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# *Bishop Board Recommendation*



## *Regarding Ordination for Women in Lancaster Mennonite Conference*

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# *Bishop Board Recommendation Regarding Ordination for Women in Lancaster Mennonite Conference*

## INTRODUCTION

The Board of Bishops has been leading Lancaster Mennonite Conference in a process of spiritual discernment regarding the ordination of women. This process involved considerable study, searching, prayer, listening and discernment.

In an attempt to summarize the journey of discernment and to recommend a direction, this document was prepared by the Board of Bishops and includes the following:

- Brief historical sketch of conversations related to the role of women in LMC over the last 23 years.
- Review of the current process of discernment.
- Summary of the feedback received in the Discerning Congregations Process cluster meetings.
- Consideration of how the biblical texts shape our understandings.
- Recommendation that we, the Board of Bishops, are presenting for affirmation by LMC credentialed leaders.

**August 2006**

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## HISTORICAL SKETCH

The immediate context for the current process of discernment is the ending of a five-year moratorium on any official discussion about the ordination of women. The moratorium was part of an LMC decision in 1999 to provide a license for specific ministry to women called into pastoral ministry. The ending of that moratorium in September 2004 led to renewed public conversation about LMC’s credentialing policy. However, the larger context is a much longer conversation regarding the role of women that goes back to 1983. The following table provides a sketch of that conversation:

Date	Action by Board of Bishops
1983	Task Force formed to “survey women’s activities” in the church
1987	Deaconess Study Committee formed
1989	12-Page Deaconess Study Report released for conference-wide review
1990	Bishops host public discussions regarding the above report
1990	Affirmed recommendation allowing Deaconesses to vote at Leadership Assembly
1991	Further work on role of women assigned to LMC Leadership Council
1992	Major consultation on women in ministry with George Brunk III
1993	Women in Leadership Subcommittee (WILS) formed
1996	Bishops study principles of biblical interpretation
1997	Policy questions lodged with Bishop Board Executive Committee
1997	Board approves a one-year decision-making process
1998	Board approves Partners in Ministry Study Paper
1999	Spring Assembly features two speakers (one representing Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and the other representing Christians for Biblical Equality)
1999	A recommendation to Fall Assembly was affirmed providing for the licensing of women for pastoral ministry, but with a five-year moratorium on any official discussion of LMC credentialing policy
2004	Five-year moratorium ended
2005	Bishops begin a six-month study of principles of biblical interpretation
2006	Current process of discernment developed and initiated in cluster meetings

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### **Additional summary reflections related to principles of interpretation:**

- Biblical interpretation requires a careful exegesis of the text within its own context. No written scripture is unimportant.
- The centrality of Christ both in the gospels and in the epistles guides the church both by what Jesus said and did and how the early church applied his teaching and example.
- On the question of men and women in the church it is important to distinguish the difference between the prevailing culture with its practices and the Christian message.
- There is a variety of ways to interpret scripture on this subject. Faithful brothers and sisters do not agree on the meaning and application of some passages of scripture. We do well to respect these differences of view among us and recognize that the early Christians likewise did not always agree on everything, yet sought to maintain the unity of the church.
- The church follows the rule of Paul in I Corinthians 14:29 and discerns together the meaning of scripture as God gives the church insight on how to apply the scriptures.

### **CONCLUSION**

As stated previously, we have put forth this recommendation about the ordination of women in Lancaster Conference congregations with the conviction that we can allow for this diversity of practice and remain faithful to the authority of scripture.

We acknowledge that different approaches to interpretation have brought us to disagreement within our conference about the biblical teaching on this matter, but sincerely believe that God would have us continue to walk together in fellowship.

We call each of us to walk in humble obedience to the conviction which we have been given, and to encourage those with whom we disagree to do the same. It is our conviction that God desires to unite us around a common mission and that our faithfulness must include a greater fulfillment of Christ's mission if it is to be true faithfulness.

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## **FEEDBACK FROM THE *DISCERNING CONGREGATIONS* CLUSTER MEETINGS**

In the March 17, 2006 Leadership Assembly, the bishops introduced credentialed leaders to a process of discernment designed to engage Lancaster Mennonite Conference leaders and constituency in community discernment on this issue using the *Discerning Congregations Process* in regional cluster meetings. In this discernment process, bishops have been attending to two important core values of LMC:

- We value Christian community, the church, where mutual care, accountability and discernment are Christ-centered and Spirit-led.
- We value the reading of Scripture that leads to obedience to Jesus Christ. We understand Scripture through Christ, discerned in community and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Bishops also sought to model healthier behaviors and habits in dealing with conflict. Attending to these values, we engaged in months of study and discernment leading to a broader process in the spring 2006 Cluster Meetings. Many people have interceded for God's wisdom and leading in this process.

In thirteen regional cluster meetings in March through June, bishops engaged 645 LMC leaders and members in prayerful and discerning conversations. Themes emerging from the conversations in these cluster meetings and public forums include:

- A shared desire to be faithful to Scriptures.
- A recognition that LMC needs to cultivate and promote a better understanding of biblical interpretation among credentialed leaders.
- A strong call for LMC to stay together and find ways to respect different understandings of Scriptures regarding the role of women.
- A shared hope that LMC will be able to hear the Holy Spirit in this discernment.
- An acknowledgement that this conversation includes issues of authority and governance, including differing perceptions about distinctions between gifts (ministry) and office (governance).
- An affirmation of the leadership of the Board of Bishops in this process.
- An acknowledgement of pain within LMC related to our differences on this issue.

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## FEEDBACK FROM CLUSTER MEETINGS (cont.)

