

## Men and women - ministry and service

Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

*'But let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.'* 1 Peter 3:4

In all the years we have been discussing the issue of men, women and ordination to the pastoral ministry, how many times do you think you've heard words like 'beauty' and something being 'precious' in God's sight? I can't remember too many. Yet in the verse above the Apostle Peter uses these words to speak about themes parallel to those involved in our discussions. I'm convinced this points to a gap that needs to be addressed where this sort of language finds a home. It's to do with the articulation of something beautiful in ministry and service: *a vision for life in the Church where the Lord has called qualified men to be pastors, but where he has also given women unique gifts for service in the life of his church which need to be recognised, utilised, and celebrated.* This little article is intended to be a contribution toward this end.

A part of the problem, it seems to me, has been that our polarised debates have often left no space in the middle for this sort of task. On the one side, those who hold to the church's current teaching and practice have focused on defending this, and so dismantling the arguments put forward for change. This can sadly give the impression to some that there is little in the way of meaningful roles for women in the life of the Church. On the other side those who believe the Church should change its teaching and practice have focused their energies on bringing about this change. In this case the impression can be that all the eggs are in the metaphorical 'pastor basket', and so again there is little room for the other discussion of how male pastors and female sisters in Christ may serve together in complementary ways.

The importance of this gap has been brought to my attention most pointedly by several Christian women in our Lutheran church. These are women who delight in the saving grace of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who have a heart to serve, and who read the Scriptures and conclude that the role of a pastor is not something the Lord has permitted to women. But for these sisters in Christ this is far from the end of the discussion. These women have looked me in the eye and asked, 'but where and how can I serve? How can I use the gifts God has given me as a woman to serve in the life of our Church?' They know we have many faithful female lay workers in our congregations, teachers in our schools, not to mention the endless ways in which women serve voluntarily. But their questions are pointing to something more than this, namely the lack of a positive vision as I have noted above, which includes words like beauty, preciousness, and honour when it comes to women serving in intentional ways alongside men.

In our discussions over men, women and pastoral ministry, one aspect which has been helpfully brought to the fore is the role of women in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament we have been reminded of figures like Miriam the prophetess (Ex 15:20,21) and Deborah the judge (Judges 4-5). In the New Testament there are the women who spread the news about Jesus, including the Samaritan woman (John 4:28,29) and those who were first to the empty tomb (Matthew 28:1-10). Then there are the daughters of Phillip who prophesied (Acts 21:9). Of particular interest is the whole chapter of Romans 16 where the Apostle Paul makes a number of personal greetings at the end of his letter.

There he mentions a number of women who were actively working with him in various ways for the sake of the Gospel. Not only this, but when one reads this chapter one is struck by the obvious affection Paul has for these sisters in Christ and the honour he wants to show them for their service.

For some these examples provide weight to the argument that women should also serve as pastors today. But I suggest there is an entirely different way of reading the situation of the early church. After all, given the prominent place of women as recorded in the New Testament, isn't it all the more surprising that Jesus should choose all male apostles, and that the Apostle Paul should reserve the central preaching and teaching task for qualified men? Jesus and Paul worked alongside women in ways which were clearly counter-cultural and dignifying for women, and yet they simultaneously ordered their service in particular ways. So then, what if the Scriptures present to us a picture of men and women serving side by side in the life of the church in ways which are equally as important and worthy of honour, but not the same, and not interchangeable?

I'd like to suggest a metaphor to exercise the imagination further in this which I have borrowed from another author<sup>1</sup>. In our modern world we often conceptualise the relationship between men and women as an ongoing power struggle, eg. 'the battle of the sexes'. This has no doubt arisen because it is reflective of some people's experience. At times in our discussions over men and women in ministry this sort of paradigm has also been dominant. But I suggest that rather than a battle, the better metaphor is that of a dance. This metaphor can apply both to the relationship between men and women in marriage, as well as by parallel to the relationship between men and women in ministry and service in the life of the church.

A battle is an ugly thing, but a dance is a beautiful thing. In both there is one who is called to take the lead, but taking the lead in battle is very different to taking the lead in dancing. In the former it entails a strong sense of hierarchy and unqualified obedience, whereas in the latter it is much more subtle and requires a closer partnership and responsiveness to the other. Still a dance is not beautiful because the partners make the same movements and have the same roles. Rather a dance is beautiful because there are two different partners working together in complementary ways. This metaphor could help us envisage our life in the church, where the work of pastors is carried out by men who are called to this, in close partnership with sisters in Christ using their gifts as co-workers for the sake of the Gospel.

In the history of the church there have been different ways in which this has happened. Our own Lutheran heritage has within it the fascinating story of the deaconess movement originating with the German pastor Wilhelm Lohe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This has continued right into our own circles where several commissioned deaconesses still serve in the LCA. In other parts of the world this movement continues to flourish, where women serve in this way as consecrated church-workers. They are trained to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ through works of mercy, spiritual care, and teaching the Christian faith in specific settings.

Those who have experienced a model like this speak of the unique Christ-like beauty that women are able to bring to this ministry of service through their sensitivity, compassion, and even

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Marriage is like dancing' by Richard Eyer (CPH, 2007)

vulnerability. Their femininity typically enables them to do acts of service for those in need that would be impossible for a male. Their awareness of peoples' emotional needs enables them to be compassionate in a way that men generally find more difficult. Christ is exalted in their ministry of service not despite their femaleness, but because of it. If we can begin to catch a glimpse of this sort of service existing together with a faithful and strong pastoral ministry, we're getting nearer something resembling a dance rather than a battle.

Of course, as sinful people living in this broken world, our lived experience will always fall short of this sort of vision. In our own circles there are stories of how young women who served as deaconesses were not always well-treated and honoured. Incidentally, the young women I mentioned earlier who first got me thinking about all these issues have also been sobering in this respect. They are able to speak simultaneously about their negative experiences of various male dynamics in the life of the church, as well as the Lord's teaching on who is permitted to be a pastor. I understand how difficult it can be for some people to distinguish these two realities, and so I've been encouraged by how these sisters in Christ are able to do this, and not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Despite disappointing experiences with men, they are nonetheless able to recognise an inherent goodness in God's calling men to be pastors and spiritual fathers to their congregations.

My thoughts on these themes are also borne out of my personal experience. As I look back over my own journey it is very clear to me how God has used women in my life in many wonderful ways as I've matured as a Christian person and been formed as a pastor. As a pastor I've been blessed in various circumstances to work alongside faithful women who have brought their own unique perspectives and abilities which have been thoroughly enriching. In my own marriage I've again caught glimpses of God's beautiful design as together with my wife we've sought to bring Christ to our children. Yet I find myself conscience bound to God's word where I believe the Lord has ordered his Church in a particular way that reserves the office of pastor to qualified men. And so I continue to search for the articulation of a vision of ministry and service which has something of beauty in it, and which honours women, honours men, and most of all honours God.

Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer, September 2018