

Committee to Review the Decision re Women in Office for Synod 2000

Note: Though the following is shortened, it is taken directly from the Report itself with no additional commentary.

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INTRODUCTION

Two perspectives: biblical-theological argumentation for each of the two CRC perspectives on women in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist

Synod 1995 approved the recommendation “that synod recognize that there are two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, on the issue of whether women are allowed to serve in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist” (*Acts of Synod 1995*, p. 727). Important in this connection is the first ground for the above decision: “The numerous overtures to this synod on this issue, as well as decisions and reports of previous synods, adduce good biblical grounds for both positions.”

The present study committee judged it important for Synod 2000 to have before it a formulation of the biblical warrants in support of both positions, that of closing and of opening to women the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist. In the summary of the evidence for closing the offices, the following have been used: the majority report of the Committee on Headship in the Bible (*Acts of Synod 1984*, pp. 282-336); “The Case in Favor of the 1984 Synodical Decisions about Headship,” presented by the Committee on Headship to Synod 1990 (*Acts of Synod 1990*, pp. 315-22); and other materials in various reports and overtures. In the summary of evidence in favor of opening the offices, the following have been used: *Acts of Synod 1984*, Minority Report 2 (*Acts of Synod 1984*, pp. 341-76); “The Case Against the 1984 Synodical Decisions about Headship” (*Acts of Synod 1990*, 322-29); and various other reports and overtures, especially the overture from Classis Grand Rapids East in 1995 (*Agenda for Synod 1995*, pp. 480-90).

A. A case for closing to women the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist

1. The Old Testament evidence

a. Genesis 1

Genesis 1:26-27 affirms that humankind, both male and female, was created in the image of God. It says nothing about defining the relationship of male and female except that they mutually are to image God and that they are equally to be involved in being fruitful and multiplying, in subduing the earth, and in having dominion.

b. Genesis 2

The account of creation in Genesis 2 supplements the account given in Genesis 1. Here the man has a certain priority, a “firstness,” in that Adam was created before Eve (vv. 21-22), and he gave the “woman” her name (v. 23). It is clear that this priority is applied to marriage (v. 24). Some, however, affirm that the priority of the male in marriage is the application to marriage (v. 25) of a more general description of the male-female relationship (vv. 21-24). Since Genesis 2 is meant to supplement and not overturn what is said about the mutual equality of male and female in Genesis 1, the male priority in marriage in Genesis 2 is not meant to suggest the subjugation of the wife to the husband. In fact, this mutuality is suggested by the fact that the woman is a “helper suitable” for man (v. 18). This phrase can best be understood as a “companion” and certainly not simply as an “assistant.” It is also significant that Genesis 2:24 is quoted in Ephesians 5:31, in a passage that is generally considered to be the Bible’s most complete description of headship in marriage.

c. Genesis 3

Genesis 3 recounts the story of the fall. The curse pronounced upon the woman states not only that the pain of bearing children will increase but also that “he will rule over you” (v. 16), a reference to the husband’s position in the marriage relationship.

There seem to be both continuity and discontinuity between what is established in creation in Genesis 1 and 2 and what is stated in the curse in Genesis 3. In Genesis 2, man is given the responsibility to work and take care of the garden (v. 15). In Genesis 3 it is assumed that his work continues but that now, after the fall, he will work a land that is cursed, and he will toil with pain and sweat (vv. 17-19). In like manner, after the fall the woman will continue to bear children and be under her husband’s leadership, but, in the context of sin, her child-bearing will be painful, and her relationship to her husband will be disrupted, since “he will rule over you” (v. 16). In the setting of the curse, this statement is to be understood as an oppressive or sinful kind of rule.

In summary, Genesis 1 clearly speaks of an equality of male and female in exercising dominion over the earth. Genesis 2 speaks of the man's priority and implied leadership within the marriage. Genesis 3 does not invalidate the pronouncement of Genesis 2 but affirms that in the context of sin the man's priority and leadership will be distorted, i.e., his rule will be oppressive.

d. The rest of the Old Testament

The male's priority and leadership function in marriage, as established in Genesis 2, is extended in the rest of the Old Testament to male leadership within the religious community. That is true in the case of the patriarchs as well as later in the organization of Israel. In the latter, the leadership roles of prophets, judges, kings, and priests were filled by men. The roles of Miriam and Huldah as prophets (Exod. 15:20-21; II Kings 22:14-20; II Chron. 34:22-28) are exceptions that highlight the fact that from the time of Moses on, all of the prophets, with only these two exceptions, were men. Deborah's leadership as prophetess and judge is specifically characterized as an exception designed to humiliate the males who seem to have abdicated their proper leadership roles (Judg. 4:4-10). In the accounts of the priesthood in Israel, there is no exception at all: only males functioned as priests.

Thus male leadership in marriage, as established in Genesis 2 and carried over into the religious community in the rest of the Old Testament, seems to have God's approval and might be expected to be carried on in the new-covenant community.

2. The New Testament evidence

a. Male headship in marriage

Male leadership in marriage is clearly continued under the new covenant. The husband is called "the head of the wife" (Eph. 5:23), and in many places the wife is instructed to "submit" to her husband (Eph. 5:22, 24; Col. 3:18; I Peter 3:1). Of course, it is important to remember that Paul, in Ephesians 5:25-33, emphasizes that the husband, in showing his priority in marriage, must do so out of love, as exemplified in Christ's own self-giving love for the church. Here the male priority in marriage that was established in creation (Gen. 2:24, quoted in Eph. 5:31) is continued in the new covenant, though modified and enlarged through the work of Jesus.

b. Male headship in the church: I Corinthians 11:2-16

The main issue before us is whether the male leadership in the religious community as exhibited under the old covenant continues in the leadership roles within the religious community of the new covenant. Consideration will be given later to specific texts that are the keystone of this position. Here it is simply noted that Jesus chose only male apostles even though he showed great love and respect for women and women of means were patrons of the

ministry of Jesus and the twelve (Luke 8:3; see also Rom. 16:2). Likewise, Paul, though he had many female helpers of various kinds in his ministry, seems to have appointed or recommended only males for the office of elder (Acts 14:23; I Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Thus the Old Testament pattern seems to have continued into the New, though of course here male leadership has been modified and defined by what God has done in Christ (Acts 20:28).

In dealing with the problem of how men and women should pray and prophesy in the church, Paul states, "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (I Cor. 11:3).¹ In what sense is man the "head" of the woman? That can best be determined by asking how Christ is the "head" of every man, since Paul speaks of that headship more often than the other. There are some passages in which Christ's headship over the church seems to combine both the idea of "source" and the idea of "authority over." For example, in Colossians 1:18 Christ is affirmed to be "head of his body, the church." Paul then goes on to say that Christ is "the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." Here, "beginning" and "firstborn" suggest "source," but "have supremacy" suggests rulership or "have authority over." In Ephesians 5:24 the church is said to "submit" to Christ as head, but at the same time Christ gives himself up for the church (Eph. 5:25-27). Thus, when I Corinthians 11:3 says that "the head of every man is Christ," it is likely that it refers both to source and rulership. Furthermore, when the text states that "the head of Christ is God," it likely combines the same two notions in that, as to his human nature, God is Christ's creator and at the same time the one to whom our Lord submits. It seems likely, therefore, that, when the text affirms that "the head of woman is the man," the same two notions of "source" and "authority over" are present.

The passage then goes on to affirm that during praying and prophesying in the church a distinction between man and woman must be maintained: the woman must pray and prophesy with her head covered, and the man with his head uncovered. Paul specifically wants women to maintain a visible expression of male priority in the church because "man did not come from woman but woman from man; neither was man created for woman but woman for man" (I Cor. 11:8-9).

