



## Leader's Preparation Guide for "Seeking Understanding: Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice"

Thank you for facilitating a conversation around the topic of scriptural interpretation and women and justice. Over the centuries the Bible has been, as Luther put it, the manger showing forth God's goodness and pointing us to Christ. Over the centuries the Bible also has too often been used as an instrument to limit the role of women in the church and to suppress their full participation in the world. This study will engage participants in a conversation about how the Bible can be faithfully utilized in a discussion of the views on the position of women in the church and the world.



"Seeking Understanding: Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice" is a study resource provided by the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ. It is one tool among several the task force has approved for discussing questions around women and justice in church and society. (For more information, visit [www.elca.org/womenandjustice](http://www.elca.org/womenandjustice).) Each section of this leader's preparation guide provides background and helpful guidance for leading this study.

### An overview

"Seeking Understanding: Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice" includes the following PDFs for download. Most of these materials are designed for those who lead the study; the handouts are for participants:

- "Leader's Preparation Guide and Overview"
- "Guide for Session One: Lutherans and Scripture"
- Handout for session one
- "Guide for Session Two: Historical Issues of Problematic Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women"
- Handout for session two
- "Guide for Session Three: The Book of Faith, Women and Justice"
- Handout for session three
- Useful tools
  - "Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice"
  - "Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible"

## Useful tools

There are two primary tools to equip you as you facilitate this discussion in your context, whether within a congregational setting or elsewhere. The first is a document produced by Dr. Erik Heen, John H. P. Reumann Chair of Biblical Studies at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Heen, a member of the task force, has produced a background paper titled, "Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice." A version of this paper was presented to the ELCA Women and Justice Task Force and they found it useful in their discussions. The task force hopes that this study resource based on that paper will engage conversation about both the appropriate and inappropriate ways the Bible has been used in discussions about women in church and society.

The second document is by Dr. Diane Jacobson, Professor Emerita of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., and initial director of the ELCA Book of Faith Initiative. "Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible" introduces those unfamiliar with the Book of Faith Initiative and its four-fold method of studying Scripture.

Heen utilizes the Book of Faith methods in his presentation. Familiarize yourself with both of these documents because they are helpful resources.

If the study group is not acquainted with the Book of Faith Initiative's four ways to approach the Bible, one option is to devote an initial session to a favorite Bible passage and approach that text

## About the social statement process within the ELCA

The ELCA takes seriously its faithful witness and participation in society. Social statements are teaching and policy documents that guide the engagement and advocacy work of the ELCA within society. The development of a social statement on women and justice in church and society was authorized by the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in response to memorials from four synods and the recommendation of the ELCA Church Council. The work toward the creation of a task force began in 2010 but was then delayed until 2012.

The development of any social statement is based on an extensive process of study, prayer and discernment. Since 2012, the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ has engaged in a great deal of each of these, as well as a great deal of listening. The task force has authorized the preparation of various study materials and hosted more than 70 listening events in many synods and at various churchwide gatherings. (The next major step will be an in-depth study with an expected release date of June 2016.) For more about the work of the task force, visit [www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice](http://www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice).

Groups throughout the ELCA are encouraged to use the various study materials for conversation and their own discernment. They are also urged to share the central points of their conversation with the task force. Responses to this study resource may be shared with the task force via email: [womenandjustice@elca.org](mailto:womenandjustice@elca.org).

In fall of 2017, the task force expects to release a draft social statement to be discussed and shared widely throughout the ELCA, once again encouraging that comments and reflections be sent to the task force. It is anticipated that a social statement on women and justice will be brought to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly for adoption.

For additional information on how social statements come into being visit: [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Policies\\_and\\_Procedures.pdf](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Policies_and_Procedures.pdf).

Encourage your group to identify and share their input into this process as they participate in this study. Again, comments and responses should be shared with the task force via email: [womenandjustice@elca.org](mailto:womenandjustice@elca.org).

in the four-fold way suggested by Jacobson (i.e., through devotional, historical, literary and Lutheran theological readings). There are many more downloadable resources available at the ELCA Book of Faith webpage ([www.bookoffaith.org/](http://www.bookoffaith.org/)) that could be explored by individuals or the group. For additional tools that may be purchased, explore the resources under the “Foundational Resources” tab on the Book of Faith webpage on the Augsburg Fortress website.

### **Important reminders**

It is important to have an understanding of your congregational and community context and its history of the discussion of the role of women in church and society. Be aware that sexism and patriarchy (social organization in which males dominate) are still a reality in today's society. Be attuned to conversation that may, in fact, seek to suppress the full value and role of women in church and society or that may undermine women in anyway.

Also be aware that some texts in the Bible are, in fact, simply damaging to women. Author Phyllis Trible refers to these as “texts of terror” in her book “Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984). Two such examples are Abraham’s use of his wife, Sarah, for his own protection (Genesis 12:10-20) and Shechem’s rape of Dinah (Genesis 34:1-19). Neither of these texts is the best to use when focusing on issues of women and justice because of the unjust way women are treated in them.

One also needs to acknowledge that male God language is dominant in the Scriptures, so it is easy to forget the passages that do refer to God as female. It would be worth your time to do an Internet search on “female images of God in the Bible” to learn about these images. Both of these topics may be raised in a much broader study as the social statement process continues, but it is good to make note of them here.

Seek to be as inclusive as possible in recruiting the participants in your study. Diversity of ages, sexual orientation, ethnicity, economic status and gender will introduce new insights into the conversation.