As articulated in the *Discerning Congregations Process* booklet used in the cluster meetings, the Board of Bishops maintains the belief that this discernment process must be viewed in the context of God's call to greater missional effectiveness. Through this process of prayerful discernment, the Spirit continues to point to God's desire for spiritual renewal in LMC congregations that will produce new love for the Lord Jesus Christ and his people and stir up passion for those around us who have not yet entered the Kingdom of God.

## UNDERSTANDING THE WORD OF GOD

One of the themes that emerged in feedback received in the cluster meetings was a shared desire in all LMC congregations to be faithful to Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. Deeply desiring to be faithful to the Bible, we have grounded this discernment process in a careful reading of Scripture. Thus we offer the following affirmations.

### **Affirmations:**

We believe that God is revealed in the totality of Scripture, the authoritative Word of God (Matthew 5:18; John 10:35; II Timothy 3:16). We accept the Scriptures as the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and practice. All claims on Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of Holy Scripture (Mark 7:13; Acts 5:29-32; Colossians 2:6-23). Insights and understandings which we bring to the interpretation of Scriptures can be different and need to be tested in the community of faith (I Corinthians 14:29-33; II Peter 1:20-21).

We believe that Jesus Christ is the Word become flesh. Scripture as a whole has its center and fulfillment in him (Matthew 5:17; Luke 24:27; Acts 4:11-12; Heb. 1:1-2). Therefore, we seek to understand and interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ as we are led by the Holy Spirit in the church. For this reason, we interpret Scripture in light of the whole, interpreting the Old Testament through the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and the apostles.

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“Using then the missionary factor for hermeneutics – the diversity of expression as *faithfulness* to the gospel - we must ask: what uses and criticisms of culture in our time and place enable us best to achieve goals central to the gospel, whether these be the goals of I Corinthians 11-14 or those articulated elsewhere in Scripture, including the unity of male and female in Christ (Gal. 3:28)? The divine-human nature of Scripture can then, like its unity in diversity, become an enriching resource for believers who live by its light” (Swartley, 1983: 191).

## SUMMARY OF INTERPRETATION PRINCIPLES

**This study has made use of the following principles of Biblical Interpretation:**

- Interpreting with the full awareness this is God's Word.
- Interpreting from the centrality of Jesus Christ as the full revelation of God's will.
- Interpreting the Old Testament from the New Testament.
- Interpreting within the Christian community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Interpreting individual texts of scripture within the broader framework of scripture.
- Interpreting with three worlds in mind: the world of the text (the biblical text itself), the world behind the text (the world in which the text first came), and the world in front of the text (our world). (See Swartley, 1983: 224-228.)
- Interpreting with the missionary principle in mind.
- Interpreting with a desire to obey the scripture.

## G. How the Early Church Contextualized the Gospel

From Acts and the Epistles, it seems clear that the early Christian church did not always follow one way of interpreting scripture. Despite the crucial decision in Acts 15 in which the church agreed that circumcision was not necessary for a Gentile believer to be part of the church, Paul had Timothy, whose father was a Gentile, circumcised so that the missionary task among Jews would be more effective (Acts 16:3).

Likewise when we come to the Pastoral Epistles we discover slavery, which was widely practiced in the Roman world, is not abolished immediately by the early church. Instead slaves were asked to serve their masters with honor *so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed* (I Tim. 5:1). In Titus contextualizing is emphasized in regard to younger women, younger men, and slaves. Younger women are to love and be submissive to their husbands *so that the word of God may not be discredited* (Titus 2:5). Younger men are to be self-controlled and follow the model of good works: *then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us* (Titus 2:8). And slaves are to be submissive to their masters *so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior* (Titus 2:10).

In each of these cases adjustment is made to acceptable practice for the sake of mission. Because the church was rejected by the larger culture, Paul encourages Timothy and Titus to make some adjustments on the full meaning of the gospel so that the non-Christian world would not be turned off by the church and would come to the knowledge of the truth of the gospel.

Might this suggest that it is acceptable for different congregations to follow different interpretations on the role of men and women in the church as each congregation seeks to be faithful to God's purpose in mission for them? An important principle of biblical interpretation is the missionary principle. Are there times when some congregations in their particular setting may not follow the same conclusion on men and women in the church because it would hinder the gospel? This would suggest there is room in the church for both the traditional view when the mission of the church requires it and the involvement of both men and women in church leadership when the mission context is enhanced by it. Swartley says,

## Current Interpretations / Practices:

Within our conference, we have a variety of beliefs and practices regarding roles of men and women in ministry and pastoral leadership. Many of these differences are theologically grounded, rooted in differing methods of Biblical interpretation. These differences are forcing us to acknowledge that ideology (i.e., one's way of thinking about human life) is present in all interpretation, even in unconscious ways. The Board of Bishops believes that a good theological method will help hold ideology accountable. But this will require maintaining a difficult honesty that owns, in humility, our shared struggle to faithfully interpret God's will for this time and place.

Contrary to the either/or clarity that some wish to bring to this discussion, the practice of LMC congregations can be more accurately described as a continuum in which women are involved to lesser or greater degrees in LMC congregations. Examples of positions within the current spectrum of practice within LMC might be briefly described as follows:

### Traditional View

Passages like I Timothy 2:11-12; 3:1-13 and I Corinthians 14:33-35 are understood to be universally normative for the church. This understanding prohibits the involvement of women in public ministry activity in which men are present.

### Male Headship View

Passages like Genesis 3:16 and I Corinthians 11 are understood to set forth regulations ordained in creation with regard to man-woman relationships. Like the one above, this view embraces male headship and the subordination of women but allows for certain public ministry functions for women functioning under the proper male headship.