This passage does not, however, argue for distinctive roles for man and woman in the church but only for the manner in which the roles are carried out. Indeed, Paul seems to want to undercut any chauvinistic feelings of superiority

¹ Here two major problems of interpretation must be noted. Admittedly, when Christ is spoken of as "head" in other passages, the term "head" (*kephalê*) can have two senses: one which implies "authority over" (as in Eph. 1:22, Christ as "head over everything for the church"; probably also in Col. 2:10); the other implies the meaning "source" (as in Col. 2:19, Christ is the "head, from whom the whole body . . . grows as God causes it to grow"; also in Eph. 4:15-16). The issue is how Paul is using the term here. (A subsidiary problem here is that when applied to either man or woman, the term "head" can mean either his or her own physical "head" or be used in a metaphorical way to mean "Christ" or "man" [I Cor. 11:4-7a]). The second major problem is to determine what relationship between "man" and "woman" is being referred to in this passage. Paul uses the term for the male (*anêr*) that can mean either "man" or "husband" and the term for the female (*gynê*) than can mean either "woman" or "wife." In what sense are they intended here?

on the part of the man when he adds, “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God” (I Cor. 11:11-12). Nonetheless, the passage indicates that male priority is to be recognized in the churches.

c. Women to be silent in the church: I Corinthians 14:33b-36

Paul says in I Corinthians 14, “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches.” In distinction from I Corinthians 11, which primarily addresses the manner in which the same roles are to be carried out by men and women, in I Corinthians 14 the apostle explicitly speaks of some role distinction between man and woman: women should remain silent in the churches.

Why should women remain silent? Because, as Paul goes on to say in verse 34, “they are not permitted to speak but must be in submission, even as the Law says.” Although there is no passage in the Old Testament that says explicitly what Paul here states, by the word “Law,” Paul likely refers to the principle of headship of the man enunciated in Genesis 2, since he alludes to that passage in I Corinthians 11:9.

At the same time, this passage should not be read as calling for closed-lipped worship by women, as if they should not even sing, read Scripture, or offer prayers. Such a reading would contradict I Corinthians 11. The intent here seems instead to rule against disruptive, authoritative teaching in the worship service. Instead of offering such authoritative instruction, the women are advised in verse 35, “If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home.” The principle of male priority in church worship restricts a woman’s participation in the area of authoritative instruction. Paul indicates that this is not only so in the churches of Corinth but also (I Cor. 14:33) “in all the congregations of the saints.”

d. Women not permitted to teach authoritatively: I Timothy 2:9-15

Perhaps the clearest and most forthright text in which male priority limits the function of women in the church is I Timothy 2:9-15. Paul says (vv. 9-10) that women should pray and that they should be dressed a certain way when they pray (“modestly,” etc.). He adds (v. 11) *that* women should learn and *how* they should learn (“in quietness and full submission”). Importantly, he also explicitly states (v. 12), “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” The arena to which Paul refers seems to be the church, since chapters 2 and 3 of I Timothy seem to be of one piece and Paul says (I Tim. 3:15) that these instructions are given so that “you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God.”

The meaning of verse 12 is crucial, though there are three disputable issues.² It seems likely but not absolutely certain, given what Paul states in I Corinthians 14, that he refers here to one of the disputable issues, “authoritative instruction.” As to the precise meaning of the word *authentēin*, there are some studies by evangelical scholars that support the meaning “to have authority over.” Although the word had a variety of meanings, in contexts such as the one given here the word most likely means “to have authority over” without any notion of domineering authority. And though the reference to childbearing in verse 15 indicates that he has married women in mind, it seems better not to limit the reference to the marriage relationship, since the reference here is to the church as a whole and there may well have been single women present. Male priority in the church thus forbids women to engage in authoritative teaching, and this fits with what Paul says in I Timothy 3. Though in I Timothy 3:11 Paul may permit women to serve as deacons, in I Timothy 3:2-7 he limits the office of elder (who must be “able to teach”) to men.

While Paul may be addressing a specific problem in Ephesus (see I Tim. 1:3-7), he specifically grounds his prohibition in the biblical accounts of creation and the fall. The reference in I Timothy 2:13 (“For Adam was formed first, then Eve”) is a clear reference to Genesis 2:4-25. In I Timothy 2:14 Paul alludes to what Eve says in Genesis 3:13: “The serpent deceived me and I ate.” Paul does not here exonerate Adam (see Rom. 5:12-19) but indicates what happened when the proper roles of men and women were reversed. Since he grounds in creation and the fall his injunction against women engaging in authoritative teaching in the church, there is good reason to conclude that this injunction is also applicable today.

I Timothy 2:15 is difficult to interpret. One plausible way to interpret the text is to understand the word *sôthêsetai* to mean “will be kept safe,” as in the NIV text. Then the text may appropriately be seen in terms of covenant curse and blessing. The curse had been pronounced in Genesis 3:16: pain in childbearing. But Paul now assures Christian mothers not only that they will be spared from suffering too much pain but also that they will receive the covenant blessing--“if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety.”

e. Passages which seem to disagree with this part of the biblical witness

The case for closing the office of elder, minister, and evangelist to women thus rests on the rather consistent teaching of Scripture which has its root in the very creation of men and women, is exhibited in both old and new covenants, and seems to be taught explicitly in some New Testament

² First, it is not clear whether Paul is addressing two issues—women are not permitted to teach men and women are not permitted to have authority over men—or only one issue—women are not permitted to teach with authority over men. In many ways the impact for the church is the same with either meaning. Given what Paul states in I Cor. 14, it seems more likely that he is referring to “authoritative instruction.” Second, the precise meaning of the word *authentēin* (often translated “have authority over”) is disputed. The word occurs only here in the New Testament. The old King James Version translates it as “to usurp authority over,” which suggests a domineering kind of authority. But many modern translations, including the NIV, render it simply as “to have authority over.” Third, as in I Corinthians 11, the words for male and female can have the more general meaning of “man” and “woman” or the meaning specific to the marriage relationship, “husband” and “wife.”

passages. To overturn it, there would have to be other clear and compelling New Testament evidence against this teaching. Such evidence, however, does not seem to be present, though there are some passages in the New Testament that are thought to provide it. These passages will be briefly considered here. It will become apparent that they may be properly interpreted in keeping with the traditional position.

1) Galatians 3:28

When Paul speaks in Galatians 3:27 of new-covenant believers having become sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, he grounds this in the fact that those who were baptized into Christ have become clothed with Christ. He then goes on to say, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The primary meaning here is the truth that regarding salvation by faith in Christ there is no difference between male and female (or between Jew and gentile or between a slave and a free person). The text, to be sure, does have social implications, as Paul's controversy with Peter in Galatians 2:11-14 indicates, in that no longer may Jews and gentiles separate themselves in table fellowship. But this text does not speak directly to the issue of ecclesiastical office.

2) Acts 2:14-21

In his Pentecost sermon Peter indicates that the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit fulfills "in the last days" the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32. God, speaking through Joel, promised, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." There are indeed new leadership roles for women under the new covenant—daughters of Philip had the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9), and the women at Corinth prophesied (I Cor. 11:5). But Acts 2:14-21 does not prove that all who have the Spirit are qualified for ecclesiastical office.

3) Women associated with Paul's work

In Romans 16:1 Phoebe is called "a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea." The term can mean "servant" or "minister" or "deacon" (in this case usually translated "deaconess"). She probably engaged in the ministry of hospitality that is suggested also by the word "helper" (*prostatis*) in Romans 16:2.

In Romans 16:5 and 12 several women are characterized as "workers" in the Lord. This is significant because Paul sometimes uses the word to describe those who have a leadership role in the church (I Thess. 5:12), including the work of preaching and teaching (I Tim. 5:17). Yet, since the Greek word in the original is a general word for "work," it may not be assumed that these female workers held roles of primary leadership. In the same vein, some women are referred to as "fellow-workers" with

Paul (Phil. 4:2-3; Rom. 16:3). We know of Priscilla (and Aquila—mentioned in Rom. 16:3) that she and her husband ministered to Apollos, teaching him “the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). But this private ministry seems to fall short of what we today call the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist.

3. Equality and differentiation of roles

The exclusion of women from the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist should not be interpreted as supporting the inequality of male and female. As coheirs of salvation, men and women are also called to be coworkers in the kingdom of Christ. The positive differentiation between the roles of male and female leadership within the church reflects the will of God, expressed originally in creation and affirmed in the new creation of the body of Christ. The existence of different roles for male and female imagebearers of God predates the fall into sin (Gen. 1:27; 2:18). Even though the entrance of sin into the world brought with it a disruption of the original harmony between male and female, the presence of sin is not the ultimate cause or reason for the assignment of different roles to men and women in the structure of God’s kingdom work.

In the context of the Christian church, the disunifying and disruptive effects of sin on the harmonious relationship of male and female (Gen. 2:23) are not reversed by the removal of role differentiation between men and women but by a renewed attitude of mutual love and submission, first of all in the home (Eph. 5:22-33) and also in the congregation (I Cor. 11:3-16).

