

# Spiritual gifts in Romans 11:29–32: Critiquing revocation of ordination at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa

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The case of the revocation of ordination from the two pastors by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (hereafter, ELCSA) in the Gauteng Province, Pretoria, South Africa has motivated the present conversation. In order to respond appropriately to the scenario mentioned earlier, the research will dialogue with Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts in Romans 11:29–32. The document released by the High Court of South Africa, Gauteng Division, Pretoria (hereafter, HCoSAP) ruled that ELCSA acted against the law and ordered that the revocation of the ordination be reversed (Case No: 62810/2018). The study comprises three main layers as follows: (1) analysis of ordination in the biblical text, including a dialogue with Paul's view of calling and spiritual gifts in 11:29–32, (2) a ruling by the HCoSAP, and (3) a critique of ELCSA. Documentary analysis, ethnography, and participant observation are employed as methodological approaches.

**Contribution:** The contribution of this research is two-fold. Firstly, the readership in general and believing communities in particular should adhere to the rules of the game as prescribed by the biblical text so that they will mitigate both conflict and confrontation with other congregants. Secondly, the study aims to educate societies that no one is above the law. Members of the sacred institution can appear at the high court either when their constitutional right is violated or as suspects of crime.

**Keywords:** calling; church; ELCSA; HCoSAP; judgement/order; ordination; pastor/s; revocation; South Africa; spiritual gifts.

## Introduction

This study is centred on the case study of a church's (i.e., ELCSA's) leadership that attempted to revoke the ordination of their two pastors stationed at a Parish in Gauteng Province, South Africa. In the New Testament (NT), there are several nuances that mention the ordination of those appointed as either disciples, apostles, elders, or leaders of congregations. Because the church's teachings (including ordination) are based on the biblical text, the study will critically dialogue with Paul's teachings on the calling and spiritual gifts in Romans 11:29–32. Other biblical references to be considered for discussion include the following: Romans 12:6–8, 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 (28–30), and Ephesians 4:11. Evidence of the 'dismissal' and 'revocation of ordination' came to light through minutes, which were accessible to members of the congregation (incl. the author), mongering and rumours by people living in the neighborhood with ELCSA's affected congregation. Added to that is the coverage of the narrative by the print media in light of the ruling of the HCoSAP (Case No: 62810/2018<sup>1</sup>). Much of the information included for this study is gleaned from scholarly contributions that covered other themes such as: the Gospels, Paul's pastoral letters, administration, church, leadership, etc. The study argues that it was not intrinsic for ELCSA to opt to resolve the matter of ordination through the high court when traditional church channels exist to conduct dialogue over matters pertaining to unethical behaviour, immorality, and neglect of pastoral duties.

## Methodology

The study utilises qualitative research comprising the following three methods: (1) documentary analysis, also known as *documentary research* (Platt 1981:31–66), (2) ethnography or *ethno-methodology* (Msangaambe 2011:16), and (3) participant observation (i.e., indirect observation). According to Msangaambe (2011:16), 'ethno-methodology is an informal kind of research that demands the

1. The high court judgement became a public document accessible online by the readership (incl. the author).

**Note:** Special Collection: Reception of Biblical Discourse, sub-edited by Itumeleng Mothoagae (University of South Africa, South Africa).

researcher to be with the people and experience with them while making intentional observations and recording the stories being told in the congregation'. As an insider, the researcher had access to the minutes from the proceedings of the ELCSA meeting on ordination revocation. When the high court order was made public, the minutes of the previous meeting on revocation of ordination by ELCSA was no longer a secret. Thus, both the minutes and the high court judgement became accessible in the public space. Hence, the above methods are preferred as methods for this study because the author is familiar with the documents regarding ELCSA and revocation of ordination. While on the one hand the court judgement as a document is consulted from time to time, the biblical text (i.e., Rm 11:29–32) remains the main source for the data pool. The judgement by the HCoSAP, which demanded the reversal of the ordination revocation, shows that the leadership of the ELCSA did not familiarise themselves with the national law regarding revocation of the ordination. Because justice is obligatory (Bird 1967:10), the court judgement ruled in favour of the reversal of the revocation. The available document by HCoSAP will be used as one of the sources in this discourse.

