

**Report of the
Synod Committee weighing
Revision requests about
The Men and Women in
Church Office decisions**

**Serve each other sincerely
from the heart**



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Preface

Here before you is the report "Serve each other sincerely from the heart" from the "Synod Committee weighing Revision requests about The Men and Women in Church Office decisions" (RMW) of the General Synod of Goes (GS Goes), 2020, of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (Liberated). The members of the committee were: PG. (Peter) Bakker, M.O. (Marc) ten Brink, L.C. (Bert) Groen, R.P. Rutger Heij, S. (Sieds) de Jong, and P. (Pier) Poortinga. The report was made in preparation for the decisions which are going to be made at the GS Goes, responding to the requests for revision and officially communicated objections from (sister-) churches in The Netherlands and abroad against the decisions of the GS Meppel, which created room for the ordination of women office bearers. Along with this, the report seeks to provide grounds for those decisions.

In this report we explore what the Bible says to us about the position of men and women in the church and in the world. An all-encompassing treatment of this theme within the scope of a committee report is not necessary, and therefore not called for. What is called for are the Biblical passages which throw light on the most important points of discussion which again and again are referred to when the question is treated as to whether next to men, women also can be deacons, elders, or ministers. We are concerned with the following subjects in particular: salvation history and the creation order, dealing with differences and culture, not ruling but serving, the so-called "remain silent" texts, and the interpretation of the Bible. Each one of these subjects receives a separate chapter, or treatment in an appendix. The major themes of this "story" are described in chapters 1 to 6. One subject which supports this story is to be found in an appendix.

Understandably, the focus of this report is on the relationship between men and women in the church. However, where the Bible speaks, we see that it treats the whole breadth of human existence, and that there is no strict separation between the church and the world. In this report the aspect of the "world" is therefore part of the discussion, although we do not deal with it in depth.

A number of writers have contributed to this report. "A number of writers" implies that the writing style of this report can differ per section. The committee doesn't see this as an objection. The fact that a number of subjects can be written about, and sometimes repeatedly, makes it possible to read the different chapters and sections individually. We would like to thank Heleen Sytsma, in particular, who, by drawing our attention to certain points and by her suggestions, has certainly contributed to improving the report.

As we mentioned, this report is first of all intended as a report to the General Synod of Goes, 2020, in relation to decisions concerning men and women in church office of the GS Meppel, 2017. It seeks to offer a perspective, based on the Bible, which can serve as a coherent interpretive framework for evaluating the objections which have been raised against these decisions. We discover the reliability and therefore the convincing power of this interpretive framework when we allow our understanding of the Bible to be led by listening to the living voice of our Living Lord. It is not helpful here if we try to make the truth of the Bible certain by a strongly rationalistic approach. We hope that readers of this report may sense that we have attempted to integrate the full truth of the Bible into it.

From the moment that the question arose as to whether women, too, could serve in church offices, there has been much study and discussion, and that has led, sometimes, to disagreements. The title of this report, "Serve each other sincerely from the heart," conveys the hope and the prayer of our committee.

Our prayer is that this report may serve, promote, and, where needed, restore peace in the church of Christ. To Him alone be the glory!

Peter G. Bakker, chairman of the RMW Committee. Marum, April, 2020

Summary of the report

A report of almost 70 pages demands something of its readers. In order to help you as readers, we are arranging the most important conclusions of each chapter in sequence. These summaries are consciously intended as a stimulus to read the chapters involved more carefully, since we hope that our arguments lead clearly to the conclusions. These summaries offer you, our readers, as well, the opportunity to get a quick sense of the drift of the report, and thus to choose what seems to you to be the most relevant or interesting among the different chapters.

Chapter 1: Men and women: starting from and returning to the beginning

On the basis of the first chapters of the Bible a certain authority relationship between men and women has been assumed (men having authority over women). From this point of view, this inequality would not permit women to bear an office in the church. However, the beginning of Genesis shows vividly how man and woman are made in God's image in exactly the same way, and that they both have the same high cultural mandate to fulfill and are to complement each other. The fact that this harmonious begin situation has been shattered, and has degenerated into all kinds of inequality, does not ask for a modification of the initial ideal (same image, same calling), but precisely for its restoration.

Genesis 1 and 2 puts all the emphasis on the unity, the solidarity, and the cooperative nature of man and woman. The keyword is not difference, but, above all, unity.

Further, the way in which Paul cites passages from Genesis 1-3 in his letters does not indicate a timeless position of command of male office-bearers, but precisely a (return to) unity and equality between man and woman. Therefore, Paul's words do not form a barrier, preventing women from serving in church offices.

Chapter 2: Not ruling over, but serving

The basic pattern which we discover in the teaching of Jesus is: don't lord it over others, but serve each other. We hear this same basic pattern repeated when the Bible speaks of the relationship between men and women in the new covenant. Because they are *one* in Christ, they are called to jointly demonstrate the image of God. In the New Testament there is no compelling reason to be found whereby women would not be able to do certain tasks or bear certain offices.

This reality asks for a concrete, joint carrying out of this task, whereby men and women, each with the gifts which they have received from the Holy Spirit, stand side by side in the service of God, and serve each other sincerely from the heart. This applies as well with respect to all the offices in the congregation of Christ.

It is the case, with respect to both men and women, that bearing a church office does not depend on differences in sex, but upon the gifts which they have received, and the tasks to which they have been called. The differences between men and women are hereby not blotted out, but being a man or a woman is not the basis on which certain tasks or offices are given, or not given.

Chapter 3: Men and women and church office, and contemporary culture

In the discussion concerning admitting women to the church offices it is said that this is, consciously or unconsciously, to bow before contemporary Western culture. By this is meant: the current climate of thought, those norms and values which are generally being held to, although not always in a clear and open way. This chapter explores this argumentation. The conclusion of this chapter is that the developments in society may, indeed, be the immediate reason for considering the position of women in the church, but the decision to open the church offices to them is the result of a renewed, in-depth consideration of what God in His Word asks from us in this area.

Chapter 4: Diversity and unity

Reflection on the subject of man and woman in church office, and the decisions which the Synod of Meppel took, have led to three results. 1) There are those who are opposed to admitting women to the church offices, on Biblical grounds; 2) there are those who favor the latter, on Biblical grounds, and 3) there are those who, on the basis of the Bible, see room for both standpoints. The question is: how should we as a church deal with this situation?

Here too there are differences of opinion. Some emphasize the differences and draw the conclusion that it is impossible to remain together in one church with people who have another point of view. The result is then a church split. Others acknowledge the differences, but find them to be of such a character as not to warrant separating from one another.

In this chapter we argue for the latter position. That is not to say that striving for unity has priority above listening carefully to the Bible. That would be a false dichotomy. For it is exactly the holy Scriptures which show us how important the Lord of the church Himself sees unity. Unity is no subordinate issue for the Lord!

Chapter 5: Hermeneutics and the authority of Scripture

Hermeneutics plays a role when we reflect on the subject of man and woman in church office. It is important that we read the Bible in a responsible way. When big changes are possible, it is proper that the question regarding our acknowledging the authority of Scripture is posed. That question is addressed in this chapter.

Considering new questions can only be done when we listen to the witness of Scripture itself, and we do this transparently and legitimately. Such new reflection can be described as being done with due regard for the "freedom of exegesis."

God's Word is diverse and opens up all kinds of perspectives to us. It is the living Word for all times! We should not try to ignore or make light of such diversity of texts and perspectives. They allow us to see the rich variety of Christ and His redemption. We are receivers of the revelation of God's salvation, which opens itself up to us, again and again, in an unimaginable and breathtaking way.

Chapter 6: The "remain silent" texts

In the course of the years a number of texts in the letters of Paul have gotten the name the "remain silent" texts, in particular 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, and 1 Timothy 2:11-15. The name which these texts have gotten makes it difficult to read them separately from the discussion which has arisen in connection with them, since it is disputable whether Paul's words can be construed as they have been. In this chapter we argue that it is, Biblically speaking, responsible to read these texts in a way that doesn't create an obstruction to admitting women to the church offices.

Therefore, in this chapter we limit ourselves to those texts which have gotten the name of "remain silent" texts, because the church+es have asked the Synod of Goes explicitly to give attention to these

texts. However, the argumentation for the men and women in church office decisions is not based on individual, unconnected Bible texts. This is clear if one reads the entire report.

Appendix: "You read it there, plain and simple, don't you?"

"You read it there, plain and simple, don't you?" This reaction from those who read the Bible about the subject man, woman, and church office, is in itself very understandable. If we read through the Bible you can certainly get the impression that men have a more important position than women.

However, whoever takes the time to read the Bible carefully begins to realize that it was written in a completely different time and culture than the one in which we live today. The subordinate position of the woman was normal in the cultural context of the Bible. While in the Bible there is no call for a direct revolution against the existing social relationships, within that context women are emphatically given worth and dignity. In this way we see how a dynamic is present with a visible impact on the concrete position of women today.

Influenced by the surrounding culture, the Scripture presumes and applies the subordinate position of women in its texts. At the same time we see critical tendencies in many Bible passage regarding its own context and, naturally enough, particularly regarding the relationships in the beginning. As a consequence, the Scripture cannot be seen as forbidding an admission of the church offices to women.

1. Men and women: starting from and returning to the beginning

Initial summary

As support for an authority relationship between man and woman (men ruling over women), reference is often made to the events which are recorded in the first chapters of Genesis. God made the man first, and the woman was the first to sin. Supposedly, this shows that women cannot be office-bearers in the church.

However, the beginning of Genesis offers us quite a different picture. It shows us how man and woman were both created in God's image, how they both received the identical high cultural mandate to fulfill, and how they were meant help each other and complement each other. The fact that this harmonious begin situation was then shattered and degenerated into all kinds of inequality, does not ask for an modification of the ideal (same image, same task), but precisely calls us to strive for a restoration of it.

Introduction

(Note of the translator: in the rest of this translation, Bible quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV)).

Different churches, both within The Netherlands and abroad, have expressed criticism of the decision of the General Synod of Meppel (2017) to create room for women as office-bearers. Part of this criticism focuses on the interpretation of Genesis 1-3, and of Paul's references to those chapters, especially in 1 Timothy 2, 1 Corinthians 11, and Galatians 3.

For example, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (OPC) pointed to the significance of the order which God made use of: He created Adam first, and after that Eve. The OPC writes (note of the translator: the original English was not consulted): "We observe that God, even before Eve was created, forbade Adam to eat of the fruit of tree. Eve violated that commandment, after she was misled by the snake. Hereby she ignored Adam's leading role, and was instrumental in leading both of them into sin. These two events (the order established at creation, and the fact that Eve allowed herself and Adam to be misled) are the basis upon which the Holy Spirit later gave His command not to admit women to the special office of minister or elder in the church of Christ."

As well, eight Dutch congregations in our federation, which have worked together to call for a revision of the decisions, asked, during a discussion session which was organized with them, for a close reading of Genesis 1-3 and of Paul's references to these chapters.

The following is, point by point, the interpretation of these Bible portions which supposedly forbid women to serve in the church offices:

Genesis 1

God makes both man and woman in His image (Genesis 1:27).

- They are called to love one another and to seek the best for each other.
- Both of them are allowed to represent their Creator and point to Him in all things.
- Together they receive the mandate to fill the earth, to give leadership to the earth, in particular to the animals (Genesis 1:28).

- Man and woman stand side by side in exercising this authority.
- God gives man and woman equal value.

Genesis 2

God gives man and woman different positions and responsibility.

- God makes the man first, out of earth, and then makes the woman out of the man (Genesis 2:7).
- God forbids Adam to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; Adam has the primary responsibility to obey that command (Genesis 2:16-17).
- The woman is made as a helper for the man, not the other way around (Genesis 2:18).
- The man (Hebrew: *ish*) calls the woman after himself: "Woman" (Hebrew: *ishah*) (Genesis 2:23).
- In the process and enactment of marriage, the man takes the initiative (Genesis 2:24).

Genesis 3

After the Fall, as well, God takes both the equality *and* the difference of position of man and woman into account.

- Not Adam, but Eve is misled by Satan. She is the first one who sins (Genesis 3:1).
- After the Fall, God first summons Adam to give an account, and only after that Eve (Genesis 3:9).
- The Gospel, by which God intervenes savingly, rescuing man and woman from sin, does not constitute a break with creation, but a restoration of creation. The loving unity of man and woman is restored, and the differing responsibilities are again put into practice according to God's original intention (Genesis 3:16).¹

1 Timothy 2

- Paul is probably talking here about a specific situation in Ephesus (see 1 Timothy 1:3-7), but he bases his prohibition on the Biblical statements about creation and the Fall. The reference in 1 Timothy 2:13 (*for Adam was formed first, then Eve*) is a clear reference to Genesis 2:24-25. In 1 Timothy 2 Paul is alluding to what Eve says in Genesis 3:13: *the serpent deceived me, and I ate*. Paul does not exonerate Adam (see Romans 5:12-19), but tells what happens when the proper division of the roles of man and woman is reversed. That's why he forbids women to teach with authority in the church. Since he bases this on creation and the Fall, there is every reason to conclude that this prohibition is in effect in our day as well.

1 Corinthians 11

- Paul wants all women to continue to give a visible expression of their support for male leadership in the church: "For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (vs. 8-9). This passage does not argue for differing roles for man and woman in the church, but only indicates the way these roles are carried out. Indeed, Paul seeks to obliterate all male feelings of superiority by adding: "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman

¹ In the Synod report of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (2000) we read on this subject: "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."

was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God" (vs. 11-12). However, this in no way takes away from the fact that this passage is saying that male leadership in the church ought to be respected.

Galatians 3

- In Galatians 3:28 Paul writes: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus." The first point Paul is making here is the truth that where it concerns salvation in Christ, there is no difference between man or woman (or between Jew and Greek, slave or free). This text certainly has social consequences. Paul, in his conflict with Peter in Galatians 2:11-14 demands that Jews and Greeks, in their fellowship around dining tables, may never be separated from each other. But this text does not speak directly about the subject of offices in the church.