Biblical differentiation between ecclesiastical roles of men and women ought in no way to be interpreted as a matter of inequality between male and female. God, in his wisdom, assigned to men and women differing roles of leadership and authority in the church without implying superior or inferior value. In the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity, the Bible itself provides a preeminent example of functional submission without the implication of inequality. Christ in his kingdom work on earth demonstrated subordination and obedience to the heavenly Father. And it was also a significant characteristic of Jesus that, while maturing in wisdom (Luke 2:40), he was subordinate to his earthly parents (Luke 2:51). Christ’s submission on earth promoted the mission of the three persons of the Trinity. So, too, in the New Testament church the ultimate assignment of spiritual leadership to men does not imply a difference of worth or value between male and female.

Consider two other New Testament examples in which submission does not imply inequality or inferiority. In I Peter 5:5 young men in the church are instructed to submit to those who are older. Their submission, however, does not mark them as inferior; rather, it reflects the means by which God transmits wisdom from one generation to the next. In Romans 13:1 Paul commands everyone to submit to governing authorities because they belong to the structure that God has established. Yet those who are governed are not inferior to those who govern. Here, too, there is an acquiescence to a divinely willed order.

4. Summary and conclusions

Although male and female were equally created in God's image (Gen. 1), male priority was established by the man's being the one from whom and for whom woman was created, a truth immediately applied in marriage (Gen. 2). Although sin has corrupted what was originally intended (Gen. 3), throughout the Old Testament male priority is exhibited in positions of primary leadership within the religious community, such as prophet, priest, and king. The few exceptions only prove the rule.

In the New Testament the same picture continues. Male headship in marriage is continued, Jesus appointed only male apostles, and Paul appointed and recommended only male elders. In addition to these practices, there are three very important passages which restrict the role of women within the church: I Corinthians 11:2-16, I Corinthians 14:33b-36, and I Timothy 2:9-15. To be sure, leadership roles for women are greatly expanded under the new covenant, but evidence is not sufficient to overturn the scriptural data that recommend only males for positions of primary leadership.

Furthermore, from New Testament times until recently, it has been the consistent historic Christian tradition that the above-mentioned texts (I Cor. 11; I Cor. 14; I Tim. 2) prohibit Christian women from serving in certain primary leadership roles. Even though women are seen to have important gifts for service in the church, they are to be excluded from those offices that involve governing authority. To be sure, the church down through the centuries has not always adequately stressed the equality of male and female. Nevertheless, the church has consistently seen that Christian women do participate fully in salvation even though they are excluded from certain leadership roles in the church. Thus the most obvious teaching of Scripture for today is that only qualified male members of the church should serve in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist.

B. A case for opening to women the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist

1. Old Testament evidence

a. Genesis 1

Genesis 1:16-27 affirms that both male and female were created equally in the image of God. It says nothing about defining the relationship of male and female but does indicate that they mutually are to image God and are to be equally involved in being fruitful and multiplying, in subduing the earth, and in having dominion.

b. Genesis 2

The account of creation in Genesis 2 complements the account given in Genesis 1. Although the male has a certain priority in that Adam was created before Eve (vv. 21-22), woman is created as a "helper suitable" for man (v. 18). From other Old Testament uses of the word "helper" where it is applied to God, the word can probably best be understood not in any sense of subjugation but

as “companion.” It is also true that Adam, in a fashion somewhat similar to how he named the animals, gave the “woman” her name (v. 23). This fact is immediately linked with marriage: verse 24 says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” This verse is quoted three times in the New Testament (Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:6; Eph. 5:31) to show the intimate union between husband and wife, and the last part of the verse is quoted once (I Cor. 6:16) to show the disastrous results of the act of prostitution. There is nothing in Genesis 2 to suggest that male priority goes beyond the institution of marriage.

c. Genesis 3

Genesis 3 recounts the story of the fall. Because of man’s sin, a curse falls on the serpent, on the ground, on the woman, and on the man. The pronouncement upon the woman is not only that there will be an increase in the pain of bearing children but also that, specifically with reference to the husband in the relationship in marriage, “he will rule over you” (v. 16). That this rule will be domineering and oppressive is suggested by the context. Man’s responsibility to work and take care of the garden (Gen. 2) is continued, but now, after the fall, he will work a land that is cursed, and he will toil with pain and sweat (Gen. 3: 17-19).

In its own way Genesis 3 seems to affirm that the only male leadership referred to in Genesis 2 was that in marriage and that now, after the fall, the male’s leadership has become distorted and oppressive.

d. The rest of the Old Testament

- 1) It is clear that in the rest of the Old Testament males are more prominent than females. It is also clear that man is in charge, filling the prominent leadership roles both in the patriarchal period and in the later organization of Israel. In the latter, the leadership roles of prophets, judges, kings, and priests were exercised by men. Yet the exceptions are important. Hannah speaks prophetically in her prayer/song (I Sam. 2:1-10), pointing to the new era of leadership of Israel under a king. Her song is echoed in the “Magnificat,” or song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), and the “Benedictus,” or song of Zechariah (Luke 1:67-79). In one sense the appearances of Miriam as prophetess (Exod. 15:20-21), Deborah as prophetess and judge (Judg. 4:4-10), and Huldah as prophetess (II Kings 22:14-20; II Chron. 34:22-28) are exceptions that prove the rule. But “rule” here cannot mean an exclusive God-ordained ordinance. It is a striking fact that when these exceptions occur, Scripture offers no apologies for the religious leadership provided by these women and only a natural and willing acceptance by the people of these women’s activities. Yet, in the main, leadership roles in the religious community were exercised by men, and there is no recorded exception to men serving as priests.
- 2) In fact, there are aspects of life in the old covenant that clearly show the diminished status of women. For example, circumcision, the sign of

admission to the covenant, was administered only to males (Gen 17:9-14). Another striking example is the fact that a woman, after giving birth to a daughter, was considered ceremonially unclean for a period of time that is twice that (two weeks and sixty-six days) required after giving birth to a son (one week and thirty-three days). And it appears that the right to divorce was given to the husband but not to his wife (Deut. 24:1-4).

- 3) Even though the old covenant was made by God, there are many aspects to it that seem not to be his final will for his people. Already from the old-covenant prophets we repeatedly hear the word that God is going to do a “new” thing in and for his people that will transcend what he has done in the past. God, speaking through Jeremiah (31:31-34), even proclaims that he will make a new covenant with the house of Israel that will not be like the covenant that he made when he brought them up out of the land of Egypt. Speaking through Joel (2:28-32), God states that in that new day he will pour out his Spirit equally upon men and women, upon sons and daughters, so that both will prophesy. Ezekiel (11:19-20; 36:26-27) speaks of the time of renewal when God will make his people more obedient to him by giving them “hearts of flesh” rather than “hearts of stone.” Isaiah also speaks clearly of that coming day of renewal. The new time will be more inclusive because God’s “servant” (Isa. 49:6) will be light and will bring salvation to gentiles as well as Jews. God’s coming salvation will include eunuchs and foreigners (Isa. 56:1-8), who under the law had been excluded (Lev. 21:17-23; Deut. 23:1-9).

From the manner in which New Testament authors use these Old Testament prophecies (see Heb. 8:7-13; Acts 2:16-21; II Cor. 3:1-3; Acts 13:47), it is apparent that they clearly understand that these prophecies will be fulfilled when the new-covenant gospel is proclaimed.

2. New Testament evidence

- a. Male leadership in marriage is clearly continued under the new covenant. The husband is called “the head of the wife” (Eph. 5:23), and in many places the wife is instructed to “submit” to her husband (Eph. 5:22, 24; Col. 3:18; I Peter 3:1). But there are two ways in which the marriage relationship is modified in the New Testament. First, within marriage, the husband’s headship is to be exercised in love, a love now further defined and exemplified in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. Second, marriage itself is less closely tied to the coming kingdom of God: Paul commends the *unmarried* state to those who have the gift of self-control (I Cor. 7:1, 8), marriage is shown not to have eternal validity when Jesus states that in the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage (Matt. 22:30), and Paul affirms that marriage belongs to “the scheme of this world which is passing away” (I Cor. 7:29-31). In spite of these modifications, marriage is an important focus of New Testament teaching. Paul and others seek to shield it against all kinds of threats.