## Calling and ordination in the New Testament

In the NT, words such as 'ordination' and 'ordained' are mentioned absolutely. For example, the Gospel of Mark (3:13–14) reads: 'And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that He might send them forth to preach' (see also Ac 14:23). Although numerous scholarly views have argued in favour of the Q-Source that portrays the Gospel of Mark as the 'primary source' for both Matthew and Luke, I have a different view, especially when the calling of the disciples of Jesus is critically examined. The calling of the 12 is mentioned in Mark 3:13–19, yet already in verse 7 'Jesus withdrew himself with his disciples to the sea'. Also in verse 9, we read that Jesus '...spake to his disciples...' yet in verse 13, Mark reports that Jesus went up to the mountain where he called his disciples. Why would the author of the Gospel according to Mark wait until verses 13–19 to mention the calling of the disciples by Jesus? Considering the inferences presented in the Gospel of Mark, it is highly likely that Luke's (6:12–19) account on the calling of the 70 disciples by Jesus might be a more accurate record than Mark's. This means that before verse 13–19, Jesus had other disciples already and the 12 was an additional number to add to 58 ordained earlier by Jesus. The calling of the 12 is also mentioned in the Gospel according to Matthew (10:2–4). However, Matthew does not make mention of the calling of disciples by Jesus before verses 2–4.

So, Jesus ordained his disciples for them to go and preach. It is my view that according to Jesus, one has to be ordained first in order to preach. In his letter of encouragement to Timothy, the Apostle Paul writes, '...If a man desires the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work' (Tm 1 3:1). Critical scholarship has tended to conclude that the two books

ascribed to Pauline authorship, namely: Timothy and Titus, are actually 'Deutero-Pauline' or 'post-Pauline' (example.g., Genade 2007:11) arguing that they were authored by someone else in the name of Paul (i.e., after Paul). However, the epistles are used in this study for their relevance in the church today. In my view, although not mentioned, Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 3:1 discussed earlier might have motivated Jinkins (2011:311) to write that, 'The bishop, presbyter, or elder charged with leadership is the shepherd and steward of the community, inheriting and transmitting faithfully the apostolic message, ensuring the safety of God's flock'. In Titus 1:5, Apostle Paul reminds Titus, 'For this cause left I thee in Crete that thou shouldest set-in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee'. The specifics of ordination are not given in Paul's writings. Meanwhile, '...as I had appointed thee' (v. 5) suggests that Titus had seen his mentor performing ordination tasks during their ministry together in Crete (Tt 1:5). However, one would also speculate that Paul's ordination procedure was based on the notations of the Torah on anointing priests. Also interesting is the fact that Apostle Paul regards both Timothy and Titus as his 'own sons' (1 Cor 4:15; Tm 1 1:2, 18; Tt 1:4). In some instances, Paul perceived members of his congregation or young pastors as 'fellow-workers' (2 Cor 6:1). The epistles (or the entire NT) do not mention Paul having a wife and children. However, according to Paul every person under his leadership was his child. Paul affirmed his 'singleness' when he said: 'Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: 'It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do' (1 Cor 7:8). Although Paul did not have a family of his own, he addresses critical issues about 'husband and wife' (see 1 Cor 7; see also Laney 1982:283–294). These critical issues are typical of spousal conflicts mutilating the church today. For Paul to suggest the option of remaining 'unmarried as I do', depicts he was overwhelmed by marital problems among church members, which could not be resolved.

## Exegesis of Romans 11:29–32

In this section of the study, the focus is primarily on exegesis of Romans 11:29–32, especially the opening verse (v. 29) because of its relevance to the theme under investigation. It is also important to observing that Paul's statements in verses 30–32 are not easy to understand. Perhaps, Liu Tsui-yuk's (2004) study on Romans 11:25–32 will shed some light for the readership. I will explain this ambiguity in due course in a separate heading (i.e., 'analysis of verses 30–32'). The passage reads as follows:

For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so that they too may become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as the result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all ... (vv. 30–32)

Of special note is the first part of the given quotation, namely: 'For God's gifts and His call are irrevocable...' Apostle Paul's opening statement above serves as the nucleus on which the present discourse is anchored. In verse 29, Paul talks about

the 'gifts' and 'calling' that cannot be revoked. The research examines the nature of the spiritual gifts and calling that Paul refers to. In doing so, the study will engage biblical references and a dialogue with scholarly views. The modern view of calling and spiritual gifts will be appropriated in due course in this study. Firstly, let us consider some parts of the biblical text concerning 'spiritual gifts'. Scripture references such as Romans 12:6–8, 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 [28–30], and Ephesians 4:11 provide the following 'spiritual gifts': Administration, apostleship, discernment, evangelism, faith, giving, healing, interpretation of tongues, knowledge, leadership, mercy, miracles, shepherding, prophecy, ministering, and teaching. So, when Paul refers to gifts in Romans 11:29, the Apostle was referring to these concepts, which he also expounded in other letters. While on the one hand Paul's instruction on the above gifts will be highlighted in consultation with other biblical references, on the other hand, the parables of Jesus Christ had profound meaning on almost all spiritual gifts outlined above. Some examples of the parables of Jesus will be explored in view of Paul's letters on spiritual gifts. Because of the lengthy list and explanations required for each spiritual gift given earlier, the study will discuss only the gift of administration in detail in order to illustrate its function both in the early Christendom and in the modern church. In addition, because administration in general reinforces and ties together other functions of any organisation, it is fitting to state that the gift of administration is key in explaining other gifts mentioned earlier as well as providing a sketch of some things happening or not happening in the church because of either good administration or lack of it. In the following section, the gift of administration is explored.