### Plural Ministry View

Passages like Acts 2:17 and I Corinthians 11:4-5 are understood to provide opportunity for men and women to freely function together in public ministries in complementary ways but within some framework of spiritual authority that respects basic principles of headship.

### Egalitarian View

Passages like Acts 21:9 and Galatians 3:28 are understood to mean that, in Christ, relationships between men and women should transcend the male-female division. This view understands that all persons, regardless of gender, are free to engage in public ministry functions.

Although inadequate because of their brevity, the above categories are helpful definitions of the deep and varied convictions functioning within LMC. Furthermore, the wide variety of current practices cannot be reduced to four neat categories; they simply illustrate the range. *(Please examine the Biblical Study beginning on page 10 for a more detailed treatment of divergent interpretations of Scripture regarding this subject.)*

One's faithfulness to and love for the Lord does not necessarily determine where one ends up on this continuum of beliefs and practices. And accepting the authority of Scripture does not settle the question of interpretation. Equally sincere and faithful people understand Scripture in different ways on this subject.

### **F. The Practice of the Early Church Regarding Women**

Paul speaks freely of women's involvement in the church. Women as well as men exercised the gifts of prophecy and teaching (I Cor. 11:4,5; 12:12-29; 14:26; Eph. 4:11; Col. 3:16). That men and women complement each other and need each other is clearly stated in I Corinthians 11:11. Paul mentions 13 women who had significant work in the church.

Lydia	Acts 16:13-15	Chloe	I Cor. 1:11
Nympha	Col. 4:15	Apphia	Philemon 2
Mary	Rom. 16:5, 6	Tryphaena	Rom. 16:12
Tryphosa	Rom. 16:12	Persis	Rom. 16:12
Euodia	Phil. 4:2	Syntyche	Phil. 4:2
Priscilla	Rom. 16:3	Phoebe	Rom. 16:1
Junia	Rom. 16:7		

Four of these women were leaders of house churches (Lydia, Chloe, Nympha, Apphia). Four "worked hard (kopiao) in the Lord" (Rom. 16:6, 12). These four are Mary, Trophaena, Tryphosa, and Persis. Paul uses the term "worked hard in the Lord" to refer to his apostolic ministry and work of leaders in the churches in his day. He specifically calls Priscilla, Euodia and Syntyche co-workers. He calls Phoebe a diaconos which can mean minister as well as deacon. And he calls Junia an apostle (Rom. 16:7). Scholars have studied this name and discover there is no evidence of any man with this name in all of ancient literature. It was not changed from a female name to a male name until the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. by Giles of Rome (1247-1316). Thus, some conclude that Junia was a female apostle (Epp, 2005; Dunn, 1988: 894-895).

From this information one may ask if the early church freely practiced both men and women in leadership. If so, why the restrictive passages? Perhaps there is another insight into this topic in the New Testament that is often missed.



- The passage encourages women to learn. Instead of being totally silent under the authority of men, women are commanded to learn by listening carefully.
- The phrase “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man” (v. 12) can also be translated “I do not permit her to teach with the intent to dominate the man.” A footnote in Today’s New International Version says “Or teach a man in a domineering way.” If this alternate translation is correct, then Paul is not stating a principle that women should not teach or rule over men. Rather, as I. Howard Marshall says, “the quiet demeanor and recognition of authority which are to characterize the learner are contrasted with teaching in a manner which is heavy-handed and abuses authority...It is, therefore, more likely the verb characterizes the nature of the teaching rather than the role of women in church leadership in general” (Marshall, 1999: 460).

*The debate over this issue is not easily resolved.*

The debate over this issue is not easily resolved. Here is one case where faithful Christian brothers and sisters can disagree and be respectful of each other’s view. Congregations can take the traditional view on this passage with integrity.

Other scholars believe these restrictive texts, though much debated by New Testament scholars, are more likely exceptions rather than the overall practice of the early Christian church. Yet they must be taken seriously with the awareness that other Christians may interpret them differently and have a legitimate point of view. For this reason, some persons believe it is important to go beyond some of the teaching passages and ask what evidence we have in the New Testament regarding the actual practice of the church regarding men and women.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATION

We, the Board of Bishops of Lancaster Mennonite Conference, believe that our shared faith and life must flow from a vital relationship with Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, and our full obedience to the Holy Scripture, the written Word of God, as guided by the Holy Spirit and discerned in the community of believers. We are committed to biblical authority and to upholding the core values of historic Christian faith and Anabaptist understandings.

As a conference, we must continue to grow in the discipline of community discernment regarding issues of faith and life, including the counsel of our international brothers and sisters. Mutual discernment will require humility as we seek God and desire to respect and honor one another and avoid divisions.

In the Bible study (*following*), we see evidence that men and women were recognized and active in ministry in the New Testament church. Given our best understanding and use of the principles of biblical interpretation, we recognize that committed, faithful followers of Christ can come to differing conclusions concerning the practice of women in leadership and ordination.

We resist the current polarization between forms of traditional patriarchy and modern egalitarianism. We should on the one hand refrain from reading contemporary notions of egalitarianism and individual equality back into Galatians 3:28 and other passages, eliminating all role distinctions between men and women. On the other hand, we must affirm the fundamental unity and equality of women and men inherent in the gospel, allowing for changing roles as the Spirit leads in the church. We desire both the courage to follow our convictions and the humility to respect differing points of view among us.

