

IS THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN CHURCH DIVISIVE?

John W Kleinig

The question of church divisiveness is raised in the **Theses On Principles Governing Church Fellowship**. They maintain that if a 'difference in teaching or practice is a departure from the doctrine of the Bible, such a difference cannot be tolerated, but must be pointed out as an error, on the basis of clear passages of Holy Writ; and if the error is persisted in, in spite of instruction, warning, and earnest witness, it must lead to a separation' (*Theses of Agreement* A1.4.(a.)). While they hold that differences in doctrine and practice are church divisive, they also concede that any 'differences in exegesis that do not affect doctrine are not church divisive' (*Theses of Agreement* 1.4.(e)).

It is true that, politically and institutionally, the ordination of women need not necessarily be church divisive. That is not a matter of theology but of skilful leadership and the adroit exercise of authority by those who lead the church. However well the introduction of such a change is managed politically, it will not, and cannot, solve the far deeper theological and pastoral consequences of such a change.

The question of division arises in a number of different levels which can be distinguished and yet are all interrelated

1. Confessionally speaking, it is true that those who advocate the ordination of women are not heretics. They may teach false doctrine, but they do not deny the Triune God and so sever themselves from the body of Christ. They do not thereby deny the teaching of our Lutheran confessions, but they do reject the confessional basis of the LCA as contained in the TA. On this level such a move would be divisive, for it would separate those who are committed to this as the confessional and legal basis for the LCA and its ministry from those who had departed from it.
2. Ecumenically, it would be divisive in two ways. It would separate the LCA from the church catholic and the orthodox tradition from the early church until modern times. We would therefore move away from those churches which adhered to that tradition and align ourselves with unorthodox Protestant groups. We would ourselves forfeit the right to be catholic and become a sect. We would, of course, thereby separate ourselves from those Lutheran and Protestant churches which continued to uphold the orthodox teaching on ministry and the catholic practice of it.
3. It would inevitably lead to divisions within each congregation of the LCA. Every call meeting would lead to a battle between those who wanted to call a woman and those who did not. If a congregation did appoint a woman as a pastor, those who conscientiously rejected her authority would either have to leave or stay away from any services led by her. Every woman pastor would constantly face theological challenges to her authority from her opponents and so need to justify her position in the congregation. She in turn would be unable to exercise proper pastoral authority to maintain the divine unity of the congregation.
4. It would be liturgically and sacramentally divisive. Those who rejected the ordination of women would not in good conscience receive the sacrament from a woman pastor. They would therefore be excluded by the church from the sacrament and the fellowship created by participation in it. If they did receive the sacrament from her, they would do so with a bad or uneasy conscience, for they could not be sure that the sacrament was valid, since, for them, it had not been administered as Christ had commanded. They would therefore be deprived of its comfort and subject to the accusation and condemnation of the evil one.

5. It would be synodically divisive. If a woman became a president, all the pastors who opposed the ordination of women would either refuse to recognise her or leave that district. People who rejected the ordination of women could not participate in any synodical service where a woman was giving the absolution, preaching, or presiding at communion. It would lead to the withdrawal of congregations from synod and the establishment of independent congregations - perhaps even districts- opposed to this doctrine and practice.