

**AMERICAN BAPTIST POLICY STATEMENT
ON
WOMEN AND MEN AS PARTNERS IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY**

INTRODUCTION

"Partners," as the term is used in this statement, means more than aides or helpers who give assistance from the sidelines. The emphasis is communion, a unity of purpose that links hands and hearts as full members of the team. It stresses full participation, sharing in both the risks and the benefits of the enterprise: "giving and receiving" (Philippians 4:15). It portrays an enduring alliance as long-term colleagues rather than a casual short walk together. Each partner has a voice and a valued judgment in the conduct of the enterprise, with full powers and discretion in leadership decisions. The legal requirements and constraints of a business partnership are not included here; therefore the notions often attached to "silent partner" and "limited partner" are not appropriate here. Covenant rather than contract is the relation that is envisioned.

Partnership involves collaboration and mutual support. It encourages doing what one does best and supporting one another in such endeavors. It recognizes, uses, and celebrates the gifts that each has been given for serving the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7). Its objective is building up the church in love (Ephesians 4:16), and its ultimate goal is the glory and praise of God (Ephesians 3:21).

For the purposes of this statement "church" is intended to designate the organized body of Christians in any particular place; and "Church" refers to the universal church. In the Affirmations, "church" is intended to designate any and all of the American Baptist churches.

"Society" in this statement refers to all people, collectively, regarded as constituting a single community of related, interdependent individuals. With an awareness that those who occupy the earth constitute one world, this policy statement addresses specifically the "society" of the USA in distinction from the other nations. "Society" refers to the full range of human relations--such as employment, education, leisure, politics, and social engagements. It includes the common affairs of everyday life at home and away from home.

BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL BASE

The Bible's message is addressed primarily to the religious community--to Israel in the Old Testament and to the new Israel in the New Testament. The whole society is not often addressed directly. The message of Scripture is intended especially for the Church.

This policy statement seeks to look to the total witness of the Bible as a sound theological base.*

The Basis in Genesis

The foundation for the partnership of women and men in God's creation appears in the opening chapter of Genesis. Two perspectives are fundamental:

1. Human beings are created in God's own image ("Let us make humankind in our own image, according to our likeness...So God created humankind in his

image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them,"* Genesis 1:26-27 NRSV.) Creation in God's image includes identity as male or female. Sexuality is recognized. Neither male headship nor female submission is suggested.

2. Both the man and the woman are charged with responsibility for all of God's creation (Genesis 1:26, 28 TEV). Together, without distinction, the first couple was assigned responsibility to manage the earth as partners in stewardship.

When the creation story is told again in Genesis 2, the equal partnership of man and woman appears again. God provides the lonely man with a companion who is both intimately identified with him ("bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," Genesis 2:23) and his helping partner in serving God (2:18).

Both partners were involved in disobeying God (Genesis 3:6-7). Their relation as equal partners was scarred by sin. The image of God was distorted. Partners who were intended to be stewards of creation became competitors struggling with each other for supremacy. Genesis 3:16 interprets the subjugation of woman to man as a punishment connected with sin. God's design seemed lost forever. With the passage of centuries women were pressed increasingly to submissive service to men, restricted in their activities to home and family, and regarded as inferior to men in almost every part of life.

The Basis in Jesus' Ministry

Then Jesus came. In his actions and teachings Jesus treated people fairly as persons of worth--regardless of society's judgment. In affirming the value of women as persons, to be included along with men within God's love and service, Jesus acted counter to the society of his day.

Jesus rejected the male-dominated divorce practice of his time (Matt. 19:3-9NRSV). He recalled the equal partnership as God's intention for marriage. He rejected the prevalent idea that women were responsible for all sexual sin. He reached out to women who were rejected: the woman with the issue of blood, who could not be received in the congregation because she was "unclean" (Mark 5:25-34); the woman who anointed his feet (Luke 7:36-50); prostitutes (Matthew 21:31); and adulteresses (John 4:7-42 and 8:1-11). Though rejected by society and the religious community these women brought many to believe in Jesus.

Jesus taught women, although teachers in Jesus' day were not to do so (Luke 10:38-42; John 4:4-42). Jesus included women in his group of disciples (Luke 8:1-3), empowering them as partners and learners. These same women stayed with Jesus at the crucifixion and burial (Luke 23:49, 55-56). They told of the risen Lord on resurrection morning (Luke 24:1-10). All four Gospels record that it was the women disciples who first declared the news of his resurrection.

Jesus' own inclusion of women in his ministry was a strong witness to the early church of the partnership of women and men.

