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John E. Toews

The Search for Understanding in the Church

Dr. Paul Brand, medical missionary to the lepers of India, often told his audiences that a leprosy patient lacks skin sensation and “nobody realizes what it means when you can’t feel pain. You need to surround yourself with new defenses.” In Indian villages the rats soon learned that it was quite safe to take a bite from insensitive hands or feet when a person was asleep, so the missionaries provided the patients with cats. “If a person doesn’t feel his hand or foot when it is injured, we speak of the foot or hand as dead. It’s the pain that makes us realize that the hand or foot belongs to us,” said Brand. “Our survival depends upon pain.” — Ten Figures for God by Dorothy Clarke Wilson

Pain in the church and a search for understanding is the reason for this book. The church is a particular one, the Mennonite Brethren, a member of the larger family of Anabaptist-Mennonite churches. The search and pain

is a universal story. It is the story of people struggling to understand the role and ministry of women in the church, and often of women struggling with the church's resistance to their calling to and giftedness for ministry.

Search

The current Mennonite Brethren search began in 1973. Allen Guenther and Herb Swartz, graduate students in biblical studies in Toronto and faculty members at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg (now Concord College), wrote an article for the Mennonite Brethren Herald, the publication of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren churches. They argued for the equality of women and men as believers. The Holy Spirit gifts all Christians to lead and to teach, they wrote; the restrictive Pauline texts deal with problems of decorum rather than issues of office. They concluded that women should be encouraged to exercise their gifts in the church.

Twice prior to 1973, the Mennonite Brethren Church had spoken to the issue of women in the church. In 1879 women were allowed to attend conference sessions "as the Spirit leads," as long as they did not teach and remained silent during "the brotherly deliberations." Each local church was freed to decide if women could vote in church meetings.

In 1957, following the ordination of at least 85 women for missionary service over a period of six decades (35 of whom were single), the church determined to differentiate "the public gospel preaching ministry" of men and women by commissioning rather than ordaining women. The intent was not to exclude women from ministry but not to "admit sisters to the public gospel

preaching ministry on par with brethren" (General Conference Year Book [GCYB hereafter], 1957, p. 106).

Between 1957 and 1973 a small group of women began to write about their struggle with the church's recent restrictive interpretation. They confessed their pain at the church's refusal to recognize their call to ministry and to affirm their spiritual giftedness. I recall vividly a rather restrictive sermon on 1 Corinthians 14 in a Mennonite Brethren church in early 1973. At least five women spoke with me following the service, several in tears, asking that I speak at the next women's meeting to outline a different understanding of the text. They respected their pastor, but knew in their hearts that there was something wrong with his interpretation of the New Testament. I declined their request because I did not want to become a divisive force in the church.

Six months later I did outline a more affirmative interpretation of the New Testament in a different context halfway across the continent. During the meeting a married woman broke down and cried, almost uncontrollably. After the session she attacked me verbally. She was fearful of the freedom I was offering her in the church. She recoiled in anger despite encouragement from her husband to be more open to the exercise of her gifts in the church. Several years later she found freedom to move into areas of ministry.

The Guenther and Swartz article put the issue on the table for discussion in the church. David Ewert, the leading New Testament teacher in the church, was asked to present a study conference paper to the Canadian Conference in 1974. A modified version of this paper was presented again to a General Conference Study Conference in 1980 (Chapter 2). Ewert affirmed the Guenther and Swartz interpretation. Not only did

he acknowledge the complexity of the issue, but he warned the church that it always tends to read the Bible in the light of its own practices. The church is tempted, he observed, to accuse scholars of unfaithfulness when they question such teaching and practice. Ewert exhorted the church not to “absolutize prohibitions” designed to address local first-century excesses. He urged the church to free women for the exercise of their gifts. The only restriction he placed on the ministry of women was the ordained pastoral ministry.

The 1974 Study Conference paper was followed by a Canadian Conference resolution in 1975. It instructed the church to “rethink its traditional stand with respect to the place of the woman in the church. . . . The biblical texts which put strictures on the place of the woman in the Church we believe must be understood, in part, in the context of local violations of the rules of propriety, and in the light of the status of womanhood in the first-century culture” (CCYB, 1975, p. 9). Churches were exhorted to elect women to church committees and councils, and as delegates to church-wide conferences. At the same time, the churches were urged to recognize a distinction between the function of men and women in the church. Women were not to be ordained for the preaching and pastoral ministry nor elected to boards and offices with “eldership” responsibilities.