If you follow this interpretation, it leads to the conclusion that women may not bear any church office. However, in the interpretation which follows we hope to show that you can explain these Bible passages differently. In chapter 5, we deal in detail with the charge that our interpretation undermines the authority of Scripture. There we discuss hermeneutics and the authority of Scripture. And in chapter 6 we discuss the "remain silent" texts. This different interpretation, which the Synod of Meppel called Scriptural, offers, in our view, room for female office-bearers.²

Genesis 1-3

Genesis 1

Equality: both man and woman are God's image

All Bible exegetes agree about how impressive and significant it is that God has created human beings in His image. B. Wentsel writes, for example: "the idea of man and woman being 'the image of God' is no peripheral thought of the author, nor does it constitute a subordinate theme in the Scriptures, but is a keyword. By means of this notion the nobility, the value, and the specific character of human beings are portrayed."³

Being the image of God: this is true of both man *and* woman. John Calvin maintained, incorrectly, that there was a difference: "Certainly, it cannot be denied, that the woman also, though in the second degree, was created in the image of God..."⁴ The plural "them" (Genesis 1:26) indicates that both the man and the woman were made in God's image. Both were equally gifted to be able, as God's representatives, to fulfill their given task, and together to cultivate the earth. "They will be fruitful and multiply, they will fill the earth and bring it under subjection, they will have dominion over the fish and the birds and everything that creeps on the ground. And that is at the same time their task, the task of humanity, both the man as well as the woman, both of whom have been created in the image of God."⁵ That says a lot. "Hereby it has been declared, in principle, that the man and the woman have a high and costly value. There is in Genesis 1:17 no thought of one being more or less important, being more or less valuable, being higher or lower, religiously and ethically, socially and culturally. Here we see the image of God as being for each the same, equality and partnership, a being together and a cooperation in the area of the entirety of culture."⁶

² In order to provide an interpretation which is as good as possible, we have chosen to first give attention to Genesis 1-3, then to compare Scripture with Scripture, and see how Paul uses these texts. The so-called "remain silent" texts are looked at in chapter 6.

³ Wentsel, B., *Dogmatiek*, Dl.3a, Kampen: 1987, p. 588.

⁴ Calvin, J., *Commentary on the book of Genesis, Vol. 1* (trans., John King; original Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh, Scotland; reprint Baker Book House), Grand Rapids: 1979, p. 129 (comment on Genesis 2:18).

⁵ Gispen, W.H., *Genesis (Commentaar op het Oude Testament)*, Kampen: 1974.

⁶ Wentsel, B., *Dogmatiek*, Dl.3a, Kampen: 1987, p. 588.

There can be no area where man or woman can say to the other: "I don't need you."

Distinctions

It is not the case that this is all there is to say, for God also creates differences between man and woman. Right after it is said that God created humanity as His image, we read that He created them "male and female" (Genesis 1:27). God did not create a unisex creature, He created male and female. However, it is difficult to pin down precisely what is unique to man and to woman. There are observable differences, for example, among which a different role in reproduction. But in the case of psychological differences, it is considerably more difficult to describe. We may safely say that the last word has not yet been spoken about this subject.

"Wholeness of life is to be reached where both the male and the female element are fruitfully present. Both are jointly responsible in their own fashion. The woman provides her contribution in her own characteristic way to the totality of life." And: "Where this equality has been put into effect at all levels, it will in practice be clear that man and woman, by virtue of their own identity, will find their own path in life, whether in the matter of choosing a profession or tracing out an area of concentration, or in playing one's own role in the same area as the other."⁷

"Many people are afraid that the distinct qualities of men and women will become invisible if they work together in all areas, afraid that they will then become 'the same,' and that the uniqueness of their sexuality will disappear. But is this really the case? Have you ever observed that people become exactly the same because they work together? Even when people carry out the same tasks, everybody does it in his or her own way. (...) It is precisely when we work together that our uniqueness comes to expression, that we discover what our own talents are and what the abilities of the other person are. And what is even more important: only then is our dependence on one another most visible. We show that we need one another."⁸

Genesis 2

Text and culture

To achieve a valid reading and interpretation of Genesis 2 it's important to realize that the events of this book in the Bible were written (much) later than they occurred in history. The writer(s) lived in a completely different time, in which the relation of man to woman was also different than our day. If you don't take account of this, you may inadvertently read elements of the culture after the Fall into God's revelation in the first chapters of Genesis. One example is the repeated formula, "the man *and his wife*" (Genesis 2:25; 3:8; see also verse 12). If you're not aware of the fact that this way of speaking about man and woman is borrowed from the language and culture the post-Fall situation, that of the patriarchs of ancient Israel, you risk understanding this phrase as a subordination of woman with respect to the man, intended by God. If you are aware of the background of the writer(s) of the Bible and the typical use of words and images belonging to it, you will be actually surprised by those passages, in Genesis 2, for example, in which the equality of man and woman is emphasized. The Holy Spirit, here, lifts, as it were, the writer(s) of the Bible up out of his (their) limitations as culture-bound human beings. See also Genesis 5:1b-2: "When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created." This sentence contains an "inversion" (chiastic) structure.⁹

⁷ Wentsel, B., *Dogmatiek*, Dl.3a, Kampen: 1987, p. 588.

⁸ Leene, A., *Samen dansen in de kerk, Als mannen en vrouwen op God lijken*, Amsterdam: 2004.

⁹ Paul, M.J., Brink, G. van den, Bette, J.C. *Bijbelcommentaar Genesis/Exodus*, Veenendaal: 2011.

- a. When God created,
 - b. Man,
 - c. he made him in the likeness of God;
 - c` male and female he created them,
(and he blessed them and named them)
 - b` Man,
 - a` when they were created

By calling both of them "man," God emphasizes the complete equality of both individuals, created by Him: both are made almost divine, crowned with glory and honor to be God's next-in-command king and queen (Psalm 8:6).

Adam first, then Eve

Man and woman were created by God *after* each other in time, and in different ways: Adam first, out of the ground, then Eve, out of Adam's rib or side. You could conclude from this that this indicates a subservient role for Eve, but that is not demanded by the description of the events as they are written in Genesis 2.

First of all, we do not read in this chapter that God created the *man* (in contrast to woman) first. The name "Adam" is not yet used as proper name in Genesis 2: God creates the woman out of the "human being" ("Adam") (Genesis 2:7). It is only after this that the "human being" becomes two: "she shall be called Woman (the female form of "man"), because she was taken out of Man."¹⁰ The woman is not created as a new creature, next to the man; rather, she is made *out of* him. Humanity "blossoms into" man and woman. But it is also true that the fact that man and woman are differently made in time and as far as "material" is concerned, is communicated as an "unadorned fact" in the second chapter of the Bible. Nothing is said about the possible consequences for their mutual relationship.

The sequence of the appearance of man and woman at creation in Genesis 2 does not imply difference in rank. "In theory a temporal sequence can indicate or imply an order of rank. But in Eden that was not the case, because the 'order' was indicated from the beginning as follows: man and woman, who were created after each other, were nevertheless given *equal dominion* over the creation in order to bear God's image *together*. Where the 'order' is so clearly described, it is impossible to draw another conclusion merely from the sequence of appearance."¹¹

The same applies for the fact that Adam gave names to the animals. There are exegetes who conceive of this as a sign of his position of superiority. However, the text of Genesis 2 does not particularly indicate this. The task of Adam giving names to the animals is described in Genesis 2 in the context of the human being who is alone and is looking for someone to help him. In *this* context God brings all the animals to Adam, and Adam calls them what they signify for him. None of them are found to provide the helper he's looking for. Thus, being called to be name-giver to the animals is not in the first place an indication of Adam's authority, but of his quest for help and cooperation.¹²

¹⁰ Boer, de ,E.A., *Zij aan zij, Pleidooi voor een vrouwelijk ambt in de kerk*, Barneveld: 2006.

¹¹ Amersfoort-de Horsten, *Man, vrouw en ambt* (In revisieverzoek), 2019.

¹² The Synod report of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (2000) sees the man's authority over the woman exclusively in the relationship within marriage: "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 (...) There is nothing in Genesis 2 to suggest that male priority goes beyond the institution of marriage."

A Helper fit for him

The word "helper" (Genesis 2:18) generally suggests to us the sense of someone who makes a certain contribution somewhere, someone who offers help where a job needs to be done. Intuitively, this means a second class position. However, in Genesis 2 an image emerges of two equally strong and equally qualified creatures of God.

"Precisely because God is called the Helper of Israel, it's impossible to interpret helper here as meaning the lesser to the person who is helped. In the texts just cited it is exactly the opposite. Being a 'helper' indicates a relation of complementing and supporting each other."¹³ The male form of the Hebrew word used here points as well to a strong helper who is really a match for the person being helped.

"Ezer," the Hebrew word for helper, is a general word which in itself does not indicate subservience. When it is applied to the woman, it does not signify that she is not of equal stature as he. The word is used 21 times in the Old Testament. 16 times it involves someone "greater" who helps us (God as Israel's helper: Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7,26,29; Psalm 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:17; 115:9, 10,11; 121:1,2; 124:8; 146:5; Hosea 13:9), 5 times without having a hierarchical meaning (2 times for the woman as creation (Genesis 2:18,20); and 3 times for nations Israel asked military help from (Isaiah 30:5; Ezekiel 12:4; Daniel 11:34)).

The addition "fit for him" (New King James Version: "a helper comparable to him") in Genesis 2:18 puts even more emphasis on the equality of the helper God is giving to the man. We may think of the "left hand" over against the "right hand," together being *one*.

The Hebrew word "kenegdo" means: "over against," "counterpart" (Herbert Donner). You could think of "mirror image," in which the man recognizes himself. See Adam's reaction in vs. 23. This was God's whole intention in "cutting" the woman out of the "wood" of Adam.

Whatever wording you choose, here an image is painted of two equal partners, who complement each other and who now, together, may carry out an important commission. "As in Genesis 1 it is not a complementarity which makes the one subject to the other. Neither has authority over the other; neither is either the leader or the led. The image puts concretely the point made in Genesis 1, that it is men and women together who comprise the representation of God in the world."¹⁴

The woman made from the rib/side of the man

The fact that the woman was made from (a rib of) the man, although indicating a different creation process, emphasizes precisely their equality and mutuality. "The term 'tsela,' 'side' ('rib') (Genesis 2:21) emphasizes the two-sidedness of the human, as we read in 1:27b, and indicates that the woman has the same level as the "adam," "human being," out of which this "side" has been taken. At the same time, by means of this expression the close relationship between the man and his wife is portrayed."¹⁵ "The intention is clear: the process of creation itself explains how man and woman belong together."¹⁶

Man-woman

The unity and equality of man and woman strike us again when Adam meets his wife for the first time. At that occasion, he exclaims with surprise: "*One* the same as me!" (Genesis 2:23).

¹³ Genderen, J. van, Velema, W.H., *Beknopte Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Kampen: 1992.

¹⁴ Goldingay, J., *Genesis for everyone*, London: 2010.

¹⁵ Jagersma, H., *Verklaring van de Hebreeuwse Bijbel Genesis 1:1-25:11*, Nijkerk: 1995.

¹⁶ Westermann, C., *Genesis 1-11*: London: 1974.

The man (Hebrew: "ish") calls her after himself: "isha" (woman). This pair of words serves to strengthen their solidarity with each other, rather than the difference between them, or express a relation of authority. "With the words: 'she shall be called "isha," because she was taken out of "ish",' the close relation between the ish, man, and the isha, the woman, is very emphatically verbalized."¹⁷ After Adam has said that the woman has completely the same character as he does, he uses a term which expresses that exactly.

Marriage

It is very special, as well, that the man is going to break his ties with his parents, and become one with his wife. In the culture of that day this says a lot. For it was the case that a married son almost always would stay with his family to live. In chapter 2 we go more deeply into this cultural context.

This makes the prescription in Genesis 2:24 even more striking: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife." We see here a manner of speaking which gives expression to a total, lasting, spiritual and emotional unity. It is a call for the man to give himself totally to that one woman, and to focus on her interests, to a deep psychological attachment to her. "It is the atmosphere of the Song of Solomon."¹⁸

Just as Genesis 1 does, Genesis 2 puts all the emphasis on the unity, the solidarity, and the togetherness of man and woman. An image is painted for us of a woman who in a complementary way fits her husband. Man and woman are, in their diversity, mutually dependent on each other. Their relationship is one of equality and complementarity, not one of the one ruling the other. The keyword is not rank order or difference, but unity. There is variety here, but above all unity.

The marriage form in our Reformed Church Book also begins by stating this: with regard to the aspects of the marriage bond, the unity of husband and wife is primary.¹⁹ This is not a denial of the differences which exist; unity is not the same as being exactly the same. What is involved is not a reduction of the differences, but being bound together, and therefore working together.

On the basis of this unity, the Reformed dogmatician, B. Wentsel, draws the conclusion that "women many not be excluded from any sector of public life. The church ought to open all the church offices to women, and, where they have done this already, give women a proportional representation in the governing of the church, corresponding to their capability and gifts."²⁰

Genesis 3

The woman is misled

The snake addresses the woman (Genesis 3:1). By perverting the facts, the snake is attempting to find an entrance into the woman's mind in order to introduce sin into the world. Wrongly, the woman does not get help from the man in her conversation with the snake. Hereby she is avoiding their characteristic and essential identity as a team. And Satan succeeds in his sly plan: Eve eats of the

¹⁷ Jagersma, H., *Verklaring van de Hebreeuwse Bijbel Genesis 1:1-25:11*, Nijkerk: 1995.

¹⁸ Deurloo, K. van, *Genesis*. (Verklaring van een Bijbelgedeelte), Kampen: 1999.

¹⁹ In the report of the Synod committee which studied the subject of man and woman in relation to the ordination of women several years ago, called "Serving Together" (Dutch: "Samen Dienen") we read the following words, which are very worth taking to heart: "In Genesis the commission to rule and develop this earth is given to Adam and Eve together. As the first human couple, they are husband-and-wife, but at the same time they represent humanity. This commission is still in effect for all of humanity. But increasingly there are those who remain unmarried, through circumstances or by choice. The original commission to men and women is in our day partly carried out outside the setting of marriage. This means, at least, that certain Biblical prescriptions are not always directly applicable in our present day" (Samen Dienen, p. 9).

²⁰ Wentsel, B., *Dogmatiek*, Dl.3a, Kampen: 1987, p. 588.

forbidden fruit. When she sins, she turns to her husband "who was *with her*" ("emah") (Genesis 3:6). "This word accentuates the fact that both the woman and the man have sinned."²¹ By means of the added clause, "the narrator seeks to bring to expression the fact that Adam didn't need any tempting, he just went along. In this way the narrator shows that, next to one way of transgressing, by means of temptation, there is another, just as important: going along."²² The man then makes manifest that he is, indeed just like his wife, disobedient to God: "and he ate" (Genesis 3:6). Together they transgress the boundaries which were given to Adam in Genesis 1:27, and which he, at that time, accepted without any hesitation. Together, and without a word, they eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree. This silence means that "the man, without any questions or further explanation, goes along with eating the fruit."²³

Further, the joint role of Eve and Adam as *partners in crime* is visible in the events which directly follow. Both are conscious of their being naked. Both make loincloths of fig leaves to cover their nakedness. Both receive God's judgment pronounced upon them.

Adam is addressed

The separation between God and humanity which has taken place, is followed by immense consequences; God does not let this go unpunished. He addresses Adam: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9).