Ultimately, we believe that this matter must remain at the level of church polity (church governance) rather than confession (essential biblical beliefs). Therefore, we will strive to resist the polarization of either/or thinking on what we do not consider to be a confessional issue. In such cases, we believe it is better to seek the unity of believers as envisioned by our Lord in John 17 and described by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:4-6: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

### **The Board of Bishops bring the following recommendation:**

- That Lancaster Mennonite Conference respect each member congregation in its discernment of Scripture, as led by the Holy Spirit, to call and affirm persons to serve in ministry and pastoral leadership, and,
- That the LMC Board of Bishops license and/or ordain, regardless of gender, those who have responded to God’s call, who have been affirmed by their respective congregation, and who meet LMC qualifications for credentialing.

### **This recommendation includes the following understandings:**

- To most fully respect the differing Scriptural understandings, beliefs, and practices of our congregations, the role of bishop and similar conference oversight roles, will be reserved for men.
- The Board of Bishops will assist in defining protocol for healthy, God-honoring male and female relationships in ministry teams.

saying there is a future bodily resurrection and that food and sexual relationships are not only good, but are to be received with thanksgiving because they are sanctified by God’s Word and by prayer (I Tim. 4:5). Furthermore, the Ephesian women will not be saved by this heretical teaching, but will find salvation in Christ and can live a normal married life including giving birth to children (I Tim. 2:15a). Salvation does not come by rejecting sex and childbirth as the heretics taught. It comes in Christ if these women “continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety” (I Tim. 2:15b).

In some of the suburban areas around Ephesus the effect of the cult of Artemis was still alive when Paul wrote I Timothy. This cult said that the female, Eve, appeared before the male, Adam, and therefore women are superior to men. Paul responds to this cult by referring to the second creation account in Genesis 2, as taught by Rabbinic midrash (*method of exegesis of a Biblical text*), saying that Adam was formed first. Moreover Eve was deceived just like the women in Ephesus are being deceived through the heretical teaching (I Tim. 2:13,14).

Given these differing approaches to interpretation, controversy continues among Christians over the meaning of I Timothy 2:11,12.

*Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent (NRSV).*

Some scholars argue that this passage means women are not to have authority over men in church life. Other scholars disagree. A few exegetical comments on the passage may be helpful:

- The passage does not use the word “silence” for women. It uses the word “quietness” (*hesuchion*) which Paul also uses for both men and women in I Timothy 2:2. Four times in I Timothy 2 Paul uses the word “quiet” or “peace” instead of disputing. Just like men are to worship without disputing (v. 8) so women are to worship in quietness (v. 11).

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A similar hermeneutical polarity arises with I Timothy 2:9-15:

*I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.*

Many of us remember considerable stress within our conference and congregations as we tried to follow a literal reading of this passage, especially related to standards for hair, dress and jewelry. One could argue that we would do well to recover a more literal reading of this text as we see standards of modesty disappear.

But we also gain helpful insights through a historical/cultural approach to this passage. These instructions were given in a context of both the influence of “new women” in Greco-Roman society and heresy in the church at Ephesus.

1. The influence of the “new women” is seen in Paul’s response. In Roman culture, you were what you wore. Thus, there were concerns in this new community of Christians that the values of the “new woman” could intrude into the gatherings in Christian homes, and hence the concern for preventative measures in I Timothy 2:9-15 (Winter, 2003: 121-122). For this reason, some believe, restrictions were placed upon dress patterns of women in verses 9 and 10.
2. Moreover, the women were affected by the heretical teaching in Ephesus. This heretical teaching held the view that the resurrection had already taken place (II Tim. 2:18). By denying any future bodily resurrection, the heretics followed the teaching of Jesus that in heaven there is no marriage (Matt. 22:30). Hence the heretics denied food and sex (I Tim. 4:3-5). Paul responds by

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## CONCLUSION

There was a time in Lancaster Conference when it was expected that the practices of all our congregations would be very similar. In the last few decades we have moved away from that and embraced a more congregational model in which greater diversity is the norm. While this has been a good experience for many congregations, it also gives rise to the question of how much diversity is realistic for a fellowship of congregations such as Lancaster Conference.

If we take note of our history, we see many situations where we have chosen to divide rather than maintain fellowship in the midst of broader diversity. In fact, it is probably accurate to say that over the years our nature or personality as a conference has been more closely aligned with division than with unity. If we hold that reality in positive light, we see a persistent desire to be faithful to God's call to holiness. On the other hand, we also recognize that we have often underestimated God's grace and been too sure of our own goodness.

As a Board of Bishops, we believe that God desires to change this pattern. God is not calling us to neglect faithfulness, to embrace diversity for tolerance's sake or to pursue unity at any cost. Rather, we believe God is calling us to seek unity around the mission to which he has called us, and to trust God to give us the grace to prepare for the diversity that will come among us through the fulfillment of that mission. This is indeed the story of the New Testament church.

We have put forth this recommendation about the ordination of women in Lancaster Conference congregations with the conviction that we can allow for this diversity of practice and remain faithful to the authority of scripture. We acknowledge that different approaches to interpretation have brought us to disagreement within our conference about the biblical teaching on this matter, but sincerely believe that God would have us continue to walk together in fellowship. We call each of us to walk in humble obedience to the conviction which we have been given, and to encourage those with whom we disagree to do the same.

It is our conviction that God desires to unite us around a common mission and that our faithfulness must include a greater fulfillment of Christ's mission if it is to be true faithfulness.

# BIBLICAL STUDY

## INTRODUCTION

This attachment to the Bishop Board Discernment and Recommendation will present additional explanation of the underlying perceptions and convictions of the Bishop Board pertaining to the direction that is being recommended. It also contains, in a second section, a study of varied interpretations of the biblical texts pertaining to the roles of men and women in God's church.

