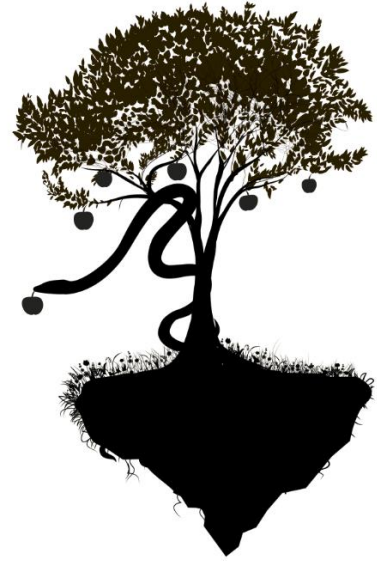


A Guide to Session Two: Historical Issues of Problematic Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women

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.

Opening

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

¹⁸Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. ²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. ²¹Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. ²²Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, ²⁴since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵For 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.

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 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

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.