

Women in Ministry Leadership Statement

Brethren in Christ U.S.

August 28, 2017

The Brethren in Christ U.S. fully affirms women in ministry leadership at all levels of Church life. Women are ordained and commissioned as pastors, bishops, deacons, denominational leaders, and members of local, regional, and national BIC U.S. governing boards.

As a denomination within the historic Christian faith, we are committed to the Bible as the divinely inspired, authoritative Word of God.ⁱ And it is our reading of the Bible that leads us to support women in ministry leadership, grounded, more specifically, in our understanding of 1) the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all people — both women and men, 2) the witness in both the Old and New Testaments of women called to spiritual leadership, and 3) the example of Jesus partnering with women in ministry.

The Holy Spirit's Commissioning of All People

The coming of the Holy Spirit not only empowered the followers of Jesus for ministry but simultaneously revolutionized the Church when the prophesy of Joel (Joel 2:28-32) was realized in the divine outpouring at Pentecost. Proclaimed Peter on that day:

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy' (Acts 2:16-18).

During Pentecost, the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 did more than enable the disciples to preach the gospel to each person in their own language. The coming of the Holy Spirit also fulfilled the prophecy of Joel in testifying that all people — “sons and daughters,” “men and women” — were equipped for ministry: gifted, empowered, and called. That day, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christ unveiled the freedom of life in him as described by the apostle Paul: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Support for Women in Leadership from the Biblical Narrative

The concern of some is that select passages of Scripture (for example, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-12) exclude women from roles of teaching and pastoring within the Church. However, the broader scope of the biblical narrative recognizes women in a variety of ministry leadership roles:

Deborah leading Israel (Judges 4-5)

Huldah interpreting the law for the nation (2 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 34)

Esther saving God's people from genocide (Esther)

Miriam leading the people and directing worship (Exodus 15; Micah 6:4)

Mary Magdalene the first to preach the Gospel (John 20:1-18; Mark 16:9-11; Luke 24:1-12)

Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus as the Messiah (John 12)

Mary of Nazareth birthing the Savior of the world (Luke 1-2)

Anna the prophet (Luke 2:22-40)

Tabitha the disciple known for her good works (Acts 9:36-42)

Priscilla who corrected false teaching (Acts 18:24-28)

Lydia and **Nympha** hosting house churches (Acts 16:11-15; Colossians 4:15)

Joanna and **Suzanna** who traveled with Jesus as disciples (Luke 8:1-3)

Junia the apostle (Romans 16:7)

Phoebe the deacon (Romans 16:1-2)ⁱⁱ

Paul instructs us that “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). As such, it should be used to establish a more fully orb-ed and broadly biblical doctrine of women in ministry leadership.

How, then, do we synthesize Paul’s teachings that appear to oppose women in Church leadership with the overwhelming affirmation of women in leadership throughout the Old and New Testaments? First, these Pauline passages, after careful study (beyond the scope of this document), must be considered as localized and contextual admonitions given to particular situations amid a profoundly patriarchal first century culture. In short, they must be seen as the early Church working out the implications of the revolutionary teachings of Jesus and the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel in Acts 2 within the laboratory of local congregations.

Second, as we read biblical passages within the framework of all of Scripture, we also should read Paul’s seemingly contradictory statements in the context of his entire writings. Consider one of the most difficult passages referenced above: “Women should remain silent in the churches” (1 Corinthians 14:34). While it appears Paul prohibits women from participating in the life of the Church, a few chapters earlier in 1 Corinthians, he advocates for women prophesying (1 Corinthians 11:2-11).ⁱⁱⁱ Clearly, Paul does not exclude women from Church engagement if he also remarks they are to share God’s Word!

Third, Paul’s position toward women in Church leadership must also take into account Paul’s interaction with — and recognition of — women in ministry. He refers to Priscilla as his “co-worker in Christ Jesus” (Romans 16:3), a term used for Church leaders such as Timothy, Mark, and Titus; calls Phoebe a “deacon” and highly extols her work (Romans 16:1-2); and praises Junia as “outstanding among the apostles” (Romans 16:7).

Jesus’ Partnership with Women in Ministry

Jesus’ inclusion of women in his ministry perhaps provides the most compelling example of God’s heart toward women leading the Church. Jesus had women disciples who traveled with him throughout his ministry (Luke 8:1-3). Systematically destroying cultural, religious, and gender barriers, Jesus commissioned the Samaritan woman as one of the first evangelists (John 4:4-42) — and “many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (verse 39). He memorialized the act of the woman who broke an expensive alabaster jar of perfume and poured it on his head (Mark 14:3-9). Celebrating her extravagant love, he proclaimed that “wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (verse 9).

But, perhaps, most extraordinary is Christ’s commendation of Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. Mary is said to have “sat at Jesus’ feet,” angering her sister Martha for not helping to entertain the guests (Luke 10:38-42). In the first century, to *sit at a rabbi’s feet* meant you were the rabbi’s disciple. In this act, Mary was calling herself a disciple, equal to men. Furthermore, a disciple’s goal was to become their rabbi’s successor. So, in effect, Mary was claiming she would share Christ’s ministry. How did Jesus respond to Mary’s audacious declaration? He defends Mary’s decision to sit at his feet — endorsing her station as a disciple and a future rabbi.^{iv}

Not only were women among the disciples following Jesus, learning from him, serving him, and supporting him, but they were also at the cross, at the tomb, and the first to see and speak to the risen Christ. Eyewitnesses to the resurrection — the defining event of the Christian faith — women were the first to proclaim his being raised from the dead (Mark 16:9-11; John 20:18). In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus welcomed women as full participants and enthusiastic proclaimers of the gospel message.

Conclusion

In 1982, the General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church took formal action to “affirm the ministry of women in the life and programs of the Church”^v — an action that was re-emphasized a decade later by the 1992 General Conference.^{vi}

In keeping with historic convictions of the Brethren in Christ Church and our desire to remain faithful to our understanding of Scripture, the BIC U.S. continues to fully recognize and support women in ministry and leadership at all levels of Church life. We believe that the Church truly does constitute God’s new community inaugurated by Christ, where both women and men are gifted and empowered for ministry, so that, together, we may fulfill the calling upon each of our lives:

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 4:10-11, NIV).

ⁱ “What we believe about the Bible: A Brethren in Christ approach to reading and interpreting Scripture,” Brethren in Christ U.S., <https://bicus.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Statement-Scripture.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Kate Wallace Nunneley, “Why I Support Women in Leadership — in 30 Seconds,” The Junia Project, May 24, 2016, <http://juniaproject.com/why-i-support-women-in-church-leadership-30-seconds>. Aside from reformatted biblical references and a slightly modified text, the passage is quoted with permission from leadership at The Junia Project.

ⁱⁱⁱ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 72-73.

^{iv} N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 69-70.

^v Minutes for the General Conference, Brethren in Christ Church (Nappanee, Ind.: Evangel Press, 1982), 85.

^{vi} Minutes for the General Conference, Brethren in Christ Church (Nappanee, Ind.: Evangel Press, 1992), 65.