The 1980 Study Conference paper also resulted in a resolution, this time to the churches of North America through the 1981 General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. The resolution was presented by the Board of Reference and Counsel (BORAC). It encouraged the churches to discover and utilize the spiritual resources of women for “various ministries in the church and in the world” including “participation in local

church and conference ministries" (GCYB, 1981, p. 47). Such ministry was limited only by the final clause that "the Mennonite Brethren should not ordain women to pastoral leadership." The resolution was meant "to encourage the expanded involvement of women in the work of the church, not to limit their ministry." But the delegates perceived the resolution as restrictive. Therefore, they received it with the understanding that it be edited to read more positively.

BORAC reported to the next General Conference in 1984 that the question of "the ministry of women in our churches" remained an unsettled issue and needed continued study. It recognized that an increasing number of women were graduating with seminary degrees, and encouraged "the churches and our conferences to be open to their services." The board asserted that "more encouragement and more open doors for service should be given to our sisters." It also reported that it intended to expand the 1981 resolution for the next convention.

BORAC presented its more affirmative and expanded resolution to the General Conference in 1987. The resolution read as follows:

We believe that God created both men and women in his image, and therefore both share an equal humanity before God (Gen. 1:27).

We believe that all Christians are joint heirs with Christ, and therefore both women and men experience full salvation in him (Gal. 3:28).

We believe that the Spirit grants gifts to all believers, irrespective of gender, for diverse ministries both in the church and in the world, and therefore both men and women minister God's grace (1 Pet. 4:10).

We believe that God calls all women and men to serve in the church and in the world; we also believe he calls some women, as well as some men, for ministries within the context of the church (Acts 2:17, 18; Eph. 4:1ff.; Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Pet. 4:10).

We believe that since God has gifted and called both men and women, the church should recognize and affirm them in their ministry for the common good of the church (1 Cor. 12:7; Rom. 16:1-16).

We urge that the Mennonite Brethren churches free and affirm women for ministries in the church, at home and abroad, e.g., decision-making (committees and boards), evangelizing (visitation and discipling), teaching (Bible study and preaching), pastoral counseling (shepherding and soul care). We affirm women as associate pastors or "leading elders." (We recognize that the ordination of women in ministry is an issue that is not addressed in this statement. It is not addressed because ordination is an issue in the Mennonite Brethren Church for many men as well as women. Therefore BORAC will address the question of ordination in the future).

We acknowledge that the evangelical church, worldwide, is in transition in its understanding of the scope of ministries of women in the church and world. Many evangelicals believe that neither 1 Cor. 14:34, 35 nor 1 Tim. 2:11-15 "rules out the ordination of women as preachers, teachers or leaders in the church" (*Christianity Today*, October 3, 1986). Other evangelicals believe these texts are more restrictive. Mennonite Brethren people also differ in their interpretation of these texts. We recognize that significant exegetical issues are involved in these alternatives. Therefore BORAC recommends a careful biblical study process by our congregations on the role and ministry of women in the church, and has commissioned the preparation of a book and study guide of all relevant biblical passages.

The resolution was historic. It affirmed the full humanity, salvation, giftedness and calling of women to

ministry. The implications were debated. The points at issue were the reference to preaching, the affirmation of the associate pastoral role, and the positive reference to ordination by Christianity Today. The resolution was approved with the following revision of the last two paragraphs:

We encourage our churches to free and affirm women for ministries in the church, at home and abroad, in decision-making, evangelizing, teaching, counseling, encouragement, music, youth, visitations, etc.

BORAC recommends a careful biblical study process by our congregations on the role and ministry of women in the church, and has commissioned the preparation of a book and study guide of all relevant biblical passages.

This book is the result of the BORAC mandate. It is a function of a search for better understanding of the role and ministry of women in the church.

Between the 1987 Conference resolution and the publication of this book, the Mennonite Brethren Church studied the issue in another study conference held at Normal, Illinois, in 1989. Tim Geddert, a seminary professor, argued that the conference should affirm diversity by freeing individual churches to shape their own exegetical conclusions and practices. Ed Boschman, a pastor, made the case for a return to the pre-1981 stance of no women in public church leadership [see Direction, 18 (1989)].

