

## **Brothers and sisters on ecclesial committees**

Our motivation should be to treat people as is taught in the Bible:

“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.”  
(Matthew 7:12. KJV)

“For all the law is fulfilled in one word, [even] in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” (Galatians 5:14, KJV)

This doctrine applies in all our relationships, and is an overall summary of the ethical teaching of the New Testament. It means that we value people, encourage people, and avoid belittling them in any way. Unfortunately, belittling people is a common worldly characteristic, and it creeps in on us too in the attitude which many people take towards sisters within the ecclesial context. Many ecclesias have gone some way towards avoiding this ecclesially, in that at the business meetings sisters may express their views and vote, as do brothers. In terms of power and authority, therefore, at the business meetings they are equal.

This applies to many ecclesial committees, and in some ecclesias to the Management Committee. In many ecclesias, however, while sisters may serve on, say, the Welfare Committee or the Preaching Committee, they are not eligible to serve on the Management Committee (or “The Arranging Brethren” as that committee is often described – “ABs” for short).

If, however, we apply Jesus’ teaching consistently, we would consider it appropriate that sisters and brothers should both take part in planning the ecclesial work, for both have insights and experiences of value, both have maturity and spiritual understanding, and it is according to Jesus’ Golden Rule that we should treat each other as we would like to be treated: as responsible, sensible, valued members of the body of Christ.

### **For the good of the ecclesia and the Christadelphian community**

On a practical level, people should be encouraged to use their talents in God’s service. If people are enabled to do so, they feel more involved and more committed, and the ecclesia is thereby strengthened.

In Romans 12, the apostle encourages participation to the best of one’s ability; he says:

“I say to everyone of you: we are to use our different gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us.”  
(Romans 12:3-8)

Contrariwise, when people are excluded, when they are discouraged from using the gifts that God has given, they are inclined to feel less valued and therefore less committed.

A brother said, after seeing sisters actively involved in speaking and running workshops at a Christadelphian conference:

“I had not realised before how much talent is lost by the practice of sisters not contributing.”

It is logical to include both brothers and sisters on all committees, including the Management Committee, and it would be to the benefit of the Christadelphian community as a whole.

### **Inclusion and Participation is Biblically correct**

Two Biblical reasons were given above: the application of the Golden Rule and the apostle Paul’s encouragement to everyone to participate “in accordance with the gifts that God has given us”.

When we look at how the ecclesias of the New Testament were organised, we see a variety of ways, in so far that we have information.

(a) In Jerusalem the leaders were the apostles (the 12 disciples of Jesus, but with Judas replaced by Matthias as described in Acts 1:26). Peter took the initiative (Acts 1:15) in the choosing of a replacement for Judas, and in the preaching on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14). John (Acts 3:1), Stephen (Acts 6:8), Philip (Acts 8:5) Paul (Acts 9:15) and James (Acts 11:2, Galatians 2:12) all took a leading part. “Elders”, additionally, are mentioned as receiving the collection for famine relief from Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:30), and when the issue of the Law and the Gentiles came up, it was considered by “the apostles and the elders” (Acts 15:6), and James’ recommendation was accepted (Acts 15:19-20). It appears that that decision was taken by the whole church, since verse 22 says: “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 15:22). How this decision was taken is not explained. It would be interesting to know whether it was by a vote, or by asking in turn what each individual thought.

(a) There were leaders like Paul and Barnabas, who established churches by their preaching and who spoke with apostolic authority.

(b) In Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas are described as returning to the believers in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch and appointing elders there. Later Paul instructed Titus to appoint elders in every town in Crete (Titus 1:5); before that, the ecclesias were presumably run by some other method, and not always satisfactorily.

(c) There were elders at Ephesus, but this did not prevent heresy entering in as Paul predicted (Acts 20:30-31), and when it did, Paul worked through Timothy to attempt a remedy in Ephesus.

(d) There is no sign of elders in the ecclesia at Corinth although it was founded by Paul. Paul addressed all the believers at the beginning of his letter, and envisaged them all meeting together and acting collectively (1 Corinthians 5:4-5). Paul’s letters were usually addressed to the believers in

general, never to the elders. Only in Philippians 1:1 were officials addressed, and then they are described as overseers (plural) and deacons. It is generally assumed that at the early period elders and overseers (bishops) were the same office. The letter to the Philippians is nevertheless addressed to everybody, including the overseers and deacons; the officials are not singled out as those to whom the letter is addressed: "To **all** the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, together with the bishops and deacons" (Philippians 1:1).

(e) The system of elders was not without its problems: Peter had to advise the elders not to be "greedy for money, but eager to serve not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3).

(f) Households seem also to have been part of the way early ecclesias were organised ("Greet Priscilla and Aquila ... Greet also the church that meets in their house", Romans 16:5), while workers associated with Paul seem to have had influence too; for example, the household of Stephanas and the workers in Romans 15, many of them sisters. As regards exercising authority, Paul seems to accept sisters as holding influential positions, calling both brothers and sisters "fellow-workers", and saying that the believers should "**submit to such as these** [the household of Stephanas] **and to everyone who joins in the work, and labours at it**" (1 Corinthians 16:16, NIV, emphasis mine).

(g) There is some evidence that deacons could include sisters, as the description of Phoebe as a deacon (*diakonos*, masculine term) in Romans 16:1 indicates. Elders appear always to have been men, but older women were also given an important role (Titus 2:3) and some inscription evidence later than New Testament times suggests women elders too.

