

Burning “the straw-man”.

By Rev Guntars Baikovs, Tanunda, October 2018.

Listening to comments and seeing attitudes of some of the LCA members, both laypeople and pastors, it may seem that the LCA’s teaching on the office of the public ministry (i.e. the office of pastors) is something obsolete, misogynistic, power thirsty, oppressive, mission hindering, culturally inappropriate fortress of utmost injustice that must be conquered and laid waste once and forever. Only then we could live happily ever after...

However, at the same time it appears that most of those who object to the current teaching of the LCA are fighting against this made-up “straw-man” [i.e. weak and demeaning imaginary depiction of the real thing], showing little or no signs that they actually know what our current teaching is. What is worse, – it seems they know next to nothing about where the new ideas, that they so zealously promote, come from.

Question: what do we believe, confess and teach about the office of the public ministry?

A. How do we know what to believe, confess and teach?

God who speaks. The Triune God is God of conversation. He does everything by speaking (Gen 1, John 1, Rom 10). He has spoken through His prophets, His Son and His apostles (Heb 1). The Holy Spirit has preserved God’s own words for us in the Bible (2 Tim 3, 2 Pet 1).

God’s word as the highest authority. The Bible as God’s own communication with us shapes how we see and perceive this world (i.e. our worldviews) for it reveals to us the truth about the Triune God, about us and about this world. It provides for us the answers to the most important questions, and guidelines for our most important responsibilities. This is, why we hold the Bible to be for us the ultimate source and norm for our faith, doctrine and life (LCA Constitution, Article 2.)

Clarity of the Word. We believe that the Bible is clear (TA VIII, 10). Otherwise we couldn’t be sure about anything. We couldn’t know what to believe about the Triune God, His attitude towards us, about ourselves, about Jesus Christ, about forgiveness, salvation, eternal life, etc. Because the Bible is clear we can ask the question “what does the Word of God teach about the office of the public ministry?”

Body of teaching. Together with the Lutheran Reformers of the 16th century we think about the Biblical message as one body of teaching. One body, many members. Some members (teachings) are more important, some less. However, similarly, as with our physical bodies, we care for and value highly every single member. For if even one member hurts, the whole body hurts.

Inter-connectedness of doctrines. Therefore, also looking at the issues related to the office of the ministry, we need to look at other inter-connected members / doctrines too (e.g. at Biblical teaching on human beings, marriage, sin), so that we can get as full picture as possible of what God's design for this particular calling is.

God's Word as the framework for morality. The Bible also provides for us God given [moral] framework that enables us to correctly evaluate what is truly good and right and just according to God's will, and what is not.

Rejection of lies. We therefore reject the moral criteria for good and right and just that come from worldviews and ideologies that are anti-Christian, anti-marriage, anti-family, anti-life, and anti-God's good design, and are incompatible with Christian faith; such as secular humanism, feminism, cultural Marxism, gender ideology, individualism, etc.

Why would Christians listen to the lies of the adversary instead of listening to the life-giving words of our loving Father who speaks to us in the Bible?!

B. What do we believe about human beings?

Equality in worth and dignity. All human beings are created in God's Image and likeness (Gen 1). That means that all human beings are equal in the eyes of the Creator. Equal in their worth and dignity (Gen 9, Ps 8). That is given. (By the way, this understanding created the Western civilization.) All people are also equal with regards to salvation in Christ (Gal 3, 1 Pet 2).

Equal, but not the same. Men and women are different, with different gifts and abilities, wonderfully complementary in their created nature. As contemporary science has put it, – men are about things, women about people, men about mission, women about relationships, men about competition, women about cooperation.¹

Head and helper. The Bible describes this reality using the language of the head and the helper. Men as heads of family, women as helpers (1 Cor 10, Gen 2). In the Bible this is not about grades of significance or power. Helper is someone without whom the mission can't be accomplished (see Gen 1:28). Imagine jigsaw puzzle where two different, but fully matching pieces create one complete picture (man + woman = one complete system). The Triune God Himself is called our helper both in the OT and the NT (Ps 54, John 14).

For our flourishing. When we take these sex differences seriously, appreciate and cherish them, and strive to organize our lives accordingly, that leads to human flourishing both for individuals of both sexes and community. On this the Bible and contemporary research are in agreement.

God's design for marriage. According to God's design, in marriage and family these differences are lived out as Paul the apostle summarizes it in Eph 5. Marriage and

¹ For overview see Steven E Rhoades "Taking Sex Differences Seriously" and Lucas Carry "The Politically Incorrect Guide to Women, Sex and Feminism".

family relationships are not about selfishness, not about me, or power, but about service to one another, each one serving in their unique roles (Eph 5:21F).