As illustrated above, the search for understanding is characterized by disagreement. The point of the disagreement is the interpretation of the Bible, specifically the so-called "restrictive" texts. Since 1973 the Bible teachers at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College (Winnipeg) and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical

Seminary (Fresno) have consistently offered affirmative interpretations of the biblical teachings as a whole and of the “restrictive” texts in particular (see Guenther and Swartz in 1973, David Ewert in 1974 and 1980, Howard Loewen in 1977, John E. Toews in 1980 and 1988, George Konrad in 1982). But in many local churches and in conference discussions a significant number of pastors have insisted on traditional interpretations (see the Boschman article as a typical case study). The teachers and pastors in the church disagree. Many lay people are confused; some are getting angry at the divisiveness such disagreement among church leaders sows in the church.

Pain

The church is searching for new and clearer understanding because many women are crying out for healing from the pain of rejection and exclusion from ministry. They are profoundly aware of their spiritual giftedness. They report clear calls to church ministry. They hear a “yes” from God, but a “no” from the church. The contradiction between their experience with God and their experience in the church is intense. More and more women are speaking of their pain and anger. Five stories told in Mennonite Brethren churches illustrate the pain.

A few years ago I visited with a young woman from a prominent Mennonite Brethren family. She graduated *magna cum laude* from one of the most prestigious universities in North America. Her parents and some friends in the church were encouraging her to consider the ministry. When I asked her how she was responding to this encouragement, she told me that it was not an option for her because of the church's stance on women

in ministry. "I can go anywhere I want in the world," she replied, "and I will not wait for the church to catch up on this issue."

Another very intelligent young Mennonite Brethren woman requested an appointment with me. She wanted to talk about the proposition "that she could not be a Christian and a woman." When I asked her to explain, she argued on the basis of 1 Timothy 2 that a woman cannot really be saved. If women are excluded from the ministry, she asserted, because of Eve's participation in the fall, but men are not despite Adam's participation in the fall, what that really means is that men can be fully saved but women cannot. And if she could not be fully saved because she was a woman, then she did not want to be a Christian. "To be a Christian and a woman" is contradictory, she said over and over again. She found nothing I said reassuring.

Another woman was converted at mid-life from paganism. Sometime thereafter she heard "a still small voice" calling her to the ministry. She resisted for several years because she knew the stance of the church. The sense of call persisted and after much struggle she yielded. She experienced a profound peace in her life. She completed seminary and serves in a church. Her church affirms her gifts for ministry, but she continues to struggle. "It is not an easy choice for a woman to make," she said with a great deal of pain, "because it means going against the expectation of women."

A young woman was converted through the ministry of a new, urban Mennonite Brethren church. She grew rapidly in the faith. Her local church began to affirm her gifts and leadership. She felt a call to the ministry. With the support of her church she entered seminary to train for church ministry. She became aware for the first time in seminary that her call to ministry was a problem in

the church. Suddenly she struggled because her call and local church affirmation were out of step with the larger church.

Another young woman grew up in a Mennonite Brethren minister's home. Over time she became very much involved in the church and in her father's ministry. She had no sense from her father or the church that her involvement in ministry was a problem. In fact, she experienced special support and affirmation from the older people in the church. As an adult she sensed a call to full-time church ministry. She entered seminary, and graduated. But now she was a problem. She could not find a place of ministry.

There are women in the church who live with enormous, often unbearable pain because the church says "no" to their gifts and calling from God. Some of these women deal with the pain by leaving the church. Others faithfully serve wherever they can while praying and hoping for a clearer affirmation from the church. Still others are training for the ministry to which they have been called in the hope that the church will soon open its doors to their desire and calling to serve.

These women are our daughters. We have birthed and nurtured them in our families and our churches. They are our daughters whom God has called to prophesy (Acts 2:17). They wonder if we will let them answer the call of God. They cry in our homes and in our churches because they hear more **no's** than **yes's**. They also continue to live in hope that the biblical prophecy, "your daughters will prophesy," will become a reality for them.

But other women also feel pain. Women who have chosen to stay home to raise their families, who have chosen to work in traditional types of ministry such as

local women's missionary groups, Sunday school teaching, relief sewing, and similar activities, often feel slapped in the face by the clamor for women's greater involvement in church ministries. Have their many years of long and submissive service, joyfully given, been worth nothing? They feel fulfilled. They have no desire for anything more. They are using their gifts as they believe God wants them to, but now they feel pushed into second-best status in God's kingdom. They also want an end to their confusion.