The Bishop Board invites you to read the following biblical study as one way of understanding the journey of discernment as well as the recommendation regarding ordination for women in LMC. The primary purpose of this study is to recognize

*Our hope and prayer is that, as leaders within LMC, we can respect our varying perspectives and continue to value one another as we together join in God's mission in the world.*

that many pertinent Scriptures related to women in leadership can be interpreted in differing ways -- by sincere brothers and sisters in Christ. As you read through the following pages, our hope and prayer is that, as leaders within LMC, we can respect our varying perspectives and continue to value one another as we together join in God's mission in the world. We caution against viewing those persons with varying perspectives as being less than faithful to God's Word.

## A CHALLENGING POLARITY

As a Bishop Board, we have spent numerous months in study and discernment related to this recommendation, believing that we would do well to gain a thorough understanding of the related biblical texts, methods of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics), and what the Spirit of God is impressing upon the credentialed leaders and congregations of our conference. During this process, our attention has increasingly been drawn to the central place that (strongly held) differing methods of interpretation (hermeneutical polarity) hold in our discussions about the involvement of women in pastoral leadership roles.

F. F. Bruce says, "Paul states the basic principle here; if restrictions on it are found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, as in I Corinthians 14:34ff or I Timothy 2:11f, they are to be understood in relation to Galatians 3:28 and not vice versa" (Bruce, 1982:190).

## E. Restrictive Passages (I Corinthians 14:34, 35; I Timothy 2:9-15)

The command to be silent (*siago*) is given in the context of a church that utilized women's gifts in praying and prophecy (1 Cor. 14:33-35).

*For God is not a God of disorder, but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a women to speak in the church.*

Building on a Jewish method on the interpretation of the order of creation in Genesis 2, Paul says these married women are to ask their husbands at home rather than disrupt the worship service with their many questions. A literal read of this passage leads some to conclude, as a norm for women's role in public worship, that women are to be silent.

A historical/cultural approach seeks to understand the meaning of the text for the Corinthian believers. Did the problem arise because these Corinthian women found new freedom in Christ and felt at ease in disrupting the worship service with their many questions? Or did they belong to a movement within Greco-Roman society of a few women known as "new women?" These "new women" appeared with braided hair style, gold, pearls, and expensive clothing. The public perception of Christian wives was a critical matter for the Christian community. If they dressed like high-class prostitutes they brought disrepute upon the Christian movement. Even secular literature spoke against these women (Winter, 2003: 77-122), some of whom may have become Christians (Acts 17:12). Is this restriction only for the Corinthian church or does it apply to universal Christianity? It is clear that freedom in Christ at Corinth is tempered by the need for orderliness in worship. This emphasis on the historical setting leads some to conclude that the restriction did not have universal application.

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As each is subject to the other, the wife voluntarily subordinates herself to her husband and the husband loves the wife with a self-sacrificing kind of love in the likeness of Christ. This is a radical departure from the traditional practice of household behavior in the first century world.

Additionally, if headship implies governance, Paul modified it by what he writes in I Corinthians 11:11-12 where there are limits for both wife and husband. Neither rules completely over the other.

*Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God (NRSV).*

This passage indicates that in creation woman came from man and in childbirth man comes from woman. Some persons interpret this to mean that neither has full power or governance over the other.

#### **D. Galatians 3:27-28:**

*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (NRSV).*

The meaning of this passage can be interpreted two ways. On one hand, it can be argued that Paul is dealing primarily with the question of inclusion in the covenant promise and is not talking about leadership roles in the church. Women as well as men can be Christians.

On the other hand, others would argue that Paul means other restrictions are also removed. A Gentile can be a Christian without becoming a Jew and can be a leader in the church. Likewise a woman can become a Christian without becoming a man and can be a leader in the church. The old order of humanity in the fall is replaced with a new order of redemption in Christ. This new order does not mean a man becomes a woman or a woman becomes a man. Instead it changes the way men and women relate to each other, just as it changed the way Jews and Gentiles related to each other.

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A polarity can be defined as the tension of belief and practice that exists between two opposing principles. Although it would be simpler to choose one principle over the other, the commitment we have to the truth in each principle does not allow us to do that. So, we find ourselves seeking the best balance between the two principles, wanting to be faithful to both while living in the tension that exists between them. As such, polarities are more helpfully viewed as healthy tensions to embrace, even nurture, rather than problems to be solved or eliminated.

The polarity related to biblical interpretation that is of particular interest to our present discussion is the one that exists between:

- A straightforward, **literal interpretation** of scripture which begins with the question, “What does this passage mean?”
- A **historical/cultural** approach to **interpretation** which begins with the question, “What did this passage mean to those who first heard or read it?”

Certainly there is a tension between these two polarities, and yet, few of us would say that we have chosen one exclusively and see no value in the other.

This polarity has a long history with Mennonites and Lancaster Conference. Ever since early Anabaptists were known for their rather simple, literal Biblicism, we have placed a high value on approaching the Bible with a commitment to believe that it means what it says and to follow through with obedience. This commitment has led us to interpret instructions that were first given to Christ’s disciples (*i.e. loving one’s enemy, washing each other’s feet, not swearing oaths, confronting the brother who has sinned against you*) or instructions to New Testament churches (*i.e. preparing for the Lord’s Supper, anointing the sick with oil and not suing in the courts*) as being commandments with universal scope so that they are just as applicable to us as to those who first received them.