Love and respect. Men are to love their wives as Christ loves the Church, even laying down their lives for them. The bar is set as high as possible. Women are to [voluntarily] submit to their husbands as to the Christ [so that husbands can care for them] and respect them [for what they do for their families] (Eph 5). This is God's design for our relationships, and it is "very good" (Gen 1:31).

You can't do anything against the truth. Again, the Bible and contemporary research agree that this model is what works the best. The above mentioned summary is God's wisdom entrusted to His Church, and the world doesn't know it. It is our responsibility to share these blessings with the confused world plagued by foolishness, idolatry, adultery and broken relationships.

C. What do we believe about what has gone wrong?

Initial goodness. In the beginning God created and ordered His creation and saw that everything was "very good" (Gen 1:31).

Serpent's question. Then our first parents disobeyed their Creator. What happened? The serpent tempted with the perennial question: "Did God really say?" They were tempted to reject God's good design and order for His human creatures.

Reversal of roles. Adam neglected His role of spiritual leader, and Eve undertook Adam's role. They believed the lies that God is withholding the ultimate divine wisdom from them, and they can obtain it by disobeying God's Word. Where obedience to God's Word leads to order and blessings, disobedience reverses God's good order and leads into chaos and curse. This is what is described in Gen 3.

The curse. As our first parents had rejected God's good design, since the Fall women's desire is for men [that is – men's role], but men rule them [by force] (Gen 3:16). This is what we have been witnessing ever since. Men don't want to serve their wives and lay down their lives for them. Their task is made even harder, as women don't want to submit and respect them, instead trying to fight for power in relationships, for men's role. This has led to two unfortunate models of relationships.

Traditional face of the curse. First, and historically the most widespread. Men exercise their superior power over women often abusing it. This distorted model of relationships is often perceived as traditional model for marriage. This is what the feminist movement was/is fighting against. (For they simply don't know the Biblical one as described in the Section B).

Contemporary face of the curse. Second one is a product of feminism's efforts. Men [are forced to] give up their role as heads of families all together, for that is labelled oppressive, and justice and equality are perceived as the state where both sexes are understood as being the same and acting the same way, that is, – like men. This is the modern model for relationships produced by feminism. None of the two above mentioned models is good for human flourishing, neither for men nor women, and

none of them work, as we can see from the relational misery around the world. “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Mt 7).

Bringing the curse upon the Church. Now the same modern [mis] understanding—created by anti-Biblical ideologies of feminism and cultural Marxism – about what it means to be a man or a woman, and what is just and equal and fair, is being tirelessly imposed on Christian churches around the world. Let’s be reminded once more, – these ideas come from ideologies and worldviews that are openly anti-Christian, anti-marriage, anti-family, anti-life, etc.

Crucial distinction. It is true that the LCA community haven’t been spared from the traditional expressions of the curse, where men abuse their power. However, running from one distorted model of relationships, by foolishly embracing the other, which is at least equally dysfunctional, is not a solution Christians should embrace. Latvians have this proverb, – “running from wolf, don’t run into bear”. Instead, the way forward lays returning to God’s good design, learning it diligently, and by God’s grace striving to live it out faithfully, so that the world could see that these Christians are, indeed, “wise and understanding people” (Deut. 4).

D. What do we believe about the office of the ministry?

God’s good design. There are close parallels between God’s design for family (Section B above) and the Church. The same created order and the same serving relationships that God has designed for husbands and wives, are also applied to the Church, to pastors and congregations. This is, why pastors are called spiritual fathers (LC, 4th Com), and servants of all (Mt 20:28). As husbands and fathers are God given gifts to serve, care for and protect wives and families, pastors are God given gifts to serve, care for and protect congregations.

All are sent. All Christians have been called and sent by Jesus Christ to share the Good News (Mt 28, Mk 16, Lk 24, Jn 20, Acts 1). In the OT all Israelites were “a kingdom of priests” (Ex 19:6), but not everyone was or could be appointed to serve with God’s holy things. Similarly, in the NT all Christians are “chosen race and royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2), all enjoy full equality before God (Gal 3, 1 Cor 12), but not everyone is or can be called to the office of the public ministry (1 Tim 3).

God’s gift to the Church. The office of the ministry is a separate gift that God has given His Church, – not to rule, but to serve and protect her and to be stewards of God’s mysteries (Mk 10:45, 1 Cor 4). Biblical narrative reveals one consistent picture of what God’s design for what we call “the office of the public ministry” is.