The Basis in the Book of Acts

The Book of Acts shows clearly that women were part of the first church in Jerusalem. Luke takes care to record that "the women" (meaning those disciples who followed Jesus) and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were among the 120 disciples in prayer in Jerusalem awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). Peter interpreted the mighty events of the Day of Pentecost as

the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel: ". . . I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, . . ." (Acts 2:17 NRSV). Women have had a foundational role in the Church's ministry from the beginning.

As the Church grew and spread, women were included--the widows in Joppa (Acts 9:36-43), Timothy's mother in Lystra, (II Timothy 1:5; Acts 16:1), the women in Philippi (Philippians 4:2-3), the prominent women who joined the church in Thessalonica (Acts 17:4), the prominent women in Berea (Acts 17:12) who believed, Damaris in Athens, Priscilla in Corinth, the wives in Tyre, and the evangelist Philip's four daughters in Caesarea (Acts 21:9). Women helped to establish the church in Philippi (Acts 16:11-15;40) and Priscilla with Aquila taught Apollos (Acts 18:2, 18, 24-26) who became a noted teacher in the church.

The Basis in Paul

Paul began his letter to the Philippians with thanksgiving for ". . . your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:5 NIV). Both men and women were Paul's partners in ministry. In his letters he mentions nine women by name: Mary Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Romans 16:6, 12); Priscilla (Romans 16:3-4); Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3); Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2); and Junia (Romans 16:7). All of these joined Paul in the gospel ministry.

At several points in his letters Paul addresses the issue of partnership of men and women in mission. To the Galatians he wrote (3:28 NRSV), "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." His point is not to erase God's created differences between male and female, but to stress that gender does not determine whether a person made in God's image can take part in the life and ministry of the church. In this definitive theological statement, Paul makes no distinctions in roles or functions between men and women in ministry.

Two texts in Paul's letters are often used to argue against preaching, teaching, and leadership ministries for women. The first is 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, which many scholars interpret as a prohibition against disruptive behavior in worship. Disruptive questioning by wives, especially in public, was regarded as indiscreet and a breach of etiquette. Paul's counsel was "If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their husbands at home" (1 Corinthians 14:35 TEV). Paul's concern is about appropriateness, order, and edification. He expects everyone to participate in the worship (1 Corinthians 14:26).

The second text in Paul's writings often used to oppose women in ministry is 1 Timothy 2:11-12. Many scholars believe that when these two verses are examined in the entire paragraph, their prohibition of women teaching and exercising authority in the Church emerges not as an absolute injunction but as a localized, limited instruction to restrict abusive activity. It does not restrict teaching and exercising of authority by women in the Church.

Two broad and basic principles of biblical interpretation are essential--balance and consistency. Balance seeks the total witness of the Bible to inform theological thought. Consistency asks for an approach to all biblical texts in the same way so as to offset blind spots and biases. It is imperative that the full evidence of Scripture and an understanding of balance and consistency in interpretation be applied to our understanding of the partnership of women and men in the ministry of the Church.

Men and women are called to be partners in Christian life and ministry. This

is the biblical message as given in the creation story, in Jesus' life and ministry, in the early church, and in Paul's preaching and teaching. In neither Old Testament nor New Testament times did society practice such partnership between men and women. The Church today struggles to understand partnership and its meaning for Christian men and women. In our brokenness we do not always fulfill God's intent. Yet the Bible is clear on God's design:

to create one unbroken human family, all members of which share equal privilege and equal responsibility as partners in ministry to the world.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Human beings--male and female--are created in God's image. Both are given responsibility as stewards of the world. Tragically this partnering has been marred by the fall. Exploitation, manipulation, and oppression appear in human society more often than partnership. Women and men are continually used as objects instead of being regarded as responsible beings made in God's image and therefore worthy of respect. Such behavior and oppression damage both the oppressed and the oppressor.

Recognition of the problems of exploitation, manipulation, and oppression has raised new concerns regarding the partnership of women and men. At times the oppressed respond with frustration, anger, and a desire for change. At other times oppressors respond with fear and a rejection of change. Ideally, society is enriched when men and women harmoniously work in partnership that honors one another.

Many women feel trapped by injustices in society, church, and home. These injustices may be caused by custom and habit or come about as a result of fear and discrimination. Not all women feel such oppression. Some women have become so accustomed to their status that they do not recognize discrimination, especially in the more subtle forms in which it is practiced. Some through good fortune, special skill, or personal drive have found or developed areas of service worthy of their talents in society, church, and home. Some women receive sufficient recognition from their male and female peers to prevent the feelings of oppression. Although these women may be used as examples to prove there is no discrimination, they are rather exceptions that may be used to defuse the complaints of others. Some women are well-adjusted, self-confident, and happy with their lives. There are also women who accept their role and have little sense of injustice even in oppressive circumstances. The fact that injustices are not felt, however, does not negate their existence. Some women exploit the discrimination to their own advantage.