On the other hand, a historical/cultural approach has had its place among us as well. Even those of us who hold to a very literal approach to interpretation take into consideration the historical/cultural settings when interpreting some passages. This leads us to interpret some teachings of Jesus (*i.e. plucking out one’s own eye, traveling without money or shoes, hating one’s father and mother, selling all one’s possessions*) and other New Testament passages (*i.e. I Cor. 7:1 “... it is good for a man not to marry”; I Cor. 5:11 “...with such a man do not even eat”*) in less literal ways.

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Those emphasizing a historical/culture approach to interpretation understand the task of interpretation to include:

- A careful listening *within* the text (allowing the text to speak for itself)
- Learning from *behind* the text (understanding the cultural, literary and historical context of the text)
- Living in *front* of the text (consciously owning one's own worldview and the distance between the world of the text and the world of today)  
(Swartley, 1983: 224-228)

Having said that leaders and members practice both literal and historical/cultural hermeneutics is not to say that we are in agreement about where to place ourselves along the continuum of this polarity. Being “balanced” within this polarity means different things to different people. Some among us embrace a primarily literal approach to interpretation and use historical background very cautiously. Others are far more at peace with asking a lot of contextual questions and believe they can do so without undermining the authority of the Scriptures. And of course, many of us find ourselves somewhere in between these positions.

Bishops have chosen to include this discussion about this hermeneutical polarity because we believe there is a close correlation between where persons or congregations place themselves within this polarity and what they believe about the involvement of women in pastoral leadership roles. As has often been said, where one begins makes a great difference in where one ends up. On the matter at hand, those who position themselves at one end of the polarity begin with certain passages of scripture, while those at the other end tend to focus on a different set of passages, which lead to significantly different conclusions. The biblical study in the next section will give a fuller explanation to these varied approaches and conclusions.

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By putting Christ at the center of all of these household relationships, the early Christians changed the prevailing pattern of household behavior. No longer could the Master take sexual advantage of the female slaves since both were called to purity of life. No longer did the wife or slave follow the Roman ancestry gods, but placed Jesus as Lord of their lives.

### C. The Meaning of Headship

In the midst of all of this Christ-centered teaching is the question of headship (kephale). It can rightfully be asked why Paul includes the theme of headship when talking about these relationships (I Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23). Does this mean women in the church should not govern but may serve in ministering roles?

Some persons' view would say yes. If the word “head” means governance or rule, the view preventing women from ruling over men is legitimate. In a few occurrences in the New Testament it has the governing idea (Eph. 1:22).

Others would disagree because they do not interpret the term “head” to mean rule. The term “head” as used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament rarely means rule. In the New Testament the term “head” has several meanings (Thiselton, 2000: 812-822) including “source” or “origin” as in the head of a stream of water. However, as I. Howard Marshall points out, “Attempts to weaken the sense of *head* to mean nothing more than “source” are not persuasive, although notions of the head as “prominent, outstanding or determinative: and thus possessing ‘preeminence’ or functioning as ‘ground of being’ are well founded” (I. Howard Marshall in Pierce and Groothuis, 2004: 198).

If “head” means governance, we would expect Paul to use it when he speaks of the master-slave relationship and the father-child relationship. But it is not used that way in Paul's writings. It is used in the sense of the husband as the provider, the one who cares for his wife, or one who functions as the ground of being. Headship is described in the relationship between Christ and the church. As the term “head” is used, it is modified by “just as Christ” kind of emphasis. Much attention is focused on the man loving the wife as Christ loved the church.

Thus both slaves and women, according to Aristotle, were fit by nature to be ruled, not to rule (Osiek, 2006:95). He taught that some people were suited to be slaves (Bell, 1998:193) and went so far as to define a slave as a living tool or living property (DeSilva, 2004: 142, 672). Based on the premise that men are more rational, women less rational, children pre-rational (immature) and slaves irrational, these household codes established an order of authority and submission for each of the classes (Achte-meier, 1996:52).

Though the Stoics encouraged more humane treatment of slaves, the order of household life changed very little from the time of Aristotle until the first century. Even Hellenistic Jewish writers, such as Philo and Josephus, used Aristotle's classic teaching on household codes. When the Christian movement arose, the Greco-Roman household was guided largely by this classical teaching on household behavior.

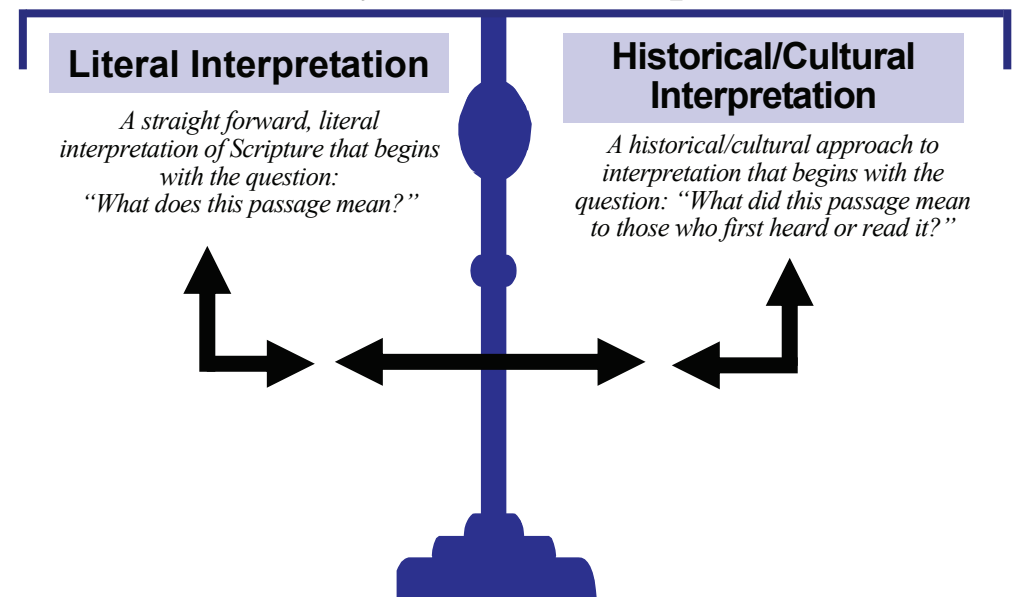
How did Christian teaching interact with this prevailing cultural view of household behavior? The following principles are seen in the New Testament household behavior passages.