Several questions therefore need consideration:

- (1) Is a method of management by apostles, elders/overseers and deacons as defined in the New Testament the one and only correct way of running an ecclesia?
- (2) Do we regard our ABs as elders in the same way?
- (3) Were the elders male because that was and is the divine intention?

**(1) Is a method of elders/overseers and deacons as defined in the New Testament the one and only correct way of running an ecclesia?**

I think we have to answer "No". At any rate, we don't follow New Testament practice in most details. We don't have people appointed by apostolic authority, nor by laying on of hands; we elect by vote to a committee.

We don't use the terminology "elders" and "deacons", though some churches do, and the ancient terms are well known and could have been used: "presbyter" (elder), and "deacon" (servant), and "minister" (Latin version of "deacon"). Nor do we stick closely to the detailed list of requirements given in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 2 which include:

"above reproach" (1 Timothy 3:2);

“hospitable” (3:2);  
“married”, and only once (3:2);  
“with children” (3:4);  
“see that his children obey him with proper respect” (3:4);  
“a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient” (Titus 1:6);  
“able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2);  
“can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it [the true teaching]” (Titus 1:9);  
“have a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Timothy 3:7);  
deacons “must first be tested” (3:10).

We rightly conclude that the intention is that the man appointed as an elder should be upright and moral, setting a good example.

But we do not exclude those who are unmarried, those who have problems with their children, those who are good at administration but not at teaching, and those who (at certain times, e.g. as conscientious objectors in time of war) do not have “a good reputation with outsiders”. We make sensible adjustments in accordance with our human weaknesses and changing circumstances.

It is understandable that men would be appointed in New Testament times. Dealing with outside authorities would be one of their tasks, and in the first century and most of antiquity, public duty was the domain of men. Naturally, therefore, the list of requirements assumes a man (“married to one wife” indicates this). But the list is primarily a list of moral characteristics, and being male as such is not specified as a requirement in itself. Good character is.

## **(2) Do we regard our ABs as elders in the same way as in New Testament times?**

In some ways yes, and in some no.

Paul says:

“... keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock which the Holy Spirit has placed in your care. Be shepherds of the church of God ....”  
(Acts 20:28-29)

“... if a man does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of the church of God?”  
(1 Timothy 3:5)

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says:

“Obey your leaders and follow their orders. They watch over your souls without resting, since they must give God an account of their service. If you obey them, they will do their work gladly; if not, they will do it with sadness, and that would be of no help to you.”  
(Hebrews 13:17)

All of us who have positions of leadership, in whatever form, feel the responsibility to care for all of our members and for the spiritual welfare of the ecclesia. Leadership is leadership by example and encouragement, not a worldly kind of leadership enforced by law. And we feel this responsibility to nurture and support others whether we are on the ABs or Welfare Committee or not. Sisters feel responsible for the spiritual welfare of others. Is it wrong to do so?

Interestingly, the Ecclesial Guide (Sections 18-23), written by Brother Robert Roberts<sup>1</sup>, does not see Arranging Brothers as leaders who give orders.

Robert Roberts produced this Guide at a time when public positions were generally held by men not women. He presumed that public service in the ecclesia was therefore done by males. When, however, he found a sister appointed to the Managing Committee, though he expressed surprise, he was strong in his approval (see below page 7). The reason lies in his Biblical understanding that ecclesial appointments are all positions of service to Christ. Here is what he wrote:

### **18. – Serving Brethren, not Rulers.**

All official brethren are serving brethren; but there are necessarily different sorts of serving brethren, such as managing brethren, presiding brethren, doorkeeping brethren, &c., but *ALL are brethren*. It is important to keep this feature constantly in the front. Christ places it there: “One is your master, even Christ, and *all ye are brethren*.” This feature, with many other beautiful features originally appertaining to the house of Christ, has disappeared from the religious systems around us, bearing the name of Christ. Having returned to it, let us hold on to it. There must be no authority, only service.

The spirit of the appointments involves this. The ecclesia does not appoint masters, but servants. In principle, the ecclesia is the doer of everything; but, as it is impossible in its collective capacity, do the things that are to be done, it delegates to individual members the duty of doing them in its behalf.

“There must be no authority, only service.” Some brothers and sisters might disagree with this, but it is interesting to see this point emphasised. So too is the comment that “the ecclesia is the doer of everything” – and it is for reasons of practicality that individual members are delegated the duty of acting on behalf of the others.

That the arranging brethren are subject to the ecclesia, not vice-versa, is also asserted in section 20:

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<sup>1</sup> The original (first edition, 1883) is easily available online at [http://www.antipas.org/books/ecclesial\\_guide](http://www.antipas.org/books/ecclesial_guide)

## **20. – Ecclesial Control**

It is next important, in making this choice, that the right of the whole ecclesia to control proceedings should not be absolutely surrendered into the hands of those chosen. To do this would be to appoint masters and not servants, and lay a foundation for the evils that have come from clerical domination. While appointing special brethren to special offices, the ecclesia ought to retain a power of regulation and control. This is done by making the proceedings of the arranging brethren subject to the periodical approbation of the general body. Let the arranging brethren report their acts once in three months to the general body, and if there is anything objectionable in those acts, it is in the power of the ecclesia to repudiate them. Yet, since the decisions of the arranging brethren must often refer to matters requiring immediate attention, it is necessary that their decisions should be valid, without the consent of the general body; and that such acts should not be subject to repudiation. The two necessities are met by giving the arranging brethren the power to carry out their decisions at once: and the general body the power of veto only as regards the future.

In comments about re-election, Robert Roberts talks about enabling us “to approximate to the apostolic model”, but this is only partly so.