In the very beginning. The Bible portrays the garden of Eden as a sanctuary, where Adam, even before Eve was created, was entrusted to perform priestly functions, worshipping God and learning and teaching His Word (Gen 2:15). Adam was given responsibility to care for creation and for his family, and to teach them the Word of God. Even after the first act of disobedience, it was Adam, and not Even, who was held responsible for what had happened. He hadn’t fulfilled His role as a spiritual leader, instead, He had neglected his responsibility as a teacher of God’s Word.

Testimonies from the Old Testament. Later in the OT we can see that faithful men tried to live out their responsibilities as spiritual leaders of their households (Abraham, Jacob, Job, etc.). When the OT priesthood was introduced, again we can see that God Himself consistently instructed to select certain men fitting for that ministry.

The office of the ministry in the NT. Then in the fullness of times, the Father sent His Son (Mk 1), the man Jesus from Nazareth. Then Jesus called and appointed twelve men as His apostles (Mt 10). When one of them committed suicide, it was required that he was replaced by another man (Acts 1:21). Then the Twelve appointed other fitting men into the office of the public ministry and gave clear instructions about what sort of men God requires for this ministry (1 Tim 3, Tit 1).

Two prohibitions. In some places, where women priests were common in pagan worship cults, newly founded Christian congregations struggled to accept God's good order for the office of the public ministry (e.g. Corinth and Ephesus), therefore Paul explicitly warned them not to act against the order of creation and the command of the Lord (1 Cor 14, 1 Tim 2).

The office of the ministry today. Pastors are God given gifts to the Church, entrusted to be stewards of the mysteries of God, the Word and Sacraments (1 Cor 4), teaching the whole council of God (Acts 20), and also undertaking the exceedingly challenging task of overseeing that the truth of the Gospel is not distorted (1 Tim 1), and that God's Sacraments are administered according to His own instructions.

Christ's Church has tried to faithfully uphold this good design for the office of the ministry since the very beginning. And vast majority of churches still do. And if pastors in the LCA had done what is entrusted to them, we wouldn't be fighting against the straw-man, as divided as we are today. By God's grace we could do better.

E. Objections expressed against God's very good design.

Justice, fairness, equality. Objections against God's very good design for the office of the ministry are often expressed as matters of justice, fairness, equality, and so on. All these objections derive their criteria for what is just and fair and equal from ideologies and worldviews that reject The Triune God, Christianity, despise marriage and family, diminish and ridicule the callings of wives and mothers, promote abortions and unbridled sexual promiscuity, etc.

And now through the pressing influence of the surrounding culture these ideologies have deceived and infected many well-meaning (but sadly not-so-well equipped) Christians. But, why would any church listen to these destructive demands?!

Our loving Father has revealed to us His very good design for our lives and His Church. We know that all people are equal in their worth and dignity, and all Christian are equally precious to our Saviour Jesus. That's given. We know that differences between men and women are not some sort of social injustice or unfairness that needs to be overcome, but the very good design of our loving God. We know what is just and right and good according to the will of the Triune God, and we should be boldly

and clearly confessing it to the world. Let's not forget that the Church is the light, the world is the darkness, and not vice versa.

Hindered mission. Some objections are to do with the Church's mission. If we do what anti-Christian ideologies demand, then good things will happen. The logic of such thinking goes like this, – “if we disobey God and reject His good order and His good gifts, then He will bless our efforts”. It is difficult to see the connection.

Besides today we know from the testimonies around the world, what happens with the churches that choose to reject God's Word and His good design. It goes hand in hand with rejection of the Gospel of forgiveness, which is then substituted with the gospel of inclusivity and tolerance. Which then opens doors to all kinds of destructive practices and thus only escalates the decline of those churches. For as we know, “there is no other gospel” (Gal 1).

Inner call. Yet another objection has to do with our inner call – “I feel that God is calling me”. God calls all Christians to share the Gospel. Amen! And there are so many ways to do it available for all God's people. We need to pray that more Christians would take this call seriously. Too often we neglect this call or “don't exactly feel” it.

But our Father would never call anyone to reject His Word and act contrary to His good design and order. That is another voice that keeps whispering in our ears the dangerous words “Did God really say it?”

They will not understand us. Yet other objection is expressed as concerns that contemporary society will not understand us. It is hard to understand other person's reasons, unless they are explained. That's true.

It seems that the LCA pastorate and laypeople alike have neglected the responsibility to confess what we believe and teach, and to explain why we believe and do what we believe and do. Our case, God's very good design for His human creatures and His Church is not only beautiful and winsome, but also deeply steeped in the good order of God's creation, and thus observable as very good to everyone genuinely interested to learn and understand.

By God's grace, we are here to confess His truth, to live it out faithfully and to teach and explain it unashamedly to the world. May the warm flames from burning “the straw-man” shed bright light into this dark confusion and enlighten our way ahead!

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-32)

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15)

“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)