

OVERTURE:

Hawarden CRC overtures Classis Heartland to form a study committee to apply scripture and its principles in practical ways in view of matters related to gender and leadership, particularly in view of 'Justice' and biblical 'Distinctions'. We ask that the committee examine these principles in view of Christ's call that *all persons 'submit'*—male and female (Eph 5:21)—to Him, particularly in the area of ecclesiastical *leadership & authority*.

HISTORY: In the fall 2019, an overture came before the body of Classis Heartland urging that women be delegated without distinction from men to Heartland's classical deliberative body. An unspoken belief of many delegates of our classical meetings is that, 'it's just a matter of time' until, like the rest of culture, churches will delegate women to all leadership responsibilities like men. The belief may come with a corresponding hope for the same, springing as much from pragmatic concern (eg. scarcity of male representatives to fill our local-church Classical delegation) as from biblical and spiritual convictions in Christ.

NEED: Toward clarifying this overture, we identify two 'camps' in view of the ordination and gender conversation. POSITION #1: 'No ordination of women' in any way, in view of Scriptural exhortations (I Tim 2:12, I Cor 14:34, Titus 2:4-5). Delegating ecclesiastical authority to women is a 'slippery slope' both biblically and practically, that will lead to out-right rejection of Scripture and eventually, Christ Himself. POSITION #2: Justice (or equality) demands 'ordination into all church roles' *without distinction*, in view of the fact that both men and women, equally, are called 'Christian', therefore, to the role—without distinction—of His anointed ones—'Prophet, Priest & King' (L.D. 12-Q&A 32).

PROBLEM: We believe that the false dichotomy—two 'sides'—noted above, *prevents Christ-exalting progress* in biblical interpretation and practical application. The fear that accompanies the 'two camps' theological method can be described as a 'winner' and 'loser' perspective. If 'Position #1' wins, then 'Position #2' loses. And, vice versa. Consider, then, a different outcome, and this in view of a unique affection which is manifest in any deliberation where the Living Word washes over that community and its public theology. Call this attitude '*reverent repentance*'. The indication that God approaches His community in Christ through His Word includes a deep sense of humility on the part of individuals on 'each side' of any argument. Humble wisdom realizes that, if there is a fissure or strong disagreement among Biblically-serious sisters and brothers, it is possible that both 'sides' seek Biblical application of very real—though possibly different—primary principles (eg. discussion below—(1) Distinction... (2) Justice). Unfortunately, more times than not, we don't hear the spiritually important biblical argument that the other is making, in view of our own personal agenda (Prov 18:2). Repentance recognizes that where 'each side' has bruised the other, there is room for the gloriously crucified and resurrected Christ to work healing, not just in apology, but in practically rendered theology.

A WAY FORWARD: Some people claim that denominational decisions about gender and authority have sought to keep 'peace' by avoiding affirmative, practical, polity positions. Now first of all, assuming there is some truth to this claim, we can be thankful for a denomination that is concerned about 'unity' in the body and 'pastoral sensitivity.' But secondly, if this

methodology aims at dressing a fatal wound by declaring, 'peace, peace where there is no peace' (Jer 6:14) we can expect festering to continue, eventually proving fatal. 'False peace' leads to important Scriptural texts unofficially declared 'off limits' for public discussion. Essential texts become practically, null and void. Humility in view of Scriptural exegesis is healthy, but as Reformed Christians affirm, Scripture is clear ('perspicuous'—Ps 119:105, 130, Dt 30:11, Eph 3:3-4, II Cor 4:3-4, II Pet 3:15-16). We can prayerfully exegete and apply Scripture in community with a good deal of confidence. So we affirm— (II Tim 3:16-17)

"All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching rebuking and training in righteousness...