## **22. – Eligibility for Re-election**

There ought to be a power of re-election without limit. In the case of the Spirit-appointed officials of the apostolic ecclesias, their position would be permanent, after the analogy of appointments to the Kingdom of God. When a brother is peculiarly qualified, there is no reason why, in our age, he should ever cease to serve. The power of re-election would enable us to approximate to the apostolic model as nearly as is compatible with the system of periodic appointments.

In section 23 Robert Roberts speaks more specifically about Arranging Brethren. He is obviously talking about Arranging Brethren being men, but there is nothing masculine in his description which would not also fit feminine. In other words, his list of qualifications is character, not gender:

## **23. – Arranging Brethren**

There must be arrangement, and it must be the work of some in particular. If those appointed to do the work are called arranging brethren, it will be a literal description, and not a name of honour. Names of honour are to be avoided in the probationary stage of the body of Christ. Seven is a convenient and scriptural number for purposes of management. Their function would be to attend to all business matters connected with the operations of the ecclesia. Their qualifications would principally require to be of a practical order. But as the business they would have to do would be business with spiritual objects, arranging brethren ought, above all things, to be men of a truly brotherly spirit possessing a business turn, but chiefly the brotherly character. It is not

sufficient that they have a business turn: they must be brethren first, arranging brethren afterwards. This is the first qualification for all offices—a point liable to be overlooked in young ecclesias. If it be asked, how is a brotherly spirit to be known, the answer is, by the test of the commandments of Christ: are they obeyed? If so, the man has a brotherly spirit. Are they not observed in the man's conduct? Then he is not a brotherly man, and not suitable for management, however great his practical abilities may be.

Good arranging brethren may often be found in men not possessing the gift of public utterance. What is wanted is, the spirit of Christ and a good practical judgment. Such men may quietly arrange many things for the general good that would not occur to brethren of more showy gifts.

On his visit to Australia and New Zealand, Roberts came to Wanganui in New Zealand where a sister was one of the Managing Brethren, and though he expressed surprise, he spoke very positively<sup>2</sup>:

I was also introduced to sister Dexter, whose characteristics are described in many a Scripture specification of womanly excellence, and whose serving capacities are so highly appreciated that she has been appointed “a managing *brother!*” Deborah, the wife of Lapidoth, was an excellent managing brother, to whom Barak naturally took the second place.

(Robert Roberts, *A Voyage to Australia*, page 117, Monday January 23rd, 1896, first printed in *The Christadelphian*, November 1896, page 421)

On another occasion, Robert Roberts strongly advocated the involvement of sisters in decision making.

I have put in bold type the sections below that are particularly relevant, but the whole comment is applicable.

... it was what may be called old man-ism that was at the root of the trouble. The question, who should be chief, is the most destructive of all discords: “When pride cometh, then cometh contention.” It is the Lord's express command to all who aspire to be his disciples: “Be servants: take the lowest place.” “If any among you desire to be chief, the same shall be last of all.” When the reasonable spirit of modest self-assessment prevails, dis-union is impossible; for each holds the other up instead of pulling him down. In this case, the affair was mixed up with the question: “Should women rule?” “Does not Paul forbid her to ‘usurp authority over the man?’” If this question is treated in the spirit the Lord

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<sup>2</sup> It has been suggested that she was an “arranging brother” because there were no other brothers there at the time. According to details printed in *The Christadelphian*, by the time Robert Roberts visited Wanganui those recorded there were Brother and Sister Hayward, Brother Beaumont, Brother Henry Holmes, Brother and Sister Dexter, Brother and Sister Taylor and Brother and Sister Mays (6 brothers and 4 sisters). (Thanks to Brother Peter Lawton for extracting this information from the electronic version of *The Christadelphian*.)

prescribes for all his brethren, there will be no danger or even question of the woman usurping authority over the man. If the last thing is for man to usurp authority over his brother—if, as Peter commands, “all are clothed with humility and all are subject one to another”—there will be no room for the usurpation of either man or woman to come in. But in point of fact, there was no question of usurpation, though Paul’s interdict was quoted. It was in reality a question of whether woman’s voice was to be heard in consultation or suggestion. There was no question of public speaking. All were agreed that the law of the Lord prohibited woman’s voice from being heard in public assembly. **The question really was whether in the non-public working or management of things, woman’s voice might be allowed a place. The question seems an extraordinary one. The Lord’s law is never directed to the prescription of impossibilities. You can no more suppress a wise woman’s influence and a wise woman’s voice, than you can suppress the law of gravitation. You may prevent her delivering a public address: but you cannot prevent her giving good counsel, and you ought not.** Though woman, by divine law is in subjection, she is not to be extinguished. If man is her head, it is not to domineer over her, but to protect and cherish and serve her in honour “as the weaker vessel,” content with the casting vote in matters of difference, which is the extent of his superior privilege. If the Scriptures appoint man as her head, they do not exclude her from partnership in all that concerns their mutual well-being. They show us women “labouring with Paul in the gospel” (Phillip iv. 3): as official servants of an ecclesia with business in hand, which the ecclesia was called upon to promote (Rom. xvi.1-3): exercising the prophetic gift (Acts xxi. 9); prominently ministering to Christ himself (Luke viii. 2-3): sometimes leaders in Israel, like Deborah (Judg. iv. 4). The denial of public speech to women is as far as we are justified in repressing them. I have seen tyrannical and unsympathetic men wrongly using Paul’s authority to put down and quench godly women more qualified than they themselves to exercise judgment and give counsel. Let women certainly be modest, but let her not be reduced to a cypher, which God never intended. **She is intended as a comrade and a help which she greatly is, when enlightened and treated rightly. We ought to be thankful when women turn up who are able to help with wise suggestion. To object to such on the score of “ruling the ecclesia,” is to evince either a shameful misconception of duty or an itch for headship which disqualifies for the true service of the ecclesia. No man who wants to be head is fit to be head. The headship that comes from service is the only headship that is either useful or tolerable, or, in the long run, possible. Where the spirit of exalting each other, instead of exalting ourselves prevails (as Christ commands) there is little danger of difficulty arising, and an easy settlement of them when they do arise.**

(Robert Roberts, *A Voyage to Australia*, pages 141-142,

Saturday February 29th, 1896, first printed in *The Christadelphian*, February 1897, pages 60-61. Emphasis in bold type is mine.)