Room set-up will affect the types of conversations that occur. Sit in a circle or around a large table. Consider using the suggested set-up option(s) in each session, especially if the conversation happens in the context of a retreat or day-long event.

*Keep in mind that you are facilitating a conversation and don't need to have all the answers to questions that may arise.* The list of useful resources and references below contains a number of leads that participants can turn to should the conversation pique their interest. Thanks to the widespread use of the Internet, they can also do a search on topics during and after the class.

**Session overviews:**

**Session one** gives background information and practice in utilizing the Book of Faith Initiative approaches to Scripture. It will also offer the opportunity to discuss Lutheran theological understanding of Scripture as described in Heen's "Women and Justice: Issues in Biblical Interpretation." Although you have options, you are encouraged to begin with this first session in your conversation as it is foundational for those that follow.

**Session two** acknowledges that there have been issues with problematic Biblical interpretations regarding women and their place in society. This session will look at some of these head-on to see where they originated and how they continue today. It will also look at which approaches to Scripture may not be helpful and why.

**Session three** is a review of some of the helpful approaches to Scripture that can inform the study related to women and justice. For example, how did Jesus invert the social structure of his day? What might this mean for us today?

**Communications guidelines**

Open each session by reading or reminding the group of the following communications guidelines. In the first session ask the participants if there are any other guidelines they would like to include. Print this and post the guidelines in your room so they are easily accessible to all.

1. We will acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit and be attentive to what is being stirred up in our midst.
2. We agree to listen to each other respectfully without making assumptions or judgments.
3. We recognize that each person has different experiences and different styles of communicating.
4. We will each own our own thoughts and feelings and speak in "I" statements rather than "you" statements that define others.
5. We will approach our conversation from a stance of being curious and ask questions of each other to draw out the intended meaning of the speaker.
6. We will keep confidentiality, which means not sharing the stories of others outside of the group unless specifically told otherwise.

(This is loosely based on 12 guidelines for more effective communications found in "Our Community: Dealing with Conflict in Our Congregation" by Susan M. Lang.)

## Time options

This study could be used in a variety of ways:

1. The study is written to be three distinct sessions and can be used that way during a Sunday school hour or weekly Bible study time.
2. If you want to go into a more in-depth conversation, you can break each session into two units.

Session one could be divided: a) Background on social statements, Book of Faith initiative background and ELCA understanding of God's Word; b) Practice with the Book of Faith approaches.

Session two could be divided: a) Discussion of the four-fold approaches to Scripture with Erik Heen additions; b) Using the approaches and considering specific texts and our context.

Session three could be divided: a) Review and use of the literary approach; b) How Jesus redefines power and discussion of Galatians 3:27-28.

3. This study could also be used as a one-day retreat. The above breakdowns could be an outline for the day.

Many congregations now hold conversations about the Bible and contemporary topics in restaurants and pubs. Consider having a conversation on the topic of the use of the Bible regarding women and church and society beyond the confines of the church building. Be creative and be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in your midst!

## Supplies needed:

- Bibles (Have at least one study Bible on hand for reference during the conversation.) Recommended: The Lutheran Study Bible (New Revised Standard Version). Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009. It is also good to have a variety of translations on hand to see how different translations give a variety of perspectives on the text.
- The Book of Faith bookmark may be downloaded or ordered in quantities of 20 by calling the ELCA at 800-638-3522 and requesting the Book of Faith Bookmark or code PRJ013271-0309. It may also be downloaded at: [http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof\\_new/logos/SABFBookmarkFNL.pdf](http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof_new/logos/SABFBookmarkFNL.pdf)
- Reading Scripture with Five Lutheran Lenses downloadable bookmark: [http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof\\_new/logos/Five\\_Lutheran\\_Lenses.pdf?v=1](http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof_new/logos/Five_Lutheran_Lenses.pdf?v=1)

- Copies of “Issues in Biblical Interpretation” by Dr. Erik Heen, for those who may want to dig deeper into the topic of biblical interpretation and women:  
([www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice](http://www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice))
- Copies of “Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible” by Dr. Diane Jacobson located at:  
<http://www.bookoffaith.org/pdf/Some%20Helpful%20Ways%20to%20Read%20the%20Bible-3.pdf>
- Pens and paper
- Chart paper and markers to collect group reflections

### Useful resources and references:

- Women and Justice Task Force website: [www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice](http://www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice).
- ELCA Book of Faith Initiative website: [www.bookoffaith.org](http://www.bookoffaith.org).
- The Book of Faith Facebook page, where a number of helpful files have been uploaded to aid in introducing the four ways to approach the Bible:  
[www.facebook.com/groups/227520933975328/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/227520933975328/). Here you can also engage in conversation with leaders and congregational members who have been involved with the initiative. It's social media, so feel free to ask questions and make comments.
- Freeman, Lindsay Hardin. *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter*. Cincinnati: Forward Movement (in partnership with the Episcopal Church Women), 2014.
- Jacobson, Diane, Mark Allan Powell, and Stanley N. Olson, et al. *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- Powell, Mark Allan. *How Lutherans Interpret the Bible*. (DVD) Inver Grove Heights, Minn.: Select Learning, 2006. [www.selectlearning.org/store/all/how-lutherans-interpret-bible](http://www.selectlearning.org/store/all/how-lutherans-interpret-bible).
- A literary guide to the Bible such as: Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III, editors, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.
- Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.
- Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.
- Malina, Bruce J. and John J. Pilch. *Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.
- Malina, Bruce J. and John J. Pilch. *Social Science Commentary on the Deutero-Pauline Letters*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.
- Stendahl, Krister. *The Bible and the Role of Women* (Facet Books Biblical Series). Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966. Reprinted 1986. (Note: This publication is out of print but can be accessed and ordered through online booksellers.)
- Trigilio Jr., John and Kenneth Brighenti. *Women in the Bible for Dummies*. Indianapolis: John Wiley and Sons, 2005.