But the main issue before us is whether the male leadership in the religious community as exhibited under the old covenant continued in the

leadership roles within the new-covenant religious community. It must be admitted that Jesus chose only male apostles and that Paul appointed or recommended only males for the office of elder (Acts 14:23; I Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). But is such a practice expected to continue? Does it ultimately fit with what the New Testament has to say about the new status and role of women in the new covenant? Such does not seem to be the case.

b. Galatians 3:28

Galatians 3 is an important passage for our purposes. It picks up some of the themes of the blessings promised by the prophets that are now being realized in the new age of redemption. Galatians is among the earliest writings of the New Testament. Galatians 3 contrasts the life realized in Christ with the previous life “under the law.” Galatians 3:26-29 may be translated as follows:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ: there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free person, neither male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Indeed if you belong to Christ, then you are the seed of Abraham and you are heirs according to the promise.

Everyone agrees that this text, among other things, declares that male and female share equally in salvation in Christ. But there are reasons to see broader implications in the text.

- 1) It is remarkable that here in Galatians Paul should include the pairs slave-free and male-female. The two issues implied by these pairs are not discussed elsewhere in the letter, which is primarily about the Jew-gentile agenda. The fact that he includes them suggests that this trio of paired opposites had become part of an early confession that announced the universality and inclusiveness of the new covenant. It is likely that the confession was meant to counter the chauvinistic statements found in the Jewish cycle of morning prayers in which the (male) believer thanked God that he had not been made a gentile, or a slave, or a woman. This early baptismal confession would thus announce the church’s belief that in Christ the old racial schisms and cultural divisions had been healed.
- 2) As noted in the translation of Galatians 3:26-29 above, the grammatical construction of the pair “neither male and female” is different from that of the other two pairs, which read “neither . . . nor.” It has been rightly discerned that this was done deliberately to pick up the language of Genesis 1:27 (“male and female created he them”), thereby indicating that in Christ male and female are restored to their original equal participation in the image of God and the concomitant call to jointly exercise dominion over creation.
- 3) From the reference to the first pair (Jew-Greek) it can be seen that the “oneness in Christ” proclaimed in Galatians 3:28 is relevant not only to the equal standing they all enjoy in salvation but also to some “societal” implications. Part of Paul’s reason for writing was to clear up the problem

of Peter's refusal to eat with gentiles at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14). The oneness of Jew and gentile in Christ required equal treatment in table fellowship. Presumably that equal treatment in table fellowship would apply not only to the Jew-Greek pair but just as well to slave-free and male-female pairs. Indeed, so the church has understood it.

- 4) Although Galatians 3:28 does not explicitly speak of the social equality of male and female, it does seem to imply it. As noted above, the confession seems to pick up the theme of equality from Genesis 1:27. The force of the implied equality in this passage can be seen as follows. Just as it would be inappropriate to say, "Theophilus may not be an elder because he's a Greek," or "Onesimus may not be an elder because he's a slave," so too it is inappropriate to say, "Apphia may not be an elder because she is a woman."
- 5) Finally, one of the many blessings that all the believers in Galatia received through Christ and through baptism into him was their adoption: "you all are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." All the privileges that go with sonship were now equally theirs, whether they were Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. Women who are in Christ are "God's sons" and thus on a par with men. Therefore, they deserve the status that accompanies sonship.

c. Baptism as the sign and seal of the new covenant

As noted earlier, circumcision, the sign of the old covenant, was administered only to males. There is no text in the Old Testament that prophesied that in the new covenant the church would baptize both male and female. And there is no New Testament pronouncement that females as well as males should receive the initiatory rite of the new covenant. The church seemed simply to know that the great day of renewal, the day of universality and inclusiveness, called for the equal treatment of male and female. In the old covenant the women were not circumcised, but they were a part of the covenant. They were equal to men regarding salvation but unequal in other dimensions of their religion. Thus, in the new covenant the baptism of female along with male suggests a more profound equality than the simple equality of salvation under the old covenant.

d. The gifts of the Spirit and the right to exercise those gifts

In keeping with the prophecy of Joel 2:28 and its recognized fulfillment in these last days (Acts 2:17-18), Paul often refers to Christians' receiving the gifts of the Spirit (Rom. 12:3-8; I Cor. 12:7-11; 27-30; Eph. 4:7-13). These gifts include many leadership functions, such as those necessary for "apostles," "prophets," "evangelists," "pastors and teachers," and the gifts include such activities as "prophesying," "teaching," and "leadership." Furthermore, these gifts seem to be given indiscriminately to all members, whether male or female. For example, Paul says, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (I Cor. 12:7; see also I Cor. 12:27; Rom. 12:3;

Eph. 5:7). In addition, along with the gift there goes the right and duty to exercise that gift. If women who have been given leadership gifts are to function appropriately in the church, opening the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist to them seems to be necessary.

- e. Women and men as prophets, priests, and kings in the new covenant
 - 1) As Joel 2:28 had promised, both men and women received the Spirit to enable them to prophesy (Acts 2:17-18). Women (wives) as well as men (husbands) did prophesy in Corinth (I Cor. 11:5), and the daughters of Philip had the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9).
 - 2) Unlike the women under the old covenant, under the new covenant, women as well as men are priests and kings. In Exodus 19:5-7, God promised Israel that, if she was obedient to his covenant, she would become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” In the New Testament this promise is applied to the church, sometimes with emphasis on the priestly aspect (I Peter 2:4-10) and sometimes with emphasis on the kingly aspect (Rev. 5:10; see Rev. 1:6).
 - 3) Citing a series of Old Testament texts in II Corinthians 6:16-18, Paul stresses first that all Corinthian believers, male and female, are priests. Then, modifying II Samuel 7:14 to his purpose, he applies God’s promise to David’s offspring so that it applies to both sons and daughters. Thus, under the new covenant, kingship is conferred upon women as well as men.

In harmony with such texts, the Heidelberg Catechism makes no distinction between male and female believers who share in Christ’s anointing and who confess his name. It calls each of them to be “a living sacrifice of thanks . . . and afterward to reign with Christ over all creation and for all eternity” (Q. and A. 32). Thus women share equally with men in all aspects of the “office of believer.” Since this is so, it would seem that there would have to be clear and indisputable evidence to the contrary to keep women also from functioning in the office of elder, minister, evangelist, and deacon.

- f. Women as witnesses and agents of special revelation in the new covenant

Women were the first to see the risen Christ and were thus the first witnesses of the resurrection (Matt. 28:1-10). The prophetic utterances of Mary and Elizabeth are recorded (Luke 1:39-56), and through them God continues to instruct the church. The Samaritan woman to whom Jesus ministered (John 4:7-42) led many to believe in him as a result of her testimony.

- g. Women as fellow workers in Christ for the gospel

In ways that far outstrip the ministry of women in the old covenant, women under the new covenant are described as carrying out many leadership roles in the church. Phoebe is a “deacon” and a “helper” (Rom. 16:1-2). Priscilla and Aquila are both called “my fellow workers in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 16:3); they are also noted for instructing the mighty Apollos more fully in the gospel (Acts 18:24-26). Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis are called “hard workers” in the Lord (Rom. 16:6, 12). These examples are important not simply because they exhibited commendable zeal but particularly because Paul sometimes uses these words (“hard worker”) to describe those who have a leadership role in the church (I Thess. 5:12), including the work of preaching and teaching (I Tim. 5:17). Even more surprisingly, Paul refers to Andronicus and Junia (many translations have the masculine “Junias,” but that masculine form of the name has never been found), who are said to be “outstanding among the apostles.” Thus it is almost certain that this woman (wife) was among the foundational apostles of the church. And finally there were Apphia, who, along with Archippus, was a leader in the church that met in Philemon’s house (Philem. 2), and Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2), who were true “fellow workers” and who labored “side by side” with Paul in the cause of the gospel.

