes no matter what meat they may be preparing for the table. No attempt is made to understand and highlight each cut's distinctive texture and flavour. This insensitivity means that whether butterfish or squid, chicken or lamb is on the menu, it always ends up tasting precisely the same.

It is vital that readers familiarise themselves with a range of hermeneutical schemas. The more sets of principles, the more hermeneutical keys one has at hand to unlock the text's never-ending doors. Each has its place, and as readers disregard one or the other hermeneutical schema, they fail to discover and appreciate the dimensions of the text and the interpretations of the text unveiled by asking that particular set of questions. By ruling this or that agenda out of bounds readers fail to step inside the shoes of those who feel passionate about it, and honour them, and they fail to gain the perspective essential for making an informed critique. Furthermore, honouring the text as the inspired word of God impels readers to search for God's will and ways by as many avenues as readers have at their disposal.

Given the growing trend among Lutherans to call themselves 'evangelical catholics', a fully rounded Lutheran hermeneutic should incorporate the best features of all hermeneutical agendas. It would then include a liturgical dimension, so that as a matter of course Lutherans asked those questions that continued to sensitise them to the role played by worship considerations in shaping the content and form of the books of the Bible, indeed in determining the content and form of the canon itself. The hermeneutic would include a feminist dimension, giving encouragement to ask whether parts of the Bible may not reflect some of the patriarchy and androcentrism of the biblical era, with an invitation to recover and attend more closely to the stories about women. The hermeneutic would

stretch its parameters to embrace liberation and ecojustice principles, thereby keeping clear before Lutheran readers a God of justice whose ear hears the voice of the oppressed and whose non-human creation now joins in God's praises and now groans in travail until the day of its delivery. The hermeneutic would draw upon sociological principles, so that it never ceased to raise questions about the socio-political world at the time of writing. That would ensure that today's teachers and preachers were constantly being alerted to the role of the text as *kerygma* in context and in that way reminded of their commitment to pointed biblical teaching and preaching in the context of today's social and political realities. Finally, if the concerns fostered by today's renewed interest in trinitarian theology were consciously incorporated into an expanded Lutheran hermeneutic, the theology that undergirded Lutheran reflection, teaching and preaching would be greatly enriched.

It is of vital importance that the church carefully review the notion that its theologians ought to be able to devise a set of agreed hermeneutical principles that is so free of bias that it can be used to discern God's will for the church in respect to any controversial matter that arises. There is a widely held view, operating at least subconsciously if not consciously, that it should be possible to feed the raw data into one end of just such a putative hermeneutical machine and the inspired answer would be spat out the other. Why isn't this possible in the case of women's ordination, given the extent of agreement on hermeneutics among Lutheran theologians? The answer lies with

- the prior existence of two diametrically opposed sets of presuppositions and biases
- the vast amount of biblical and theological data that is available for consideration
- the tendency to privilege those parts of the Bible and the church's theology that support one's pre-set presuppositions and biases, while seeking to minimise, ignore, suppress or refute those parts of Bible and theology that support the other position in the debate

Contemporary hermeneutics has taken us beyond the confidence, engendered by the Enlightenment and fostered and perpetuated by the tools of historical criticism and literary analysis, that properly schooled and hence unbiased readers could interpret the Bible so thoroughly and accurately that all doubt could be removed, of its meaning then and its application now. Accordingly, the time has come to put to bed the fiction of the neutral reader, the objective text and the fool-proof and fail-safe hermeneutic.

Capital punishment

In connection with the debate about capital punishment, those who favour its re-introduction, or retention, will highlight the following pieces of information:

- After the flood God instituted capital punishment, among other things, as a way of reducing the devastating effects of human violence, or at least keeping a lid on it.
 1. Those who shed
 2. The blood
 3. Of a human being
 - 3' By a human being
 - 2' Their blood
 - 1' Shall be shed (Gen 9:6)
- The principle of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' (Ex 19:23-25; Deut 19:21) would suggest that punishments ought to fit the crime.
- Paul speaks of the power of the sword that is given to government (Rom 13:4), suggesting that the early church did not make moves to speak out against capital punishment.
- Capital punishment serves as a deterrent to others, and prevents repeat offences by the culprit.
- Capital punishment provides 'closure' for families of victims, bringing to a quick end their grief and anguish.

