



11 A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.

12 It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because a better should take this to heart; mourning is better than laughter, and a sad face is good for the heart.

13 But the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the heart of the fool is in the house of feasting, for he will despise his laughter.

14 Like the laughter of fools is in the house of mourning, so is the laughing of fools under the rebuke of wisdom.

15 A fool is not to listen to the song of fools, for he will despise their laughter.

16 Do not be like the fool, who says, "I am rich, because I have much wealth."

17 It is better to be poor and have a portion of food than to be rich and have no food.

18 It is better to be poor and have a portion of food than to be rich and have no food.

19 It is better to be poor and have a portion of food than to be rich and have no food.

20 It is better to be poor and have a portion of food than to be rich and have no food.

12 The sleep of a laborer is sweet, except to feast his eyes on the work, and what benefit are they to the owner, so do those who consume their wealth hoarded to through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him to take from his father's wealth.

13 I have seen a grievous evil under the name of wealth hoarded to through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him to take from his father's wealth.

14 The sleep of a laborer is sweet, except to feast his eyes on the work, and what benefit are they to the owner, so do those who consume their wealth hoarded to through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him to take from his father's wealth.

15 As goods increase, so does the laborer's sweat, and he will not be able to count them, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.

16 Whether he eats little or much, he does not know, for he does not eat, and he does not know, for he does not eat.

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# the Continuing conversation

Mennonite Brethren and women in church leadership— understanding the different approaches to the issue and examining how we interpret Scripture

**WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP HAS BEEN A** volatile topic for many in the Christian church—and Mennonite Brethren are no exception.

MBs have been discussing the role of women in the church for four decades. Like many within the evangelical movement, MBs have gravitated towards two basic approaches to the issue, commonly referred to as the “complementarian” and “egalitarian” positions. The complementarian position restricts women from holding authoritative leadership roles within the church while the egalitarian position affirms women for all leadership roles.

In 1957, MBs rescinded a 38-year practice of ordaining women as foreign missionaries, though an explanation of the scriptural convictions underlying that decision wasn’t given. Discussion surfaced in the *MB Herald* and the *Christian Leader* during the 1960s, giving voice to the earlier assumptions about what the Bible said regarding women’s roles. Challenges to this “traditional” perspective emerged during the 1970s and 1980s focusing the growing debate around the issue of church leadership. This eventually led to a loss of consensus among MBs and the struggle over whether or not to allow for diversity of conviction and practice.

Mennonite Brethren have expressed the results of discussions about women in church leadership in policy resolutions (see “*Just what have MBs said on the issue?*” on page 14). Interestingly, the official MB position balances between the complementarian and egalitarian positions by *both* affirming and restricting women in the church. The most recent General Conference resolution encourages women “to minister in the church in every function other than the lead pastorate.” Two months ago, the issue was put back on the table with the approval of a resolution by the Manitoba provincial conference affirming women in church leadership without restriction (see “*Just what have MBs said on the issue?*” on page 14). This has been forwarded to the Canadian Conference Board of Faith and Life for further deliberation.

Why has the issue of women in church leadership not been resolved? Over the years MB teachers, pastors and conference leaders have consistently pointed out that at the heart of the debate is hermeneutics—how one interprets the Bible. Despite a strong and consistent affirmation of the authority of the Bible, MBs have not agreed on either the interpretation of the meaning or the application of the significance of the biblical texts that speak about women in the church. Discussion wanes when both sides of the debate simply resort to quoting chapter and verse to support their positions. Assertions that some have embraced a “hierarchical literalism” on one hand or

“secular feminism” on the other hand also have made it difficult to talk openly together about the strengths and weaknesses of each interpretive approach.

An implication arising from the Manitoba resolution is the call for MBs to once again reflect about what the Bible says regarding women in church leadership. Rather than seeking to defend complementarian or egalitarian positions, it may be better to read the Bible as brothers and sisters who are seeking to understand together what the Spirit is saying to the church. To do this, we first need to listen carefully to one another in order to clearly understand the different interpretations of the biblical texts that have arisen among us. Second, we need to examine how we have arrived at these interpretations in order to faithfully identify the appropriate application of what the Bible says.

### Two interpretive perspectives

The two basic approaches to women in church leadership interpret key passages of Scripture quite differently. A brief and simple side-by-side comparison reveals diverse priorities and emphases.

■ **Creation and the Old Testament.** Those interpreting biblical support for restricting women in church leadership begin with the recognition that man was given primary leadership responsibility in God’s arrangement or order of creation (Gen. 2:4-25). Adam was created first and given responsibility for the environment, obedience before God, and the naming of the animals and the woman. The woman is a “helper” or assistant, whose relationship with her husband is distorted after the fall (Gen. 3:16). In the Old Testament, women were restricted from participating in the priesthood and any involvement in the prophetic ministry was temporary or an exception to the rule.