These specific cases of women in leadership roles in the new covenant support the notion that the baptismal confession of Galatians 3:28 functioned powerfully in the church. Women not only equally shared in salvation but were amazingly and to a surprising degree involved in essential leadership roles in the early church.

h. Passages which seem to disagree with this part of the biblical witness

The case for opening the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist to qualified women rests upon the general analogy of Scripture, that is, on the “obvious scope and import of its teachings as a whole.” There would have to be explicit and universally binding scriptural arguments against this teaching in order to overturn it. Some think that such evidence exists in I Corinthians 11:2-16, I Corinthians 14:33b-35, and I Timothy 2:9-15. These texts may not be dismissed; they are to be dealt with according to Reformed hermeneutics, and their teaching must be honored. Rightly interpreted, these passages, too, can properly be understood to be in harmony with the general analogy of Scripture that has just been presented.

1) I Corinthians 11:2-16

In Corinth the believing women were exercising their new-found freedom in Christ and were participating in the worship service by praying and prophesying. Paul in no way discouraged the women from praying and prophesying, but he did insist that they show proper decorum in doing so, probably by wearing long hair and an appropriate head covering. To support his concern, he states in I Corinthians 11:3, “I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.”

How is the term “head” (*kephalê*) used here?³ There are two reasons to suggest that here Paul is using “head” to mean “source.” First, in Greek the term “head” (*kephalê*), when used in a metaphorical way, did not mean “have authority over.” It wasn’t until later in Ephesians and Colossians, that Paul used it that way when he referred to Christ, so the Corinthians most likely would have understood *kephalê* as “source.” Second, when Paul elaborates later on the man-woman relationship (I Cor. 11:8-9), he elaborates on the idea of “source” (“for man did not come from woman but woman from man. . .”). In the context, then, *kephalê* (“head”) probably has that same meaning in verse 3.

It is also uncertain whether the references are to “man” or “husband” and to “woman” or “wife,” since the Greek words used here can mean either. Elsewhere in his letters Paul often takes pains to protect the relationship between husbands and wives, and that may also be his most important concern in I Corinthians 11. But there are some more inclusive statements here (such as “every man prophesying” and “every woman prophesying”) that make it difficult to limit what Paul says here only to the marriage relationship. Even though acknowledging that man and woman have equality in praying and prophesying and mutual dependence in the Lord (I Cor. 11:11-12), he insists that women have their heads covered while praying and prophesying, because of man’s being the source of woman (vv. 3, 8-9), because of the angels (v. 10), because of what “nature itself” teaches (v. 14), and because of the widespread practices in the churches at that time (v. 16).

But the church over time has judged that the wearing of head coverings by women is an application of a principle rather than the principle itself, and therefore it has not usually required women in other cultures to cover their heads. In fact, this passage clearly permits a woman to pray and prophesy in the worship services as long as she does so with proper decorum. So this passage supports rather than opposes what the Bible as a whole teaches, namely, that women and men share equally not only in salvation in Christ but also in the responsibility of working for—and even prophetically proclaiming—the gospel.

2) I Corinthians 14:33b-35

The context of I Corinthians 14:33b-35 (see I Cor. 14:26-33a) speaks of the proper decorum during worship gatherings involving those who speak in tongues and those who prophesy. Participants—including prophets—must know when to keep silent (I Cor. 14:28-30). Wives also should be silent; they are not permitted to speak, and they must be in submission. If they wish to inquire about something, they are urged to ask their own husbands at home, since to do otherwise is disgraceful (I Cor. 14:33b-35).

³ For an accounting of the major problems here, see footnote 1.

Two things are to be noted about I Corinthians 14: (a) Paul here applies his instruction to the marriage relationship, since he says that the women should “ask their own husbands at home”; (b) The injunction to be silent was obviously not meant to be absolute, for that would contradict I Corinthians 11. So Paul must in this context be referring to the kind of disruptive speech that would be inappropriate in the marriage relationship and dishonoring to the God of peace who had called them. God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

To hear the enduring message of this passage, we must again distinguish between a principle and the application of a principle. Two principles seem to be at work here: (a) male headship in marriage must be honored, and (b) in worship everything must be done in an orderly and edifying way. As principles, these are valid for all times and places. The application of these principles in Paul’s day, in the rather free-flowing worship services at Corinth, required forbidding wives to speak in a disorderly way. Today, compliance with these principles means that wives (or women) may participate in the worship service as long as their participation does not violate headship in marriage and is not disruptive or unedifying.

3) I Timothy 2:9-15

Four features of I Timothy 2:9-15 deserve mention: (a) in the church women should pray and dress modestly and adorn themselves with good deeds rather than external finery (2:9-10); (b) women are to learn but must do so in quietness and full submission (2:11); (c) Paul does not permit a wife (or woman) to teach or usurp authority over a husband (man) (2:12); (d) he bases this restriction on creation and the fall (2:13-14) but concludes with a message of hope for the woman (2:15).

Timothy was left in Ephesus to combat false teachers (I Tim. 1:3-7) who were promoting speculative theories and wrong ideas about the law, leading many astray. They seem to have had considerable influence among some women, especially younger widows (5:11-15). It seems that some of the younger widows (5:13) were even propagating this false teaching and some (5:15) had already capitulated to Satan. The false teachers seemed to be forbidding marriage and advocating other ascetic practices (4:3). The injunctions in I Timothy 2:11-15 can best be understood against this polemical background.

The meaning of verse 12 is crucial, though it raises three disputable issues.⁴ It seems likely that here again Paul is addressing the marriage relationship. The word “submission” is the same one used in Ephesians 5:22 and I Corinthians 14:34, where marriage is being discussed. And since I Timothy 2:15 refers to women being saved through childbearing,

⁴ For a description of these points, see footnote 2.

Paul seems to have the marriage relationship in mind—as he does in I Corinthians 14:33b-35.

Although the word *authentein* in I Timothy 2:12 can mean “to have authority over,” it seems likely that here it has the more pejorative force of “to usurp authority over,” as in the King James translation. One point in favor of the latter is that Paul uses a different word in I Corinthians 7:4 when he affirms that in marriage a woman has authority over the body of her husband just as the husband has authority over the body of his wife. Given the context of teaching in I Timothy 2:12, what is probably being prohibited is the exercise of the wrong kind of authority within marriage, the domineering kind of usurping authority.

Paul’s injunctions in I Timothy 2:11-12 are rooted in an appeal first of all to the creation story: Adam was first formed, then Eve (2:13). (Paul made the same appeal in I Cor. 11:8-10 in grounding his injunction for women to wear head coverings in worship.) This affirmation is best understood here as countering the false teachers who were forbidding marriage and advocating other ascetic practices by not adequately recognizing the good creation order (I Tim. 4:1-5).

I Timothy 2:14-15 is notoriously difficult to interpret. These verses carry the argument about women in the church beyond anything we have elsewhere in Paul. Yet this very fact supports the suggestion that the entire passage has in mind a very specific problem in Ephesus, specifically, the one pictured in I Timothy 5:11-15. Gordon Fee (*Gospel and Spirit*, pp. 57-59) interprets verses 14 and 15 in a way that seems right:

Based on words of Eve in Genesis 3:13 (“the serpent deceived me, and I ate”), Paul states that Adam was not deceived (by the snake, that is), but rather it was the woman (note the change from Eve to “the woman”), who having been deceived (by Satan is implied) fell into transgression. That is exactly the point of 5:15—such deception of woman by “Satan” has already been repeated in the church at Ephesus. But, Paul says in verse 15, there is still hope she can be saved (eschatological salvation is ultimately in view, but in the context she shall be saved from her deception with its ultimate transgressions), provided she is first of all a woman of faith, love, and holiness.

In summary, Paul in I Timothy 2:11-15 is seeking to preserve the integrity of marriage by forbidding women to teach their husbands in a domineering way. The reason for these injunctions can best be seen over against the false teachings that were troubling the church at Ephesus. Paul is here spelling out the application of the principle of male headship in marriage because of the kind of feminism that was present in Ephesus. Paul’s injunction against teaching done in a domineering way is similar to his insistence in 1 Corinthians 11 on head coverings for women when they are praying and prophesying. Such a reading of what Paul teaches here regarding marriage and piety suggests that if women teach and exercise the authority of leadership without domineering, then there is no objection to their using these gifts for the upbuilding of the church.

3. Summary and conclusions

Male and female were equally created in God's image (Gen. 1); male priority in marriage was established with the first couple, Adam and Eve (Gen. 2). Sin corrupted what was originally intended, with dire consequences (Gen. 3). Throughout the Old Testament, leadership in the religious community was dominantly male. In addition, some aspects of the old covenant indicated the diminished status of the female. Through the prophets, God promised that a day of renewal was coming in which he would make a new covenant that would go far beyond the old covenant and its practices.

