

Why I Changed My Mind

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Those who know me know that I am firmly opposed to the ordination of women. Yet many of them can't understand why I am so adamant on this, since it seems such an unimportant issue and so contrary to common sense. How could I be so unreasonable? They are even more puzzled when they discover that I did not always have a strong conviction on this matter. I have therefore been asked why I have changed my mind on whether women may be pastors, and why this matters so much to me.

The answer is quite simple. Despite my conviction of the equality of women and men before God, close attention to God's word has made me change my mind. And that with some difficulty as it has meant taking a culturally unfashionable stance! Yet I have done so joyfully because I am confident in God's word and certain that many blessings flow from obedience to it. Since Christ has spoken on this matter I must listen and obey for the good of the church and its mission to our broken world. In that light I would like to spell out for you, as clearly and briefly as I can, why I am conscience bound to uphold the traditional teaching of the whole church on the ordination of women.

It was a long and somewhat arduous personal theological journey, an exercise first in listening to what people on both sides of the debate had to say for and against the ordination of women, and then to what Christ Himself and the apostle Paul have to say about it. I will not recount all the various steps on that journey, but will only focus on the turning point for me in my reflection, the reason why I cannot go along with the ordination of women, the reason why that is now a matter of conscience for me.

I reached my firm position from a close study of 1 Corinthians 14:33^b-38 and the weight of Paul's conclusive pronouncement in 14:38. I would therefore like to explain why this verse is so significant for me and others like me who uphold the teaching of the LCA on the ordination of women.

In connection with his discussion on prophecy and speaking in tongues in Corinth Paul argues that women are 'not permitted to speak in the church,' the assembly of the congregation for the divine service (1 Corinthians 14:34). That does not just apply to the church in Corinth but to 'all the churches of the saints' (14:33^b). That speaking has to do with 'God's word' (14:36), the word that was used to assess prophecies and to determine their relevance to the congregation, the word that came to the church in Corinth from Christ through his apostles, the word that calls for repentance and brings the forgiveness of sins (cf. Luke 24:47). Paul goes on to explain that the prohibition of speaking by women is 'a command of the Lord' (14:37). Then finally in 14:38 Paul declares: 'If anyone does not recognise (this), he is not recognised.'

This final declaration is closely linked with the previous verse by the repetition of the conjunction 'if' and by the contrast between 'recognising' the Lord's command in verse 37 and 'not recognising' that command in verse 38. The close connection between these two verses explains why Paul does not add an object in the clause: 'If anyone does not recognise'. That is implied from the previous verse. Thus the refusal of those who claim to be prophets and spiritual persons to 'recognise' the Lord's command means that they are 'not recognised.' They have no authority to say what

they say and do what they do. They act in their own capacity without his authorisation.

Paul's pronouncement in 1 Corinthians 14:38 applies to those who refuse to recognise that what Paul has just written in this letter is 'the Lord's command'. To what does this refer? The nearest 'command' that Paul has given is to be found in 14:34, where he states that 'it is not permitted for them (the women) to speak.' His use of the passive form here is rather surprising, for in 1 Timothy 2:12 he uses the active form: 'I do not permit a woman to teach.' The passive indicates that he is not speaking by his own authority but about what someone else has commanded. The Lord Jesus does not allow women to be speakers in any of the churches; instead they are to be 'silent' and 'subordinate.' The sense of that is clear from the parallel passage in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 where Paul refers to quiet attentiveness instead of 'silence' and teaching and exercising authority rather than 'speaking'. The context of 14:38 backs up this interpretation since Paul connects this instruction with the origin and reception of God's word in 14:36 and the recognition of the Lord's command in 14:37.