Those interpreting Scripture as affirming women in church leadership begin with the recognition that the image of God in creation includes both male and female (Gen. 1:27), who together are commanded to be fruitful and have dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). Woman was created as a “helper” of man to address his loneliness (Gen. 2:18). Adam recognized the mutuality of Eve (Gen. 2:23), suggesting that the hierarchy of the husband over his wife was a result of the fall and not prescriptive for defining relationships (Genesis 3:16). In the Old Testament, women such as Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4-5) and Hulda (2 Kings 22:14-20) fulfilled prophetic roles, thereby proclaiming the authoritative Word of God to his people.

■ **Women in Jesus’ ministry and the church.** Those advocating women in church leadership point out that women were counted among Jesus’

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disciples (Matt. 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41) and reflected models of faithful discipleship (Mary, for example, in Luke 10:39). Women proclaimed Jesus' true identity (John 4:1-42, 11:27) in the same way his male disciples did (Mark 8:27-30). Women remained faithful witnesses of the crucifixion (Matt. 27:55-56, 28:1-10; Mark 15:40-41; John 20:10-18) and were commanded to proclaim the good news of Jesus' resurrection to his other disciples (Matt. 28:7; Mark 16:7; John 20:17-18).

At the inception of the early church at Pentecost, women received the Spirit and were empowered to prophesy (Acts 2:4; Acts 2:17-18). Women continued to be involved in the ministry of God's people as teachers (Acts 18:24-26) and prophetesses (Acts 21:8-9). Paul honored women as co-workers (Euodia

and Syntyche in Phil. 4:2-3), apostles (Junias in Rom. 16:7), deacons and patrons (Phoebe in Rom. 16:1-2). Women were house church leaders in local churches in Philippi (Lydia in Acts 16:11-15), Corinth (Chloe in 1 Cor. 1:11) and Colossae (Nympha in Col. 4:15).

Paul recognized that in Christ, distinctions are not made between male and female (Gal. 3:28). The Spirit gifts the church as he wills (1 Cor. 12:11-13) so that believers may build up one another (Col. 3:11-16). Similarly, Paul's teaching demonstrates that God does not show favoritism between slave and free (Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25) or between Jew and Gentile (Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11). The "new creation" in Christ becomes the model for relationships in the church, his body (2 Cor. 5:16-17; Gal. 6:15).

Those advocating the restriction of women in

#### MANITOBA CONFERENCE BROUGHT NEW RESOLUTION IN MARCH 2003

## Just what have MBs said on the issue?

**MBs HAVE** traditionally seen the issue of women in church leadership as a polity versus a confessional issue, reflecting their discussion in policy statements and resolutions rather than including it in the Confession of Faith, which serves as an authoritative guide for North American MBs in biblical interpretation, theological identity and ethical practice.

Highlights of that discussion are below:

■ **1974:** The Canadian Conference opened the door for women to "be eligible to be elected as delegates to conferences and to church and conference boards and committees," clarifying that women could not be ordained for preaching and pastoral ministry nor elected to boards and offices "whose work is of the nature of eldership."

■ **1981:** The General Conference (the former North American conference) acknowledged the contribution of women in ministry of the church and encouraged

"churches to continue to discover and to draw upon the spiritual resources found in our sisters for various ministries in the church and in the world. This may also include participation in local church and conference ministries, if the local church so chooses." The resolution also stated, "We do not believe that the Mennonite Brethren Church should ordain women in pastoral leadership."

■ **1987:** The General Conference attempted to remove the ambiguity regarding what areas of ministry were open to women by defining these as "decision-making, evangelizing, teaching, counseling, encouragement, music, youth visitations, etc." The General Conference also published *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy* in 1992 as a study guide to assist MB churches in their reflection on this issue.

■ **1993:** The General Conference Board of Faith and Life proposed to "allow for the diversity of conviction

and practice in the appointment of women to pastoral leadership in ways that are consistent with the governance patterns of the local congregation." This was an attempt to mediate an "interim solution to diversity and disagreement in the denomination." The proposal was not accepted by convention delegates.

■ **1999:** The General Conference clarified and reaffirmed the 1981 resolution by encouraging women "to minister in the church in every function other than the lead pastorate."

■ **2003:** In March of this year, the Manitoba Conference leadership presented the following resolution: "We call our people in the Spirit of Christ to relate to one another in mutual respect as sisters and brothers in Christ... We invite men and women to exercise leadership on conference boards, in pastoral staff positions and in our congregations, institutions and agencies.