The quotations from The Ecclesial Guide and Robert Roberts' comments in *Voyage to Australia*, demonstrate his belief in the following points:

- (a) The Ecclesia, not the Arranging Brethren, is the ultimate *human* authority among us. Because of the system of voting, whether on paper or show of hands, both brothers and sisters exercise this ecclesial authority. (It should be recognised, of course, that Jesus and the Father are the ultimate authority, and just as ecclesially appointed officials are to be servants not rulers, the same applies to the ecclesia as a whole. We are all servants of Christ and servants to one another, not rulers over others – see Jesus' teaching in Matthew 23:11-12 and Luke 22:25-27.)
- (b) Appointments to the Arranging Brethren are for service, not rulership.
- (c) Sisters should be involved in "the management of things"; "you cannot prevent her from giving good counsel, and you ought not".
- (d) Involvement depends on character and ability, whether male or female: "a wise woman's voice"; "enlightened and treated rightly".
- (e) Since we are not apostolically ordained, we need to approximate to New Testament practice where possible, but things cannot be identical.

Which brings us to the third question asked above:

### **(3) Were the elders male because that was and is the divine intention?**

When adapting NT practice to the present day, we normally seek to follow the spiritual principle, not the literal. When someone in the ecclesia is ill we do not usually call the elders together, pray and anoint them with oil (James 5:14), we pray, and visit, and send cards.<sup>3</sup> Our wives don't wear veils (1 Corinthians 11), but practice the principle which we understand to be the wife acting with respect towards her husband and to our marriage vows. We don't wash one another's feet (John 13:13-15), but show care and attention to our visitors.

We do the same with the list of requirements for elders, as Robert Roberts illustrates, especially in section 23 of the Ecclesial Guide (quoted above). We do not follow the literal details: if we did, many who are currently Arranging Brothers would have to resign, and most of the other brothers in the ecclesia would not be qualified to take their places.

I suggest that our willingness to follow the principle but not the literal detail should also apply regarding gender. Being male is not in itself the point any more than having to be married. Male elders were necessary, given the type

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<sup>3</sup> Since writing the above, I have been told of two large Christadelphian ecclesias where on several occasions both have called "the elders" (brothers and sisters) to prayer meetings for someone who is ill, and have used the pouring on of oil. The arrangement is done by announcement with a stated place and time. Prayers are said by anyone present (whether brother or sister) who wishes to do so.

of society at the time, but quality of character and ability to do a job of service was the essential determinant. And that should be the determinant today.

Robert Roberts assumes that officials in the ecclesia will be brothers, though when he encounters the ecclesia in Wanganui where this is not so, he approves of sister Dexter as “a managing *brother*”.

The guidelines he gives use the term “brethren”:

“All official brethren are serving brethren; but there are necessarily different sorts of serving brethren, such as managing brethren, presiding brethren, doorkeeping brethren, &c., but ALL *are brethren*. It is important to keep this feature constantly in the front. Christ places it there: “One is your master, even Christ, and *all ye are brethren*.”

(Ecclesial Guide, section 18)

“Brethren” (in Greek *adelphoi*) is the normal term by which believers are addressed in the New Testament, especially in the letters to the early brothers and sisters. It is included in our name “Christadelphian” (*Christou adelphoi*), Brothers and Sisters of Christ.

Robert Roberts was writing in an age when it was still the case that most public functions were done by men rather than women, though the position was changing. The change is reflected in his approval of sister Dexter and in his comment: “You may prevent her delivering a public address: but you cannot prevent her giving good counsel, and you ought not.” His wife, Jane, addressed meetings of sisters, which indicates a change from the earlier Victorian period. Her public speaking was explained as not being “public”! Robert Roberts considered that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 was a direct ban on women addressing the meeting as a whole. For the reasons given at length in *All One*, I think this is a misunderstanding of the apostle Paul on this point. But the “offices” described in section 18 of the Ecclesial Guide, like “serving”, “managing” and “doorkeeping” do not involve public speaking, and there is no reason why (even if we accept the traditional interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35), these should not be done by appropriately qualified sisters. They too, within the New Testament definitions, are “brethren in Christ”.

## **Tradition, Legalism and Bible Teaching**

Amongst the hindrances from which Christ has set us free are tradition and legalism.

Sadly we are not free from these, but should be. We should decide issues on their merits, weighed up in a calm, sensible, spiritual atmosphere, not on the basis that “we have always done it that way” or “ecclesias elsewhere do it that way” (tradition) or “1 Timothy such-and-such says” (which can become a form of legalism when texts are quoted away from their original context, and then selectively applied).