Part of the newness of the new covenant is that the equality of male and female was reestablished (Gal. 3). To be sure, male priority in marriage as depicted in Genesis 2 continues, but it is now revitalized by the sacrificial love of Christ (Eph. 5). The renewed status of women meant that they held leadership roles within the New Testament church that went far beyond those of the old covenant. For reasons of decorum and to protect the marriage relationship, Paul found it necessary to restrict the manner of functioning (I Cor. 11) and sometimes the role of married women (I Cor. 14; I Tim. 2). But this evidence is not sufficient to overturn the general analogy of Scripture that all the rights and privileges of the office of believer belong to women as well as to men.

To be sure, throughout the history of the church, some of these passages—especially I Timothy 2—have been understood as prohibiting (a) women from voting in civil elections, (b) women from voting in congregational meetings of the church, (c) women from serving in any of the church offices, and (d) women from serving in the office of elder, minister, and evangelist. On several of these issues there has already been progress in the understanding of these texts. There may be a parallel in this situation to in the church's progress in its understanding of Scripture's teaching on human slavery. For many centuries certain regulations in the Old and New Testaments were understood as permitting, if not encouraging, human slavery. More recently, the church has progressed in understanding that at its core the Scriptures teach the kind of human equality that prohibits slavery. So, too, the church may be progressing in understanding that the oneness and equality of male and female are more basic than the temporary regulations regarding the functions of wives/women. Thus the most obvious teaching of Scripture is that both qualified male and female members of the church should serve in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist.

C. Differences and ecclesiastical unity

A. Introduction

The issue of women's ordination is one of the most vexing theological dilemmas in the history of the Christian Reformed Church. Whether this is due to our stubbornness and sinfulness or to inadequacies in our hermeneutic, we have failed to reach a consensus. As a result, we are now faced with issues that go far beyond the ordination of women. One of them is ecclesiastical unity.

When Synod 1995 stated that on this issue "there are two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scripture as the infallible Word of God," it implied that we cannot realistically expect to convince each other of one position or the other solely on the grounds of biblical argumentation. Some members welcomed this statement as giving biblical and theological integrity to both positions. Others saw it as an impossible attempt to validate two irreconcilable positions.

This serious difference raises urgent questions. How does a church deal responsibly with an issue about which there is fundamental and long-standing disagreement? How long may a church allow such an issue to consume the time and energy of her members? At what point is it justifiable to take or retain a position that deeply unsettles others? What differences are allowable under our common submission to God's Word? When do we have the biblical authorization to go separate ways?

Faced with questions like these, this study committee senses a need to ask for light from the Bible that can show us the way. Living in biblical times would have made the answer relatively easy. When God first called Israel to be his covenant nation, he made provisions by which his will could be known. In addition to his "word disclosure" to Moses, God provided the Urim and Thummim for use when the will of God on a matter of national significance was unclear (cf. Num. 27:21). Later in Old Testament history, the Urim and Thummim gave way to the prophetic word. When they were uncertain about the will of God, the leaders could consult a prophet, who would mediate God's intentions. Eventually, prophetism as a form of additional revelation ended, and the corpus of the closed canon remained as the primary means by which God's will was to be determined.

At times the church may look back with longing to the previous stages when God's revelation was supplemented by physical signs (the Urim and Thummim) or by additional verbal explanation (the word of the prophet). The reality is that today we must attempt to determine God's will as correctly as possible by the only means available to us, his written Word. But that Word is subject to interpretation, and even when our confession about the Bible is the same, we do not always agree on the meaning of individual texts.

Since we as a denomination have failed to come to a consensus in interpreting God's Word about women in office even though we have sought the guidance of the Spirit, what choices are open to us? One choice is to perpetuate the study and debate of this matter in the patterns we have been following, a course of action that does not look fruitful. Another option is to accent our differences and to draw the conclusion that

we cannot live together in one denomination, a course of action that creates problems far beyond the issue at hand. A third choice is to acknowledge our differences and yet maintain unity because the present divergences of opinion, though significant, are not of such an essential nature that they warrant division of the church.

In the section that follows a case will be made for the third option. The call for unity in no way implies that our pursuit of unity may supplant the need for diligent listening to ascertain the truth of God's Word in every aspect of its message. A plea for unity may never be a substitute for pursuing a correct interpretation of the Bible. However, when faced with serious differences, we need to be reminded from Scripture that the Lord of the church hardly views unity as a mere accessory.

B. Characterizing the issue

The present polarization in the denomination is directly tied in with how we categorize the issue of women in office and the church's stand on that issue. Some view the church's stand as a reflection of fundamental and confessional principles of Scripture. Others suggest that the issue may be viewed as *adiaphora*, like eating meat versus eating only vegetables (see Rom. 14).

Is women's ordination confessional in the sense that the main articles of the Apostles' Creed are confessional? Does it merit classification along with essential doctrines of salvation or the nature of God? Does it undermine the teachings about Jesus, his birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and present reign? Does it detract from the Bible's teaching about the Holy Spirit and the way of salvation? In a case of serious doctrinal error we know what needs to be done. If this ordination issue were an essential confessional issue, our salvation would depend on it. That is not the case.

Is women's leadership among God's people a moral issue, like committing adultery, killing, stealing, or any other violation of God's covenant code? If it were, the Lord himself would hardly have used Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah in positions of authority. If it were such a moral issue, it would test whether our faith is real or fake.

Does the issue then belong to the *adiaphora*, the disputable matters? We judge that such a designation is not really satisfactory either. In I Corinthians 11:16 Paul concludes his discourse on the relationship between men and women in the church with this rather blunt statement: "If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God." His stance here is different from the tolerance about the *adiaphora* he expresses in Romans 14.

Then what kind of issue is it? Perhaps a more helpful approach can be made from the wisdom literature of the Bible. The Bible's wisdom literature is intended to help God's people to model their conduct, individually and communally, after the principles that reflect God's will for living beneficial and productive lives.

In the Old Testament, especially in the book of Proverbs, wisdom is personified as emanating from God. In Proverbs 1, for example, wisdom is presented as a person calling to be heard and to be heeded. Proverbs stresses that, by hearing the voice of wisdom, God's people can learn how to live in a manner pleasing to God and

advantageous to the well-being of themselves and society. Wisdom literature in the Old Testament is a clearly identifiable type of writing, or genre. In the New Testament, however, wisdom is more an integration of principles rather than a personification or a separate genre.

Within the New Testament Christian community, God's people are called to embody wisdom in new ways, in keeping with the fuller revelation that has come in Jesus Christ. Here wisdom is first of all the revealed means of salvation through the redemptive work of Christ (I Cor. 2:7; Rom. 11:33). To be truly wise is to know and believe the mysterious will of God leading to salvation. Second, those who have been transformed by this wisdom of God are called to live as personifications of God's wisdom for life (Eph. 4:17-6:9, note especially 5:15-16). The personification of wisdom within the body of Christ is to be visible in the conduct of individual members as well as in their various relationships, e.g., spousal, parent-child, and even slave-master relationships. Within the church there is the expectation that the members of God's family will conduct themselves in a manner consistent with the wisdom of God. Accordingly, the church was given wisdom principles to guide her in the regulation of worship and in the appointment of officebearers (I Tim. 2:3; I Cor. 11:2-16).

Wisdom principles help people pull together insights and truths from a number of spheres: the nature of the created order, observable societal principles and circumstances, and, in particular, the nature of humankind as illuminated by God's special revelation. Wisdom teachings provide boundaries and goals for human life in the presence of God.

Couldn't the women-in-office issue be approached from a similar perspective? How can the church act wisely today? How can it discern the nature of God's created order, God's intention for the relationship between male and female within the body of Christ, and the ministry of the church in the world today? The debated New Testament passages about women's roles in the church are embedded in passages where Paul addresses the organizational life of God's people, and great wisdom is required to discern their meaning.

Characterizing the issue as a wisdom issue seems more accurate than categorizing it as a doctrinal, moral, or disputable matter, as summarized above. Characterizing an issue as a wisdom matter in no way lessens the authority of any passage of Scripture from which the teaching is drawn. But attempting to characterize an issue properly is of genuine help in discerning the area and the extent of our differences on the issue. It also helps us to know how to respond appropriately when we reach differing conclusions.