We ask them to minister as gifted, called and affirmed .... We call the Mennonite Brethren church of Manitoba to be increasingly alert to the gifts of women and men and to become more active in calling and blessing them to minister in all areas of church life." It was noted that the resolution was consistent with the one brought to the General Conference convention in 1993, which would have allowed women to become senior pastors at the discretion of the local church. While the resolution presented at the 2003 Manitoba convention would not change the practice in Manitoba in the immediate future, the results were passed on to the Canadian Board of Faith and Life for deliberation. Delegates accepted the resolution by a 79 percent majority.

—by Doug Heidebrecht and Carmen Andres with a report from the MB Herald, a publication of the Canadian Conference.

church leadership point out that women were not part of Jesus' 12 disciples (Matt. 10:1-4; Luke 6:12-16) nor were they appointed as elders in churches (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5). Women who served as deacons in the ministry of the early church, for example, did so under the authority of men.

Gal. 3:28, while establishing the equal status of women and men in Christ, does not remove functional differences in the church. The context of Galatians suggests that social implications are not addressed by Paul's statement proclaiming oneness in Christ. The analogy between women and slaves does not apply since slavery is not a God-ordained institution grounded in creation.

■ **Instructions to women (1 Cor. 11 and 14).** Those in favor of a restriction on women in church leadership emphasize Paul's recognition that "the head of the woman is man." Paul's instructions regarding the significance of a head covering represent his concern for maintaining man's authority over the woman (1 Cor. 11:3, 5). God's arrangement in creation—woman was made from man and for the sake of man (1 Cor. 11:8-9)—and nature itself require that the distinction between the sexes be reflected in different roles in the church. The principle behind Paul's command for women to be silent in the church (1 Cor. 14:34-35) is based on an appeal to the practice of the churches, the principle of submission of wives to husbands and an appeal to the law (Gen. 3:16).

Those in favor of women in church leadership emphasize that Paul instructed women who were praying and prophesying in the church (1 Cor. 11:5) to dress appropriately in order not to bring shame on their husbands (1 Cor. 11:5) or draw attention away from their authority to prophesy (1 Cor. 11:10). Interdependence should characterize relationships between women and men "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:11). Paul's concern regarding proper order in the church service motivated his call for tongue speakers, prophets and disturbing women to be quiet so as not to create chaos (1 Cor. 14:28, 30, 34). Paul was worried about damaging the reputation of the church among unbelievers.

■ **Relationship of husband and wife (Eph. 5).** On one side, a wife's submission to her husband in the home is interpreted as one expression of mutual submission among believers (Eph. 5:21). The metaphor of "head" illustrates the comparison between a husband and wife and Christ who nourishes and tenderly cares for his "body," the church (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15-16; 5:25, 29).

On the other side, the relationship between husband and wife is interpreted as the pattern for relationships between men and women in the church.

Headship, defined as "authority," must be reflected through a husband's loving leadership and responsibility for the family (Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-19; Titus 2:3-5). Wives are to submit to their husbands in everything (1 Peter 3:1-7).

■ **Quietness and authority (1 Tim. 2).** Those advocating restriction of women in church leadership suggest that women are commanded to learn in quietness and in submission (1 Tim. 2:11). They are neither to teach nor to have authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12). The appeal to man's priority in the order of creation indicates that this command is a permanent principle transcending cultural practices. Woman's role in the fall reflects her overstepping of God's order for male and female relationships. Women are therefore restricted from the authoritative positions of pastoral leadership and eldership in the church.

Those advocating affirmation of women in church leadership suggest the primary issue of concern in 1 Timothy is false teaching, the promotion of controversy, meaningless talk and presumption about the ability to teach (1 Tim. 1:3-7; 4:1-7; 6:3-5). The call for quietness must be understood in the context of living peaceful lives (1 Tim. 2:1), where women are instructed not to domineer men (1 Tim. 2:12). These instructions are best understood in light of the situation involving women described in 1 Tim. 5:9-15.

### Reflecting on our hermeneutics

So, how is it that we interpret the same passages so differently? Several issues play into how we interpret Scripture.

Whenever we read the Bible, we typically follow three steps. First, we observe what the Bible says. Then we interpret the meaning of the biblical text in its context. What was the author trying to communicate within a particular historical and cultural context? How does this text fit into the flow of the entire biblical book? Finally, we apply the meaning of the biblical text to our lives in our contemporary context. What is the significance of the text for the church today?