Those who oppose capital punishment will draw on reason, common sense and experience, and principles (rather than specific texts) drawn from the Bible, to make their case.

- Experience tells us that the threat of capital punishment does not deter people from committing murder. That is achieved by the increased threat of capture, trial and imprisonment.
- The evidence is clear that capital punishment has a brutalising effect on a society.
- Capital punishment allows no opportunity for repentance and faith and a new start in life.
- The percentage of those sentenced to death who later were proven to be innocent is alarmingly high.
- It is cheaper to keep a person locked up for long periods, even for life, than to execute them, because of legal costs involved in the endless round of appeals following a death sentence.

- Strict adherence to the Bible would require that people be put to death for far more than murder, for example cursing or striking one's parents, kidnapping somebody, lying with an animal (Ex 121:15-17; 22:19) or committing adultery (Lev 20:10).
- Rather than aiding and abetting family members of victims in giving vent to their feelings of anger and revenge by putting murderers to death, it is far better to help families of victims work through their emotions and maybe even achieve feelings of compassion and sympathy for those who have caused them so much grief. Like many before him and since, Pope John Paul II forgave his would-be assassin.
- The high value that Christians place on human life is contradicted by the ready acceptance of capital punishment. It could well have a transforming effect on a murderer to tell him or her that life is so precious to God that it would be wrong to punish them by taking their life in return.
- The capital punishment to end all capital punishments is the death Jesus endured on the cross, so that no matter how horrific the crimes people commit may be, their punishment has been borne and forgiveness secured for those who turn to him in faith.

Women's ordination

In connection with the women's ordination debate, those who favour the ordination of men only are predisposed to highlight the following items, even before the battle is joined:

- The church's tradition of ordaining men only for the most part
- The texts calling for the silence and submission of women (1 Cor 14:34,35; 1 Tim 2:11,12)
- The command of the Lord (1 Cor 14:37)
- The precedent Jesus set by calling men to be his disciples
- The order of creation
- The order of fall
- Male headship

Those who favour the ordination of women, on the other hand, are predisposed to highlight the following items, even before the battle is joined:

- Implications for ministry of equality in Christ
- No reference to gender in the Lutheran understanding of ministry
- Indications of strenuous attempts by Paul and others to avoid offence where women's leadership would create problems for the fledgling church
- Textual evidence that in principle Paul supported women's equal participation in worship; their inclusion and involvement at all levels
- The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh, for prophecy
- Pastoral concern for women today who feel called to ministry, and for the church that would benefit from their ministry
- Evangelistic concern arising from Paul's endeavours to become all things to all people in order that by all means he might save some (1 Cor 9:19-23)

When such differences are acknowledged, participants in today's church-wide debate will learn again to honour those whose stance differs from their own. Unfortunately, people have not always been as kind and thoughtful as they should be. Among other things, supporters of women's ordination are said to be placing the unity of the church in danger, or jeopardizing the pastoral care of the people. Among other things, advocates of male only ordination are called biblical literalists or stubborn traditionalists. It is vital that church members love and respect those who think differently from themselves, remembering that everyone holds to their convictions in good faith.

This paper cautions against becoming too optimistic about the ability of hermeneutics to achieve the grand consensus that all long for. But the exercise of hermeneutical reflection is invaluable. Hermeneutics is a descriptive tool, which helps participants in a church-wide debate to stand back and study the dynamics of the interpretative process and theological formulation, while urging them to identify and own the specific features of their own hermeneutic. I suspect that the widespread notion that hermeneutical consensus will quickly lead to consensus on women's ordination arises from a failure to distinguish between hermeneutics and exegesis. Exegesis is the place where real progress is made – in thorough and exacting textual work, undertaken within a community of scholars and the community of the church at large. In that connection it is vital that all voices – lay and ordained - be heard and given due consideration in the ongoing conversation.

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