## Administration

It must be observed here that in Romans 11:29 the Apostle Paul talks about 'gifts' and 'call' but does not provide specifics on the types of gifts he referred to. According to Paul, a calling is accompanied by spiritual gift/s. By reading the inferences from Paul's other letters (Rm 12:6–8; 1 Cor 12:8–10 [28–30]; Eph 4:11) the gifts that the apostle referred to in Romans 11:29 become apparent. In 1 Corinthians 12:28, Paul begins by naming the church, apostles, prophets, and teachers. He then goes further to mention miracles, healings, helps, governments, and diversities of tongue as 'gifts'. Healing, miracles, and speaking in tongues have become common practices of the modern day church, especially the Pentecostal movement (see e.g., Togarasei 2005:349–375; 2016:1–13). Talking of 'helps', caring for orphans and widows is also part of the biblical teachings (see e.g., Ex 22:22–23; Dt 10:18; 14:29; Ps 10:14; 68:5; 82:3; Ja 1:27; Ac. 6:1; 1 Tm 5:1–16).

Jesus chose his 12 disciples to assist him to evangelise and spread the Gospel. It will be interesting for one to establish whether the disciples of Jesus went through an administrative orientation, but one would speculate that they did give the parables that Jesus gave which were administrative in character. For example, the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Lk 15:1–7; Mt 18:12–14), which teaches about responsibility and care

towards the flock; the Parable of the Lost Coin (Lk 15:8–10), which teaches about finances and that every cent counts in business; and the Parable of the Talents (Mt 25:14–30) which teaches about accountability and investment. Again, when Jesus chose his 12 disciples and sent them out in pairs (Mk 6:7–14), he showed his human limitation of insufficiency of knowledge in everything. He also showed that shared responsibility ('delegating') covers a larger population and reaches diverse communities. I also see that Jesus knew that people have divergent communication skills, which could be put to good use when the disciples approached their acquaintances first about who they understood the language and culture. The approaches were key to spreading the Gospel and increasing the number of converts. The given assertion is evidenced by the notion that most of the disciples emerged from the same trade. For example, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew; James and his brother John were fishermen (see Mt 4:18, 21). In other words, the disciples already knew each other prior to their calling for discipleship. Although one may regard it as speculation, in my view the 'two-set' approach that Jesus employed depicts notions of complementarity and support where the other disciple was lacking. Although Luke's account (Lk 10:1) of the chosen disciples is larger (i.e., 70) than that of Mark's (i.e., 12), Jesus still applied the 'two-set' method. In my view, the approach was an attempt to mitigate conflicting reports when the disciples returned from the field. Numbers 11:16–30 prefigured Luke 10:1–24. Numbers 11:16–30 is a record of Moses making a list of 70 leaders from among the Israelites to help him lead the people. Although not mentioned, Moses might have ordained these leaders for this role. In another incident, Moses's father-in-law, Jethro, advised Moses to teach the Israelites 'the statutes and instructions and make them known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do' (Ex. 18:20). Although not mentioned, Moses might have paid heed to the advice of his father-in-law, which Moses implemented in Numbers 11:16–30.

The method of travelling in pairs for ministerial tasks was also adopted later by the disciples and apostles after the death of Jesus Christ and after the Pentecost. For example, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13–35; see also Gillman 2002:165–188; Wright 2004:292); Peter and John (Ac 3); Paul and Barnabas (Ac 13); Paul and Silas (Ac 16). In Mark 6:7–14, Jesus demonstrated knowledge of administering a qualitative research method involving interviews and participants: 12 and/or 70 people deployed in pairs to different places. In other words, according to the Gospels of Mark (6:7–14) and Luke (10:1) Jesus had intended to cover 6 and 35 destinations, respectively. Varying reports on the missions of the disciples were expected. It is interesting to observe that in Mark 6:7 (last part), Jesus empowers his disciples. Empowerment is one aspect of good leadership and good administration. The given assertion arises from my familiarisation with Zscheile's (2007:43–63) findings, which locate leadership in a tripartite pattern with Trinity and power. Frank (2006:127) had previously penned of leadership as '...a dynamic that circulates through a community empowering various persons in various circumstances'.