There is a difference of interpretation concerning the fact that *God* calls to Adam. Nevertheless, it is clear that this call is heard *after* the Fall into sin. It is a signpost marking the contrast between the situation now and the harmony and equal status of Adam and Eve in Genesis 1 and 2, before. The Fall into sin has shattered the original unity which existed previously.

Ruling

God comes now with three severe punishments. The snake "bites the dust." Man and woman are deeply, negatively affected as far as carrying out their jointly given cultural mandate (Genesis 1:28). The man is confronted with thorns, thistles, and the sweat of future labor. The woman sees, next to the pain and difficulty she will experience in childbearing, that her unity with the man has been severely compromised: her "desire shall be with her husband," and "he shall rule over her" (Hebrew: "mashal").

"Ruling" is itself a neutral term. Depending on who is ruling, it can have either a positive or a negative result. For example, Ezekiel speaks of foreigners who "rule" as a judgment (11:9), Isaiah gives an oracle concerning Egypt as having a "hard master," a "fierce king" who will "rule over them" (19:4), and of usurers who exploit the people of Israel and "rule" over them (3:12). However, God Himself is also called a "ruler": "Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him" (Isaiah 40:10). "O Bethlehem... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel... And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth" (Micha 5:2,4). The connotation and emotional impact of "ruling" is thus dependent upon the context.

Genesis 3 tells of the announcement of judgment and a curse. The "ruling of the man" over the woman (3:16), in the light of this context, is interpreted by almost all commentators as extremely negative for

²¹ Selms, A. van, *Genesis (De Prediking van hert Oude Testament)*, Nijkerk: 1989.

²² Westermann, C., *Genesis (Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament)*. Neukirchen:1974.

²³ Jagersma, H., *Verklaring van de Hebreeuwse Bijbel Genesis 1:1-25:11*, Nijkerk: 1995.

the woman. "Ruling is just as negative as the thorns and thistles of verse 18. It is a judgment, and that not only for the woman, but indirectly also for the man (...) The ruling of humanity over the animals is part of the order of creation, but the ruling of the man over the woman is a judgment."²⁴

In the following chapters of Genesis the fact that the perfect unity of man and woman, as it existed in the beginning, has been disrupted by the tyrannical behavior of the man, becomes visible in many different ways. We can point out a few examples: Lamech is not satisfied with having *one* wife, as God intended (see the Song of Solomon), but takes two wives (Genesis 4:19). Sichem brutally crashes through all boundaries, and assaults and rapes Dina, Jacob's daughter (Genesis 34:2).

Curse or punishment

The punishment, described in Genesis 3:16, that the man will rule over his wife, was seen for a long time, by many Bible expositors and churches, as a universal prescription.

You find this interpretation in the marriage form which was used in the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands up until the previous century. Here the bride receives the following commission: "You are to love your lawful husband, honor, respect, and also obey him in all things which are right and proper, as your lord; just as the body is to be submissive to its head, and the congregation to Christ. You are not to rule over your husband, but be silent; for Adam was made first, and then Eve, in order to help Adam. And after the Fall God said to Eve, and through her, to all women: 'your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.' You are not to oppose this ordinance of God, but much rather obey the commandment of God, and follow the example of those holy women who put their hope in God, and were submissive to their husbands; just as Sarah was obedient to her husband, Abraham, calling him lord."

However, Genesis 3 does not prescribe a divine "ordinance," but pronounces a *curse* on the woman, the effects of which may and actually *must* take place, just as the thorns and thistles were pronounced on the man as a curse.

"We do not read here that what will be the case in practice, is the way it should be (quoting Genesis 3:16). Much of the misery in the relation between husband and wife is a factual result of the Fall. However, this does not mean that wives are to acquiesce to abusive situations instead of combatting them. That's why it is also incorrect to derive an ethical guideline from this text, as if it were God's intention that wives should be submissive to their husbands."²⁵

"Genesis 3:16 was interpreted in the past as a *command* that the wife should be submissive to her husband, whereas the situation here is a *punishment*, a curse pronouncement, or distress regulation, which was to be and still must be fought against and overcome."²⁶

Restoration

Happily, God does not abandon men and women to their fate, after the Fall. In addition to the judgment, He announces the end of the dictatorship of the one who is the chief guilty person, and comes with words of grace: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring, he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

²⁴ Selms, A. van, *Genesis (De Prediking van het Oude Testament)*. Nijkerk: 1989.

²⁵ Douma, J., *Genesis*, Kampen: 2005. p. 32.

²⁶ Wentsel, B., *Dogmatiek*. Dl.3a, Kampen: 1987. p. 588.

God offers a hopeful perspective and restoration with this promise of the coming of a descendant who will dethrone Satan.

Adam and Eve

Adam gives the woman a name, Eve. "She was the mother of all living."

It is not correct to see in this giving of a name an act of leadership on Adam's part. Women, too, give names to others (without the man being mentioned) in the Bible: Cain (Genesis 4:1), Seth (Genesis 4:25). Other examples are: Moab (Genesis 19:37), Ruben (Genesis 9:32), Joseph (Genesis 30:6), Moses (Exodus 10), Samson (Judges 13:24), Samuel (1 Samuel 1:20), and see also Luke 1: 60.

Back to the beginning

God restores what has gone wrong in His good creation. It is striking about this restoration that when the "last things" are mentioned ("eschaton"), the language of the "first things" ("proton") returns (see Isaiah 11, Revelation 21). The return is thus a going back to the beginning, but then glorified. We hear this refrain continually in the Bible.

We hear it in Mark 10:6 ("But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female'"), and in 2 Corinthians 3:18 ("And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another"), echoing Genesis 1:26 ("Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock, and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth'").

Colossians 3:10 ("[you have put on] the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator") refers to Genesis 1:27 ("So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them"). Matthew 19:8 ("Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so") goes back to Genesis 2:24 ("Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh").

And Revelation 22:2 ("...also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month") is directly connected to Genesis 2:9 ("And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil").

In His grace, God works with "slow haste" on returning to the beginning. That is to say, without domination from man's side or the subordination of the woman, God is moving to restore, personally to each, and jointly together, His image, and the love which as a delicious aroma pervades everything. "New Jerusalem is at the same time New Eden (...) The disturbance of the first paradise forced God to pronounce the curses (Genesis 3:14,17). That is in New Eden no longer necessary: nothing which God's curse rested upon will be found in the city."²⁷

Paul and Genesis 1-3

Introduction

In his letters the apostle Paul refers back, in different places, to God's creation of man and woman. He does that for example in 1 Timothy 2:11-14, 1 Corinthians 11:3-12, and Galatians 3:28. (An extensive

²⁷ Kamp, H.R. van der, *Openbaring. Profetie vanaf Patmos* (CNT), Kampen:2000.

discussion of the interpretation of the first-mentioned text, about the "remain silent" texts, is to be found in chapter 6 of this report.) Here we look above all at how Paul appeals to Genesis 2 and 3.

1 Timothy 2

Paul writes to Timothy: "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." (1 Timothy 2:11-13).²⁸

The chronological order of "first Adam, then Eve; first the man, then the woman" does not signify a "creation order" of rank, as we found in reading in Genesis 1 and 2. The relation between man and woman at creation is distinguished by unity and equality. There is no indication of a normative, asymmetric structure which God has placed in creation.

Does what Paul says to Timothy give us a reason to return to Genesis and revise the interpretation which we have given earlier? Or is it possible that Paul in 1 Timothy 2 means perhaps something other than that we have long thought was his reasoning?

What Paul writes in other places, does not, in any case, point in the direction of a pattern which applied to Adam and Eve (the one created after the other), which can be extended to meaning a strict rank order applying to all men and all women.²⁹

We look at a few examples. In his letter to the church in Rome Paul, when he writes about who has brought sin into the world, sees all men and women as included in Adam: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Adam may then here be seen as the head of humanity. On the other hand, Eve is called the mother of all human beings (Genesis 3:20). In the "foundational promise" concerning the battle with the snake, Adam is not mentioned, but she is, and believers are called the descendants of Eve (Genesis 3:15). In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul alludes to the fact that "the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning"; but he does not apply this to women only. He warns *all* the Corinthians, thus also the men, that they ought not to be led astray from following Christ: "But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3).

After Paul points to Adam's priority at creation, he then points to Eve's priority in being tempted and sinning.³⁰ If the creation order of "first the man then the woman" meant a timeless rank order, then wouldn't that have been sufficient and decisive for the apostle to state?³¹ However, instead of that he comes with a *second* argument regarding a "Fall order": the woman was misled, not the man.

All things considered, there is good reason to wonder if Paul in 1 Timothy 2 is really referring to Adam and Eve in order to argue for a continuing, subordinate position of the woman.

If Paul is not arguing based on a "creation order," or even a "Fall order," *what* is Paul getting at with his reference to Adam and Eve?

²⁸ The question of whether Paul is thinking here specifically of gatherings or not is addressed in chapter 6. See especially footnote 73 there.

²⁹ Niemeijer, P., *Over zwijgteksten en scheppingswerk*, Hilversum: 2018

³⁰ Klinker-de Klerck, M., *Herderlijke regel of inburgeringscursus?*, Zoetermeer: 2013. p. 57.

³¹ Dorland, P., *Ambtsdrager M/V. Mogen vrouwen een kerkelijk ambt bekleden?* Soest:2013.

To get a good answer to this question, it's important to consider that the apostle is reacting to a concrete discussion in the congregation of Ephesus, and that he is addressing himself to what is happening there. Concretely he is facing the question about how he should react to the claim from women that they may exercise authority over men, and even place themselves *above* them (vs. 12). It seems that these women have supported their claim with arguments, pointing to the central role of Eve. Paul responds to this argumentation. Eve as seen by the women in Ephesus as a role model. She is the "mother of all living" (Genesis 3:20). New life proceeds from her and her daughters. This reasoning, with the claim that belongs to it, is rejected by Paul. Eve was not first, but Adam. They may not use the order at creation as an argument to claim authority. Support for this interpretation can be seen in the way Paul, in the original Greek, emphatically names Adam in the sentence: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve." He says this to contradict what is being said about Eve's priority. Further, Paul calls Eve by her name, whereas she had received that name only after the Fall (Genesis 3:20). This seems to be a conscious choice, since in verse 14 he speaks once more about "the woman." While she was only called Eve later on, according to Paul, the first woman was created after and out of the man. Humanity did not begin with the woman. Women in Ephesus can therefore not argue from a "birth order" to claim authority over men. And thus we, in our day, can similarly not argue from a chronological order at creation to support the claim that only men can be considered for exercising a "ruling office" in church.³²

The same thing applies to the second argument of Paul: not Adam, but the woman was misled. Paul had once written: "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:21). That suited the interpretation of the women in Ephesus just fine, that is, with their claim of legitimately having authority in and leading the church. But Paul rejects this claim. For the second "misled" he uses in Greek a strong word that means something like "to mislead completely." Hereby he states that the woman did not do better than her husband. That is what he wants to say. His message is in any case *not*: "The first woman allowed herself to be misled, and therefore, also, women may not teach in the congregation."³³

1 Corinthians 11

Paul writes: "For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man."

This passage about head coverings has to do with the application of a principle, instead of the principle itself; there is little difference of opinion about this. In fact in this passage it is clearly allowed for a woman to pray and to prophesy in church services, just as long as she doesn't do so in an offensive way. This passage thus supports the broader Biblical teaching that women and men do not only share in the same way salvation in Christ, but also in the responsibility for church services and even for the prophetic proclamation of the Gospel.

Paul reminds his readers, just like in 1 Timothy 2, about creation: God made the woman from and for the man. It seems to be just a small step to say on this basis: on the grounds of creation there is therefore a continuing subservient role for the woman with regard to the man. But when we draw this conclusion we ought to take account of *all* of Paul's words.

"Paul makes it clear that what he has been saying is not meant as an undue subordination of women. There is a partnership between the sexes and in the Lord neither exists without the other."³⁴

³² Folkers, H., Harmsen, M., Leene, A., Verkerk, M., *Zonen & dochters profeteren*, Zoetermeer: 2004, p. 156

³³ Dorland, P., *Ambtsdrager M/V. Mogen vrouwen een kerkelijk ambt bekleden?* Soest:2013.

³⁴ Morris, L., *1 Corinthians*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Melbourne: 1958.

Almost directly after his statement about the woman who comes forth from the man and for his sake has been created, Paul writes strikingly: "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God" (1 Corinthians 11:11,12). This very significant addition of Paul is not to be found in Genesis 1-3, but the apostle brings it to the readers' attention. Hereby he points to the motif of the interconnectedness and the solidarity of a husband and his wife. Both matters belong, according to Paul, to the structure of created life: the woman comes out of the man, *and* the man exists by means of the woman. The total picture becomes hereby quite different.

Paul does not put the emphasis on subordination, but, just as Genesis does, on the unity of man and woman. God has determined at creation that "in the Lord" one cannot exist apart from the other. It is a matter not of subordination, but of coordination as "creation order."

"Paul reminds his readers in a healthy way that man and woman have been created for each other and that they need each other. While the first woman was taken out of the man, all men since then have been born from a woman. Paul emphasizes that this mutual service is 'in the Lord' (that is to say, in Christ), not because this truth only applies to Christians, but because it is precisely Christians who ought to respect the equality of man and woman."³⁵

³⁵ Anderson, D., *1 Korintiërs, Orde op zaken in een jonge stadskerk* (Nieuwe Testament), Kampen:2008.

Galatians 3³⁶

Paul writes: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28) His statement has been significantly called "the magna charta of the proclamation of equality."³⁷ More is involved here than only participating in salvation in Christ.

"Differences or variation ought not make a difference in privilege or rank in the congregation" (Jager:94).³⁸

"...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."³⁹

"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."⁴⁰

"Here the normal words for man and woman are not used, but rather two words which indicate male and female. This means that in Christianity no woman is any longer made subordinate due to her sex. In Christ she has the same position as the man--for that time a revolutionary statement!"⁴¹ (We write more about this in the following chapter.)

"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."⁴² What is here involved is nothing less than the disappearance of ranks and classes; now there is equal value for all who have been clothed with Christ.

The equal position of men and women in church services becomes even clearer against the background of the subordinated position of the woman--because of her not being circumcised and her menstrual bleeding as a source of uncleanness--in the Old Testament services in the temple and in the synagogue. "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Colossians 3:11).

³⁶ Much of this chapter is borrowed from the Synod report of the Christian Reformed Church in North America from 2000.

³⁷ Wentsel, B., *Dogmatiek*, Dl.3a, Kampen: 1987, p. 632.

³⁸ Jager, H.J., *De briefaan de Galaten*, Collegedictaat, Kampen: 1980.

³⁹ Christian Reformed report, p. 16-17.

⁴⁰ Christian Reformed report, p. 16.