(Once you select the Bible passages you will discuss in each session, check with church staff to see if there are Bible commentaries available that might be helpful to have on hand for the class.)

## A Guide to Session One: Lutherans and Scripture



**Set-up:** Arrange the seating either around a large table or in a circle so all participants can see each other. Consider setting up a small altar in a central location in the room. Simply drape a cloth on a table. Display an open Bible and a candle. Light the candle when you begin your conversation as a reminder that Christ is the Word Incarnate and that the Holy Spirit is in your midst as you converse. Consider adding a clear bowl filled with water as a reminder of our unity in baptism.

### Session objectives:

- To review the Book of Faith four-fold engagement of Scripture using “Some Ways to Read the Bible” by Diane Jacobson
- To review some aspects of the Lutheran theological tradition
- To review the ELCA understanding of the meaning of God's Word

### Opening

**Scripture reading:** Mark 7:24-29 (NRSV)

<sup>24</sup>From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, <sup>25</sup>but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup>Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup>He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." <sup>28</sup>But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." <sup>29</sup>Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

**Prayer:** O God, who throughout time has guided and nurtured your children through your Word. We thank you for the gift of your Holy Scriptures which are the story of your never-failing love for us. Open our ears to hear your Word anew as we embark on this study together. Amen.



Welcome participants to this study and briefly explain how it will invite participants into a conversation about how the Bible can be faithfully used in thinking today about issues of justice for women in the church and the world. In this sense, the study is both a Bible study and a chance to give careful attention to *how* passages have been or could be used or interpreted.

Spend a few moments explaining how this study is part of the larger social statement process on women and justice. (See "Leader's Preparation Guide" for more, the section on "About the social statement process within the ELCA." The text there could be printed out as a handout.) Indicate that your group could, though is not required to, summarize their reflections and share them with the ELCA Women and Justice Task Force via email: [womenandjustice@elca.org](mailto:womenandjustice@elca.org). The decision to do this can be made, or changed, at any point along the way.

### **Communication guidelines**

It is important to take a bit of time to discuss with the group the framework for participation in this study, which includes reading the communications guidelines presented in the "Leader's Preparation Guide." These guidelines should be easily accessible to all. Ask the participants if there are any other guidelines they would like to include. Explain that you will review them at the start of each session.

### **Four ways to read the Bible**

Introduce and share the Book of Faith's "Four Ways to Approach the Bible" bookmark as a summary of the types of questions addressed by each approach to reading the Bible. The bookmark will serve as a reminder as you work through the three study sessions. Pass out copies of "Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible" by Dr. Diane Jacobson for those who are interested in digging deeper into the Book of Faith approaches to reading the Bible.

If participants are not familiar with the Book of Faith Initiative, you should explain the following background:

The initiative originated as a memorial from the North Carolina Synod to the 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly to begin a movement to increase biblical engagement and fluency in the ELCA. The Assembly passed the memorial. The five-year initiative ran from 2008-2012 and produced an abundance of Bible studies and other resources based on four ways to study the Bible. The Book of Faith Initiative lives on, and its advancement currently resides with the ELCA program director for faith practices and missional leadership. On a handout you might provide the Web address.

Tell the group they will have the opportunity to practice these methods in this session.

Ask which members of your study group already have experience in utilizing these four ways to approach the Bible. They can be a resource to you and others who may not have the same experience.



## Devotional reading

A devotional reading of the Bible asks each of us: What does the Word stir up in you?

Review “Some examples of helpful devotional questions” in the Jacobson document.

Ask participants what thoughts or questions come to mind as they hear about a devotional reading of the Bible. What is new to them? What is familiar?

## Historical reading

A historical reading of the Bible asks each of us: What is the ancient historical context and how does it relate to us today?

Review “Some examples of helpful historical questions” in the Jacobson document.

Ask participants what thoughts or questions come to mind as they hear about a historical reading of the Bible.

## Literary reading

A literary reading focuses on the story itself and all aspects of it.

Review “Some examples of helpful literary questions” in the Jacobson document.

Ask the participants what thoughts or questions come to mind as they hear about a literary reading of the Bible.

## Lutheran theological reading

Share Mark Allen Powell’s “Reading Scripture with Five Lutheran Lenses” downloadable bookmark which is a summary of how Lutherans engage Scripture. (See: URL in the “Supplies needed” section) Additional background and insights are available in “Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for the Bible,” pp. 20-45, and in the article “Lutheran Insights that Open the Bible” in the Lutheran Study Bible, pp. 1538-1543.

Review the bookmark with participants.

Use this background if you have time:

### How the ELCA views God’s Word:

The ELCA Constitution gives a tri-fold meaning of the Word of God.

1. Jesus Christ is first and foremost the eternal Word Incarnate – the Word made flesh who dwelt among us (John 1:1-5).
2. Preaching is God’s Word spoken among us as law and gospel. The law reveals our sin and need for God’s love. The gospel reveals God’s mercy and love for us beginning with creation and continuing throughout history.
3. The Bible is the written Word inspired by God’s Spirit working through the authors of the various books of the Bible.