Jesus regularly came into conflict with his contemporaries over just such attitudes:

“You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!” (Mark 7:9)

We are in danger of doing the same as regards sisters. Tradition and legalism damage and crush people. It might seem fine to older brothers and sisters who are used to traditional ways of doing things to say: “Why not just continue as we are?” But young people who are taught to respect others as individuals, who are trained to avoid racist or sexist attitudes, who are taught to think and question, are not going to be so easily accepting – and in the interests of Biblical truth they should not be. I know several people who have been put off by the tradition and legalism of our community, a community which began very specifically as a protest against both of these, but has slipped back into them.

When we look back at the history of the ecclesias after New Testament times, we observe many ways in which they departed from the original teaching of Jesus and the apostles. This is the case not only on doctrines about life after death, or the relationship of Jesus to God, or involvement in the Roman state, but also in attitudes to sisters. Texts were selected out of context, and used to restrict women’s service. We should examine these carefully in context – as we do with all our doctrines – to check that we are following genuine Bible teaching, not human traditions.

Brief comments on some of these are given in Appendix 2 (below, page 20). My wife and I have given a more detailed analysis in our book *All One in Christ Jesus: Bible Teaching on the Work of Men and Women in Christ’s Service* (available for free download from <http://www.OneVoice.info/>).

Since texts can be set against texts, and translation of key words is often debatable, it is an example of legalism to try to decide attitudes to women on the basis of a few restrictive texts. We need to see the whole picture, which is to be found in the new life for all believers, the new creation. As the New Testament indicates, the new creation wipes out discrimination between Jew & Greek, rich and poor, male and female, slave and free in ecclesial service.

“Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old has gone, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

“It does not matter at all whether or not one is circumcised; what does matter is being a new creature.” (Galatians 6:15)

“All of us, then, reflect the glory of the Lord with uncovered faces; and that same glory, coming from the Lord, who is the Spirit, transforms us into his likeness in an ever greater degree of glory.” (2 Corinthians 3:18)

“God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10)

(Above quotes are GNB)

These passages describe the new life, the new person of the believers, male and female. It is such persons who vote to select our ecclesial committees, and who should be eligible to be selected by the ecclesia to serve.

There are four more points I think it appropriate to make:

- (1) "Try to do what everyone considers to be good." (Romans 12:17)
- (2) "Dare to be a Daniel" – and know why!
- (3) "Do your best to win full approval in God's sight." (2 Timothy 2:15)
- (4) "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (Ephesians 5:21)

### **(1) "Try to do what everyone considers to be good." (Romans 12:17)**

One of the qualifications to be an elder was: "he must also have a good reputation with outsiders" (1 Timothy 3:7). So must we, but one method not to have a good reputation is to be known to discriminate. Racial discrimination is deplored, snobbishness and class distinction receives no approval, and if we teachers were to discriminate at school by favouring boys instead of girls, or vice-versa, we would be in trouble. So would our employers if they favoured male appointments over female in choosing staff. The General Teaching Council for Scotland advises:

"The beneficiaries of an anti-sexist strategy will be all our children: sexist attitudes and assumptions constrain and limit boys as well as girls." (*Gender in Education*)

My experience in working with colleagues at school, or sisters in the ecclesia on committees, is that they all have much of value to contribute, and it is not possible to differentiate the value of their contributions in terms of gender: good suggestions, sensible judgment, wise counsel is not the preserve of either male or female. We are all diminished if we do not recognise this, and our standing in the eyes of those outside the ecclesia is reduced if we are known to support in our ecclesia the traditional anti-woman attitudes which many of us acknowledge to be unbiblical anyway.

### **(2) "Dare to be a Daniel" – and know why!**

*Dare to be a Daniel,  
Dare to stand alone.  
Dare to have a purpose firm,  
Dare to make it known.*

We should not be intimidated by those who criticise us or our ecclesias. Dr Thomas published the following recommendations:

#### RULES FOR STUDYING THE SCRIPTURES

*Third.* Never be afraid of results to which you may be driven by your investigations, as this will inevitably bias your mind and disqualify you to arrive at ultimate truth.

*Fourth.* Investigate everything you believe: if it is the truth, it cannot be injured thereby; if error, the sooner it is corrected the better.

*Fifth.* Pursue this course with as much independence as if you were the only one concerned.

PROVE ALL THINGS : HOLD FAST THAT WHICH IS GOOD.

*(Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come, 1859, page 180)*

If we adopt a different approach from tradition, or from how others now see things, it should not be one which arises from carelessness, or laxity, but from a willingness to put into practice the Golden Rule, not the rule of tradition. We need to be forward thinking, not constrained by the past. Issues should be judged on their merits. We should act in accordance with reason. It is important to be accepting of the fact that different views exist among us, and to seek positive improvements in how we do things.

We should make our decisions on the basis of what we believe to be right, know why we make them, and be prepared to stand by our decisions if challenged.

Involving sisters on committees is consistent with the Ecclesial Guide, and consistent with the normal way in which we Christadelphians adapt New Testament practices for today. If we enquire, we find that there is considerable variety amongst ecclesias. Some ecclesias do not have Arranging Brothers. Instead, all the brothers and sisters discuss, and decisions are taken by general agreement. Some ecclesias have an arranging Committee with both brothers and sisters. I expect if you made your own enquiries you would find further variations in practice too.

Involving all brothers and sisters directly is easier in a small ecclesia – of which there are many. The Ecclesial Guide assumes a large ecclesia, with enough members to have seven arranging brothers. In a large ecclesia, it is more difficult for all to be directly involved in day-to-day details; and hence the election of office-bearers to act in the name of all. But since ecclesias consist of brothers and sisters, and usually sisters are in a slight majority, the interests and input of all can best be served by shared contributions on committees, including the Management Committee.

So let's not be afraid to take an independent ecclesial line when we decide to do so, and to make the best we can of the talents and resources God has given us.