In summary, our Council believes it possible, through Scripture, to expect a different outcome in view of the present discussion: not (1) 'win' and 'loss,' nor, (2) textual avoidance. Good listening—The Scriptures and each other—may very well remove the impasse if each 'side' affirms the Biblical concern of the other. Listening. The end of the 'standoff' will come through repentance which recognizes two equally important concerns, as each 'side' humbles themselves before Christ and one another.

THE TWO "SIDES":

Toward illuminating this discussion, we choose names for the two sides alluded to above. We shall call them: A. The 'JUSTICE' Perspective B. The 'DISTINCTIONS' Perspective.¹

A. THE 'JUSTICE' PERSPECTIVE—Depraved humanity has a tendency to promote personal interest, and interest groups, at the expense of the other. This happens in all spheres, in view of all kinds of relationships—political leaders & citizen, police & populace, employers and employees, husbands and wives, parents & children. We can expect the same, unfortunately, in view of gender—male & female—even inside of the church. Consequently, where there is injustice, there must be repentance toward a return to norms that guide such relationships (I Cor 13:14-15, Phil 2:3, I Cor 10:24, James 3:16).

In the "Justice Perspective", key Scriptures emphasize the importance of the 'priesthood of all believers' (I Pet 2:5, Heb 13:15-16, Rom 12:1-2) and the anointing in baptism of all persons (Eph 4:5, I Cor 12:13). So, for instance, Paul says,

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." --Gal 3:18

Or, to explain these scriptures from another angle. Justice tends to *emphasize* scriptures classically exegeted to explain justification (contra: 'sanctification'). According to the argument, because Christ declares all types of persons 'righteous,' it is time to stop making oppressive distinctions in view of race, age, language and gender.

The "Justice Perspective" bristles at the 'slippery slope' argument. The "Justice Perspective" is also hostile to temperance and 'waiting,' in a vein similar to that of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s argument in view of racism—"The time is always right to do the right thing!"²

¹ The 'JUSTICE' Perspective & The 'DISTINCTIONS' Perspective: Recognizing limitations of each title, we encourage a study committee to consider different titles. Yet, at this point we believe that these two titles—'Justice' and 'Distinction'—provide 'handles' toward a possibly Christ-exalting discussion and solution to the present situation.

² Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "The Future of Integration". Oberlin College, October 22, 1964.

B. THE 'DISTINCTIONS' PERSPECTIVE—Emphasizes that the church (ecclesia- 'called out ones') is distinguished from all of humanity. Consequently, a primary call as holy (ie. 'sanctified') people is the call to 'make *distinctions*.'

The gospel for Israel, even before 'The Exodus' from Egypt, is the gospel of 'distinctions.' Creation from 'formless void' (technical phrase: 'tohu wabohu') (Gen 1:2)³ is God providing the foundation of faith through distinction-making—light vs. darkness, up vs. down (sky/sea), habitable land vs. chaos waters. Chaos is defeated resulting in what is 'ordered' and 'distinct.' Note essential verbs of the creation act include—'separate' (Gen 1:4,6,7,) and 'gathered together' (v. 9-10). God's grace began at creation in distinguishing, one substance from another.

The people of God rejoiced in Creation, and His glorious propensity for driving back chaos through distinctions. God's People, to whom 'The Law' had been revealed, would soon leave the chaotic, unordered wilderness. They would worship on '*the* holy mountain' (Zion), in the ordered space of *the* worship center (the temple) in *the* holy city (Jerusalem). God's people not only made distinctions vs. 'Nations of Unbelief' (Canaanites; Hittites, Perizites, Jebusites...), they celebrated their distinctiveness under The LORD (Dt. 33:29, II Sam 7:23, II Kings 8:53). Not having God's Law, unbelief is incapable of discern right from wrong, 'their right hand from their left' (Jonah 4:11). God's people not only make distinctions as part of the gospel imperative. The orthopathy of faith— corresponding to the orthodoxy of faith—cheers the exclusive gift of God's Law and the call for making 'distinctions.'