Ask the participants what thoughts or questions come to mind as they hear about these five lenses typically and traditionally used by Lutherans as they read the Bible.

### **Practice using the four-fold approaches to Scripture**

Break your group into smaller groups of three or four to practice using the approaches. You can use the opening Bible verse for this session or another where women are central characters such as Mark 5:24-35 (the bleeding woman).

Assign a different Book of Faith approach to each group. Give them 10-15 minutes to use their assigned approach to discuss the text.

When you call them back into the larger group ask:

1. What was that like utilizing the approach you used?
2. What insights into the text did you gain?
3. How did your particular approach give you new insights about the perspective on and the role of women in the Bible?
4. How might your insights affect how we think about what it means to be a human being, that is, a person with gender?

### **Wrapping up: Next week**

Conclude by indicating how the session next week will use this four-fold approach to explore some of the historical issues of problematic biblical interpretation regarding women. The third week will look at areas in which Scripture can inform the study of women and justice. (It could be helpful to provide a list of several passages used in session two so that participants can read them in advance.) Thank the group for their participation and commitment to looking at Scripture together around these issues.

**Closing prayer:** O God, help us to see your Word as a living word, which can touch our hearts and minds in a variety of ways. Open us to discern your presence among us through your Word so that we might live and be more fully in you. Amen.

## Session One: Lutherans and Scripture



### **Mark 7:24-29 (NRSV)**

<sup>24</sup>From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, <sup>25</sup>but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. <sup>26</sup>Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. <sup>27</sup>He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." <sup>28</sup>But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." <sup>29</sup>Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

### **Four ways to read the Bible:**

**Devotional reading:** What does the Word stir up in you?

**Historical reading:** What is the ancient historical context and how does it relate to us today?

**Literary reading:** Read with special attention to the story itself and all aspects of it.

**Lutheran theological reading:** How can these Lutheran insights illuminate the text?

- Law and gospel
- What shows forth Christ
- Scripture interprets Scripture
- The plain meaning of the text
- Public interpretation

### **Useful resource links**

- Women and Justice Task Force website: [www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice](http://www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice)
- ELCA Book of Faith Initiative website: [www.bookoffaith.org](http://www.bookoffaith.org)

**Communication guidelines:**

1. We will acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit and be attentive to what is being stirred up in our midst.
2. We agree to listen to each other respectfully without making assumptions or judgments.
3. We recognize that each person has different experiences and has different styles of communicating.
4. We will each own our own thoughts and feelings and speak in “I” statements rather than “you” statements that define others.
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Additional information on how social statements come will be found at:

[http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Policies\\_and\\_Procedures.pdf](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Policies_and_Procedures.pdf).

## A Guide to Session Two: Historical Issues of Problematic Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women

**Set-up:** Arrange the seating either around a large table or in a circle so all participants can see each other. Consider setting up a small altar in a central location in the room. Simply drape a cloth on a table. Display an open Bible and a candle. Light the candle when you begin your conversation as a reminder that Christ is the Word Incarnate and that the Holy Spirit is in your midst as you converse. Consider adding a clear bowl filled with water as a reminder of our unity in baptism.

It would be helpful to have copies of the Book of Faith bookmark and the Reading Scripture with Five Lutheran Lenses bookmark on hand for newcomers or those who may have forgotten theirs from the last session. Check the resource section of the “Leader’s Preparation Guide” for links to download the bookmarks.

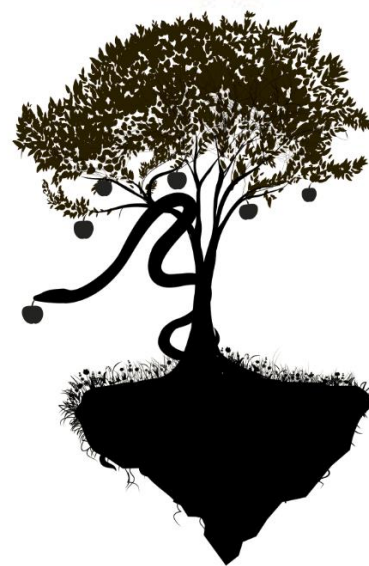
Additional copies of “Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible” by Diane Jacobson and “Women and Justice: Issues in Biblical Interpretation” by Erik Heen may also be helpful should newcomers want copies for deeper study and reflection.

Check the resource section in the “Leader’s Preparation Guide” for additional books that might be helpful as you delve deeper into the use of Scripture in the discussion of women and justice.

### Session objectives:

- To review both the four Book of Faith methods of the engagement of Scripture regarding women and men and two others that Erik Heen points out in his background paper. Which methods are problematic? Which are most helpful?
- To review some of the common texts used to place women in client (subservient) status in society.
- To determine what are some unhelpful approaches to Scripture regarding issues of women and justice.

This session will further review the methods of engaging Scripture that were introduced in the first session. In his background paper, Erik Heen identifies two additional approaches to the Bible that are not helpful in looking at issues of women and justice: a) thematic reading and b) proof-texting. These will be discussed in this study in the devotional reading section. After discussing all the approaches, break the group into smaller groups and assign them the texts and questions listed under the method. Give the groups about 10-15 minutes to discuss their texts and questions. Come back together in the larger group and share experiences. Several texts are given



under each method. Depending on the time frame you are working with, you can pick just one or allow the groups to select their own text from the options given.