Instead of solely remaining the centre of power, Jesus employed a 'systems thinking' approach/theory (see e.g., Boardman & Sauser 2008; Checkland 1999; Jackson 2003; Von Bertalanffy 1968) because he could not be everywhere all the time; so he empowered the disciples to perform miracles even when he was not with them. The term 'delegate' fittingly expresses the approach Jesus adopted. A system thinking theory can be summarised as a 'group of functions aiming to achieve productivity for the organization' (e.g., administration, purchasing, sales, production, management, human resources, export & import, logistics, etc.). Thus, Von Bertalanffy's (1968) definition is in order when he described a 'system' as a set of interacting units with relationships among them. Jesus thought that it was time for the disciples to implement the skills they had acquired and exercise the authority he gave them by sending them out to the field (see Mt 28:19).

### Analysis of verses 30–32

Having discussed aspects of calling and gifts in verse 29, attention is now on verses 30–32, which read as follows:

Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so that they too may become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as the result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. (Romans 11:29–32)

Earlier on in this study, I alluded to the fact that Paul's dictum in verses 30–32 is complex. Let us analyse these verses explicitly. The last part of verse 30 talks of 'their' unbelief. The identity of the possessive determiner 'their' (see personal pronoun 'they' and possessive pronoun 'theirs') raises the question of Paul's clarity given the fact that he is talking to an audience (congregation) in Rome yet reference is made to other people's unbelief, 'their unbelief'. In my opinion, a misunderstanding might have occurred in the Roman congregation to which Apostle Paul was responding. It seems Paul's addressees were accusing some people ('their') for wrongdoing, which might have led some of them to either drift away from faith or influence a split among the congregants. So, Paul was attempting to show that his addressees obtained mercy from God even though they were sinners like 'their' counterparts. In my view, by 'their' Paul referred to some members of the congregation.

Verse 31 indicates that Paul's addressees should show mercy to the 'accused' so that through the mercy of the addressees, 'they' also may obtain mercy and remain part of the congregation. In my view, Paul shows that everyone within the congregation was dependent on the other by showing mercy to one another. According to Paul's understanding, his addressees were not justified to be hostile to the 'accused' because the addressees were also recipients of mercy shown to them even though they were sinners. In other words, everybody who was part of the Roman congregation became part of that congregation because of the mercy shown to them by God.

The readership will notice that verse 32 is reminiscent of Paul's saying in another occasion when he stated that, 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rm 3:23; see e.g., Seifrid 2008:19–44). Paul is like saying, 'Come on! Do not focus more on the wrongdoings of others as if you were righteous from the beginning'. The pervasive attitude of Paul's addressees of not showing mercy to the other members of the congregation perceived as sinners was previously challenged by Jesus in a different scene when he asked the following question: 'And why do you worry about the speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?' In other words, both Jesus and Paul taught that it was not in the best interest of a ministerial function to focus on the wrongdoings of other people because God showed mercy to them still. Verses 30–32 can further be problematised. Paul himself was a sinner before he repented on the road to Damascus (Ac 9:1–19; see also Seifrid 1994:73–95; Wilson 2014:367–86). Apostle Paul was therefore qualified to comment on mercy because Ananias had almost denied God's message to receive Paul. Reports about one Saul's acts of killing believers had spread far and wide so much that for Ananias to think of meeting Paul was a deliberate encounter with a murderer. Hence, Ananias responded to God:

I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name. (Ac 9:13–14)

Because God showed mercy to Saul, the latter would use every platform to teach about mercy towards others.

## Church administration: HCoSAP's ruling and a critique of ELCSA

Barnhart (ed. 1967) writes that, 'to ordain is to invest with material or sacerdotal functions, confer holy order upon'. Latourette (1953:713–14) maintained that, 'Martin Luther regarded ordination as the ceremony of establishing preachers by the church'. Part III read with Chapter 2 of the ELCSA's Constitution deals with the office of the ordained ministry. Clause 2.2 provides that: '[T]his office shall be given to and be undertaken and performed only by the one who has received a regular call by the Church and who has been ordained'. Like every sacred institution, the church in South Africa is also prone to numerous challenges of different shapes and sizes. For example, desertions (also known as 'breakaways') by young pastors to either start a new church known as 'Pentecostal churches' or to join an existing Pentecostal movement have come under the spotlight. Reasons for such a move vary from lack of support to poor administration. Masenya and Masenya (2018:634) maintain that the moves by young pastors 'are motivated by material and financial gains, which these young pastors would enjoy after breakaway'. In numerous instances, young pastors are reportedly attracted by what they regard as 'success' when they interact with young pastors from Pentecostal movements (see Masenya & Masenya 2018:633–654). Masenya and Masenya wrote, 'In South Africa there is an ongoing trend in Pentecostal churches whereby young pastors leave their