The Old Testament call to God's people was to be holy (aka. '*distinction makers*') in every area of life. This included, under the Old Covenant, making *distinctions* in view of everything that they saw & ate, or touched—Leviticus: animals & food (11-13), clothing (19:19). While in the coming of Christ, we have the 'fulfillment' of Old Testament shadows, His ministry does not abolish 'The Law' or this essential call to 'Be Holy.' In the words of the Apostle Peter—'be holy, as I the Lord your God am holy.' (Lev 11:44-45, I Pet 1:6)

The call to *distinctions*, finds its source in the Triune majesty in heaven. The members of the Trinity, model what should be reflected in leadership patterns on earth, whether related to politics, employment, family roles or gender. The Triune majesty are all co-eternal and co-equal, yet they submit *in a particular way* to one another. The Father sends out the Son and The Spirit; Christ, while submitting to the will of His Father (Jn 6:38, 14:31, 15:10), sends out The Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26, 16:7, 20:22); The Holy Spirit is sent from Father & Son. For, as our own Creeds make clear—

"The Holy Spirit...proceeds from the Father and the Son, while with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified!" (Nicean Creed)

This Trinitarian phenomenon proclaims a mysterious fact which finds real-time correspondence in the creation order, as followed by God's holy people growing in sanctification.

³ A culture—even Israel's—was threatened by a return to disordered chaos—"tohu wabohu"—when she failed to obey God's covenant Word, and celebrate the nation's distinctiveness. See Jeremiah 4:22-23.

OBJECTIONS TO STUDY

Consider then, two objections to a study committee seeking to move forward in the present task at hand. The objection comes from both ‘sides’—

“DISTINCTIONS” Perspective—*Women don’t need communal, ecclesiastical recognition to do their work. Christian women have worked in churches for centuries without delegated authority. Women who ‘want’ authority in view of ‘the old nature’ are not the kind of woman that one would want as leaders.*

But, most arguments made in view of ‘the female’ could be made for ‘male.’ All men should lead without a desire for recognition, so then, it’s not needed. Men who ‘want’ authority, are not the type that the church probably wants. Yet, it has been normal in church practice to select persons outstanding in faith and practice. There is, also, some evidence for women, recognized in view of faith and practice as early church leaders.

“JUSTICE” Perspective—*We don’t need any distinctions, male and female, in view of church leadership. We are all one in Christ, and all should be treated without distinction.*

But, the same Paul who declares, ‘no Jew or Greek, slave or free,’ (Gal 3:28-29) declares the essential nature of such distinctions in other places in his writings (Eph 5:22-6:9: Wives & Husbands, Children & Parents, Employees and Employers). The application of these distinctions, as each ‘submits’ to God, declares a ‘New Humanity.’ If we use Paul’s writings as normative in one place, we should use His other writings as normative.

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES OF SUCH A STUDY:

1. Particular Authority: Women might be delegated authority in local congregations and the classis, under biblical & Christ-ordained authority for their leadership. Such women could be recognized who, as men, are outstanding Christians in faith and practice, through the grace of Christ. They could be recognized, even by the laying on of hands. Perhaps they could lead women’s ministries toward applying and living out God’s word, in view of the fact that women are an equal, though unique part, of the Image of God in humanity.

2. Particular Terminology: In view of distinctions for such female roles, a whole new set of words could be utilized to glorify God in our Classis as we seek to make as Christ-exalting distinctions: a) if males are ‘ordained,’ perhaps women could be shown a sign of authority using a different term (eg. ‘christening’, ‘blessing’) b) if males are elders & deacons, perhaps women could be called by particular names of authority: (1) local church (eg. deaconess) (2) classical level (eg. shepherd).

3. Particular Polity Structure: There could be a series of gatherings for women designated with authority, both in the local church and as representatives to a classical gathering. These women servants could deliberate and make decisions and recommendations. Reformed principles for ‘decency and good order,’ could be met through reports given to the deliberative bodies under whose authority, these female delegates serve (eg. local church Councils, Classis).