It would be helpful to either write these texts and questions on chart paper or make copies of them to distribute to the groups. Participants may also want to take these texts home for further reflection. Include a reminder on the sheet that the ELCA's Women and Justice Task Force is interested in hearing from conversation participants. Comments may be emailed to the task force at [womenandjustice@elca.org](mailto:womenandjustice@elca.org).

## Opening

**Scripture reading:** Colossians 3:18-25 (NRSV)

<sup>18</sup>Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. <sup>19</sup>Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. <sup>20</sup>Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. <sup>22</sup>Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. <sup>23</sup>Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, <sup>24</sup>since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. <sup>25</sup>For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.

**Prayer:** O God, open our hearts and minds as we look at the helpful and unhelpful approaches to Scripture as they relate to the position of women in church and society. Bless us with discernment in our discussions so we might understand your intent for your creation. Amen.

Remind or read to the group the communications guidelines presented in the "Leader's Preparation Guide." Ask the participants if there are any other guidelines they would like to include.

If you have new participants give a brief summary of the social statement process in the ELCA found in both the "Leader's Preparation Guide" and session one. Remind the group that the Women and Justice Task Force welcomes comments at [womenandjustice@elca.org](mailto:womenandjustice@elca.org).

## Her story

Read this story to the group as a way to get them into the topic of how the Bible has been used to limit the role of women in the church. It is a true and recent story:

A young female pastor steps into an elevator as she prepares to visit a member of her congregation. A male medical professional is already on the elevator. As the door closes, he turns to her and points at her collar.

“You shouldn’t be wearing that,” he says angrily. “Only men are permitted to speak in church. It says so in the Bible.”

She is both stunned and relieved that he gets off at the next floor. Sadly, this was the first, but would not be the last, time she was told by someone that she should not be preaching or teaching in the church because she is a woman.

Provide a brief amount of time for comments if that seems needed.

Observe for the group that over the years the Bible too often has been used by some people to subjugate women and their role in church and society. Indicate that this session will look at some of the problematic biblical interpretations regarding women. It will put into use the four ways of reading Scripture from last week. It will also offer an opportunity for your group to discuss the differences between the social context of antiquity and our context today.

### **Discussion: The four approaches and women**

#### **Devotional approach**

Under the devotional use of Scripture, Erik Heen goes beyond the Book of Faith Initiative approach and adds thematic study (looking for biblical passages to seek information on specific topics such as divorce, homosexuality or the subjugation of women) and proof-texting (using specific Bible passages to prove a doctrinal point).

A thematic reading of the Bible might look like someone using a concordance to search for all the mentions of the word “wife” in the Bible and then noting how a husband is told to treat his wife. It means using the Bible like a research tool.

We run into trouble when we use the Bible as a research tool, much like an encyclopedia, in which you can look something up to get a definitive answer about a specific question. Heen notes how for centuries the Bible was used exactly in this way to support slavery and male dominance in society. In fact, in a thematic reading the opening reading for this session could be interpreted to support both slavery and male dominance. Rather than a reference tool, though, the Bible is a book of faith revealing God’s Word and presence to us.

Another unhelpful way of using the Bible is for someone to use a specific text to prove a doctrinal point of view that he or she holds. This is commonly referred to as proof-texting. Heen points out in some cases, such as in the doctrine of justification, the Bible can be used effectively to support doctrinal positions. However, when it comes to the position of women in church and society, the use of the proof-text method has been harmful as described in the brief opening story.



Ask the group:

1. How have they experienced people using a thematic reading of the Bible on the topic of women in church or society. What were their thoughts and feelings about their experience?
2. How have they experienced people using proof-texting on the topic of women in church or society? What were their thoughts and feelings about their experience?

### **Literary approach**

This approach looks at the Bible as a collection of stories and examines the story elements, such as setting, plot and characterization. In all cases the purpose of looking at these elements is to learn more about Jesus' ministry and message.

Using this approach to examine the role of women in the stories about Jesus yields a different result than using either a thematic or proof-text model. In fact, it becomes apparent that women play an important role in Jesus' ministry and in spreading the gospel. Consider the fact that the first witnesses to the resurrection in all four Gospels are women.

Luke 8:1-3 also lists women who accompany Jesus and the disciples as he ministers; some are even listed as patrons who offer their resources to him.

Read Luke 8:1-3 for the group.

Ask the group:

1. What might this passage indicate about Jesus' ministry?

### **Historical approach**

It is helpful to have a one-volume biblical commentary and at least one annotated NRSV Bible on hand for this discussion of texts that have traditionally been used to limit the role of women in society and the church. An annotated Bible will give you historical perspective in your discussion of the role of women in antiquity. Ancient society was guided by household codes that indicated how each person should relate to another. The opening reading is an example of this.

Heen also talks about the patron/client relationship in antiquity. He describes patronage as "a system of reciprocal relationships of (supposed) mutual benefit among people of unequal power." (There is additional information on the patronage system in the reading scenarios sections of the social science commentaries listed in the resource section of this study.) Think of the patronage system as a hierarchical structure in which one person (patron) has more honor and power than the other (client). For example, in antiquity a husband was the patron and the wife was the client.

Share with the group the modern day analogy of the Mafia, which Heen discusses in his background paper.