What a blessing that the issue is neither doctrinal nor moral! That means that our differences in understanding the passages from Paul separate us neither from Christ nor from the one new humanity he is creating. Therefore we don't have to walk away from each other, reject each other, excommunicate each other. Instead, we can address the issue out of our common tie to Jesus Christ, the head of the church.

This conclusion also helps us on the matter of conscience, which has been raised by representatives on both sides of the issue. It has been argued that when synod

makes a decision that some judge to be contrary to their interpretation of Scripture, and therefore wrong—whether for or against women in all offices—conscience should play a major role in one's response. However, when the difference can be characterized as pertaining to neither an essential doctrine nor a moral standard but as belonging to the area of biblical wisdom principles, responding with a “conscientious objection” may not be as appropriate as recognizing and conceding a “serious difference of judgment” which needs to be resolved within the unity of Christ's church. Then, in spite of sharp differences on the issue, we are freed up to recognize and celebrate our continuing unity in him who is our peace (Eph. 2:14-18).

C. *Biblical directives on unity*

1. Passages demonstrating the ideal of unity

Of the numerous New Testament passages which call for unity among Jesus' followers, perhaps the most moving of all is John 17:20-23. In what has become known as the high-priestly prayer, Jesus shows deep compassion for the well-being of his church. He points to threats which will come from external forces, from the devil's manifestation of power (John 17:11-19). He also addresses the internal threat of disunity (John 17:20-23). Most noteworthy is his deep desire and abiding will, captured in the repetition of verses 21 and 23, that unity within his church is to be a witness to the world: “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (v. 23). The Lord's goals for the church are furthered through unity. Disunity is a negative witness, both to the outside world and to the church's own members, especially to the young, new Christians, and the weak in faith.

Christ's emphasis in John 17 is expanded in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The members of the church, i.e., “those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy” (I Cor. 1:2), have an urgent responsibility to work for unity (I Cor. 1:10-13). Quarrels and divisions within the body are in direct opposition to what the church fellowship ought to be like. Paul understood that his mandate as an apostle was so to proclaim the gospel that all eyes would be fixed on the central figure of Christ. Partisan allegiances which divide the body detract from that essential goal of the gospel ministry.

2. Passages giving guidance on how to handle difference and error

In Ephesians 4:3 the apostle Paul commands, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Significantly, he doesn't simply command the keeping of the unity in Christ; he provides practical guidance on how that unity is to be maintained. In verses 4-6 he lists what all believers have in common—one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. In other words, when faced with disunity, the church must appeal to the essential core of the Christian faith.

In some respects the presence of differences can actually enhance the life of the body of Christ. For example, in I Corinthians 12 Paul shows that diversity within the body is a necessary and healthy characteristic of the church (see also Rom.

12:4). To be sure, the diversity he mentions here refers to a variety of spiritual gifts, not differing or conflicting interpretations of Scripture. Nevertheless, his emphasis on recognizing and accepting diversity without quickly judging each other as inferior or superior is instructive about the attitude that ought to prevail within the body of Christ. This attitude is supremely characterized in that wonderful thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians, in which the call for faith, hope, and love culminates in the declaration that “the greatest of these is love.”

Love, in the biblical fullness of that word, is not a substitute for Christian obedience to God’s Word. Rather, as I John repeatedly stresses, obedience and love are inseparable. Love is the essential uniting factor which enables the Christian community to remain focused upon its goal of glorifying God through building his kingdom. For that reason Paul also prays that “love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:9-10). When the church is divided by differences, it is tragically impoverished both with respect to its mission to proclaim the gospel and its ability to disciple its own members into a fuller expression of sanctified obedience.

Since all of Jesus’ disciples are one in him, the abiding goal is to bring this unity to visible expression, though there will always be forces to divide the church. Philippians 4:2-3 provides a personal call to each believer to make every effort to agree with the others in the Lord. The qualifying phrase “in the Lord” is essential for understanding the dynamics of Paul’s appeal. Our unity is in Christ, and it is only as we focus on him as Savior and as Lord of the church that we can express and maintain this unity. In Philippians 4, as in I Corinthians 1:10-13, Paul’s overwhelming concern is the damage that visible disunity does to the mission of the church.

The Bible also teaches that God’s people ought to walk together in humility and a spirit of mutual service. Humility requires that “we consider others better” than ourselves (Phil. 2:3) and that we “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21). The false gospel of our secular society doesn’t make it easy to do so today. It tells us to put our individual selves first and to stress the rights to which we are entitled. That attitude easily translates into a mindset which assumes that we have a God-given right to have a congregation and/or denomination in which all think the same about matters far beyond the central doctrines and morals which mark us as Christians. When this happens, it is no longer the Lord who determines the parameters of his church; we do.

How Christians must treat each other when facing significant but nonessential differences is highlighted by Paul’s instruction on how to approach those who are guilty of basic error. The early church encountered false teachers who held that the resurrection had already taken place. Paul tells Timothy that in preaching and defending the truth he must not be quarrelsome, irritable, and resentful so that he, as the Lord’s servant, would not be an obstacle to the repentance of these false teachers. Instead, he must “be kind to everyone,” including his opponents, and instruct them “gently,” with “the hope that God will grant them repentance leading

them to a knowledge of the truth” (II Tim. 2:24-26). Even in the face of such error, the approach of the gospel bearer has to be such that positive contact is maintained. How much more true that should be among those who confess Christ as Lord, according to the Scriptures!

3. Voices of past leaders

It is instructive to note how diversity of opinion was dealt with in the time of the Reformation. The Reformers appealed first of all to the Word of God as the foundation for all doctrinal truth. However, in the presence of doctrinal diversity, the doctrine of the church also became vitally important. We see this truth illustrated in two different but comparable ways in the writings of Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Martin Luther, as is well known, abhorred the thought of leaving the church. For him, what provided the essence of the church on earth was the real presence of Christ in the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. In his opinion, as long as the gospel was preached and the sacraments observed, one was not to separate from that church. In fact, Luther was always ready to advocate reform within the church rather than separation or division. It was not until 1537-1538 that he came to a definitive acceptance of the division that existed in the church. But even later, in his treatise *On the Councils and the Church*, written in 1539, he recognized that even if ecclesiastical councils make errant proclamations and decisions on important theological matters, those errors don't necessarily provide reason enough for individuals to reject the authority of the council or to separate from the church. In Luther's view, as long as the gospel is being preached in the church, thereby demonstrating the real presence of Christ, it is necessary to work toward reformation from within.

For John Calvin, too, a doctrinal understanding of the church was crucial when it came to the issue of how to deal with diversity of opinion and interpretation. The fourth book of the *Institutes* is devoted to his study of the church. In Chapter 1, Sections 10-20, he argues strenuously that, as long as the marks of the true church are present, it is unwarranted to separate from the church or to participate in schisms on the grounds of error or falsehood within the body. The following lengthy quotation demonstrates Calvin's approach:

The pure ministry of the Word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist. The principle extends to the point that we must not reject it so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults. What is more, some faults may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all the articles of doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith. Suppose that one church believes—short of unbridled contention and opinionated stubbornness—that souls upon leaving bodies fly to heaven; while another, not daring to define the place, is convinced nevertheless that they live to the Lord. What churches would disagree on this one point? Here are the apostle's words: "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, be of the same mind; and if you be differently minded in anything, God shall reveal this also to you" [Phil. 3:15]. Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over these nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians? First and foremost, we should agree on all points.

But since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation.

(*Institutes* IV. 1. 12)

According to the criteria presented by both Luther and Calvin, dividing the church over an issue such as women in office is justified only if it can be clearly demonstrated that the church has lost the marks of the true church and has, in fact, lost the real presence of Christ in the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. When members are unable or unwilling to make such a claim, in the Reformers' opinion, the onus rests upon members to remain within the church, working where necessary toward reform and a clearer understanding of the Word of God.