4. Better Equipping: Women would be better equipped for growing and serving in their local church, and through Classical efforts. This would include better care mechanism for

women, by women, who have been victims of systematic sin or violence. Such female servants would be very helpful in addressing concerns and implementing efforts related to women and children (eg. Safe Church leadership--Coordinator Mrs. Tara De Boer).

5. Learning from Others: A study committee would give Classis Heartland the opportunity to learn from the wisdom and practice of other Reformed brothers and sisters, including globally. Locally, our churches promote the use of women's gifts, though unofficially recognized (eg. not ordained) ways, that are still very real (eg. authority, budgets for work, reports to Council). Beyond our small, local traditions, other Reformed Christians are doing careful and effective work in promoting both 'distinction' and 'justice.' Consider for instance, the role in the Korean Presbyterian tradition of the 'Kwanzanim'.

OUTCOMES OF NOT RESPONDING TO THE PRESENT SITUATION:

God does not change. But as culture develops in complexity, we sometimes need to read the Scriptures more carefully. We would do well to develop a practical theology that responds to the present situation in which we find ourselves. It seems to us that if we do not think, deliberate and respond more carefully, we will face negative results—

1. Scripture Silenced: Preventing Christ's Holy Spirit, through His Word from being unleashed in all areas of our lives. Avoiding 'difficult' themes and scriptures in public theology may, even if unwittingly, silencing Scripture which is the Holy Spirit's tool.

2. Women's Gifts Underutilized: We don't need to write more 20-page studies that merely re-emphasize that women should not be ordained. Yes, distinctions. But yes, justice.

3. The False Dichotomy: The wait for another 'winner' and 'loser' vote at a classis in the near future, rather than a serious effort to engage in the challenges. It may be an overstatement of the case, but the victory from each side: a) 'the Canaanites' who make no distinctions b) 'the chauvinists' who say no, not just to promoting the gifts of women, but even to washing the dishes in the kitchen at Classis meetings.

4. Unevaluated Cultural Attack: 'The World,' or might we say 'Modern Canaanite Culture' is not equipped to make creation-affirming distinctions that are necessary for responding to the proper shape of creation: political leaders & citizen, police & populace, employers and employees, husbands and wives, parents & children—male and female. Our children need to be equipped to affirm creation, even as the church faces stronger and greater headwinds from 'the spirit of our age,' including the promotion of gender-neutral campaigns and 7th commandment-breaking in all variety of ways—(LGBTQ).

5. Male Dominance: "Conservative" Christianity can be a safe harbor for a harsh, non-Biblical masculinity that masquerades as something good, and normal.

6. Ungodly Feminism: "Progressive" Christianity can sometimes fail to check 'feminism,' the aggressive and secular kind of 'femininity' that urges males to abrogate their unique biblical responsibility in church leadership. This, men will ultimately do—although disobediently—toward creation's peril.

7. Fruitless Theology: Airplanes fly at 36,000 feet above the ground. There is an advantage to seeing the broad view of the landscape. But life happens on the ground. We honor the Synod's 'pastoral intent' in examining biblical mandates from 36,000 feet. But efforts to 'keep unity' by not zooming in any closer may have set an undesirable precedent by steering away from practical, affirmative action. Perhaps, Synod's 'two equally acceptable views' can be more helpfully explained as two essential gospel truths, both of which need to be applied practically in local church polity, toward unity.

We pray for deliberation marked by '*reverent repentance*' recognizing the concern for the brokenness of creation expressed by each view (ie. Justice, Distinctions). May Scripture unleash the Spirit's fire in all areas. May humility defeat triumphalism. As Christ is exalted, we can expect a whole new chapter of fruit.

Under the LORD's leadership, we follow The Son through the Spirit. In view of the opening words of this document—that *males and females* are called to submit...*to Christ*—we close with this sure promise for the obedient:

"For my yoke is easy and my burden, light..." Matthew 11:30

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