Ask the group:

1. What are their reflections on this analogy? What does it stir up for them?

### **Lutheran theological approach**

As Lutherans we have certain views and insights about how Scripture can and should be engaged. Review these using the “Reading Scripture with Five Lutheran Lenses” bookmark. “Scripture interprets Scripture” points out that we avoid using proof-texts, and some Scripture is more important than other Scripture.

Ask the group:

1. What do these lenses say to us about how Lutherans traditionally interpret Scripture – especially some of those that seek to place women in a “client” status?

### **Small group discussion**

Break the group into four smaller groups and assign each a Book of Faith approach to use to consider the texts listed. Depending on time limitations, groups might pick one of the two texts to discuss. Give 10-15 minutes. Come back together as a larger group to discuss their discoveries.

It would be helpful to have all the texts under each approach listed on a handout sheet should participants want to do some further reflection at home.

### **Devotional approach**

Texts to consider:

1. Colossians 3:18-25 (opening Scripture); alternatively use Titus 2:1-14

Use the Book of Faith bookmark and the questions below to open it up as a devotional reading; spend some time thinking about how these have or might be used in a thematic study or a proof-text.

Questions:

1. What is God up to in this text?
2. What is the predominant message in this text?
3. What gets stirred up in me when reading this text?
4. How is asking these kinds of questions different from either a thematic or proof-text method?

### **Literary approach**

Texts to consider:

1. Luke 1:26-38 (The angel appears to Mary to announce Jesus’ birth)
2. Luke 10:38-42 (Jesus visits Martha and Mary)
3. John 8:1-11 (Jesus and the adulteress)

Use the Book of Faith bookmark as a starting point for questions, but also ask:

1. How do the women in these stories contribute to the narrative of Jesus' ministry?
2. What does Jesus say about these women in Luke 10 and John 8?

### **Historical approach**

Texts to consider:

1. 1 Timothy 2:8-15
2. 1 Corinthians 14:33-34
3. 1 Peter 3:1-4

Use the Book of Faith bookmark as a starting point for questions, but also ask:

1. What do these passages say about women in antiquity?
2. How do you understand the text in light of our conversation about the different context of antiquity?

### **Lutheran theological approach**

Texts to consider:

1. Colossians 3:18-25 (opening Scripture)
2. Titus 2:1-14

Use the Book of Faith bookmark as a starting point, but also ask:

1. How might our sinfulness block God's intent for us as we read Scripture?
2. How is God's grace expressed in these texts?
3. How does one best approach the classic proof-texts that relegate women to "client" status?

### **Wrapping up: Our context**

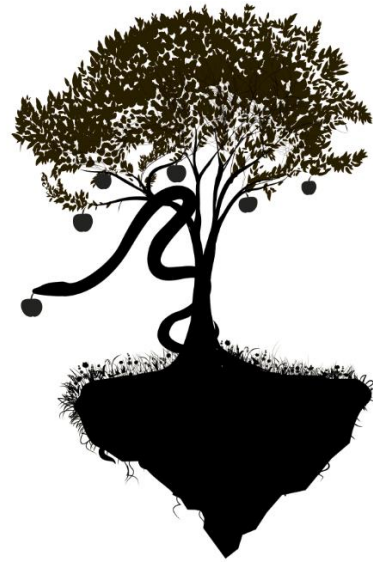
Observe that we do not live in the same historical context in which the books of the Bible were written. The moral codes of that time existed to maintain orderly living in a patron/client organized society in which women were subservient. In the United States, significant strides toward equality have been made: women have had the right to vote since 1920, and women hold jobs and public positions unimaginable 100 years ago. The predecessor bodies of the ELCA have ordained women since the 1970s, and in 2013 we saw the election of the first woman as presiding bishop. Still, significant barriers to equality exist as evident in economic statistics, media portrayals, acceptance of women's leadership in the church and many other ways. Although our context is different, the Bible speaks to us today as it has throughout the ages. It speaks to issues related to women and justice.

**Closing prayer:** O God, we acknowledge that in our sinfulness we often turn what you intend for our good – sometimes even our use of Scripture – into something that may harm and separate. Empower us to recognize your love for all your creation and to live accordingly. Amen.

## Session Two: Historical Issues of Problematic Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women

### Colossians 3:18-25 (NRSV)

<sup>18</sup>Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.  
<sup>19</sup>Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. <sup>20</sup>Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.  
<sup>22</sup>Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. <sup>23</sup>Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, <sup>24</sup>since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. <sup>25</sup>For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.



### Devotional approach: Colossians 3:18-25 or Titus 2:1-14

1. What is God is up to in this text?
2. What is the predominant message in this text?
3. What gets stirred up in me when reading this text?
4. How is asking these kinds of questions different from either a thematic or proof-text method?

### Literary approach: Luke 1:26-38, Luke 10:38-42, John 8:1-11

1. How do the women in these stories contribute to the narrative of Jesus' ministry?
2. What does Jesus say about these women in Luke 10 and John 8?

### Historical approach: 1 Timothy 2:8-15, 1 Corinthians 14:33-34, 1 Peter 3:1-4

1. What do these passages say about women in antiquity?
2. How do you understand the text in light of our conversation about the different context of antiquity?

**Lutheran theological approach:** Colossians 3:18-25, Titus 2:1-14

1. How might our sinfulness block God's intent for us as we read Scripture?
2. How is God's grace expressed in these texts?
3. How does one best approach the classic proof-texts that relegate women to "client" status?

