

## **Request to the Fellowship Council Regarding the Accommodation and Encouragement of Women into Ministry**

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To: Tom Avey, Fellowship Coordinator

From: Robert MacMillan

Dated: September 11, 2009

As is evident everywhere you look, we have a great many effective and talented women serving in our *Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches*. Sadly, it is also evident that our churches, by and large, have no policies, written or otherwise, that express the biblical warrant by which women would be prepared for the effective ministries they perform nor the means by which that would be accomplished. Present practices by the churches show a great inconsistency.

### *Some truths we should affirm:*

#### We believe the following:

- That God calls both men and women to be a part of the Great Commissions (Acts 2:18).
- That Titus 2:3-5 clearly calls the older women to teach the younger.
- That women have long had an effective public ministry in the Brethren movement until the end of World War II, at which time churches implemented unspoken restrictions.
- That the women who are doing that teaching must be firmly grounded in God's Word and capable of discerning (rightly dividing the word of truth).

- That the husband and wife relationship, as a picture of Christ and His Bride, be protected throughout the Church.<sup>1</sup>
- That only men can be elders of the local church.

Our ecclesiastical history confirms the following:

- We affirm the marital hierarchy while releasing women to vocational ministry.
- Women should have full access to theological training and have the option of vocational ministry.
- The church is not an authority-giving institution; it can only recognize and authenticate the authority God has already bestowed.
- Our practices must be consistent with what we say we believe.

*The requests made:*

- Since there is no generally understood policy concerning the acceptance of women in ministry, particularly professional ministry, please express in a formal and well-published manner to our member churches the support of women in ministry by our Fellowship Council.
- Since women in vocational ministry are financially disadvantaged without the ability to receive parsonage allowance, please consider a category of licensure that provides women the opportunity to receive the tax benefits of a housing allowance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As a convenience of definitions, “Church” refers to the universal Church and “church” refers to the local body of believers.

<sup>2</sup> Women could be licensed to ministry and men ordained to eldership. This allows for the legal and formal category for women and it more-biblically states the nature of ordination. AGBM would have to adapt to this need. It would technically change nothing for them, the only change would be the terminology. Other organizations would need to clarify their categories regarding make up of boards of directors, etc. The terms, laity and pastoral, would no longer work.

- Since this process will not happen on its own and the accommodation of women into ministry is going to be a big issue in the Church in the West in the next few years, please provide a means of having a Fellowship-wide discussion with the allowance of white papers, etc., through a dedicated web site and focus groups at our various national conferences.<sup>3</sup>
- Since confusion and carnality are an ever-present threat, you might set up the debate in the following manner:

## **A suggested approach**

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### 1. Establish a national network for the debate.

One thing we have now we did not have during the “Two-year Study on Ordinances” is a fast, efficient, all-inclusive communication network that can be centrally managed. The best time to establish this study is soon after a Fellowship Council meeting.

#### A. Establish a secure web page.

- Secure page for all elders of Grace Brethren Churches. (Elders of churches must be free to ask questions in a confidential environment.)
- Site available to all members of Grace Brethren Churches. (All peer-reviewed documents would be posted.)

#### B. Appoint an oversight committee to keep us all on track.

- Monitor the civil tone of the debate.
- Review all documents submitted for quality of scholarship.
- Establish focus groups for regional discussions.

#### C. Set up principles of communication & publication.

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<sup>3</sup> Because of the opportunity for Satan to have a disruptive involvement, ground rules for dispassionate conversation must be agreed to prior to the beginning of any debate.

- We need a repository for any and all papers written to address any given point in the discussion.
  - Rules of engagement must be written to guide our debate.
- a. Don't get personal.  
No *ad hominem* attacks.
  - b. Speak to the issue, not to the potential “slippery slope.”  
We cannot back away from this biblical issue simply because of potential fears for the future.
  - c. Determine not to allow this discussion to be a “them or us” argument.  
Our desire should be to determine biblical truth, not to win “our day in court.”
  - d. Realize that, at the end of the study, all the churches are free to determine their own principles of inclusion of women in ministry.  
At the end of this study, the national organizations and cooperating agencies will have the most difficult time due to their need to accommodate the various churches which may now have differing determinations regarding women in ministry than before.
  - e. Discourage “reply-to-all” emails or any emails, or any other such sidebars, that would establish a back door to the debate. (Encourage the restriction to working through the oversight committee and the web site.)
  - f. The Fellowship Council must, at the end of this study, present an appropriate biblical direction for our Fellowship at-large.
2. By three months of first announcement: Commitment of churches.  
The boards of elders of member churches must be willing to commit to this year-long study.
  3. Definitions of terms.  
Most of the problems, particularly those brought up by egalitarians, are the result of careless usage of terms. “Minister,” “pastor,” “elder,” “servant,” co-worker,” and so forth are often carelessly blended together and cause sloppy and inaccurate applications of passages. As a result, terms should be clearly defined, biblically, prior to attempting resolution of policy issues.
  4. Assessment of present practices and values.
    - This would be an assessment within each local church and within each national organization: “How do we handle women in ministry in this church?” “How do we authorize women in ministry?” “What procedures and opportunities for education and discipleship are available to women at this church?”
    - Have the policies regarding women been expressed formally and promulgated to the congregation at large?
  5. At the end of one year: Produce final documents that would express the following:

- The approach that would be taken by the Fellowship at large. (This would be a compromise for the sake of inclusiveness.)
- The clarification of gifts (spiritual gifts), ministries (gifts to the Church: Ephesians 4:11, 12), and offices (elders and deacons) for the sake of discussion within the Fellowship.
- The means by which women in professional ministry would be able to benefit from the housing allowance.
- A suggested procedure of discipleship of women in theology and Bible within the local church. (Women do not have [or should not have] intimate access to the pastor of a church for discipleship as is available to men; they must, however, have the equivalent.)
- An affirmation of the great value women have and have always had in the ministries of the Church.

In summation, the Fellowship Council must give us guidance in this review of biblical truth and church polity. The solution of our uncertain trumpet sound must ultimately come from the elders of our local churches, not from the members of the Fellowship Council but we need the encouragement of the Fellowship Council to proceed.

As a representative of a member church of our *Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches*, I am asking that this issue be placed on the agenda for the next meeting of the Fellowship Council.