**(3) “Do your best to win full approval in God’s sight.”  
(2 Timothy 2:15)**

A term employed over the last decade has been “Best practice”. That means that even though we are not forced into following certain guidelines, such as in safety when taking pupils hillwalking, out of moral obligation we should seek to accept and implement the highest standards.

I don't know of any sisters who actually wish to be on the Management Committee, and I know of some who have said they don't wish to be! Many brothers don't wish to be either, but do so out of a sense of service. We ought to encourage sisters to consider doing so for the same reason. The ecclesia will be better served if we have a wider range of experience and wise counsel.

When change is suggested, not infrequently people say: I agree with the proposal, but now is not the right time. It will be acceptable ten years from now!

However, there is a saying:

**If not now, when?**

**If not us, who?**

And if everyone in history had said, "Ten years ahead but not now", "Someone else but not me", would any of the important reforms that we value ever have taken place?

This is not simply a matter of time. More and more people are becoming disillusioned by the traditional and unfounded belittling of women in our community. It is time now to make a change.

**(4) "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."  
(Ephesians 5:21)**

It is important to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." In this life we cannot always achieve what seems desirable; it is up to groups of brothers and sisters, meeting as individual ecclesias, to decide how they make their arrangements. Attitudes which seem to demean either brothers or sisters should be rejected, but where agreement cannot be reached, we need to continue to work constructively for the ecclesia. Paul's words in Colossians are obviously written for situations when brothers and sisters might be unhappy with each other and with their decisions:

"You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So then, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you." (Colossians 3:12-13, GNB)

# Appendix 1

## Objections

Several objections can be presented to the involvement of sisters on committees.

### Objection 1

#### **Leaders in the Bible are mostly male.**

In the New Testament, leaders are mostly male, particularly apostles, elders, and well-known preachers like Paul. So this – it is argued – demonstrates that it is God's will that leadership should be male.

To this it can be replied that being male is never stated as a requirement in itself. The ancient world was one where women were largely uneducated and usually took little part in society outside the home. The situation is different now, both as regards education of women and their position in society where they regularly and competently teach and hold positions of responsibility (e.g. in schools, or on Christadelphian Care Home committees). A change can be observed within the New Testament itself where women are given a new status in Christ, and where we see considerable involvement by women, including in areas which might be seen as solely a man's preserve, such as Priscilla and her husband instructing Apollos (Acts 18:26) or Phoebe being a deacon (Romans 16:1). If someone decides to argue that sisters should not hold any position of responsibility because leaders were generally men, it is not because the Bible states that this should be the case, but because he or she has decided (consciously or subconsciously) to draw that conclusion.

### Objection 2

#### **Ecclesial leaders are described as "men who must give account".**

Hebrews 13:17 (NIV) "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy..."

Note that the word "men" is an NIV addition in the English, as shown in the Authorised Version: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy..." Hebrews 13:17 (KJV)

This passage does not say that rulers should be male but that they should act responsibly: we must all give an account of our stewardship whether we are leaders or not.

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body."  
(2 Corinthians 5:10, RSV)

Or must we *all*? The word "all" in "we must *all* appear" is masculine, as too is "each one" in Greek, and the RSV refers to "what **he** has done".

If the argument is adopted that masculine statements refer only to brothers, then this verse could be used (wrongly) to argue that only men, not women, will “appear before the judgment seat of Christ”.

This verse illustrates how the Greek language uses masculine terms in making inclusive statements. “We must all” (masculine plural) refers to both brothers and sisters; likewise “each one” though masculine in Greek, refers to each of us, male or female. See the further explanation in the next section, “Objection 3”.

### **Objection 3**

#### **New Testament Instructions are addressed to brothers not sisters.**

Instructions in the New Testament are given in the masculine, indicating (it is sometimes asserted) that brothers are to pass on these instructions to the sisters. Therefore it is always the duty of brothers to instruct sisters, never vice-versa. Ecclesial offices must therefore always be held by brothers not sisters.

A verse quoted to present this argument is Colossians 4:16:

“And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.”

If we ask to whom this is written, the answer is in Colossians 1:2:

“To the saints [*hagioi* – masculine plural] and faithful brethren [*adelphoi* – masculine plural] in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”

But as we read on, and Paul repeatedly says “you”, it is hard to believe that he is only addressing the women through the men, or that when he praises them for “the love which you have for all the saints”, he means the love they have for the brothers in the ecclesias worldwide, excluding the sisters.

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints [*hagioi* – masculine plural].” (Colossians 1:3-4).

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” (Colossians 3:1-4).

These look like a direct address to brothers and sisters in Christ, not just to brothers. Is there any reason to think otherwise? Further on, he speaks directly to “wives” “husbands”, “children” “fathers” “slaves” “masters” (Colossians 3:18-4:1). Some of these people would be unable to read it for

themselves, but it is addressed nevertheless to them all. Why, then, the masculine terms “saints”, “brothers”?

The answer is that in Greek, masculine expressions are used to include feminine. That is a feature of languages like Latin and Greek, but it does not mean that women are not included. Many modern versions translate *adelphoi* as “brothers and sisters”. They are careful to do so only when the context indicates that this is the meaning of the original. This is usually the case where the New Testament letters address believers as *adelphoi*.

The preface to GNB (second edition, 1994) says:

“...where references in particular passages are to both men and women, the revision aims at language that is not exclusively male-orientated. At the same time, however, great care was taken not to distort the historical situation of the male-dominated culture of Bible times.” (Preface, XV)

If anyone can show me that *adelphoi* in the New Testament letters refers only to brothers and not to sisters, I shall be interested to examine any evidence produced.