“mother churches” to form independent churches’ (2018:633). Nevertheless, with Masenya and Masenya’s findings in mind, one would also like to postulate that mainline churches (‘mother churches’) seem to be reluctant (if not responding very slowly) to adhere to psychosocial changes taking place in our modern world (Bishop 2013). Having said that, it is imperative for the church to attune herself towards transformation in view of the changes overtaking the church in the 21st century. Instead of looking at the desertions of young pastors negatively, it is critical for the church to take an introspection of herself towards reformulation so that both the young and the old aim to achieve the same goal: preaching the Gospel and meeting the everyday needs of communities.

In another incident, a case was heard at the high court in Pretoria regarding the revocation of ordination of two pastors by the ELCSA. It appears the problem emerged from the issue of transfer of the incoming pastor. It was alleged that the transfers missed the theological mark, which the pastors assumed to be biased and based on personal issues. Sadly, protesting the transfer by the Parish Council and its general membership motivated the revocation. According to clause 7.4 of Part IX in Chapter 7 of the church’s constitution, which is uncontested, makes provision that ‘It shall call, appoint, transfer, suspend and terminate services of church servants assigned to the and Diocese by the Church Council’. The two accused pastors opted the intervention of the high court because ELCSA was reluctant to have a concrete dialogue over the matter. In terms of clause 2.3, before a person can be accepted into the ministry, ‘that person shall, during his or her time of training and probation convince the church of his or her fitness and suitability for the office’. The available documents do not mention that ‘fitness’ and ‘suitability’ issues were the causes of the dismissal and revocation of the ordination. The two applicants have held the office of self-supporting pastors of the ELCSA Parish (HCoSAP 2018:2). The available court judgement indicates that the revocation of the ordination was reversed by the high court (see HCoSAP 2018:21). The HCoSAP (2018) ruled in favour of the two applicants as follows:

49.1 The application for an order reviewing and setting aside decision number 199 of 24 January 2018 of the third respondent removing the applicants as pastors of the Tembisa West Parish is dismissed.

49.2 Decision number 141 taken during on or about 27 to 30 May 2018 of the second respondent withdrawing the ordination rights of the applicants with effect from 24 March 2018 is reviewed and set aside.

49.3 The applicants’ ordination rights are restored.

49.4 There shall be no order as to costs. (p. 21)

Thus, Calvin P. Van Reken urges that, ‘Part of responsibility as Christians is to exercise our compassion and love for others in tangible ways’ (1999:199). In lieu of the given notion, Reken (1999:199) adds that, ‘Christians should feed the hungry, comfort the sorrowing, and visit the sick’. Hence, Reken’s observation is an affirmation of Luke’s writing in the *Book of Acts* that says:

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood. (Ac 20:28)

While the NT presents Jesus Christ as the son of God and the one who died for human sins (e.g., Jn 3:17; 1 Cor 15:3), in some instances the church appears to neglect the sacrificial thrust that Jesus represented.

## Conclusion

In this study, I have explored the biblical view of ordination from the NT perspective. Various examples of ordination from the biblical perspective were given and discussed. It was also shown that although few places mention the terms ‘ordain’ and/or ‘ordination’, the word ‘anointing’ featured in numerous places in which case certain individuals were selected and assigned to perform specific liturgical duties. The Apostle Paul’s epistle, namely: Romans 11:29–32 was preferred for discussion in this article because of its focus on the call and spiritual gifts. Various NT texts were analysed in view of their thrusts on calling for discipleship. The calling of the disciples by Jesus was also discussed, and his approach to ‘evangelism’ was applauded. In all the biblical texts consulted, it was shown that God was believed to have made choices of the individuals for ministerial functions. It would be unrealistic for humans (including the leadership of ELCSA) to revoke either the calling or ordination. It was discussed that God gives spiritual gifts to the people he called. One of the spiritual gifts is ‘administration’. Because for the modern church ‘ordination’ is highly esteemed as one of the very critical ordinances, discussion on the revocation of the ordination of two pastors by the ELCSA would not escape an academic scrutiny. It was discussed that the high court ruled in favour of the two pastors and their ordination rites were restored by the court of law.

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## Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Author’s contributions

M.A.M declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinion expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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