**To read for next week:**

- John 4 (The Samaritan woman)
- Mark 16:1-15 (The resurrection)

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**Communication guidelines**

1. We agree to listen to each other respectfully without making assumptions or judgments.
2. We recognize that each person has different experiences and has different styles of communicating.
3. We will each own our own thoughts and feelings and speak in "I" statements rather than "you" statements that define others.
4. We will approach our conversation from a stance of being curious and ask questions of each other to draw out the intended meaning of the speaker.
5. We will acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit and be attentive to what is being stirred up in our midst.
6. We will keep confidentiality, which means not sharing the stories of others outside of the group unless specifically told otherwise.

**Useful resource links**

- Women and Justice Task Force website: [www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice](http://www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice)
- ELCA Book of Faith Initiative website: [www.bookoffaith.org](http://www.bookoffaith.org)

## A Guide to Session Three: The Book of Faith, Women and Justice

**Set-up:** Arrange the seating either around a large table or in a circle so all participants can see each other. Consider setting up a small altar in a central location in the room. Simply drape a cloth on a table. Display an open Bible and a candle. Light the candle when you begin your conversation as a reminder that Christ is the Word Incarnate and that the Holy Spirit is in your midst as you converse. Consider adding a clear bowl filled with water as a reminder of our unity in baptism.



It would be helpful to have copies of the Book of Faith bookmark and the Reading Scripture with Five Lutheran Lenses bookmark on hand for newcomers or those who may have forgotten theirs from the last session. Check the resource section of the “Leader’s Preparation Guide” for links to download the bookmarks.

Additional copies of “Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible” by Diane Jacobson and “Women and Justice: Issues in Biblical Interpretation” by Erik Heen may also be helpful should newcomers want copies for deeper study and reflection.

Check the resources and references section in the “Leader’s Preparation Guide” for additional books that might be helpful as you delve deeper into the use of Scripture in the discussion of women and justice.

### Session objectives:

- To look at areas in which engaging Scripture can inform the study of women and justice
- To review stories and texts used to support women and justice

### A summary of past sessions

If the study has been done as two or more separate sessions, give the group a summary of the material you’ve covered thus far. This will be a reminder for those who have previously attended and a quick catch-up for those who have not.

Session one gave an introduction to the Book of Faith Initiative approaches to studying Scripture: devotional, historical, literary and Lutheran theological reading. The bookmarks that were shared give a summary of the methods. The group also had an opportunity to engage in and compare the methods in the study of Mark 5:24-35 (the bleeding woman).

Session two looked more in-depth at the Book of Faith approaches and which were most helpful in studying issues related to women and justice. Material from Erik Heen's document, "Women and Justice: Issues in Biblical Interpretation," was also added to the conversation. Under his discussion of the devotional approach, Heen added two ways in which the Bible has historically been used to place women in a "client" status: thematic study (looking for biblical passages to seek information on a specific topic such as divorce, homosexuality, or women and justice) and proof-texting (using specific Bible passages to prove a doctrinal point).

In this last session the importance of the literary approach in the interpretation of Scripture regarding women and justice issues was introduced and participants had an initial opportunity to explore it. This session will give the group a deeper dive into the literary approach to see how women are portrayed in the ministry of Jesus. It will also look at how Jesus redefines power in Matthew 22:35-40, and look at Galatians 3:27-28, which is identified as a key text related to women and justice.

## Opening

**Scripture reading:** Luke 1:46-55 (NRSV)

<sup>46</sup>And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

<sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

<sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

<sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

<sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

**Prayer:** O God, the Bible is the greatest story of your love for us, a love that is embodied by your Son, Jesus Christ, whom you sent to live and minister among us. The power of this love is ultimately demonstrated by Jesus' death and resurrection. As we study this greatest story, open our hearts and minds to see the way your Spirit empowers *all* of your people to participate in the story, both past and present. Amen.

Point out or read to the group the communications guidelines presented in the "Leader's Preparation Guide." Ask the participants if there are any other guidelines they would like to include. Here is the place to provide a bridge into this week's session by sharing a review of what the previous two sessions have covered. (See above.)



**God's story**

Return to Mary's song in the opening devotion, but this time from the perspective of a literary approach to Scripture in which God is the primary actor. As the central actor, God has a way of turning things upside down. In her song, Mary recognizes that she is but a lowly servant, yet God has seen fit to glorify her by setting her apart to carry God's Son, a savior. She is both surprised and honored that God has placed her in this position.

When you look at the entirety of the narrative about Jesus, just when it appears that his opponents have won by crucifying him, the story takes an unexpected turn. Jesus conquers death and appears to his disciples. God doesn't follow the typical expectations or rules of society or its leaders.

Since you have been discussing the topic of how women are treated in the Bible, it is worth pointing out that Mary's song contains 11 pronouns referring to God as male. While the majority of references in the Bible refer to God as male, it is worth doing an internet search on "female images of God in the Bible" to locate passages where God is portrayed as a woman, e.g. Isaiah 66:13 where God is described as a comforting mother. While this is a much more in-depth conversation it is worth mentioning here.

It is also worth noting that Genesis 1:27 says God created both male and female in his image. What might this mean for conversations surrounding the image of God?

Use the Book of Faith bookmark questions to look at Luke 1:46-55 together or break into smaller groups. What does the group notice using the literary approach?

**Bible study in small groups**

Break the group into smaller groups to have them look at some additional texts that mention women. Use the literary approach. The following are two suggested texts, but at the end of the lesson there are also additional texts listed for further study and contemplation. Give each group 10-15 minutes to discuss their text. Then come back for a large-group conversation.

