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RESPONSE TO: "THE 'PLACE' OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH"

Brother Ewert is right. The issue of women's "place" in the church is divisive and complex. Merely affirming the authority of scripture doesn't relieve all of our tensions on the issue. I commend Brother Ewert for discussing the difficulties and inconsistencies of commonly held scriptural interpretations. I affirm him for his courageous call for a church ministry of women that goes far beyond the point currently practiced in our conference.

Brother Ewert's review of the role of women in the New Testament and review of what he calls restrictive passages take me convincingly in the direction of women's full participation in the work of the church. So much so, in fact, that I am unprepared for his concluding statement.

"Since the divine order of creation is not reversed by redemption, and because of the New Testament emphasis on man's headship, it would seem to me that the pastoral leadership of the congregation should be in the hands of men."

I fail to see in his paper a thorough discussion of scriptural references to the order of creation or headship of men. Thus, I do not understand his rationale for the limitation he places on a woman's ministry. Allow me some observations on scriptural references to these two concepts.

Readers often understand the Genesis 2 account of the creation of man and woman to mean that man, the ruler, was created and brought a subordinate. This to me is a distortion of the Genesis 2 account:

"And the Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.'"

Genesis 2:18, NAS

The word "helper" translated from the Greek word ezer, implies no hierarchical arrangement. It is, in fact, the same word used frequently when referring to God as our help.

Adam's need for a helper was not a need for someone to dominate and

subdue. Domination was the disappointing experience of the first day's work.

"And the man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him."

Genesis 2:20, NAS

Adam's delight with God's creation of Eve was the joy of finding a partner, "flesh of my flesh," who could share side by side the unique business of being human under God and with whom no question of status need exist.

The Genesis 1 account affirms this lack of a hierarchy by comparing the created man and woman to the plural yet unified image of God.

"Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness'.....and God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

Genesis 1:26, 27, NAS

Such is a creation of man and woman with distinctness, yet oneness, like the unity of the Godhead. Only after the fall do we read:

To Adam: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman."

To Eve: "He shall rule over you."

Genesis 3:15, 16, NAS

Thus the Old Testament does not isolate the relationship of man and woman from the "tragic consequences of sin." Likewise, in the New Testament, even though Paul refers to the order of creation in the context of maintaining traditional woman-man appearances (I Corinthians 11:8,9), he includes a reordering of creation as part of redemption.

"However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also man has his birth through the woman, and all things originate from God." I Corinthians 11:11-12, NAS

Is the creation described by Paul or the creation described by Genesis, a creation that establishes leadership as a male prerogative? I think not.

And what of headship? Brother Ewert states that he doesn't understand headship to mean "lordship." What then is the headship as spoken of by the Apostle Paul?

Paul compares the headship of man to woman with the headship of God to Christ and with the headship of Christ to the church. Such a headship (sometimes translated "origin" or "source") is unity in function and voluntary submission given in the presence of love that edifies the other.

How is God the head of Christ? Scriptures say: "The Word is God." "I and the Father are one." "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself."

How is Christ the head of the Church? Scriptures say: "Now you are Christ's body." "No one ever hateth his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the Church." "Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her."

I believe that with such a headship model Paul establishes for believers radical new woman-man relationships in which status, and independence, are clearly inappropriate. To say a woman should never spiritually shepherd a fellowship of God's people, on the basis of Paul's headship model, is to say it is inappropriate for the pulpit ministry to reflect a male-female unity; it is inappropriate for the pastor to exhibit a submissive spirit in the presence of edifying love from her congregation.

Now let me go beyond my interpretations of these scriptural concepts to offer a second rationale for arguing against drawing a line between women's participation in the work of the church and the ordination of women for the pastoral ministry. That rationale concerns the leadership model such a line promotes.

Since when have we believed in an authority leadership as the ideal or only model for our pastors? To draw the line where Brother Ewert draws it is to identify Mennonite Brethren with a "High Church" view of the priesthood. Our leadership becomes a priesthood of separated brethren, set aside

to perform holy acts on the stage and present authoritative interpretations of scripture, rather than a priesthood of believers, submissive according to the servant model of Christ. Brother Ewert bans women, not from servant leadership and ministry of believers in Christ, but from authority leadership and ministry as it has been institutionalized by men. That is, he allows women to reach out to spiritual needs, interpret and teach scripture through the Holy Spirit, bring help and comfort to the sick and bereaved, be God's agents to the lost and poor; but women should not do such things if such things imply authority over men. Sisters and brothers, men should not usurp authority over men. God grants the authority to His ministry through the believer's relationship to Him. If in that relationship, the Holy Spirit reveals itself as authority through one of us, then we should be about the business of recognizing and submitting ourselves to such authority, not predetermining the authority or making the person and the authority synonymous. We have not, cannot, and will not ban any believer from being an vessel of the authority of the Holy Spirit.

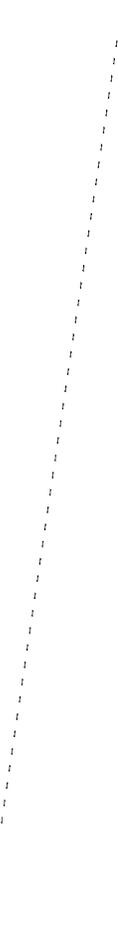
Our churches should not imply through ordination that a believer is set aside to be an authority over us. Rather ordination should be a symbol of God's call of that person to a ministry of servanthood. It should be a recognition of the presence of the authority of the Holy Spirit in the person's life. It should be a commitment from a local congregation to that person's ministry.

To me the tragedy is not so much that we have not allowed a woman to pastor a people, but that we stand in the way of Christ's gospel reaching lives of people by allowing an authority ministry to separate us. Some men have becomes god's in the pulpit, seeking power and authority. Some

women are now attracted to the same idolatry. Some men have been embarrassed to work with the women in a children's Sunday School class or in the kitchen at a church supper. Some women have been so "kept in their place" that they tremble at the thought of the simplest public task. And we sow seeds of anger, privilege, and hurt, rather than love, discipleship, and servanthood.

Is the issue of women's role in the church peripheral to the essence of faith and life for the Christian? Not to me. The issue of women's role in the church stands at the heart of what we believe the church to be and what we believe relationships to be among believers. As long as we say that a woman, no matter what her gifts, her call, or her circumstances is not to be considered a full servant of the church, we establish an exclusive male leadership in the church. We in fact dictate to God, how and through whom He shall work among us. God forgive us, we know not what we do.

Karen Berg Neufeld



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