

WELS
Southeastern Wisconsin District

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Brothers,

The introduction to our Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles (contained in the "Doctrinal Statements of the WELS" (1997)) recaps the development of that document regarding man and woman roles from 1978 and afterwards. It mentions three studies in which we concluded that "Scripture teaches that already at creation God established differences in male and female roles for this life on earth and that these differences in roles are still applicable today." It also mentions that concerns were raised in the 1980's as to whether such an "order of creation" was taught in Scripture.

The "order of creation" refers to God's design for the world he created, such as how the planets function and how animals, birds, and fish relate to humankind, as well how God intends men and women to relate to one another. It is a broad concept based upon the scriptural teaching of a Creator who called into being all that is and makes things work together in a blessed and orderly way. In other words, it does not refer only to the chronological order of the creation of man and woman. The concern about this term in connection with man and woman roles, together with questions about whether the role relationship of man and woman applies to church, home, and also society, resulted in another decade of study. This study culminated in the document mentioned above, which was adopted at the 1993 synod convention as a "correct exposition of scriptural doctrine." Other materials and documents to help us study this doctrine and apply man and woman roles in a Christ-centered, evangelical way have continued to be produced since that time. The most recent example of that is the "Heirs Together" Bible study, which is now in its fourth edition and is available through NPH.

You may be aware that two of our WELS members, Paul Kelm and Bruce Becker, have written a series of drafts over the past few years about the man / woman role relationship which raise similar questions and concerns from those past years, which our previous studies of God's Word addressed. In their writings they have stated that they believe our doctrinal statements in the Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles go beyond Scripture in saying that the head / helper principle is a universal principle established by God at the time of creation. They believe that the principle is limited to the family, and then is applied by St. Paul to the church, but that God did not intend it to apply in any way to society. As a result, they believe it is not appropriate to speak of an "order of creation" in regard to the roles of men and women. They also believe that our doctrinal statement expresses an improper or inadequate understanding of what constitutes the exercise of authority, and that leads to questions about how to apply the man / woman doctrine to issues in the church, such as voting. They asked our church body to restudy our stated doctrine on the man / woman relationship.

Since late 2016 we as a praesidium have sought to work through these questions with Paul and Bruce through a series of meetings and a study of the pertinent Scripture passages, which have involved our praesidium, representatives of all the disciplines of our Seminary faculty, and a smaller Seminary faculty committee, as well as Paul and Bruce. Periodic reports were also given to the Conference of Presidents. In early 2018 all those involved in the discussions agreed with regret that we had come to a doctrinal impasse regarding the principle itself. These meetings were very brotherly and respectful, but Paul, Bruce, the praesidium, and the Seminary professors all concluded that we are not walking together in the same doctrine. As a result, our praesidium is stating, with the concurrence and support of the Conference of Presidents, that we do not believe that the papers written by Paul and Bruce are scripturally correct, and therefore they are not to be used among us as the basis for our teaching or practice.

We do agree that every generation needs to wrestle with scriptural truth to make it their own. We agree, as well, with the concern that we need to make sure that our doctrinal statement on man and woman clearly states what Scripture says (and no more), and that our statement needs to be written in a way which avoids misunderstandings or caricatures of its intended meaning. For example, we believe it would be wise to emphasize the interdependence of men and women to avoid the mistaken conclusion that our only concern is the distinctiveness of men and women, as if there were no other roles and principles which also apply in the world. We want to find more ways to make use of the gifts of both men and women in keeping with Scripture. That is why we also agree that ongoing discussions regarding specific applications of an agreed-upon principle are necessary.

It is for that reason that the Conference of Presidents has formed a committee to study our current doctrinal statement and to suggest ways in which we might more clearly express our conviction on the truth of Scripture. The goal of this committee is to engage as much of our synod as possible in a careful restudying of the key biblical passages so that we can express ourselves clearly on the biblical principle and make wise applications for how we live out our interdependent partnership as men and women.

With this restudy of our doctrinal statement just starting, we asked Paul and Bruce if they would be willing to continue refraining from advocating for their convictions until that restudy had been completed. The goal of this request was to make sure that we truly have come to an impasse on the principle rather than simply wrestling with questions of application. Paul and Bruce stated they could not agree to that, since the basis for this study would be the universal principle of the man / woman relationship, with which they do not agree.

We respect Paul and Bruce's honesty in speaking straightforwardly about this. This did confirm, however, that we have indeed reached an impasse in regard to the biblical principle. Therefore, we have informed Paul that he will no longer have the privilege afforded our retired pastors of being eligible to preach and teach in the congregations of our synodical fellowship. This removes him from our list of retired pastors. Since Paul and Bruce are not active pastors in our ministerium, their home congregations are responsible for carrying out discipline in connection with church membership. In this regard, Paul had asked that we make a public statement like this regarding his ministry status, which we are doing in this letter.

This has been difficult for all of us. We love and respect Paul and Bruce, as we believe they do us. They have been a blessing to our church body. That is one reason why we, together with the Seminary faculty, have sought to have straightforward discussions with them. If we ourselves believed their position was correct, we would ask for a restudy and, if necessary, change our stated position from Scripture. However, that is not the case. If we are to walk together as brothers, we cannot have two

different doctrines being promoted at the same time. We are sad that it has reached this point, but that is why we are compelled to take this action.

Since Paul and Bruce's paper has been publicly disseminated to some degree, and since it has not been publicly responded to in an official way, our praesidium's intent is to have a response to it prepared in the near future. The lead author of that response and his committee have agreed to finalize their work by the end of summer. Hopefully individual pastors, circuits and/or conferences will be able to use this response for further Bible study and discussion. The upcoming rearticulation of our doctrinal statement will also provide an opportunity for more thorough study, together with our other materials, such as the "Heirs Together" Bible study.

Again, we recognize the importance of every generation restudying for itself all the doctrines of God's Word, so that we may regard them as blessings from God to help us serve him with joy. As we study this teaching, our prayer is that all of us will see and appreciate the beautiful design God has in mind for men and women as we work together in an interdependent way for the benefit of his people out of love for our Savior. We know very well that this can be a difficult and confusing issue for a variety of reasons. Where we have failed to treat men or women appropriately, or where we have failed to make use of both men's and women's gifts in the work of the church, or where we have made applications indifferently or legalistically, we ask for God's forgiveness. Confident in that forgiveness, we go forward with joy as his people. May God bless us with his grace and peace as we humbly do so.

On behalf of the Southeastern Wisconsin District Praesidium

In Christ Our Lord,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David P. Kolander". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Pastor David P Kolander
President, Southeastern Wisconsin District (WELS)