1. John 4 (The Samaritan woman)
2. Mark 16:1-15 (The resurrection)

Use the Book of Faith book mark as a starting point.

1. Be attentive to what aspects of the story seem predictable. What aspects of the story seem unpredictable?
2. How does this story contribute to the overall narrative of Jesus?
3. What does a literary interpretation reveal about the role of women in Jesus' ministry?  
(See the following additional Gospel texts mentioning women if the group or particular

individuals want to delve more deeply into other passages where women are central characters.)

Some additional Gospel texts mentioning women:

- Matthew 15:21-28 (Canaanite woman)
- Mark 5:24-34 (Bleeding woman)
- Mark 12:41-44 (Widow's offering)
- Luke 1:39-45 (Mary visits Elizabeth)
- Luke 7:36-50 (Woman bathes Jesus' feet)
- Luke 8:1-3 (Women accompany Jesus)
- Luke 13: 10-17 (Jesus heals the crippled woman)
- Luke 15:8-10 (Woman and the lost coin)
- Luke 18:1-8 (Woman and the unjust judge)
- Luke 21:1-4 (Woman's offering)
- Luke 24:1-11 (Resurrection)
- John 11 (Mary, Martha and Lazarus)
- John 12:1-8 (Mary anoints Jesus)
- John 20:1-18 (Resurrection)

### **Discussion topic: Jesus redefines power**

In the Gospel of Matthew when the Pharisees ask Jesus which is the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:35-40) his response is all encompassing. Read this text out loud for the group. Ask one or more of the following questions:

1. What are the greatest commandments that Jesus lists?
2. How might these commandments affect the way that women, or any group previously discriminated against, are treated?
3. How might congregations or church bodies embody these commandments in the world today?
4. How can we individually embody these commandments in the world today?
5. What are the implications of these commandments for issues of women and justice?

### **Wrapping up: One in Christ as breakthrough**

If participants have been involved in this entire three-part study, they have likely come to the conclusion that there is no clear view on what the Bible says specifically about the role of women in church and society. As indicated in session two, thematic and proof-text use of Scripture has typically sought to subjugate women. Yet, Jesus in stating the two greatest commandments shows that there are over-riding themes within the Bible that take priority in how we relate to one another.

In his case study based on the debate over the ordination of women in Sweden in the 1950s (see resource list), Krister Stendahl, then the dean of Harvard Divinity School, identifies one text that he believes is a theological breakthrough text addressing how Christ redefines unity. This text is Galatians 3:27-28, the text which sets the path for the work of the Women and Justice Task Force.

Break the group into four and assign each one a different Book of Faith approach to reading the Bible. Once again have them start with the Book of Faith bookmark to review what Galatians 3:27-28 says from each perspective. Give approximately 10- 15 minutes for conversation. Come back into the larger group and share insights. Consider collecting the insights on chart paper for visual review.

As the group winds down its study and conversation, ask what insights they would like to share with the Women and Justice Task Force. Remind them they are free to share their own personal insights, but if there is consensus consider, sending a group email.

Ask the group for any parting thoughts. If they are interested in continuing a discussion on the topic of women and justice, there are other study materials available at [www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice](http://www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice).

**Closing prayer:** O God, it is our tendency as human beings to define people into hierarchies of value and power that are used for harm and injustice. Open our hearts and minds to see that through Jesus Christ you have redefined the entirety of our lives both on earth and eternally. Empower us to understand how your desire for us is lived out in the details of our daily living. Embolden us to truly live as one in Christ. Amen.

## Session Three: The Book of Faith, Women and Justice

### Luke 1:46-55 (NRSV)

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."



### Discussion topic: Women in Scripture (Alternative passages may be suggested)

- John 4 (The Samaritan woman)
- Mark 16:1-15 (The resurrection)

### Discussion questions:

1. Be attentive to what aspects of the story seem predictable. What aspects of the story seem unpredictable?
2. How does this story contribute to the overall narrative of Jesus?
3. What does a literary interpretation reveal about the role of women in Jesus' ministry? (See the following additional Gospel texts mentioning women if the group or particular individuals want to delve more deeply into other passages where women are central characters.)

### Discussion topic: Jesus redefines power

In the Gospel of Matthew when the Pharisees ask Jesus which is the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:35-40), his response is all encompassing.

**Discussion questions:**

1. What are the greatest commandments that Jesus lists?
2. How might these commandments affect the way that women, or any group previously discriminated against, are treated?
3. How might congregations or church bodies embody these commandments in the world today?
4. How can we individually embody these commandments in the world today?
5. What are the implications of these commandments for issues of women and justice?

**Wrapping up: One in Christ as breakthrough**

Read Galatians 3:27-28, the text that sets the path for the work of the Women and Justice Task Force. How does this passage throw perspective on your discussions throughout this study of “Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice?”

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**Communication guidelines**

1. We agree to listen to each other respectfully without making assumptions or judgments.
2. We recognize that each person has different experiences and has different styles of communicating.
3. We will each own our own thoughts and feelings and speak in “I” statements rather than “you” statements that define others.
4. We will approach our conversation from a stance of being curious and ask questions of each other to draw out the intended meaning of the speaker.
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**Useful resources**

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ELCA Book of Faith Initiative website: [www.bookoffaith.org](http://www.bookoffaith.org)