The voice of Reformers such as Luther and Calvin is echoed in more recent periods of our Reformed church history. Another instructive voice is that of the respected leader Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), who echoes their stance on church unity every bit as forcefully. In his *Treatise on the Reformation of the Churches*, Kuyper pictures two scenarios:

One: You see and know that your church has become a synagogue of Satan. If that is the case, you must leave her without delay and shake off the dust of your feet against her. But if you see and know that she has not become a synagogue of Satan as yet, you may not send her the certificate of divorce. On the contrary, it is your duty to remain. (P. 162)
Following Calvin's footsteps, we would want to admonish everyone most earnestly to see if the church, which he wishes to leave, has indeed been abandoned by God to the extent that she has not only lost her well-being but even the essence of a church. You may not withhold your love from your church because she is sick or mutilated. Rather, on account of this sickness she may claim even greater compassion on your part. (P. 176)

4. Synodical studies: implications and conclusions about unity

As the discussion of women in office unfolded in the Christian Reformed Church and significant differences of understanding came sharply to the fore, the issue of church unity necessarily received more and more attention. The following summary may prove helpful.

In 1978, synod's advisory committee pointed to the discussion in the 1950s on women's suffrage in the church. It observed,

. . . from that page of history we can learn. There was unity in the church. . . . Yet, at the same time that there was unity, there was also diversity. . . . The church must respect its diversity within its unity. . . . The advisory committee believes that on this sensitive issue . . . our love for Christ and his church must compel us to put our personal preferences aside, and to believe that the Spirit of truth will lead us into the truth and will enable us to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

(*Acts of Synod 1978*, pp. 103-04)

In 1981 the advisory committee of synod approached the issue from a different angle. It stated, "To preserve and nurture the unity with which we begin, the following are biblical and confessional teachings we want to hold before ourselves as common ground from which our differing interpretations proceed." It went on to list (a) that both man and woman are fully made in the image of God, (b) both are

recipients of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, (c) they share spiritual equality in Christ, (d) women are gifted by the Holy Spirit no less than men, (e) both participate in the anointing from the Holy Spirit with its consequent knowledge of the truth, and (f) both share equally in the office of believers.

The study committee on women in office that reported in 1984 offered an extensive note entitled “A Preliminary Caution,” which pleaded, among other things, for mutual understanding:

We urge everyone who is considering the question of the ordination of women to do so with charity and humility. We ask everyone to acknowledge that the matter is not crystal-clear. If it were, it would have been solved long ago. Some of the most gifted theological minds and pastoral hearts in our denomination have wrestled with this matter and have come to different conclusions. This alone should suffice to eliminate stridency from our discussions.
(*Acts of Synod 1984*, p. 286)

This caution was echoed by Synod 1984's advisory committee on women in office:

The advisory committee observes that gifted and devout students of the Bible do not agree on what the main passages say. . . . Humility, openness, and mutual respect are therefore appropriate attitudes as we seek, by the leading of God's Spirit, a decision that will at the same time build us up and hold us together. . . . In some cases we have yielded to the temptation of doubting each other's faithfulness. As the study committee wisely observes, we must now go beyond this, resolving to treat each other with strong love and to reach with respectful compassion to those who feel hurt or disappointment by synod's decision.
(*Acts of Synod 1984*, p. 621)

Several synods went out of their way to stress our unity by stating that the issue of women in office is not on a par with what we need to believe for our salvation. Synod 1989 stated, “Decisions made by synod at least since 1978 indicate that the ‘women in office’ issue has not been regarded as a creedal matter, but as a church order matter” (*Acts of Synod 1989*, Art. 15, B, Ground 2, p. 433; see also *Acts of Synod 1990*, Art. 92, p. 654, Ground b). The most forceful expression comes from Synod 1995, which adopted the recommendation to

. . . urge the churches to recognize that this issue is not one of salvation and that even in our differences we remain sisters and brothers in Christ.
Ground: Unity in the church will come only when we focus on him who unites us, Christ Jesus our Lord, instead of on those issues on which we differ.
(*Acts of Synod 1995*, p. 736)

5. Conclusion

The firmly held differences regarding the women-in-office issue have placed a severe strain on the unity we have in Christ. Some are not sure that the Christian Reformed Church still desires to remain true to the Word of God. Others have definitely interpreted the actions of Synod 1995 as a sign that the church has forsaken its loyalty to Scripture and has capitulated to trends in society contrary to God's Word. On the basis of that interpretation some members and congregations have even left our fellowship, and some denominations with which we had long-standing relations have cut these ties. This is a sad development for everyone involved.

To this point in the history of the women-in-office debate within the Christian Reformed Church, the diversity of opinion has in some ways been like a strong centrifugal force, tearing apart those who belong together. In the preceding sections we have demonstrated how other doctrines and conclusions with regard to the unity of the body of Christ may provide a strong enough centripetal force to withstand and overcome the forces which divide. In light of the biblical demand for unity, few developments could create greater joy in the present situation than the nurturing of mutual trust, the exercising of patience where there is a lack of clarity, and the healing of the ties that have been broken, both within the denomination and within the broader church community.

D. The use of women's gifts

Directly connected to the issue of women's ordination to all offices in the church but overshadowed by the thirty-year debate is the use of women's gifts. How important is this issue? It has to do with the use of the gifts of the majority of the church's members! Women have received the Holy Spirit and his gifts in the same measure as men have. What happens with respect to the exercise of women's gifts has a huge bearing on the life and ministry of the church. When the use of women's gifts gets overshadowed by a debate about women in ecclesiastical offices, the consequences are serious.

How can the debate about women in office overshadow the full use of all women's gifts? One way is through benign neglect. Since the debate creates discomfort, an easy reaction is to shy away entirely from all ways to use women's gifts. Another way is to conclude in instances where the church has opened up one or more of the offices to women that the use of women's gifts need no longer be pursued with full vigor. On the other hand, when a council takes the position that women ought not to serve in official positions of leadership, it may view the full use of women's gifts as a luxury the church can survive without. Male council members may even come to an unspoken conclusion that a fuller use of women's gifts could undermine their stance on women in office, and therefore, intentionally, they may avoid attempts to correct this unsatisfactory situation. The very synod that appointed this committee failed to strike an appropriate balance between male and female members—an example of how, consciously or unconsciously, we as a denomination can be negligent about the use of women's gifts.

Already in 1975, when synod had before it a recommendation to permit women to serve in all offices of the church, it addressed the use of women's gifts. Within the context of saying no to opening the offices to women, it decided to “urge the churches to make all possible use . . . of the talents and abilities of women in the work of the church.” It added two strong reasons. First, the “many gifts and talents” which the Holy Spirit has given to women “can and should be used for the edification of the church.” Second, “some of the gifts and talents given to women are presently not being fully used.” Synod then proceeded to appoint a committee of women and men “to help the churches implement” this recommendation (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 78).

In 1992 synod once again strongly encouraged the churches “to use the gifts of women members to the fullest extent possible in their local churches,” specifying such uses as passing on the Word of God and providing pastoral care. It cited these compelling reasons: “Any failure of the church to use women's gifts results in serious

impoverishment of the church's life and inhibits women's joyful service in the church" (I Cor. 12). And synod observed, "Women already minister in these capacities on mission fields with great blessing" (*Acts of Synod 1992*, p. 700).

These synodical appeals for the use of women's gifts are still valid. The reason is simple. The appeal is fully biblical and needs to be heeded, whether or not the local council favors or opposes the opening of all offices to qualified women. Structuring the life and ministry of the churches for full use of the Spirit-given gifts of women is the only obedient response to the Lord of the church. Some churches, though opposed to the use of women's gifts in ordained offices, have developed valuable programs for their use in ministries of discipleship, worship, administration, and pastoral support.

The committee believes that there is more than adequate reason for synod to challenge all the churches to make biblically appropriate use of the spiritual gifts of women wherever Scripture instructs and/or allows. One result will be that the church's ministry will increase in range, richness, and effectiveness. Another will be that its women members will gain a stronger sense of place in the church and of the role the Lord of the church wants them to have.

E. Concluding Encouragement

That synod invite those who have become estranged from the Christian Reformed Church over the issue of women in office to study this report, read it for the further clarity it may provide, and receive it as a warm invitation for the restoration of fellowship; and that synod instruct the Interchurch Relations Committee to use this report in suitable ways to promote understanding among churches with which the denomination has or had ecumenical ties and to seek restoration where these ties have been broken.

Committee to Review the Decision re
Women in Office for Synod 2000

Andrew J. Bandstra

Sander de Haan

David H. Engelhard, ex officio

Roger S. Greenway

William T. Koopmans

Gayla Postma

Jai-Sung Shim

John G. Van Ryn

Jack B. Vos