- All in the household are to be guided by the model of Christ.
- There is a reciprocal relationship between each person.
- The normally inferior person in each couplet is addressed first, giving the inferior person moral dignity that was not recognized previously.
- The normally superior person in each couplet is instructed to treat the other person in a Christ-like manner. Thus Christ is the model and motivator for a new understanding of relationships within the household (Yoder Neufeld, 2002: 276).
- All, including husbands and masters, are to subject their lives to each other in the household (Eph. 5:21).
- Subjection called for a voluntary response and is distinguished from the command to obey which is rarely used in these New Testament household texts.
- In Ephesians and Colossians, household behavior is seen from the perspective of the lordship of Christ. In I Peter, household behavior is interpreted from the perspective of the sufferings of Christ.

# A CHALLENGING POLARITY

*A spectrum of belief and practice existing between two opposing principles*

## *Methods of Biblical Interpretation*



*There is a tension between these two views; yet, few of us would say that we have chosen one exclusively and see no value in the other.*

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## 1. A LITERAL READING OF THREE TEXTS.

### I Corinthians 14:34-36:

*As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached? (NRSV)*

### I Timothy 2:11-15:

*Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man, she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through child-bearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (NRSV).*

On the basis of a literal sense of these two scriptures, many persons believe there is an order in creation in which roles for men and women are such that women are not to take authority over men.

Other persons reach a different interpretation by looking, in a literal way, at a third text:

### Galatians 3:26-28:

*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (NRSV)*

Some persons interpret this text to be saying that in Christ Jesus there are not separate roles for men and women in the church.

All three of the above texts can be argued on the basis of a literal reading with a similar method of biblical interpretation. Neither view is wrong in and of itself. However, there are other Biblical passages, questions and insights that need to be asked and examined in the interpreting process.

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## 5. THE EPISTLES.

In the epistles there are several themes that give insight into the question of men and women in the church:

### A. The Holy Spirit's Work in the Church

As noted above at Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon both men and women (Acts 1:14; 2:1). It seems evident that women as well as men prophesied in the early church without distinction (Acts 21:9; I Cor. 11:4-5).

Additionally the fruit of the Spirit, the character of Christ, was given to all Christians regardless of gender (Gal. 5:22-23). And the gifts of the Spirit were given by God to all Christians regardless of gender (I Cor. 12:28-30; Eph. 4:11-16). Thus both men and women received the Holy Spirit who enabled them to live the Christ-like life and to carry out Christ's work in the world.

### B. The Household Behavior Passages

In the epistles we have several passages which talk about household behavior (Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1; I Peter 2:13-3:7; Titus 2:1-10; 3:1). A historical/cultural approach to these passages seeks to understand household behavior and practice in the Greco-Roman world and then observe how Christianity interacted with that teaching and practice.

Household behavior codes likely originated with the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. Aristotle described a female as a deformed male and concluded women are inferior to men (Politics, ed. Loeb Classical Library, 1254 b 10-14). He wrote about politics and described how the city (polis) is governed. The household in the Greco-Roman world included men, women, slaves, masters, and children. Aristotle taught household management was a microcosm of the way the political state or city was to be ruled.

On this basis Aristotle established a hierarchy around four subtopics: master-slave relationships, husband-wife relationships, father-child relationships, and the art of acquiring wealth. These relationships were understood as the relationships of ruler and ruled, of superior and subordinate (Verner, 1983:84).



When interpreting Jesus and women, one can rightfully ask why he did not choose a woman as one of the twelve disciples. Does the fact that he did not choose a woman as a disciple indicate that women should not lead men? Some interpret this to mean that because Jesus did not choose a woman as one of the twelve, some leadership roles in the church today should be reserved for men. Others believe that while Jesus did not choose a woman as a disciple, he did treat women with dignity and as partners in kingdom work.

Both of these views should be respected as legitimate. In looking further at Jesus and women, it may be helpful to examine how the early church worked out the teachings of Jesus in daily life.

*Both of these views should be respected as legitimate.*

#### 4. WOMEN IN ACTS.

Several texts in the book of Acts indicate what people did in the early church. Women were present with the men in the upper room when the Holy Spirit came upon the believers at Pentecost (Acts 1:14). In Acts 2 the Holy Spirit came upon women as well as men. Peter's sermon indicates the promised age of the Messiah has come and that the prophecy of Joel 2:28 is fulfilled.

*In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams (Acts 2:17, NRSV).*

In this new Messianic age God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34). In Acts we have accounts of a husband-wife teaching team, women teachers, women prophets, and women deacons. In the book of Acts, Luke "takes care to reveal to his audience that where the Gospel went, women, often prominent, were some of the first, foremost, and most faithful converts to the Christian faith, and that their conversion led to their assuming new roles in the service of the gospel" (Witherington, 1988:157). Then, as well as today, the Holy Spirit often uses women in the missional task of the church as the gospel breaks into new people groups in the world.

## 2. WHAT DO THE CREATION TEXTS SAY?

In a paper entitled *Partners in Ministry* (1999), bishops shared the following regarding the creation accounts:

The creation accounts describe how the first man and the first women were created for dynamic partnership in God's world.