⁴¹ Ouweneel, W.J., *De vrijheid van de Geest. Bijbelstudies bij de brief van Paulus aan de Galaten.*, Vaassen: 1997.

⁴² Christian Reformed report, p. 17.

See also Ephesians 4:5-6: " one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." Paul is not speaking here about baptismal practice, but about the meaning of baptism. All are equally incorporated as member of the body of Christ and are worthy, according to the measure of the gifts given (vs. 7), to be equipped for work in His service (vs. 12).

In this way the confession in Galatians 3 appropriates the equality of man and woman in Genesis 1:17 once again. "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.'"⁴³

Conclusion

Genesis 1 and 2 put all the emphasis on the unity, the solidarity, the togetherness of man and woman. An image is painted of a woman who in a complementary way "fits" the man. Man and woman are, in their diversity, mutually "right" for each other. They have an equal, complementary relationship, not one of the one having authority over the other. Not rank order or difference, but unity is the keyword. There is variety, but above all unity.

As well, the way that Paul, at different moments in his letters, quotes from Genesis 1-3, does not point to a timeless position of superior authority of male office bearers in the church, but precisely to (a restoration of) the unity and the equality of man and woman. Paul's words are therefore no barrier to allowing women to serve in the church offices.

⁴³ Christian Reformed report, p. 17.

2 Not ruling over, but serving

Initial summary

The chief question of this chapter is: does the New Testament teach us that there are differences between men and women which of necessity lead to the conclusion that women may not have a teaching or ruling office in the church? In the first place we consider whether gender is a criterion or not. If the Bible only describes situations in which men bear certain offices, does this lead of necessity to the conclusion that women may not bear these offices? In the second place we see if a difference in gifts would provide grounds for a distinction between men and women with respect to the offices. After this exploration via two approaches, our next step is to listen to the teaching of Jesus Christ about mutual relationships within the Kingdom of God. This teaching offers us an important fundamental imperative: don't lord it over others, but serve! Stemming from this fundamental imperative we look at the reality of the New Covenant and what Paul, in particular, writes about it, when it involves the mutual relationship between a man and a woman within marriage, and between men and women within the congregation of Christ. What can we learn from this about mutually being of service and serving in the church offices where men and women in the congregation are concerned? Finally, the chief question is answered in a conclusion.

Two lines?

When reflecting on man, woman, and church office, it is often said that there are two lines in the Bible, both of which ought to be taken into account of. One line is that of the equality of man and woman, and the other is that of different responsibilities. It is claimed that man and woman are equal, but that they have each received their own special position from God, with the accompanying responsibilities. They complement each other. The man leads, and the woman follows, it is then claimed. Or expressed differently: the man is given the service of ultimate responsibility, and the woman the service of giving help. In marriage, the man is to be the head, and the wife is to give the help which is fitting. The husband has authority over his wife, and the wife should obey it. This division of the position and the responsibilities is often described as a relation of authority: the husband has authority over his wife.

The difficulty of these two lines does not rest in the starting point, that God has made human beings as man and woman, and that this brings differences with it. God chose for this and had a clear intention in doing so. This is the way that God looks at humanity which He made as male and female, not equal in all ways, but of equal value. The question is: do the differences signaled here imply that women may not bear a teaching or ruling office in church? Do the latter belong exclusively to the responsibilities of the man?

When you answer this question on the basis of the two lines, you are using gender as the first criterion. If men are to assume a teaching and ruling office due to their maleness, does this mean, conversely, that women may not assume these offices due to their femaleness? However, the prior question we ought to pose is: does God use gender as the first and most important criterion? A question which flows from this is: suppose that in the situations which the Bible describes, only men have certain offices. Does this lead of necessity to the conclusion that the church offices, as we know them, cannot be opened to women? Or does the Bible give us more room here than we have thought for a long time?

Church offices: gender as the criterion?

On the basis of the commonly accepted structure of church offices in the Reformed tradition, with, for example, only male deacons, we have tended, indeed, to see maleness as the first criterion to be used, even before we look at the gifts which have been given by the Holy Spirit. We read, for example, in 1 Timothy 3:2 that the "overseer" must be the husband of one wife. The Lord Jesus appointed only male apostles. That strengthens us in the conviction that certain tasks are only meant for men. However, the question is whether these observations must be elevated to a norm, in the sense of: this is the way it should be, and should be always.

The way the Lord Jesus chose twelve men as His disciples is in continuity with the Old Testament, where we read about the twelve sons of Jacob as the patriarchs of the people of Israel. By appointing twelve disciples as His apostles, Jesus laid a basis for forming the new Israel (see Matthew 19:28), by means of which the blessing of Abraham was to reach all the nations.

However, this appointment of twelve apostles does not in advance exclude the appointment of women, in the preaching of Gospel. It is clear that women are able to proclaim to these twelve apostles the Gospel concerning the resurrection of the Lord. On the day of Pentecost, women share in receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament, and women are specified as fellow workers in the proclamation of the Gospel.

J.P. Versteeg writes about the fact that women, too, followed Jesus, as follows: "The fact that Jesus was followed by women must have been extremely startling and offensive. The attitude of Jesus toward women was in the most sharp contrast imaginable with the general attitude toward women of the men in Judaism of those days (...) Jesus' allowing women to follow Him was the most clear proof that He--over against the public opinion of those days--saw women as being at the same level as men. It had to be clear for every teacher of the Law and Pharisee that Jesus and His salvation were there for women in precisely the same way they were there for men. The women who followed Him each received from Him their individual task. Their following Him was at the same time their serving Him."⁴⁴

Seeing men, exclusively, as being able to serve in church office in the New Testament seems to mesh with the exclusive service of priests in the Old Testament (see 2 Corinthians 5:20). However, on the basis of what we see about the appointment of twelve men as apostles, we may wonder if this is really the case. And there are more texts of Scripture which do not support the case of men-only church offices.

We read in the letter to the Hebrews that the entire service of priests in the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ. If there is a service of priests now, then it applies to the congregation of Christ in its entirety, both men and women. This is the way the apostle Peter speaks about the congregation as a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:9). The line of being a priest is here extended to the congregation as a whole.

To connect the Old Testament service of priests with the New Testament service in the offices is furthermore remarkable, because the church of Christ in the age of the new covenant on earth does not need a separate office of priest any longer. Jesus Christ, as High Priest, continues the service of priests in heaven. Hereby He has brought into being a totally different, new reality. It means that men and women may participate, through Christ, in His salvation and in His Spirit, and may directly stand before God. They may boldly go to the throne of grace.

⁴⁴ Versteeg, J.P., *Evangelie in viervoud. Een karakteristiek van de vier evangeliën*, Kampen: 1980, p. 85.

Finally, in making a connection between the Old Testament service of priests and the New Testament service in the offices, it is not clear what exactly it means now to "minister Christ's redemption," and why this ministry would be only reserved for men.

For the rest, we ought to be careful in equating the New Testament elder with the office of elder as we now know it in the Reformed tradition. Strictly speaking, we don't have an office of "elder" anymore. We are accustomed to having often relatively *young* elders, who have not been appointed for a lifetime (Note of the translator: Presbyterian churches do ordain elders for life, but Reformed churches do not), and who have another set of tasks than is described in the New Testament. The same thing applies as far as the office of minister is concerned.

The church structure, as it is described in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, shows signs of the ancient family ("familia"): the elder was "...an overseer," "God's steward" in God's house (Titus 1:7). For the faith community in which men received a leading role was in large part was analogous to the community of the home (1 Timothy 3:5; see also Titus 1:6-9). The father, the "pater familias," of a home was the first to be seen as being suited to lead the Christian congregation.⁴⁵ The fact that apparently for Paul and the apostles it was natural that the "pater familias" would be appointed as elder, does not have to mean that their intention was hereby to establish a church office for all times which was exclusively meant for men. It is on the other hand a good explanation of why all the elders we see in the New Testament are men. However, in the New Testament we also read about women who were able to be active in the same way as the elders.

Prof. Dr. J. van Bruggen has pointed out that a woman like Phoebe, who as deaconess must have independently carried out many activities (Romans 16:1), undoubtedly also gave leadership to the congregation. That's why Van Bruggen does not want to conceive of the difference between overseers and deacons as a contrast between giving leadership on the one hand, and giving help and service on the other. Van Bruggen, while it is true that he assumes that hereby deacons did not yet have leadership over the whole congregation, still does not see the difference between overseers and deacons in the area of giving leadership or not.⁴⁶ Apparently, giving leadership (ruling) is not in itself unique to the task of the elders, but has a broader radius.

That's why it's easy to explain why we read about women who received responsible tasks in the congregation in Paul's first letter to Timothy.

Paul writes in this way in 1 Timothy 3:11 about women who in various ways are involved with the work of (overseers and) deacons. In 1 Timothy 5 we see older women/widows for whom the same can be said; we can even wonder if these women did not in fact belong to the group of elders. This also applies to the older women we read about in Titus 2. Often emphasis is laid on the men in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. But you can wonder about the kind of position the women we read about here really possessed in the congregation there. Did Paul and the apostles, when they appointed elders, really want to make the sharp distinction between offices which were only for men and offices in which women could play a role? It is plausible that, in a time and culture in which the role of elder was automatically filled by a man, they saw the possibility of letting women, next to the men, not only bear the office of deacon, but also the office of elder and minister.

⁴⁵ Van Houwelingen, P.H.R. *Timoteüs en Titus. Pastorale instructiebrieven* (CNT, deel 3), Kampen: Kok, 2009, p. 27.

⁴⁶ Folkerts, F.H. e.a. (red.), *Ambt en aktualiteit, Opstellen aangeboden aan prof. dr. C. Trimp t.g.v. zijn afscheid als hoogleraar aan de Theologische Universiteit van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, Haarlem: Vijlbrief, 1993.

As far as the office of minister is concerned, Prof. Dr. P.H.R. van Houwelingen has looked carefully at the relation between the current office of minister in Reformed churches and the New Testament elder. He writes that in the footsteps of Calvin, in the Reformed tradition, a distinction has been made between two kinds of elders: elders with a ruling office, and elders with a teaching office. "But there is an insufficient exegetical basis for two kinds of elders. The difference was one, not in the nature of their tasks, but rather of the intensity of their work in the congregation (...). The minister of our day is thus not an elder who has been given a special task (that of minister), but can be better compared to an apostolic assistant, like Timothy or Titus, as the classic Reformed ordination form does."⁴⁷

Apparently the ministry of the Word is not so much connected with the office of elder, but with the task of an apostolic assistant. In other words, one didn't have to be an elder to have this task. Therefore the question is: is it proper to say that women cannot proclaim the Word (cannot bear a teaching office) because they are not elders? If men didn't have to be an elder to have that position, why would women have to? And if the Word can be ministered by male apostolic assistants, why not by female apostolic assistants? It is striking that women in the New Testament are also called this, and are introduced to us as such (Romans 16:1-20). They too were thus assistants and fellow workers in the ministry of the Gospel. They too taught and prophesied (see for the teaching activity, Acts 18:26). In the written Gospels we hear already how on Easter morning women went on their way, proclaiming, and on the day of Pentecost women were mobilized to proclaim the mighty works of God. In the letters of the New Testament this line is apparently continued: women may know that they have been fully mobilized in passing on the good news of Jesus Christ. This offers us a basis to let them function as ministers in our present day.

Finally, our current structure of church offices in Reformed churches is traceable back to the time of the Reformation, and in particular, to Calvin. But Calvin, too, understood that the Bible does not offer us a kind of blueprint for the structure of offices and how they are to be filled. Functions in the church can disappear and/or shift. Church offices can be in movement. This fits very well with the work of the Holy Spirit, who gives His gifts where they are needed, and thereby mobilizes people in His own time and manner.

In this connection, how should we read Article 30 and 31 of the Belgic Confession? Does this confession allow us to open the church offices to women? These questions deserve attention because it has been thought that our Reformed confessions, on the basis of the Bible, clearly set up a boundary: the church offices ought to be closed to women in the congregation. Therefore, opening the offices to them is in conflict with the confessions. Supposedly, this is the only conclusion, seeing as the confessions clearly speak about male church office-bearers.

However, the difficulty with this approach is that in this way we pose questions to the confessions to which they have no answers. The issue as to whether women may or may not bear a church office, and what this involves, remains outside the horizon of the confessions. That is to be expected, of course, in confessional documents which arose in a time and culture in which only men were candidates for service in these offices. From the fact that the confessions assume this reality we cannot conclude that the confessions, on the basis of the Bible, do not allow any room for opening the offices to women in the congregation.

By the way, we observe that Article 30 and 31 of the Belgic Confession do not put any emphasis on the maleness of office-bearers. It is striking that Article 30 formulates its text modestly and even neutrally, when, in connection with the first letter to Timothy it speaks of "persons" (as the original French text

⁴⁷ Van Houwelingen, P.H.R. *Timoteüs en Titus. Pastorale instructiebriefven* (CNT, deel 3), Kampen: Kok, 2009, p. 29-32.

also says). It is possible to hear here that Paul, in First Timothy, is writing about the ministry of men *and* women.

Offices and gifts

Looking at it from another angle, we can wonder if the borderline between allowing or not allowing certain people to bear a church office is the one separating the different genders. Suppose that we look at the two issues separately from each other, and take our starting point in another connection which is unmistakably present in the Bible, namely the connection between church offices as gifts to the congregation, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit which believers themselves receive. What is then the picture that the New Testament gives us?

Hereby we can think of the example of Timothy. Paul calls him not to neglect the gift which is in him, and which he has received in order to fulfill his calling (1 Timothy 4:14, see also 6:12). Paul connects the gift which Timothy has received and which has received public acknowledgment, on the one hand, and his competency to carry out his tasks, on the other. What is important is the gift which has been received. This guarantees that Timothy will be able to keep on carrying out his tasks. Timothy's special tasks demands a gift adequate to them, you could say, but, inversely, the gift demands to be used to carry out the tasks which Timothy has received.

Alongside this, we may think about the way in which Paul writes about special ministries in the congregation. From 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, for example, we can conclude that these ministries are gifts, given in order to guarantee that the gifts of the Spirit which all have received are put to use for the sake of building up the congregation of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:7,28, and Ephesians 4:7,11, and 16).

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-10 it is striking that the gifts and tasks are spoken of together; it seems as if they are one and the same thing. That is not extraordinary, when we think about the fact that those who have received the task from the Spirit to fulfill certain special ministries in the congregation are themselves just as much part of all in the congregation to whom the Spirit has given gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7). In other words, these are special ministries or tasks, carried out by persons who, with those gifts which they have received, have been able to be of service in putting into practice the gifts of all in the congregation.