Apart from letters written to a specific male individual, like 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon, there is no validity in the suggestion that the New Testament letters are addressed to brothers so that they can then pass on the message to sisters.

#### **Objection 4**

##### **Man is head of the woman.**

“The head of the woman is the man” (1 Corinthians 11:3, KJV). Therefore – it is argued – it is inappropriate for a woman to have any kind of authority over a man, as it says in 1 Timothy 2:12 “I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men”.

These verses look like a more substantial objection, especially when 1 Corinthians 11 is interpreted to mean that the men in the ecclesia rule the women in the ecclesia.

An examination of the context suggests something different. Ephesians 5:23 says “the husband is the head of the wife”, translating exactly the same Greek words as in 1 Corinthians 11. The RSV translates 1 Corinthians 11:3 “the head of a woman is her husband”, which is consistent with Ephesians 5:23 and similar passages like Colossians 3:18-19. Each passage indicates a husband and wife situation, not men in general over women in general: Ephesians says “**your** husband”, “**your** wife”, and “let each one of you love **his** wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects **her** husband.” Colossians likewise says “**your**”. What of 1 Corinthians? The passage says “any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonours **her** head” (verse 5). *Her* “head” cannot be every man in the ecclesia (or in the world); in accordance with Ephesians and Colossians, it refers to her own husband. The passage moves on to discuss the creation of Eve from Adam (Genesis 2:18-23) and verse 12 comments that “as woman was made from man. So man is now

born of woman. And all things are from God." It has been correctly pointed out that one cannot translate "husband" and "wife" in verse 12, but this does not mean that the basic discussion is not about how husbands and wives relate to each other and are created by God to relate.

So, does "the husband is the head of the wife" mean that the wife may not take part in sharing the planning and organisation of the ecclesia? There is nothing in the references to "head" which suggests such a ban. Does the fact that "the head of every man is Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:3) mean that no brother may speak or be involved in ecclesial organisation? Why then should "the head of a woman is her husband" mean that a woman may not speak or be involved in ecclesial organisation?

In 1 Corinthians 11, the same activity is done by both brothers and sisters, namely prayer and prophesying, and prophesying is described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:3 as speaking to men "for their upbuilding, encouragement and consolation" (RSV). "Men" here means people, men and women, brothers and sisters. It is not the word translated "husbands". Both brothers and sisters are encouraged by Paul to build up, encourage and console (1 Corinthians 14:3-5: "I want you all ... to prophesy so that the church may be edified.")<sup>4</sup> The wife is to show respect for her husband (in ancient times this was shown by wearing a marriage veil, or by having her long hair respectfully "up" on her head) but as long as she is respectful to him, there is nothing to suggest she should not give good spiritual advice. In Ephesians 5:25 husbands are told to "love your wives, as Christ loved the church", and taking account of her needs, interests, and enabling her to use her talents in the service of Christ is a very appropriate way of acting as "head of the wife".

1 Timothy 2:12 "I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men" should also be seen in its context. Women are encouraged to teach elsewhere in the Bible, and this verse should be understood in the context specified as preventing a specific abuse in a particular situation. See the further comments in Appendix 2, page 19.

## Objection 5

### **A woman should be subject to her husband.**

"Wives, be subject to your husbands" (Ephesians 5:22). How then can a wife take a part in organising ecclesial affairs if her husband is one of those who will be subject to the organised arrangements?

This depends on our understanding of "be subject". Ephesians 5:22 should not be read in isolation. It is part of a long sentence which begins in verse 18, and is prefaced by: "**Be subject to one another** out of reverence for Christ." Wives have to be subject to husbands, but so do husbands to wives: "... husbands should love their wives as their own bodies" (verse 28). Being "subject" to one another is a matter of putting the interests of the other person before one's own.

"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness

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<sup>4</sup> For further explanation, see the detailed exposition of this and the explanations about the inclusive Greek language used here in *All One in Christ Jesus*, chapters 6-8.

of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory. Likewise you that are younger be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" (1 Peter 5:1-5)

We can observe the following from this passage:

- (a) The elders are to lead by good example, not by ordering people about.
- (b) Younger members of the ecclesia are to "be subject" to the elders. Should we assume, therefore, that they may take no part in running the ecclesia, in speaking, in offering good ideas, in organising events?
- (c) The instruction is to "all of you" (elders and ordinary members of the ecclesia alike): "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another". Humility means putting others first, in other words submitting to one another.

If submitting means "always do what another requests", nothing would ever get done. If two people try to let another go through a door first, saying "After you", no one would ever get through a door! Submitting is to do with having a humble, helpful, cooperative attitude to another, but that does not and should not preclude giving wise advice, making suggestions or taking on responsibilities of organisation, i.e. ecclesial service. To return to the Ecclesial Guide, section 18,

The spirit of the appointments involves this. The ecclesia does not appoint masters, but servants. In principle, the ecclesia is the doer of everything; but, as it is impossible in its collective capacity, do the things that are to be done, it delegates to individual members the duty of doing them in its behalf.

Being subject to one another applies to us all, and this does not apply to sisters more than to brothers. It is therefore fully compatible with both the New Testament and "The Ecclesial Guide to the Creation and Conduct of Christadelphian Ecclesias"<sup>5</sup> that suitable sisters and suitable brothers should serve on ecclesial committees.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thechristadelphians.org/htm/books/guide/index.html>

## Appendix 2

### Texts in context

There is a long tradition in Christendom of anti-women exposition of the Bible. Texts have regularly been taken out of context and generalised in a manner which does not accord with other passages in the Bible or with the basic message of the new life in Christ.