While some commentators claim that it is hard to make sense of 14:37-38 in its immediate context, most of them agree that 'he is not recognised' is a divine passive, for the passive voice is often used in the New Testament to refer to what God does. Any person who does not recognise Christ's command that women are not permitted to speak in church, is, Paul declares, not recognised by God. Anyone who rejects that command does not have God's backing, his approval for what they do. This, of course, also implies that the churches do not, and should not, recognise those who reject this command of the Lord. The question is when, why, and how are they unrecognised.

In his study on this passage the New Testament scholar Käsemann argues that this is a case of sacrificial law, a sentence of divine judgment. Paul does not just threaten divine retribution but actually pronounces God's judgment on those who violate the Lord's command. This sentence of judgment is couched by St Paul in terms of the law of equivalent retribution. The rejection of the Lord's command results in his rejection of those who reject it. We find another similar pronouncement of divine judgment in 1 Corinthians 3:17. There Paul says, 'If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.'

In both these passages Paul exercises his apostolic authority as an ambassador of Christ to pronounce God's judgment on certain people who are damaging the church in Corinth. Yet here in 1 Corinthians 14:38 he does not warn them about what could happen to them at the Last Judgment, for then he would have used the future tense. Instead, he uses the present tense to anticipate that sentence by announcing that they are already judged by God for what they are doing. This pronouncement is a speech act, a performative utterance which enacts what it says; it is an act of judgment, Paul's exercise of the keys. It is obvious that Paul would not pronounce such a judgment for some trivial matter, like disruptive chatter or disorderly behaviour, but only for a severe violation of God's holy word.

What is meant by Paul's pronouncement that those who do not recognise the Lord's command are 'not recognised'? This, ultimately, refers to the lack of divine recognition for their teaching and practice. Paul here is addressing those who 'claim'

to speak as ‘prophets’ or to act as ‘spiritual persons.’ Since they use their spiritual giftedness to reject the Lord’s command by claiming the right for women to speak God’s word in the divine service, their teaching on this issue is not recognised by the Lord. So too the ministry of women who claim the right to be teachers and preachers because they are prophets. Christ does not recognise them. They cannot be sure that their words and deeds are the words and deeds of the Holy Spirit. After all, the Spirit that speaks and acts through them cannot contradict the Spirit that inspired Christ and his apostles. So the risen Lord Jesus does not recognise and approve what they say on this issue and do in this capacity, either now or on the last day.

This understanding is consistent with Paul’s distinction between the judgment of a person and the judgment of a person’s work in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. If those who work for Christ in the church use what is rejected by him as useless, their work will be undone, burnt like wood or hay or straw on the Day of Judgment, even though they themselves may still be saved as through fire. The fire of divine judgment will destroy everything that is contrary to Christ and rejected by him, everything that goes beyond what is written in the Scriptures (1 Cor 4:6). What’s more, if they, by their persistent disobedience to Christ and God’s word, destroy the congregation, which is God’s holy temple, they too will be destroyed (1 Cor 3:16-17). That, surely, is something that we should avoid at all costs!

So then, I have, rather gradually and with some initial hesitation, been persuaded that St Paul exercises his authority as an apostle by his pronouncement in 1 Corinthians 14:38, a pronouncement that is also addressed to us. He speaks at the Lord’s command to the church in Corinth about what applies to ‘all the churches’ (14:33); he uses the keys to ‘bind’ by teaching that women are not permitted to be speakers in any of the churches and declaring that the Lord does not recognise the teaching of those who reject that command. I therefore conclude that the Lord Jesus recognises those who teach and act according to his command in opposing the ordination of women. Since I am guided by his word I can speak with the joyful confidence that comes from a good conscience and with the steady assurance that this pleases God (1 John 3:21-22). I can be sure that my teaching will promote the cause of the gospel and bring God’s blessing through it to many people. That ultimately is my passion as a pastor and a disciple of Christ.

This then is my story. This is why I adhere to the traditional teaching of the church on the exemption of women from the public ministry of God’s word. This is my confession of faith, which I do not make lightly, but with conviction that I will be held accountable for what I say before the judgment seat of Christ my Lord.