The image that we get here of the congregation is the image of a "gifted" congregation where all, both men and women, share without distinction in the gifts of the Spirit. Gifts point to the way in which someone can and may be of service, and will be so in helping build up the congregation. We see that here no distinction is made between men and women. This could be an indication that they are equally available for service, including service in the ministry of church offices, in proportion to the gifts they have received for it.

Finally, Romans 12:3-8 and 1 Peter 4:10-11 certainly assume that there are services and ministries in the congregation, but they are not mentioned as such. The gifts are what is prominent. Apparently what is of first importance is the gifts themselves. In other words: the special services and ministries are hidden behind the gifts. Here too it appears that what is of decisive importance is not whether it is a man or a woman who fulfills these tasks. The gifts themselves settle the matter.

If it concerns the gifts of the Holy Spirit, then, on the basis of what we have just seen, the conclusion is that the tasks apparently demand gifts which fit these tasks, and that, inversely, the gifts demand certain tasks to be carried out. Tasks and gifts go and work together. No mention is made of a firm

connection between tasks and being a man. Further, nowhere in the New Testament do we read that women may not fulfill certain church offices in the congregation. And just as little is there any explicit statement that only men may bear certain offices. We may assume that with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), a new reality has truly made a breakthrough. With it, it is now the time in which all believers, both men and women, may share in the gifts of the Spirit. This includes the fact that women can be called to use their specific gifts for tasks for which their gifts are fitting, including when that will include church office responsibilities. Here it is not a matter of unconnected "proof texts" from the Bible, either for or against women in church office. The issue is: how may the reality of Pentecost take shape in the devoted use of gifts by men and women in the congregation of Christ? It has to do with the developing impact of the coming of Jesus Christ, in order to save us from the curse of sin and to restore broken relationships.

The teaching of Jesus

How did it actually happen that we as churches came to explicitly exclude women from the ministry of the church offices in the congregation?

One explanation is to be found in a certain interpretation of the so-called "remain silent" texts (1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15). A line of thinking emerges from this interpretation in which other Bible texts are seen to join in the chorus. Because of the so-called "remain silent" texts, women are given a subordinate place in church life, and this is coupled to the man being the head. That places him in a certain way above the woman: he represents Christ. Concretely filled in, this means that a married man can tell his wife what to do, *and* that men in the congregation should give direction to the women. You can call this ruling or dominating. From this standpoint it follows that in the congregation only men may speak with authority flowing from a church office. Because in the "remain silent" texts reference is made to the creation and to the law, this supposedly demonstrates that it is a matter of something which God has established as a timeless structure of the relationship between man and woman, as it has been since the beginning. Shortly summarized: in the whole Bible you find a "line of male responsibility," in which the woman is subordinate to the man.

In other passages of this report, as well, this line of thinking is analyzed. In this chapter we look at the question: is it possible that a danger is lurking in this line of thinking, whereby we unintentionally ascribe to men a certain superiority, which doesn't jibe with the teaching of Jesus?

In Mark 10:42-45, we read: Jesus called his disciples and said to them: "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Not "lording it over people," but serving them: Jesus Himself came with this approach to the world, and He asks His followers to adopt it as well. Following Jesus Christ means that that listen to Him, who tells us: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

There is a lot to say for the view that we should not conceive Mark 10:42-45 as words in which a contrast is made between the abuse of power of worldly leaders and the exercise of authority by (future) church leaders. The Lord Jesus appears to be teaching us a basic principle which applies in His kingdom and in the Christian congregation. That basic principle is heard in the Reformed church order

(see the *Gereformeerde Kerkboek* or www.gkv.nl/bestuur-en-organisatie/kerkorde/) in A2.2: "We all stand before the one Lord, Jesus Christ, the head of His church. No person or church may lord it over another person or church."

Not "lording it over people," but serving them: that basic principle totally opposes the curse of Genesis 3:16. It resounds in the way Paul, in Ephesians 5:21-33, speaks about the man as head within marriage, but also about the surrender of the woman to the man. We recognize it in the so-called "remain silent" texts. It is the lesson which Peter gives the office-bearers (1 Peter 5). This is evidently what is fitting for the kingdom of God, for everyone, regardless of gender.

The fact that Paul and Peter (see 1 Peter 3:1-7) speak in the context of the social relationships which were current in their day, does not mean they saw those relationships of authority as what God willed the creation order to be for all time. "Not lording it over people, but serving them" expresses the command to love from a different perspective than people of that time were used to. It is here a matter of the reality of God's kingdom and the restoration of relationships in Christ.

In the following section of this chapter, this is made more clear and worked out.

The restoration of relationships in Ephesians 5:21-33

This section of the letter speaks about the relation between man and woman within marriage. Hereby, verse 21 is the starting point for Paul. In marriage, too, the command is: submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ. What is involved here is mutual submission. By using this language the apostle expresses himself forcefully. Within a Christian marriage "lording it over the other" is completely wrong, just as it is completely wrong in the congregation of Christ.

This we continue to hear in the following words: Paul calls the man the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the church. Hereby self-renunciation is meant, the love of Christ which offered itself up. The husband ought to follow that example in relation to his wife. What is involved is a deep offering of oneself, in which Christ is reflected, He who loved us as Himself. A wife may in this way be served by her husband.

What can Paul have meant when he chose for the word "head"? He lived in a time in which women needed a "head." Generally the wife remained, in the legal and religious sense, part of the family of her father or eldest male representative, the "pater familias." What Paul writes here about marriage means that the woman disengages herself from the structures which belong to her old, pagan life, not a trivial step in any sense. She dedicates herself to her husband, and together with him they follow Christ as their head (Ephesians 5:22-24). What is going on here is a new order of existence: dedicated to Christ, a wife is from that point on dedicated to her husband and thereby also detached from her old, pagan life.

But doesn't that imply a new relationship of authority, whereby the husband commands and the wife obeys? Take notice that Paul here places the husband's being the head within the context of the relation between Christ and His congregation. The latter is the model and source for the mutuality within marriage. Paul is anxious to place men and women in their marriages within the community/family of Christ. Moreover, he characterizes the relationship between husband and wife in marriage from God's command to love, which gets its fulfillment in Christ. Everything indicates that Paul here is not describing the next relationship of authority, but a mutual, close solidarity with each other. Husband and wife form a solid relationship, just as there is a solid relationship between Christ

and His congregation. In this sense Paul is building on what he said in Ephesians 4, where he writes about Christ as head of the congregation. There Paul describes as primary the indissoluble solidarity between Christ and His congregation, and not His authority over it.

What does it mean for the wife to be dedicated to her husband? It means that she is being asked to answer his serving love with a surrender to her husband. Her surrender, too, exists in the light of the love of Christ, which is also true for her husband. Just as the love of Christ stirs up to mutual love and surrender to Him, so the wife can and may, for her part, surrender to her husband.

But the fact that the wife in this way submits to her husband, does not mean she is subordinate to him. It places her back in her proper place, side by side to her husband, just as it was in paradise. In this connection, the reference to Genesis 2:24 is very fitting, there where it is emphasized that man and woman together may be *one* (humanity). Just as Christ is bound to His congregation, so may man and woman be bound together: together one body.

This is a great mystery! Together husband and wife may show forth the love of Christ in their marriage. Here it may be expressed that they submit to each other out of reverence for Christ and for God (verse 21).

In Ephesians 5:33 we read that a wife ought to have reverence for her husband. Is this an example of subordination? It is quite natural to connect the word "reverence," which Paul uses here, with what he says about the mystery/the secret in verse 32, namely, how marriage may be a reflection of the solidarity between Christ and His congregation. The word "reverence" fits the holiness of this secret. Within the image that Paul uses he sees this "reverence" reflected in the surrender of the wife to her husband, just as husband and wife, together, are exhorted to serve each other out of "reverence" for Christ and for God. In this way verse 33 goes back to verse 21, and the circle of what Paul is saying is completed. Within the luminous circle of God's love in Christ, marriage begins to shine again as it was originally intended to do, when the LORD created man and woman and gave each other to each other.

On the basis of this interpretation of Ephesians 5 the question arises: can we derive something from this about the diversity between man and woman, and about their different roles? If Paul let the latter be heard in his teaching, in any case it doesn't play a major role here, for the whole of this section is focused on the unity and the solidarity within marriage, with as major chord: love.

Being the head as an image of Christ

This interpretation of Ephesians 5 shows us that the man being the head in the Bible has a special meaning. This portrayal is only used in the New Testament for married men (see also 1 Corinthians 11:3). It's only within marriage that the man (husband) is the head of a woman (his wife). But we have to say something more about this: the husband is only the head of his wife as an image of Christ! This is an important point. In this way it becomes clear that the man being the head has everything to do with the restoration of relationships through Jesus Christ. In paradise the man is not called the head of his wife. It does not belong to the creation order that the man is the head of his wife. This has been maintained, but on shaky grounds, for nowhere in the Bible is this said. The man's being the head is a description given not before, but after the Fall into sin, and clearly to indicate how Christ binds man and woman once again in unity--as head and body--in order to manifest, together, the image of God in mutual submission.

In this way it becomes clear that the man being the head does not have anything to do with a hierarchical order, whereby the husband would have an authoritative position with respect to his wife,

with accompanying powers. Moreover, it becomes clear that being the head is not an indication of the position of men with respect to women in general. This being the head of the man is so only within marriage, as we've seen. In Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-24, too, no mention is made, in a general sense, of the man as the head of the woman. In these verses Adam is not presented as the image of Christ, but as the image of a sinful and mortal humanity. Here the argument does not revolve around Adam as being as man, but as the one out of whom God has created humanity. All of humanity, descended from this one Adam, is directed to the one Mediator, Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:25-29 and the reality of the new covenant

In Galatians 3:28 Paul writes: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul speaks here not of "man or woman," but uses the expression "male and female." Hereby he is referring to Genesis 1:27, where we read that God created humanity as male and female. Can this text throw light on the relation between men and women, and does this have possible consequences for opening the church offices to women in the congregation?

In the traditional exegesis within the Reformed churches we hear often a warning that there are no far-reaching conclusions to be drawn from this text. The point being made here concerns our (personal) faith commitment to Christ, it is said, not the mutual relations which are described here.⁴⁸

However, we may ask if this narrowing of the meaning is correct here, and if there is possibly something being said about the consequences of the new reality in Christ for living together in the congregation. For in this part of the letter Paul is writing about baptism and how they who come to faith and are baptized are *one*, and together form *one* body. In this connection he even speaks of the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham. In other words, Paul is speaking here with emphasis of a new situation which accompanies the reality of the new covenant. He says that the time of the old covenant, and of being "under the law," has passed, and that a new reality has appeared. Now is the time of living "under grace."⁴⁹

From this perspective, it is striking that Paul now mentions distinctions which were very important for the Jews. These distinctions were even regulated by the law, and subordination was a constant theme. And further, Christians with a pagan background knew these kinds of separating walls between people. In Ephesians 2 Paul writes penetratingly about the wall dividing Jews and Greeks, which has now been broken down since the age of the grace in Christ has appeared.

The letter to the Galatians, as well, emphatically portrays this new reality. Paul expands the application to other areas: slave and free, male and female. The relations as they took form "under the law" have now been removed in Christ, so that the promises to Abraham concerning all nations can be fulfilled. Moreover, relations are restored. In the congregation of Christ the described relations are now to be seen in the light of the redemption through Christ, and of the renewing power of His Spirit. In Christ the separating walls of ethnicity, social status, and gender, have been pulled down, and relationships are totally restored as they were meant to be. Here we glimpse, indeed, a new reality which transcends the individual person.⁵⁰

If we do not relate the new reality of being "under grace" to living together in God's kingdom, and maintain old forms in it, we could be maintaining structures which do not reject attitudes of superiority and discrimination. For example, this is the way that slavery was maintained and defended,

⁴⁸ See, for example, Prof. dr. S. Greijdanus (KNT-Bottenburg), Amsterdam: 1936, p. 252.

⁴⁹ See, for this interpretation, W. Steenbergen, 'Samenleven onder de genade. De genade als structuur-bepalende kracht voor het samenleven in en buiten de gemeente', in: Dr. J.P. Versteeg (e.a.), *De Geest schrijft wegen in de tijd*, Kok: Kampen, 1984, p. 58.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 48-49.

with the Bible open.⁵¹ Further, our challenge is to see how the reality of the being "*one* (body) in Christ" may be given shape in the congregation and in society.

The new reality has as its produced effect for the congregation that every rank order falls away. There are still differences, in background, social status, and gender, but the reality "in Christ" remains preeminent and leads us. Prof. Dr. J.P. Versteeg, who points to this, adds that the distinction between the old and the new dispensation, with regard to the congregation, can be indicated by the words "representation" and "participation." Where walls of separation are broken down, no one acts *on behalf* of the other. Everyone stands *side by side* to the other.⁵²

This becomes visible, as well, in baptism, as Paul writes about it in Galatians 3:25-29. Men *and* women, sons *and* daughters receive the sign of the new covenant. This is in contrast with the sign of the old covenant, circumcision. Further, Paul's reference to Genesis 1:27 is now to be understood, for with the restoration of relationships we return to the way that God created humanity: man and woman, side by side to each other in complete harmony.

The interpretation of Galatians 3:25-29 which we present here is not a matter of giving in to the spirit of the age or culture, but is doing justice to the reality of the new dispensation. In no way is Paul totally leveling gender or other relevant differences, and even less is he rejecting authority relationships in general; parents have authority over their children, the government over its subjects, and employers over employees. What is important is that in all things the unity in Christ becomes primary, and that (gender) differences and mutual relationships are always to be seen in that light.

If these new relationships, flowing from the unity in Christ, are so all determinative, why doesn't Paul, in the New Testament, stand up as a fighter for women's rights, and why doesn't he stimulate women explicitly to take on certain tasks? The reason for this is that he is not a politician, and that he is not promoting the overthrow of relationships in society, but rather he is proclaiming the breakthrough of the kingdom of God. His focus is: how do *all* people participate in salvation, and in what way does that begin to permeate *all* the areas of life? Relationships change from inside out: between Jews and Greeks, between a Lord and his slave, and between men and women, if they stand side by side to each other in solidarity with Christ.

If this what Paul is presenting to us in Galatians 3:25-29, we are faced with insistent questions. Have we, as churches, been sufficiently conscious of the fact that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit creates new forms? Have we as churches perhaps been too much enmeshed in worldly relationships, while they have been cursed at Golgotha? Isn't maintaining a certain kind of inequality then a form of wordliness?⁵³ This interpretation of Galatians 3 leads us to draw the conclusion that by putting the emphasis on the men leading, and the women being subordinate, we have unjustly maintained hierarchical structures, which after Pentecost have no legitimacy. In this way, it could very well be the case that we have unintentionally made room for the continuance of the curse of Genesis 3.