We Christadelphians have deliberately rejected many of the teachings, practices and traditions of the established churches. We should recognise that their attitude to women has also been at fault, and we should go “Back to the Bible” with fresh eyes to see what it *really* says.

The restrictive texts need to be explained accurately within their context and circumstances.

Here are some examples:

#### **Should prayer be given only by men?**

“I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.” (1 Timothy 2:8)

But in 1 Corinthians Paul accepts both as praying:

“Every man who prays or prophesies ... every woman who prays or prophesies ...” (1 Corinthians 11:4-5).

1 Timothy does not say that women should not pray, but that Paul wants men to pray without quarrelling. As often, there is some debate about the translation, as commentaries point out, and as is illustrated by the translation known as “The Jewish New Testament” by David Stern:

“Therefore it is my wish that when the men pray, no matter where, they should lift up hands that are holy – they should not become angry or get into arguments. Likewise, the women, when they pray, should be dressed modestly and sensibly...”

(1 Timothy 2:8-9)

The translation by Jerome into Latin (at a time when New Testament Greek was still a spoken language), and the modern language Greek translation also understand the text this way. Since 1 Corinthians 11 approves of sisters praying in public, but asks them to do so with appropriate modesty, it is more consistent to Scripture to understand 1 Timothy 2:8-9 as meaning the same.

#### **Should women teach?**

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” (1 Timothy 2:11-12)

The context is problems within Ephesus, uneducated wives, women teaching “godless myths and old wives tales” (1 Timothy 4:7). The passage says therefore that women should be educated, but what happens when they are?

“Take the teachings which you heard me proclaim in the presence of many witnesses, and entrust them to reliable people, who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2, GNB)

The restrictions in 1 Timothy should be understood in the context of heresy which is described by Paul when writing to Timothy. The Bible positively approves of teaching given by women when done to promote Godly values (Proverbs 31:26 – “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue”); Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:26 – “they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately”); Titus 2:4 – “older women ... are to teach what is good”.

### **Should sisters give talks?**

“... women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” (1 Corinthians 14: 34-35, NIV)

The context suggests disruptive behaviour in the meetings: asking questions, and acting in a manner that is not submissive, to husbands or to other brothers and sisters. There are several possible contexts from which these words may be understood. When seen in the overall context of 1 Corinthians, the traditionally understood ban on *orderly* speaking by sisters is a most unlikely option. It is more probable that these words are either restricting irresponsible talking, or that they are the words of Paul’s opponents, and he strongly disagrees with a ban on speaking by sisters, as he goes on to say in verses 36-40.

The traditional understanding of verses 34-35 also does not fit well with the description a few verses earlier of an ecclesial meeting where we read:

“This is what I mean, my brothers and sisters. When you meet for worship, one person has a hymn, another a teaching, another a revelation from God, another a message in strange tongues, and still another the explanation of what is said.”

(1 Corinthians 14:26, GNB)

According to this, both brothers and sisters speak in the meetings, as is indicated too by 1 Corinthians 11 where both pray and prophesy (a spoken activity) and Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:5 that he wishes all of them to speak: “I want you **all** ... to prophesy so that the church may be edified.”

### **Is the New Testament addressed only to brothers, not sisters?**

The translation in 1 Corinthians 14:26, GNB, translates *adelphoi* (“brethren”) as “brothers and sisters”. Is this legitimate? Or is Paul addressing only the male members of the churches?

Paul, Silas and Timothy,  
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the  
Lord Jesus Christ:  
Grace and peace to you.

We always thank God for all of you mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.

(1 Thessalonians 1:1-8, NIV)

Do we deduce that none of this refers to the sisters because Paul refers to them as "brothers loved by God" (*adelphoi egapemenoi hypo tou Theou* – "brothers" and "loved" are both masculine words in Greek)?

The word *adelphoi* ("brethren" in King James' English) can be shown to be the normal way of addressing the believers (male and female) and means "brothers and sisters" like "Christadelphians" means brothers and sisters in Christ, not just brothers.

Consider the references ("you") directly to the recipients in 1 Thessalonians: (Verse 1) "Paul, Silas and Timothy, **To the church of the Thessalonians** in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace **to you**."

(Verse 2) We always thank God for **all of you**, mentioning **you** in our prayers.

(Verse 3) We continually remember before our God and Father **your work** produced by faith, **your** labour prompted by love, and **your** endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Verse 4) For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen **you**, because our gospel came to **you** not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived **among you** for **your** sake.

(Verse 6) **You** became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, **you** welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

(Verse 7) And so **you** became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

(Verse 8) The Lord's message rang out **from you** not only in Macedonia and Achaia—**your** faith in God has become known everywhere."

(1 Thessalonians 1:1-8, NIV)

Does this passage refer only to the male members of the ecclesia? It specifically says it is written to the ecclesia (verse 1), it mentions "all of you (plural)" (verse 2). Is it only males that have been "chosen" (verse 4), only males who "welcomed the message" (verse 6), only males who have become "a model to all the believers" (verse 7)? This could be argued if we go by the masculine terminology, but not if we go by the obvious application to all

believers at Thessalonica, male and female. As I said above (pages 16-17), in Greek this is the way of making general statements addressed to and applicable to men and women, not just men.

When applying the Bible, we should be cautious of attempts to exclude service by women. If we take texts properly in their contexts, we should encourage all believers, male and female to serve to the best of their ability in whatever area they have talent.

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (1 Peter 4:10-11, ESV)

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