Several dilemmas arise when we seek to interpret and apply the Bible. While we may all be able to observe what the Bible says about women in ministry, we often disagree about how to interpret the meaning of those texts. Sometimes we are unclear about the meaning of specific words. For example, what did Paul mean when he spoke of "head"? At times we debate the significance of the cultural background for understanding the meaning of the text. What role did veils play in Corinthian society? At other times we are unsure about the historical experience of the first readers. In what way is the issue of false teachers in Ephesus related to the

## RESOURCES FROM VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES

### Balanced Reflection

■ *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, James R. Beck & Craig L. Blomberg, eds. (Zondervan, 2001)

■ *Women in Ministry: Four Views*, Bonnell Clouse & Robert G. Clouse, eds. (InterVarsity Press, 1989)

### Complementarian

■ *Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*: [www.cbmw.org](http://www.cbmw.org)

■ *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner & H. Scott Baldwin, eds. (Baker Books, 1995)

■ *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, John Piper & Wayne Grudem, eds. (Crossway Books, 1991)

**RESOURCES FROM VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES**

**Egalitarian**

■ **Christians for Biblical Equality:** [www.cbeinternational.org](http://www.cbeinternational.org)

■ **The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate,** Kevin Gilles (InterVarsity Press, 2002)

■ **Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry,** Stanley J. Grenz & Denise Mulr Kjesbo (InterVarsity Press, 1995)

**Hermeneutics**

■ **Slavery, Sabbath, War & Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation,** Willard M. Swartley (Herald Press, 1983)

■ **Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis,** William J. Webb (InterVarsity Press, 2001)

**MB**

■ **Your Daughters Shall Prophesy,** John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel & Katie Funk Wiebe, eds. (Kindred Press, 1992)

issue of women teaching?

Another difficulty arises when we are unsure whether a text should be applied literally or whether we should derive a principle based on a practice embedded in a cultural expression. In some cases, we recognize on the basis of common sense that even though we clearly understand what the author meant in a text we do not always literally apply it to our lives. For example, we seek to apply the principle behind the command, "greet one another with a holy kiss," rather than attempting to literally follow it. Furthermore, if we are unclear about the meaning of a biblical text, we will consequently struggle with identifying its significance for our lives in the contemporary church.

Finally, it may not be enough just to observe and interpret all the individual biblical texts that speak to the issue of women in church leadership. We recognize the presence of both affirming and restricting passages in the Bible regarding women in the church. How do we hold together all of Scripture without forcing the Bible to say what we want it to say? How do these texts fit together into a coherent picture? As we process these questions, it is imperative that we allow Biblical themes and emphases to shape our understanding rather than impose a foreign theological framework onto the biblical text.

**Questions for reflection**

Typically, the discussion regarding women in church leadership focuses on the meaning of various biblical texts that are used to either affirm or restrict women's involvement. What we rarely discuss is *how* we interpret the Bible. How do our particular experiences and theological assumptions shape the kinds of questions and expectations we bring to the text?

The following questions identify some areas for further reflection regarding how we interpret the affirming and restricting biblical texts regarding women in church leadership.

■ What is the significance of the creation account to the issue of women in church leadership? Is the chronological order of creation significant? Is there a created order or arrangement set forth by God in the beginning for all time? Does the Bible teach a doctrine of the "order of creation"? Can the implications from creation be limited to the home and the church and not the rest of society?

■ What is the significance of the fall for understanding how life should now be lived? Are the consequences of the fall descriptive of what happened or a normative pattern we must now follow?

■ What is the significance of the new creation in Christ? How does the new creation relate to the original creation? Can a distinction be made between the status and function of believers in Christ?

■ Should one text take interpretive priority over another (i.e., Galatians 3:28 or 1 Timothy 2:11)? On what basis would we make that choice?

■ What is the significance of Jesus' teaching and example? Does Jesus provide the interpretive key for reading the rest of the Bible?

■ How does our changing practice of church governance shape our understanding of leadership? How do we understand the relationship between authority and servant leadership? What is the biblical model for church leadership (pastor, elder or overseer)? What are the implications of our theology and practice of ordination for this discussion?

■ What is the significance of the gifting of the Spirit for leadership positions in the church? Does the church determine the gifting of believers or only recognize what the Spirit has already given?

■ Is the husband/wife relationship a model for relationships between men and women in the church? How do we understand the concepts of submission and authority? How does our own experience flavor our understanding of these concepts?

■ What role do societal attitudes, whether contemporary or traditional, play in shaping our interpretation of the Bible? How is the reputation of the gospel message affected by the church's stance on this issue?

■ How does our experience as either males or females shape our understanding of the biblical text?

■ Do differing interpretations of some biblical passages imply differing views of the authority of the Bible?

■ How does the church practically reflect a hermeneutical community in the interpretation of the Bible? Should consensus be the basis for unity in the church? Given the diversity of the church, what does consensus look like? What is the relationship of local congregations to the larger conference?

**Talking together**

Mennonite Brethren have continually expressed their commitment to the role of the church as a hermeneutical community in the interpretation of Scripture. We recognize that as we interpret the Bible together, the perspective of the larger group offsets the limitations of individual blind spots and biases. We believe that the Spirit speaks to the gathered community as they seek to understand the Word. We must continue to talk together as women and men—wrapping our convictions with humility and gentleness, being patient and bearing with one another in love in order to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:2-3). ■

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