At the same time, Galatians 3 challenges us to consider what way men and women *together* may manifest the image of God in the congregation, so that it is clear that God is a God of love, who loves us in His Son as Himself. God gives them to each other, to stand side by side in His service, for the

⁵¹ Wentsel, B., *Dogmatiek 3a God en mens verzoend*, Kampen: 1987. P. 636. Wentsel adds that this does not hereby mean that a "unisex" will emerge, or that all relations of authority disappear.

⁵² Versteeg, J.P., *Kijk op de kerk. De structuur van de gemeente volgens het Nieuwe Testament*, Kampen: Kok 1985, p. 11-12, zie ook p. 20.

⁵³ See P. van der Velde in *De Geest schrijft wegen in de tijd*.

upbuilding of the congregation, and to the honor of His great name. And therefore it should be also: side by side in the church offices.

Galatians 3:25-29 thus does not give explicit teaching about gifts and ministries in the congregation, but the text shows us vividly the transition from the old to the new covenant, and the restoration of relationships in Christ. The new reality has consequences for living and working together in the congregation of Christ. Galatians 3:28 (see also Colossians 3:18-25) paints a picture of a Christian fellowship of Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, and men and women, who in this world may form a fellowship of love as model of a new humanity (Ephesians 2:15). The question is: have we sufficiently seen and honored this new reality? And concretely: how is this to be put into practice with regard to the church offices?

Ministering in church offices is being of service

The New Testament does not use the word "office" as such.⁵⁴ Where we speak of offices, the New Testament often speaks of gifts. Nevertheless, there is a word which is very prominent when tasks in the congregation are involved. Prof. Dr. J.P. Versteeg points to the fact that the central word which is used for (church) office is "service" (Greek: *diakonia*). He points out that what is involved here is a completely new characterization, in connection with which every element of receiving honor or appreciation is missing. In his opinion, it can be called striking that this word, with this unique denotation, has been chosen for. In this way it is made clear that not authority, but service is characteristic for the church office concept in the New Testament. The office itself is even in two respects to be characterized as service. It is itself service, and it is aimed at giving service. The church office is to be carried out in service of the charismatic (use of gifts) serving of believers.⁵⁵

Also, when we speak of the authority of the church office we ought to bear in mind what has just been noted. The office does not derive its authority from itself, but from the Word. This authority remains in effect, also when women carry out a particular service/ministry in the congregation.

Conclusion

When we step back and get an overview of all our findings in this chapter, then it is striking that the basic pattern which we came across in the teaching of Jesus, namely "not lording it over others, but serving," is also the basic pattern which resounds again when we read of the relation between men and women within the new covenant. Because they have become one in Christ, they are called to manifest the image of God together.

This reality asks for a concrete, joint carrying out of this task, whereby men and women, each with the gifts which they have received from the Holy Spirit, stand side by side in the service of God and serve each other sincerely, from the heart. This applies also with respect to all the church offices in the congregation of Christ. We certainly saw in the New Testament that there is no compelling reason to be found for preventing women from carrying out certain tasks or holding certain offices.

It is for both men and women the case that their holding an office or not does not flow forth from a difference in gender, but rather from the gifts which they have received and the tasks to which they are called. By saying this we are not levelling the differences between men and women, but their being a man or a woman is not the basis of their being appointed to or prevented from certain tasks or church offices.

⁵⁴ Van Bruggen, J., *Ambten in de apostolische kerk. Een exegetisch mozaïek*, Kampen: Kok 1984, p. 146.

⁵⁵ Versteeg, J.P., *Kijk op de kerk*, p. 30-31.

3. Men and women and church office, and contemporary culture

Initial summary

In the discussion about admitting women to the church offices, is regularly said that this is bowing before contemporary Western culture--consciously or not. By this is meant: the current climate of thought, the norms and values which are regarded to be applicable to everyone, though often not made explicit. This chapter delves into this argumentation. The conclusion is that you can't say this so confidently.

Church in time and culture

Christ's church finds itself always existing in the midst of the culture of its time; it doesn't float in the air. Thereby it must always find a way to relate to that culture, and it has always done that. The question is: how do the norms and values of the society in which the church finds itself relate to Christian norms and values, and to what degree is there a mutual influence, back and forth? The Bible makes clear that the church has as its task and calling to be healingly present in society: as salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16; see Philippians 2:15; Titus 2:7-8; 1 Peter 2:12). That makes the church relevant.

Not always unambiguously

The way the church relates to culture is diverse. There are subjects concerning which the church ought to distance itself from the culture. Examples are: the prevailing loose sexual ethics, the egotistical culture of enjoyment, and the enormous emphasis on the individual and on economic interests and motives. This climate of thought is far removed from Biblical ethics. There are also subjects concerning which the church must shine in giving a good example to society. Examples are: concern for the environment, care for the displaced, and striving for just social and economic relations. As far as what culture offers us, we must "approve what is excellent" (Philippians 1:10) (Dutch text: "discern what is valuable").

The Spirit and culture

That distinction, between the areas where the church must distance itself from culture, and the areas where it ought to take leadership, makes the assertion that the man and woman and church office decisions of the Synod of Meppel are clearly "going along with the culture," shaky at best. Using that label, the implication is that our surrounding culture is always bad, and that we as a church may never go along with the tendencies in society. In other words, the church, supposedly, should by definition look with suspicion at developments in the culture.

However, there are examples which demonstrate the opposite, namely that it is the church, especially, which should have learned from the time and culture in which it functioned. In the period when in society there was resistance to slavery, for a long time the church defended slavery, appealing to the Bible. When apartheid (in South Africa) was looked at critically in Dutch society, the same thing happened in that area. These two examples show that the Holy Spirit sometimes can make something clear to the church concerning the will of God in the age in which it is functioning. This asks for a careful evaluation of the situation in which women take on the same functions as men in society, while the church keeps them out of the church offices. Perhaps the latter took place by means of the influence of the culture on the church, up till the beginning of the 20th century, while the Bible points us in another direction. That would mean that the church was following culture, rather the Bible, in this area for more than 1,500 years.

'Christ and Culture'

H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) wrote about the church and culture, and how they relate to each other, in the insightful book *Christ and Culture*.⁵⁶ Niebuhr distinguishes different possible positions:

1. Christ over against culture: a radical turning away from and retreating from culture;
2. The Christ of culture: you feel at home in the culture you live in, which manifests divine points of light;
3. Christ above culture: grace lifts the culture to a higher level;
4. Christ and culture in paradox: you know yourself to have been placed by God in a condemned culture;
5. Christ, who transforms culture: grace recreates a culture according to God's will.

The accusation that the man and woman and church office decisions of the Synod of Meppel mean that the church is bowing before culture, evaluates these decisions negatively in the light of position 4. Niebuhr makes clear in his book that other positions are also possible, as we see in this list.

Christian emancipation of the woman

These Synod decisions can certainly be seen as the result of a Christian emancipation of women. In the Reformed tradition there were already moves, since the beginning of the 20th century, to think through again the place of women in the church.⁵⁷ Developments in society were the immediate reason for thinking more about admitting women to the church offices, but the decision which has been taken is the result of a renewed thinking through about what God in His Word asks of us in this area. It witnesses to self-reflection when, in these new discussions this question plays a role: how strongly is our traditional situation colored by culture? Let us search for that which, in our current culture, forms a threat to the man and woman relationship, but also for that in which the culture may challenge us in a positive way.

Remaining alert

It is important, as a church federation and as individual believers, to be alert to being influenced by things in society which are opposed to God's Word. In times in which the church seeks and finds solidarity with society, it's necessary, out of principle, not to dilute the wine with water. At such times vigilance is called for: are we not going too far in going along with the culture in areas where the Bible points us in a different direction? There can be an undesirable influence coming from our culture which strongly affects our hearts. The Bible has the first and the last word in all the areas of our life, including where society is threatening to penetrate and capture our life. However, the sanctification of life does not begin with decisions about admitting women to the church offices, but in our own heart.

Conclusion

The immediate reason for considering admitting women to the church offices has been the developments in our society, but the decision which has been taken is the result of a renewed thinking through of what God asks of us in this area.

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, H.R., *Christ and culture*, [HarperCollins Publishers Inc](#), 1951.

⁵⁷ Kuiper, A., *Tractaat van de Reformatie der kerken*, Höveker en Zoon, Amsterdam: 1883.

Maarten Verkerk, Nienke Verkerk-Vegter en Hillie van de Streek, *Herman Bavinck en het 'vrouwenvraagstuk'. Religie als motivatie en inspiratie*. Tijdschrift voor Genderstudie 2012, nr. 1.

4. Diversity and unity⁵⁸

Initial summary

The reflection about the subject of man and woman and the church offices, and the decisions which the Synod of Meppel took, have led to three results. People are: 1) on the basis of the Biblical arguments against admitting women to the offices, or 2) for their admittance, on the basis of Biblical arguments; or 3) they see, Biblically speaking, room for both standpoints. It appears that we will not be able to convince each other and come to a general consensus. The question is: how are we going to deal with this situation as a church?

To that question there are also different answers. Some emphasize the differences and draw the conclusion that it is impossible for people who have different views of this subject to remain together in one church. The result would be a church split. Others acknowledge the differences, but find them not weighty enough to warrant a church split.

We would like to plead for the latter option. That does not mean that striving for unity has priority above the need to listen carefully to the Bible. You can never play those two convictions off against each other. For it is precisely the Holy Scripture which shows us how important the Lord of the church finds unity to be. Church unity is for the Lord no minor issue.

Is uniformity demanded?

In the years past we in the Reformed churches (Liberated) were used to a situation in which uniformity prevailed in our federation from Limburg in the south to Groningen in the north. Every church used the same order of service in the church services, and everywhere the same psalms and hymns were sung. We read the same newspaper (Nederlands Dagblad), and voted for the same political party (the GPV). That uniformity was not a matter of a Biblical principle; that was the way it went in Dutch society as a whole, with various distinct religious and ideological streams, each with their own newspapers and political parties (Note of the translator: I have added some explanatory material).

Now the situation has changed, as everyone can see easily, and the question is: what (degree of) uniformity does God ask of us in the Bible? In this report we try to show in a careful way that the decisions of the Synod of Meppel are responsible ones, and depend on another exegesis than was used in the past. Differences in exegesis are not new, and we should allow them from each other. But now we see that this has led to a growth in diversity in practice in our church life, we will have to find ways to deal with this and relate to each other in a Biblical manner.

The Biblical truth

It is important to establish what the weight is of the subject in question. When it involves admitting women to the church offices or not, we're not talking about the teaching about redemption, but about how the offices are to be organized, and the way in which church government is to be given shape. Perhaps this can be done in various ways, and there is room for differences of opinion and activity in this area.

We are not so used to this way of doing things. Often we thought that the Bible had to lead to having *one* standpoint, because otherwise there would be no objective truth any more. But it is not the character of the Bible to teach us *one* standpoint about all kinds of matters. Over against postmodernism we hold tenaciously to *one* truth. That one truth is not formed by conclusions or

⁵⁸ For this part of the report we have made use of the report of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (2000).

standpoints of people, not even by synod decisions or age-old church policy, but by the one Word of God (Art. 7, Belgic Confession). That is the one truth which we must return to and rest upon in every discussion. This one truth has been summarized by the church in the true and complete teaching about redemption (the second question to parents of a child who is to be baptized, in our traditional Baptism Form), that which we have put into words in our confessions. It is quite striking that there is nothing in our confessions which makes it impossible to open the church offices to women.

How should we use the Word of God to arrive at a valid standpoint? It is important to acknowledge that there is relief, rich variety, in the Bible: we read there not only commands, but also description, there are not only norms prescribed, but also examples given. With regard to certain issues, the Bible gives clear warnings, but in other cases gives a general indication in a certain direction.

A number of the texts which play a role in the man and women and church office discussions are embedded in passages where Paul is speaking about the organization of God's people. If there is difference of opinion about what Paul exactly means, that does not mean that this difference separates us from Christ and from the new humanity which He is now involved in creating. We don't have to walk away from each other simply because of that difference of opinion, or reject each other, or show each other the door. It is important to keep on talking to each other about this subject out of our joint union with Christ, the Head of the church.

Hereby we recognize that the issue as to whether women may bear church offices or not does not affect the heart of Christian faith, but rather the organization of church life. This recognition may also help us by considerations which we must make with a good conscience. Sometimes it is said that whoever has difficulties with the Synod decisions must be able to decide, in his or her own conscience, whether he or she can remain a member of a congregation which agrees with these decisions. That can certainly be a considerable struggle. However, a serious difference about the organization of the church ought to be resolved while still maintaining the unity of the church. The Bible, and, in the tradition of Biblical theology, diverse Reformed theological leaders show us this way of proceeding here.

The Biblical ideal of unity

Jesus calls His disciples to stay united. In connection with this, the most well-known text is probably John 17:20-23. In the so-called High Priestly prayer, Jesus shows Himself to be deeply moved concerning the well-being of the church. He points to the dangers and the powers which come from outside the church, and to the manifestation of the power of the devil (John 17:11-19). He names also the internal threats to this unity (John 17:20-23). Most striking is His deep wish and desire, expressed repeatedly in verse 21 and 23, that the unity of the church ought to be a witness to the world: "...that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent me and loved them even as You loved me" (John 17:23). The aim which the Lord has for the church is to be realized, certainly in part, by its unity. Divisions create a negative witness, both to the world and to the members of the church, in particular the young, new Christians, and to those weak in faith.

Christ's urgent prayer in John 17, with its desire for unity, is worked out by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. The members of the church, "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1 Corinthians 1:2), have an urgent responsibility to commit themselves to maintaining unity: "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment..." (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). Splits and divisions in the body of Christ are in direct conflict with what the fellowship of the Church ought to be. Paul understood that it was his commission as apostle to proclaim the Gospel, so that all eyes had to be focused on the central figure of Christ. Partisanship, which divided the body, diverts our attention from the essential aim of the service of the Gospel.

Dealing with differences in a Biblical manner

In Ephesians 4:3 Paul gives us the guideline: "(I urge you to be) eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." For the wisdom of God, in all its variety, is meant to be visible through the church (Ephesians 3:10). It's quite striking that Paul doesn't just say to maintain the unity in Christ, He gives a practical guideline for how that unity must be kept intact.

In Ephesians 4:4-6 he sums up what all believers have together: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." That is to say, when the church is confronted with splits and divisions, it must make an appeal to the heart of Christian faith. Unity and diversity is possible through the power of peace, which binds believers together: humility, gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2). "Humility" here points to modesty in your relation to God, the term "gentleness" here indicates your attitude toward your neighbor, and "patience, bearing with one another in love" means that you are generous in giving the other person the space to be different, and to think and to act differently. We're called to hold the banner of God's Word high, *and* we're called to be modest and gentle and to bear with one another in love.