Women are not the only ones suffering in the church. When one member suffers, all suffer. I visited with a father recently whose daughter has left the church because of the church's stance on women in ministry. His pain is profound, his confusion without bounds. Why does the church say "no" to his daughter? Why can his daughter not be more patient with the church? Tears rolled down his cheeks as we talked.

Husbands feel hurt by accusations that they aren't allowing their wives to achieve a fulfilled life. They and their wives feel pressured to accept interpretations of Scripture alien to their view of life. They also know pain.

A veteran church leader spoke to me recently about his confusion. There was a time when he was clear on the issue of women in ministry, he reported. But within the last several months he had visited with several women who spoke of their call to ministry. "Their call is as clear as mine," he confided. "How can I say no to their call? I am beginning to change my mind." And then he added, "In ten years we will accept women into the ministry. If it will be okay in ten years, I want to know why it is not all right today?"

During a visit with a pastor friend a few years ago the question of women in ministry came up. He was very troubled by any attempt to read the restrictive texts as first-century and culture specific or to limit the meaning of the texts, e.g., 1 Corinthians 14, to not asking questions, or 1 Timothy 2, to learning properly or to unlearned women. I pulled my Greek New Testament out of my briefcase and translated the texts very literally and carefully, trying to show him an alternative way to understand these texts. Suddenly, in considerable exasperation, he said, "That is not what my Bible says. It says 'women should keep silent' and 'women should not teach or have authority over men.'" Any other reading was due to liberalism and secular feminism, he proclaimed. Even though we had been friends for many years, he expressed real fear, even anger, that I was becoming a theological liberal. Nothing I could say would persuade him that I was still solidly evangelical. Our trust relationship had been fractured. Relationship is strained because we read the same Bible and the same specific texts to say different things.

The pain women experience in the church is increased by the discrepancy between words and actions. Since 1974, conference resolutions have exhorted the churches and conferences to affirm women for church and conference ministries, but women experience more resistance and hostility than affirmation. In 1984, women represented only 8.6% of the membership of General Conference boards, compared to 32.5% in the General Conference of Mennonites and 35.6% in the Mennonite Church. The 1984 resolution specifically encouraged churches to utilize seminary-trained women in ministry. An increasing number of women are graduating from seminaries, but few find openness to ministry in the church.

The Intent of This Book

The intent of this book is to stimulate Bible study and discussion in local churches about the role of women in church ministry. The book was mandated by BORAC to address these issues. BORAC asked John E. Toews, a member of the board, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe to edit a book that would call upon a group of teachers in the church, both men and women, to study the critical biblical texts involved in the discussion of women in church ministry. BORAC reviewed a draft of the book in 1989, and recommended some significant changes. It reviewed the final draft in 1990 and recommended its publication as a study guide in the churches.

The book is primarily a Bible study. Nine of the thirteen chapters study biblical texts.

The focus is Bible study because the issue in the church is defined as one of biblical interpretation. Mennonite Brethren, with other evangelicals, believe the Bible is the sole and ultimate authority for questions of belief and practice. A former consensus about how to interpret the Bible has broken down. Alternative interpretations exist. The struggle in the church is over how to understand the Bible correctly in the midst of changes in society and in the context of diverse interpretations of biblical texts.

The book begins with two general studies. The first is a shortened version of David Ewert's 1980 Study Conference paper. The second study, written by Elmer Martens, makes the case for a permanent "creation order" that frees women for ministry within the context of overall male leadership.

The other eight biblical chapters study the specific texts central to the discussion in the church. Two chap-

ters on Old Testament texts suggest a stronger emphasis on equality than Martens sees. The New Testament studies consistently affirm women for ministry among the people of God. The restrictive texts are reviewed with special care, and fresh interpretations are proposed that will need to be tested in the church. All writers affirm the general direction of Ewert's paper, and cautiously challenge the significance of the creation order in the New Testament.

The clear message of the book is that one can accept the full authority of the Bible and read it carefully and seriously as affirming women for ministry in the church either within the context of overall male leadership or independent of male leadership. That message will provoke more discussion, perhaps even disagreement, in the church. It is presented by the editors and writers with the hope and the prayer that the church's understanding of the Bible will be deepened and enlarged through study and that all the gifts of the Spirit will be freed for ministry in the body of Christ.

Alternative interpretations are identified in the book. The most accessible of these interpretations are listed below.

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