In Genesis 1, we witness a fundamental equality between man and woman. Both were created in God's image. Both shared responsibility for conceiving and rearing children. Both were given dominion over the created order (1:26-28). Both were given the same name (*Genesis 5:2*).

In Genesis 2, we see complementarity (differences that complete or make whole) in the relationship between the man and woman. The man was created first. The woman was taken from man, served as a helper (*ezer*) suitable (*kenegdo*) for him (*Genesis 2:18*). While the word "helper" has been used to imply female sub-ordination or inferiority, this meaning is not found in the original word. The word *ezer* refers to God in most instances of Old Testament usage (e.g. *1 Samuel 7:12; Psalm 121:1-2*). The word "suitable" denotes equality and adequacy (*Genesis 2:18*). Further, the forming of woman from man demonstrates the fundamental inter-dependence between the sexes. Man and woman are made of the same material. Both sexes are necessary for the perpetuation and wholesome nurture of human life (*Genesis 2:21-23; 1 Corinthians 11:11-12*). Both are needed to fully reflect the image of God.

So in the Creation accounts we see both equality and complementarity of roles (*1 Corinthians 11:7-9; 1 Timothy 2:13*), establishing the basis for equal value even when there are role distinctions. Yet Christians disagree among themselves as to the extent to which these role distinctions apply to the church today.

Aside from the exegesis of these two creation accounts, the hermeneutical question is, "How do these creation accounts relate to each other?" In *1 Corinthians 14:34-35* and *1 Timothy 2:11-15*, Paul follows a line of Jewish rabbinic method that appeals to the second creation account indicating different roles for men and women. As Paul Jewett says, "all the Pauline texts supporting female subordination...appeal to the second creation narrative which in rabbinic thought of Paul's time was used as a basis for the doctrine of subordination and the perpetuation of restrictions on women" (Jewett, 1974: 119).

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However, if there is inadequacy in going directly from the second creation account to Paul's more restrictive texts, there may also be inadequacy in going directly from the first creation account to Galatians 3:26-28 and downplaying any distinctions between male and female. Interpreting the two creation texts together leads some in the direction of affirming that both male and female complement or make each other whole while preventing either one from lording it over the other.

Creation, of course, was profoundly affected by the fall, as recorded in Genesis 3. The "Partners in Ministry" paper described the Fall as follows:

The beauty and harmony of God's created order were profoundly distorted by the Fall. Although the tempter approached the woman, Adam was no less guilty than Eve (*Genesis 3:6,17*). Man and woman were co-participants in disobedience to God's command (*Romans 5:12-21; I Corinthians 15:21-22*). God's curse predicated the dire consequences of sin (*Genesis 3:14-19*). Through sin, the powers of domination, division, destruction, and death have been unleashed in humanity and all of creation. As a result of the Fall, the relationships established at Creation were marred. Man and woman were alienated from God and each other. The mutual dominion given the couple at creation was distorted (*Genesis 3:16*).

In I Timothy 2:14 Paul mentions Eve's deception. Given the context of the church at Ephesus which was threatened by heresy, Paul is concerned about women being deceived and uses Eve as an example of such deception. Paul is not saying Eve deceived Adam. In fact, in Romans 5:12-21 Paul says the opposite. It was Adam's sin that affected the whole human race.

The effects of the fall can be seen in the Old Testament. Women were not counted as part of the numbering in Israel, nor did they enjoy the same status as men in the tabernacle, temple, or synagogue.

While the creation accounts, the Fall, and the Old Testament practice must be considered when interpreting the scriptures on male and female, they do not give us the full picture. Based on our Christocentric view of Scripture, we must look at Jesus as God's full revelation and how he treated women.

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### 3. JESUS AND WOMEN.

Much could be said regarding the historical and cultural context of the first century. In the Greco-Roman world women were not given much status. Most women got married in their early teens to men in their mid-twenties. Many women died in childbirth. Boys were more highly regarded than girls. At times baby girls were not given a name and in some cases were entirely rejected and left to die by exposure (Bell, 1998: 238-240). Jewish rabbinic thought did not allow women to own property, did not allow women to read in the synagogue, taught that men can divorce women for burning a meal while women could not divorce their husbands for any reason, and did not allow women's voice in court (Witherington, 1984: 2-10). Furthermore, according to Rabbi Judah, each male was taught to pray daily:

Oh God, king of the universe I thank thee that I am not born a Gentile.

Oh God, king of the universe I thank thee that I am not born a slave.

Oh God, king of the universe I thank thee that I am not born a woman.

Into this world God sent His Son. God could have left created humanity die, become extinct, and start over by creating persons without sin. Instead God chose to send His Son through a woman for the redemption of both men and women.

*Into this world, God sent His Son.*

There are many accounts in the Gospels that include Jesus affirming the ministry of women and women ministering to Jesus:

- More than once Jesus used a woman's action to teach the male disciples a lesson (Luke 7:36-50; John 12:7).
- Jesus conversed with a woman when it was not socially acceptable in the case of the Samaritan woman who became a witness for Jesus (John 4:1-42).
- Women honored Jesus by anointing him before the crucifixion (John 12:3-8).
- Women were present at the crucifixion (Matt. 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:48-49; John 19:25).
- Women stayed at the crucifixion when others left (Luke 23:48-49).
- Women were the last to leave the cross and the first to bear witness of the resurrected Lord.
- Mary Magdalene told the male disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18).
- A good number of women were present after the resurrection when Jesus showed himself to more than five hundred (I Corinthians 15:6).