It is precisely this combination which is important. God, too, does not sweep the truth--of our sins--under the carpet; rather He finds a way to in no way minimize that reality, and still have a relation with us. It is sin in me which pushes me to do away with relationships; it is a dissolving power. But if in the entirety of the Gospel it's a matter of restoring relationships, I may not do away with them. Jesus Himself offered Himself up to have enemies be reconciled with each other. The unity of the church is not threatened by diversity, but by division. We will have to find ways to prevent such division.

In certain ways, differences within the congregation can be beneficial to the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12, for example, Paul shows that diversity in the body is necessary and is a healthy mark of the church (see also Romans 12:4). To be clear: the diversity which Paul is talking about here is related to the diversity of spiritual gifts, not to a difference of opinion concerning or conflicting interpretations of the Bible. Nevertheless, his emphasis on recognizing and accepting differences without coming to a quick condemnation is instructive regarding an attitude which ought to characterize the body of Christ. This attitude is vividly described in that great and beautiful chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians, in which the call to faith, hope, and love concludes with the declaration that love is the greatest of these three.

Love in the deep, Biblical sense, does not replace Christian obedience to God's Word. Not at all: in 1 John it is repeatedly emphasized that obedience and love are inseparable. Yet love is the essential, binding factor which enables a Christian congregation to stay focused on its aim: to glorify God by working on the growth of His kingdom. For this reason Paul prays, "...that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:9-11). If due to a difference of opinion division is prevailing in the church, it will, tragically, lose power. That applies to different areas: with respect to missions, seeking to proclaim the Gospel to others, but also in the capacity of its own members to be able to grow in holy obedience.

We believe, on the basis of God's Word, that all of Jesus' disciples are one in Him. That must be visible and remain so in the church. There will always be opposing forces which try to undermine that aim. Philippians 4:2-3 makes a personal appeal to every believer to make every possible effort to become one with the others in the Lord. That latter addition is essential, if you want to understand the dynamic of Paul's appeal. Our unity is in Christ. As long as we seek to make everything we are and have to be focused on Him as Savior and Lord of the church, we can radiate unity and keep that unity intact. In both Philippians 4 as in 1 Corinthians, Paul is deeply concerned about the damage which visible divisions will bring to the mission of the church.

Philippians 2:3 calls us, in all humility, to regard the other more important than ourselves. That appeal is not a one-time affair. The Bible teaches us that the people of God must walk together in humility, and in a spirit of mutual service. We are called to live, "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). That is not an easy task in our secularized society. There the self-interest and the rights of the individual are the number one priority. That can very easily mean that in the church there is an attitude whereby we think that we have a God-given right to have a church or church federation in which we all think alike about issues which do not belong to the heart of our faith, and are not a mark of a Christian life-style. If things go this way, it is not the Lord who determines the boundaries of the church, but we ourselves. We learn to deal with differences from what Paul writes to Timothy. Ephesus had false teachers who said that the resurrection had already taken place. That is certainly no unimportant issue. Paul writes to Timothy, here, that he must not be argumentative, but should be friendly to everyone. He must be a good teacher, and a tolerant human being, and should correct his opponents gently. Then the Lord will perhaps bring them to repentance, so that they come to know the truth (2 Timothy 2:24-26). Even in the case of doctrinal error of this type, the approach of the servant of the Gospel should be one that enables there to be a continuing, positive contact with the erring person. How much more should this be true of all of those who confess Christ in accordance with the Scriptures!

Around the Reformation

The Reformation of the 16th century was a time, pre-eminently, in which mutual differences manifested themselves within the church. It is instructive to see how things developed at that time. Above all, the Reformers made an appeal to the Word of God as the foundation of the truth.

Martin Luther

Luther abhorred the idea of leaving the church. For him, the substance of the church was the presence of Christ in the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. He believed that you ought not to leave the church as long as the Word was proclaimed and the sacraments administered. In fact, Luther was always ready to defend the reformation of the church, more than separating or division. It was as late as 1537-1538 that he came to accept definitively the division in the church. But shortly after that, in his book *On the Councils and the Church* from 1539, he acknowledged that even if church councils made wrong decisions about important theological subjects, it was not a reason, necessarily, to reject the authority of the church gathering, or to leave the church. In Luther's view, as long as the Gospel was proclaimed in the church, and thus the true presence of Christ was visible, it was necessary to reform the church from within.

John Calvin

For Calvin, too, the teaching of the church was crucial, when the issue was how you should deal with differences of interpretation and views. The fourth book of his *Institutes* is dedicated to the church. Going into much detail, he argues that if the marks of the true church are present, it is not legitimate to leave that church, or to take part in splits on the grounds of the mistakes or lies in the church. The following quote shows how Calvin thought about this:

"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 fault 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 true 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 pace, 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 go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation."⁵⁹

If we follow Luther and Calvin, then a church split on the grounds of a difference of opinion about women office-bearers, would only be justified if it can be clearly shown that the marks of the true church are in dispute. Concretely this means: only if the presence of Christ in the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are at issue. If they are not, then there is only one thing to do, according to the Reformers: remain in the church, and work there on reformation, and on bringing about a better understanding of God's Word.

The 18th and the 19th centuries

The echo of this attitude is to be heard in the voice of the respected leader, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), who, just like the Reformers, powerfully argued for the unity of the church. In his *Treatise on the Reformation of the Churches*, Kuyper paints two scenarios:

1. "You see and know that your church has become a synagogue of Satan. If *that* so, then you must, without hesitation leave it, and shake off the dust of your feet to it.
2. You see and know that your church is not yet a synagogue of Satan. If *that* is so, you may not yet send it a letter of departure. On the contrary, you are obliged to remain.

Following Calvin's example, we would like to seriously urge everyone to see if the church, which you want to leave, has indeed been left by God in such a way that it is not only its well-being has been lost, but also the substance of the church. You may not withhold your love because it is sick or mutilated. Instead of that, it may expect from you, seeing it is sick, an even greater involvement on your part."⁶⁰

Limited responsibility

It is true that that the Reformed churches (Liberated) have changed, including their stance toward "the uniformity of the churches." (Note of the translator: the Reformed churches (Liberated), since 1944, had insisted on the Biblical requirement of one church federation in a geographical area, as opposed to accepting different denominations as legitimate). But the changes are not occurring everywhere at the same tempo. The increased diversity in our federation can call forth the question: what is the scope of my responsibility, and when am I bound in my conscience?

It is important to know that church members are not responsible for the decisions of their local church council. Even more important, even office-bearers do not have to agree with a decision which has been made by the majority of the church council. Even less are local congregations responsible for the

⁵⁹ Calvin, J., *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.12, (Vol. 2, trans. F.L. Battles), Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.

⁶⁰ Kuyper, A., *Tractaat van de Reformatie der kerken*, Amsterdam: Höverker en Zoon 1883, p. 162.

decisions of other churches. "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith" (2 Corinthians 1:24).

In connection with this point, the General Synod of Groningen-South (1978) made a declaration regarding the baptism of adopted children which is worth mentioning here. The Synod declared that the decisions were not binding doctrinal statements, but a church rule for baptismal practice. In a comparable way, the decisions of the Synod of Meppel to allow women to the offices, are not binding doctrinal statements, but offer room within the church federation to local congregations to have women office-bearers when they appoint members to the church offices. In short: the decisions do not establish a universal truth, but offer a guideline for church practice. Furthermore, it's important to give shape to this practice in such a way that there is room for those who agree with the new guideline as well as for those have trouble with it.

Tolerance for opponents

The Bible teaches us to distinguish between differences which occur within the church and the fight against "opponents." The latter expression comes from Philippians 1:28.

In the congregation of Philippi there was no agreement about everything, as we see in Paul's letter. Nevertheless, Paul says that the brothers and sisters there must learn to "strive for the Gospel" (1:27). It is a big mistake to confuse these two categories, as if brothers and sisters who are striving for the same Gospel are our opponents. Yes, there are opponents, there is thus no limitless tolerance. But with those who strive for the faith in the Gospel there can be differences of opinion. However, those differences of opinion ought not to bring their unity in danger. Neither of the two positions around women officer-bearers may be called an unwillingness to subject oneself to God's Word. We are all building on the same foundation (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). That's why tolerance is called for.

When there are such differing views, humility is called for. No one of us can speak the last word about these things. Differing views about what God means in His Word flow forth from our human and sinful limitations.

It is important to signal two dangers: abandoning God's word, but also: making human words the Word of God. We need each other (Ephesians 3:18-19). We stand side by side in our common quest to find Biblical answers to our questions. Entering into and remaining in discussion with each other gives trust in one another, as we discover in each other love for God, His Word and His church.

The catholic church

The church is formed and filled by those who confess Christ as the anointed Son of God (Matthew 16:13-18). Many of the people who followed Jesus saw Him a forerunner of the Messiah: Elijah, Jeremiah, or John the Baptist. But the disciples saw Jesus as the Messiah Himself. Peter speaks on behalf of the disciples when he is asked to speak: "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.'"

God enables people to confess that Jesus is the anointed Son, and together they form the church. Article 27 of the Belgic Confession says about the church: it is a holy gathering of the true believers. We see something of this in the growing unity across church borders. At the same time tension is increased: there is a certain unity, but we're not yet one. But if we were to become one, we don't see the tension diminished: we are one, but we're not agreed about all kinds of issues.

We can react in different ways to the broken reality in which there is only one church, while all kinds of churches are visible. You could say: there is only one church, therefore all those other churches are wrong. You could also say: there is indeed only one church, but the reason for the existence of all these different churches is our own fault as believers. We are somehow not able to have the unity which there should be. Therefore, we maintain the catholicity of the church by knowing ourselves bound to each other, even in the midst of the brokenness which expresses itself in our inability to convince each other concerning truth and error.

Conclusions

The differences with regard to women in church office have put the unity which we have in Christ under pressure. There are some who are not sure that the Reformed churches (Liberated) still want to remain faithful to God's Word. Others have interpreted the pronouncements of the Synod of Meppel as a signal that the church has forgotten to be faithful to the Word, and has capitulated to the movement for change in a society which is opposed to God's Word. This conclusion has led some church members to threaten to leave their local congregations. Further, a number of foreign churches, with whom we have had sister-church relations for years, have broken ties with us. For everyone who is involved this is a deeply sad development. The difference of opinion about the subject of men and women and church office has had a strongly bipolarizing effect, till now: some of us have already been pulled apart, and those of us who belong together are being pulled apart further.

In this chapter we have tried to show how different convictions and conclusions with regard to the unity of the body of Christ can be the cause of a centrifugal force, bringing people together, which is strong enough to resist and overcome confusion and division.

In the light of the Biblical imperative to have church unity, we hereby make an appeal to our brothers and sisters in Christ to cherish mutual trust, both in our own fellowship as well as world-wide.

5. Hermeneutics and the authority of Scripture

Initial summary

Hermeneutics plays a role in the reflections about man and woman and church office. It is important to approach the Bible in a responsible way. When big changes are happening, it is proper that there is a call to acknowledge the authority of Scripture. That call is answered in this chapter.

Reflections upon the new questions being posed can only take place based on the witness of Scripture itself and along that path become transparent and legitimate. We can describe the new reflections in this area as the freedom of exegesis.

Hermeneutics

Biblical hermeneutics is reflection about our way of interpreting and reading the Bible. In short: exegesis is the Bible interpretation itself, and hermeneutics thinks about the way we come to a particular exegesis, and, more broadly, how we ought to read the Bible. The word "hermeneutics" is also used in other connections, such as in the study of law.

In the reflections about man and woman and church office, the term "the new hermeneutics" is regularly heard. This expression is generally used to describe the result of an interpretation of the Bible: whoever, on the grounds of the Bible, does not see any room for opening the church offices to women, is seen as an adherent of the "old hermeneutics," while whoever does see such room is then supposedly an adherent of the "new hermeneutics." Often the concept of "new hermeneutics" is looked at with distrust, as if it is a magic wand with which you can let the Bible say what is not there.

Hermeneutics has always followed a path of development, and the border between "old" and "new" hermeneutics is therefore difficult to pinpoint. If you would want to describe a difference, you could say that classic Biblical hermeneutics is the reflection on doing exegesis and on the exegetical rules by which someone arrives (or should arrive) at a particular exegesis of a Bible passage or passages. The "new hermeneutics" (of the Bible) can be described as critical reflection on understanding Scripture. In this process, reading, interpreting, and appropriating communicative activity and processes play a role.⁶¹ The "new hermeneutic," of this sort, asks, properly, for an account of the choices which we have made in arriving at a certain exegesis (of the Bible).

There is also a form of hermeneutics by which the reader himself or herself may read and interpret the Bible in the way he or she wants to, just as everyone can, and may see something different from someone else--as in interpreting a modern work of art. This we may call philosophical hermeneutics. This, in our context, is certainly not the way we (the Synod of Meppel and the writers of this report) read the Bible, but there is a fear among some that this is where we are heading.

In the reflection about man and woman and church office, hermeneutics plays a role, indeed, but not according to the division of the "old" and the "new" hermeneutics. What is important is that the demand be honored that Bible interpreters carry on hermeneutical activity in a responsible way. You cannot establish this ahead of time, but only after the fact. In chapter 6 we show that with more attention for critical reflection on understanding Scripture it is possible to come to a trustworthy exegesis.

The Bible on its own interpretation

⁶¹ Bruijne, A.L.Th de, *Gereformeerde hermeneutiek vandaag*, Barneveld: Vuurbaak, 2017, p. 22.

It is evident that various plausible exegeses of a Bible text can exist, next to each other. That puts pressure on us: is this because of the Bible itself, or because of the reader? The General Synod of Ede (2014) declared that both ways of looking at the issue--women *may not*, and women *may* be church office-bearers--are possible on the basis of the Bible.

The church, the tradition, or the confessions may not establish the interpretation of Scripture, but the church must, on the basis of exegesis, come to decisions with an eye to church practice. Luther said: the Bible does not need any interpretative authority besides itself. That was his answer to the Roman Catholic church, which declared that *it* determined what the Word said. Luther and later Protestants said the opposite: *the Word* determines what the church should say. That is what we, too, believe and confess (see the Belgic Confession, Art. 5).

Different people, who sincerely say that the Bible alone is determinative for what we in the church should do, can have different standpoints. In 2 Peter 1:20-21 the apostle says: "knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." "Someone's own interpretation" means here: unconnected to the rest. You may not artificially detach a single text from the totality of the Bible, for there is only *one* Author. If you do that, then you can let the text say something completely different from what is intended. The Bible is clear, that is a faith principle. And just as much: the clarity of the Bible is a critical principle: the Bible is clear for me, but also for the other person. I must always be ready to listen, and to have my views and starting points open for discussion. The Holy Spirit can truly make the Bible clear. He leads us into the truth. Hereby, He makes use of human beings. We must patiently take the effort to always read the Bible afresh, and to try to understand it.