Examples of gender discrimination are found in employment, public leadership, the home, social interaction, and the church's ministry. In each situation the oppression is the opposite of Christ like love, the genuine caring concern for others that seeks their full liberty as the people of God, and their full growth to maturity as measured by the stature of Jesus Christ.

When challenged to recognize the basic injustices of discrimination, some men and women respond that the Bible supports male superiority. Some men become fearful of their loss of power and authority. Some men fear being replaced by more competent women. Others are reluctant to surrender the enjoyment of a superior social rank or work position. Some men fear the power of female attraction in a setting of equality.

Some women deal with discrimination by fear and anger and bitterly attack those who discriminate. Other women become like the oppressor and take on an authoritarian role. Some react with depression and give up on meeting injustices directly or use manipulation or other indirect means to alter a

situation. When challenged by discrimination, however, many concerned women and men work as partners to point out areas of injustice and oppression in order to bring about change.

Gender discrimination in society, especially the work place, is being dealt with to some degree through legal channels. Legislation and court actions are frequently initiated by Christians who have a conscience about gender prejudice. The Church of Jesus Christ must also be concerned about the partnership of men and women in the home and church. Often the church has not challenged both women and men to work equally for the nurture of the family. While the church has challenged people to consider professional church work, it has not provided opportunities to both women and men to use their talents and abilities to the maximum within the church.

Partnership, as best evidenced today, calls both women and men to work in leadership roles and share in a broad spectrum of positions in church, home and society. It calls for men and women to cultivate and use the unique gifts God has given each of them. Genuine partnership calls for women and men to work for opportunities for each person regardless of gender.

AFFIRMATIONS

1. We affirm that the Gospel of Jesus Christ liberates all persons, female and male, to serve in any ministry to which they have been called by God and for which they have God-given talents. This means that women, as well as men, should have access to and serve at all levels of church and society--local, regional, national, and international--in the roles of policy makers and implementers.
2. We affirm that for the church to be whole and effective in its witness, it must have both women and men of all races as full partners in all parts of its ministry. This means that the church must address those policy issues in its own life that limit full participation in ministry, even as it appeals to society to change its attitudes and actions relating to women and men.
3. We affirm that the practice of partnership between women and men can be most effectively taught in the home with the church's active help. This means that the father and the mother should model mutual love and respect for the gifts and qualities that each brings to their marriage and the home they have established. This means that the churches can help single parents teach mutual respect and love to their children. It also means that parents should teach their sons and daughters to love and respect all persons, seeking to free them from stifling male and female stereotypes and encouraging them to develop skills and talents according to their individual gifts.
4. We affirm that both men and women in church and society should share concern for strong family units and consistent child care. This means that both men and women should cooperate in building a stable home environment for child rearing, with both parents assuming major responsibilities in home duties, including the care and discipline of children. This means that both homemaking and careers outside the home should be supported as worthy callings and occupations.
5. We affirm that children are not to be neglected in order that parents may develop their careers and interests. This means that parents must give appropriate support to their children as the family moves through the successive stages from the birth of children to their leaving home as adults. It also means that both the mother and the father should be able to develop their careers and interests across the years with shifts in the requirements of time, energy, and attention to the family. It further means that when parents work outside the home, quality child-care facilities and programs in

the community should be important to both men and women.

6. We affirm that the churches, as well as secular organizations, should offer employment opportunities for all women and men with equal compensation, recognition, and appreciation. This means that women employed by the church should be given equal pay and status with men who do comparable work. It also means that the church should take special care to open all doors of opportunity for women in all of its professional ministries.

7. We affirm that men and women who now hold key leadership places in church and society have a special responsibility to act so that more women may be moved into many of these positions. This means that men and women should willingly use appointive powers and make fiscal and educational decisions that open the way for talented women to be prepared for major roles as leaders in church and society. It also means that able women should prepare themselves for key leadership roles in response to God's call.

8. We affirm that Christian men and women have a special calling to be advocates and models for children and youth, by identifying early those who have leadership promise and giving them consistent personal support and encouragement to prepare for positions of leadership in church and society. This means that both women and men share responsibility for recruitment of future leaders.

9. We affirm that the church needs to use language that is congruent with the partnership of women and men. This means that appropriate words referring to both women and men should be sought and used in the church's worship, literature, and official statements.

*An article by Dr. David Scholer, dean and professor of New Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, is followed extensively in the Biblical-Theological Base section of this statement. A Biblical Basis for "Equal Partnership of Women and Men in the Ministry of the Church," in Christian Action, Spring 1984, published by National Ministries, American Baptist Churches, USA, pages 1-6.

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