The Bible and culture

The Bible contains the Gospel for all times and all places, but in its form has been shaped by the time and the culture in which it was presented. One example of this, which already has been mentioned, is that the culture of almost all ancient Eastern countries was strongly patriarchal. This culture worked itself out in the Greek and Roman world, and therefore in the New Testament texts. The inequality of man and woman, the subordination of women and the hostility to women which went along with it, formed the cultural climate of the New Testament age.

In God's patience, He chose to adapt to that culture with His gracious work of restoration, with the result that the society of His people, too, was strongly colored by that patriarchy. That does not mean that this kind of patriarchy, with all the consequences for the relations between man and woman, was God's prescription for all times and places. In other words, that God and His Bible writers adapted to the culture of that time does not make the recording of it in the Bible normative.

The Bible and translation

The Bible was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, in a time which was not ours. In order to understand its language, not only a translation of the words and the sentences is needed. The time, as well, in which the original text was written, needs to be taken account of. "This requires us to travel back in time in our thoughts."⁶²

Next to the language used, we must have knowledge, among other things, of the topography, the geography, the culture, and even the flora and fauna of that time and place, in order to understand the Scripture. And this includes its historical and literary context.⁶³ We must be careful with the sources and the data to be found outside Holy Scripture. They can help us in understanding the Scripture, but they are always of a secondary significance. "The things these sources say cannot be decisive

⁶² Bruggen, J. van, *Het lezen van de Bijbel, een inleiding*, Kampen: Kok 1995, p. 78.

⁶³ Bruggen, J. van, *Het lezen van de Bijbel, een inleiding*, Kampen: Kok 1995, p. 78-88.

concerning the truth and the value of Holy Scripture."⁶⁴ It is clear that such data can never have an importance above or next to the Scripture.

The authority of Scripture

When certain texts and Biblical notions are interpreted differently now than previously, the question inevitably is raised as to the authority of Holy Scripture: are we listening, with this new interpretation, sincerely and with respect to what God reveals in His Word, or are we giving it our own subjective twist?

God's Word cannot exist without "translating" the message of God's Word. There must always be a certain distance to be bridged over when the Scriptures are interpreted.⁶⁵ Jesus does this too when He opens the Scriptures for the travelers to Emmaus (Luke 24:27). The interpretation of the Scripture is aimed at understanding God's Word and at faith. Jesus therefore tells the travelers to Emmaus, as well, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25)

It is important to see the close relationship between the authority of Scripture and translating it. The church has not let itself be hindered from composing confessional statements by its principle that the Scripture is its own interpreter.

The freedom of exegesis

Because the Scripture is its own interpreter, in the churches there has always existed the possibility of new reflection. The decision in answering new questions can only become clear and legitimate by listening the witness of Scripture itself. This new reflection can be described as the freedom of exegesis.⁶⁶ That is to say, when confronted with a new, relevant question, we must go back to the Scripture itself, and try, with utmost respect and in faith, once again to understand what we read there. This coming to understand the Scripture we must do together, in a transparent and legitimate way. Abraham Kuyper calls the freedom of exegesis an obligation over against the confessional life of the church, and he says that he cannot do without the freedom of exegesis. "This total freedom is furthermore indispensable, if Theology is to fulfill its obligation to the confessional life of the Church."⁶⁷ He wants to maintain the freedom of exegesis, so that the church "does not live from the water in a pitcher, and cut itself off from the Fountain out of which that water was taken."⁶⁸

If we, through the freedom of exegesis, arrive at a new interpretation, then the authority of Scripture is not being questioned. We have to do with differences in *interpretation* of the Scripture between people who all acknowledge the authority of the Scripture, and with integrity and in good conscience make an appeal to Bible texts and to the Bible as a whole. In this interpretation, historical and cultural arguments play a role.

The question as to what is authoritative, is something characterizing all ages, and is posed with regard to all kinds of ethical issues. That was already so in the time of ancient Judaism, in which people were able to differ about all kinds of matters, but had to be agreed about the Jewish law. There are examples in the New Testament, too. The most well-known example is the discussion at the apostolic gathering in Jerusalem (Acts 15). Often there was a search for giving proper shape to a Christian way of life. More recent examples of ethical reconsiderations concern the legitimacy of slavery and apartheid, and the view of the place of women in society. Again and again the church has gone back to the Scripture

⁶⁴ Greijdanus, S., *Schriftbeginselen ter Schriftverklaring*, Kampen: Kok 1946, p. 126.

⁶⁵ Berkouwer, G.C., *Dogmatische Studiën, De Heilige Schrift I*, Kampen: Kok, 1966, p.142.

⁶⁶ Berkouwer, G.C., *Dogmatische Studiën, De Heilige Schrift I*, Kampen: Kok, 1966, p. 202.

⁶⁷ Kuyper, A., *Encyclopedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid, algemeen deel*, Amsterdam: 1894, p. 544.

⁶⁸ Kuyper, A., *Encyclopedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid, algemeen deel*, Amsterdam: 1894, p. 545.

with its questions, and change was accompanied by a lot of pain. Again and again, too, the question about the authority of Scripture was posed, and answered.

The Bible is not a "pitcher," but a "fountain," in which we may see and believe the activity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for all ages. We may appeal to the promise: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13,14) This promise is in the first place meant for the apostles, but in the second place also for those who through their proclamation believe in Jesus (John 17:20).

Conclusion

God's Word is richly diverse, and opens up all kinds of perspectives on reality. It is the living Word for all times. We must not try to do away with or make light of that diversity of texts and perspectives. They show us the many-colored glory of Christ and His redemption. We are receivers of the revelation of God's salvation which again and again, in a marvelous way, reveals itself.

6. The "remain silent" texts

Initial summary

In the course of the years a number of texts in the letters of Paul have gotten the name the "remain silent" texts. We're talking about 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15. They are quoted in discussions about man and woman and church offices. However, the label these texts have received has a limiting effect, as if they only touch the issue as to whether, next to men, women may bear a church office. The label that they have gotten makes it difficult to read them separately from that discussion, while it is questionable if these words of Paul are applicable to it.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes about what should be happening in the congregation of Corinth. Applied to our subject, the question arises: does Paul believe that the women in that congregation should remain silent, and if so, what does that mean exactly? Only when you have answered those questions can you proceed to consider what these texts mean for our day.

In the first letter which Paul sent to Timothy, Paul gives Timothy advice. Here, too, we have to ask ourselves: what kinds of advice are they exactly, and are they for us, too, normative? That's why we try, in this chapter, to look carefully at what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14 and in 1 Timothy 2.

In this chapter we limit ourselves, thus, to a number of texts which have been called the "remain silent" texts, also because churches have asked the General Synod of Goes emphatically to give attention to these texts. However, the substantiation of the man and woman and church office decisions does not rest merely upon unconnected Bible texts. That is clear from the entirety of this report.

About Paul and the Corinthians

Paul wrote a letter, as is evident at the opening of it. That is worth pondering: this is not prophecy, nor a law text, but a letter. And specifically, it is a letter addressed to the congregation of Corinth, a port city. At the same time, it is more than just a letter. It is namely one of the books of the New Testament (see Art. 4 of the Belgic Confession).

The first letter to the Corinthians is the first letter which has been preserved, not the first one which Paul sent to the congregation there (1 Corinthians 5:9). When Paul is at Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:8) he hears from those who were living with Chloe that there are problems in the congregation of Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:11). That is, among other reasons, the immediate reason for his writing this letter, the first of such letters to be preserved. Another reason is that the congregation has asked Paul all kinds of questions.⁶⁹

After the letter which we call 1 Corinthians (while it is actually the second letter), Paul writes again, a letter which has not been preserved (2 Corinthians 2:4). His last and fourth letter we know as the second letter to the Corinthians. In this chapter we focus on the first (preserved) letter.

1 Corinthians as a whole

The passage which plays a role in the man and woman and church office discussion we find in 1 Corinthians 14:27-40. Later in this chapter we go into detail about this passage, but it is important not to forget the whole of the letter when we are discussing it.

Paul writes about factions being formed, adultery, and about bringing each other to the secular judge for justice. He has heard about this from "Chloe's people" (1 Corinthians 1:11). The questions which the congregation has sent Paul, he treats starting in chapter 7 (1 Corinthians 7:1). Paul deals with marriage, eating meat offered to idols, prayer, prophesying, the Lord's Supper, and about the

⁶⁹ Anderson, R.D., *1 Korintiërs, Orde op zaken in een jonge stadskerk*, (CNT), Kampen: 2008.

relationship between different gifts, prophesying, and speaking in tongues. He then writes about the resurrection and his travel plans, and closes the letter with greetings.

The letter is thus a reaction to information from Choe's people (those who lived with her), and answers the congregation's questions. When we read 1 Corinthians 14, it's important to remember that Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 already wrote that women were prophesying in Corinth. On the basis of that passage, you cannot conceive of 1 Corinthians as a total prohibition of women prophesying. 1 Corinthians thus does not properly belong to those group of texts which we call the "remain silent" texts.

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

In 1 Corinthians 14:26-40, Paul gives practical guidelines for how the congregation is to react to speaking in tongues and prophecy. Verse 34 and 35 belong to this discussion. For the church members in Corinth, these two verses were not the heart of this passage. You can see that, because verse 36 is connected with verse 33. Verses 34 and 35 seem to be a side remark. It could be that Paul, after he was finished with his instructions, added this remark to them. In a number of manuscripts (copies) of this letter, verse 34 and 35 occur after verse 40.

Starting with verse 26, Paul begins to explain the concrete meaning of the instructions he had given earlier regarding the gatherings of the congregation in Corinth. He had said in 1 Corinthians, namely, that everyone may contribute something, thus men and women. Paul now gives examples of what people can contribute: a song, a lesson, a revelation, something said in tongues or the translation of what was said in tongues. He gives as the criterion: let that which is contributed be upbuilding to the congregation. And in the verses 27-33 he makes that concrete, so concrete that we can almost see it before our eyes.

Paul says: in the meetings let only two or three speak or prophesy at the same time, while he had previously called for all to prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:1,12, and 39). If someone speaks in tongues, there *must* be an interpretation; otherwise that person must be silent. That is not an absolute prohibition from speaking, but rests on the criterion Paul had mentioned earlier: is it upbuilding for the congregation? Prophesying, as well, may take place by two or at most three people at the same time. This is to be followed by an evaluation of this prophecy by others. On what grounds? We may think of the principle in 1 Corinthians 12:3, "Jesus is Lord," and what is said about false prophets in Matthew 7:15-23. Think also of what John writes in 1 John 4:1-6: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (1 John 4:2).

In the case of evaluating prophecy, too, the idea is that it must be upbuilding to the congregation, and everything must take place in an orderly manner. If, during the prophesying, someone who is sitting there wants to interrupt, the speaker is to be quiet and first let the other person speak. It seems as if the first speaker is not told to be quiet, but that someone in the gathering place is given the right to speak. How someone indicates that he or she wants to speak, is not said.

Verse 30 is not grouped with the "remain silent" texts, but in fact that is the case here. Paul says here, as it were: you are not the only one who has the gift of the Spirit. Don't absolutize your gift, and stop talking at the appropriate moment.

Everyone who has the gift of prophecy, may prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:5, 24 and 26). Verse 31 adds here an instruction for the gatherings: do it one by one, so that everyone can be taught and encouraged. Proper order and the peace of the gathering must not be disturbed. For that reason Paul writes further: (Dutch NBV translation) "The person who prophesies must have power

over his own spirit" (English ESV: "and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets") (vs. 33). Thus when you prophesy during gatherings, keep yourself under control, in contrast with the pagan way of prophesying, whereby prophets become ecstatic. The Holy Spirit does not take the control away from the believers' own spirit.

Speaking in tongues must be translated or interpreted by another person. "Don't become ecstatic" could mean that you must speak understandable language. One gets the impression from these verses that the Corinthians had a very high opinion of themselves, for Paul writes a bit further on: "Or was it from you that the word of God came?" Verse 36 closes, with this remark, connecting to verse 33. The subject here is not women (verse 34-35), but the gifts of the Spirit (verse 26-33). The Corinthians wanted to ignore Paul's demands, while in all the other congregations the people held to them.

Paul's remark in verse 36 is quite sharp in tone. In verse 37 he adds to this sharpness. It sounds like a direct confrontation, which concludes with a declaration from the Lord. In the words of Paul we hear: if you don't recognize what I'm saying as from the Lord, *your* words shouldn't be recognized at all! This expression could be referring back to Matthew 7:21,23. The passage concludes with a short summary of the previous verses in verse 39 and 40: "So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order." And for all the words spoken in the congregation the criterion is that they must be upbuilding.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Now we look at the passage which is called a "remain silent" text: "the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church."

These verses occur in the context of evaluating prophecy and combatting chaos. In the surrounding verses there are other limitations regarding people who are prophesying. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul has already mentioned that women also are prophesying (1 Corinthians 11:5). For the Corinthians it was immediately clear what Paul meant in 14:33-34. Paul is giving instructions, and he substantiates them as well. Women must remain subordinate, as the law says. This "being subordinate" you can interpret as "patiently endure," without doing injustice to Paul's intention. Compare this to church members in our day who "endure" quietly what is being said in a sermon, without shouting out all kinds of things in reaction.

The reference to the law (verse 34) is special, because we know of no law in which this is said. Some think that Paul is making a reference to Genesis 3:16, but those words do not have the power or the status of a law. It is more probable that Paul is here making a connection with what the Greeks at that time imagined with the word "law." By "law" the Greeks thought of a habit or convention, that which has been commonly done, either written down or not.⁷⁰

The context and the words which Paul uses here make it possible to read 1 Corinthians 14:33 and 34 as follows: you women must voluntarily not get involved in discussions in the gatherings. They must

⁷⁰ Dorland, P., *Ambtsdrager M/V, Mogen vrouwen een kerkelijk ambt bekleden*, Soest: 2013.

"endure" it, as is the custom. If they want to ask something, they must do it at home, for it's not appropriate if they do that in the congregational gathering.

Paulus advises Timothy

The next text which is grouped with the "remain silent" texts, we find in 1 Timothy 2:11-13. Here too it's important to give attention to the character of the text itself and to the context in which it is found.

The apostle Paul writes a letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:1,2). In contrast to many letters of Paul, this is not a letter to a congregation, but a letter to a fellow worker. The letter is to be seen as "internal correspondence."⁷¹ The letter is addressed to Timothy, the "preacher" in the young congregation in Ephesus. His task is to lead the congregation in the right direction. Because Paul is no longer in the city, he gives his instructions through a letter.

The congregation of Ephesus is in danger. There are people who are teaching a divergent doctrine. They are named in full (1 Timothy 1:20). The warnings against error and the people who are in error begin and end the letter.⁷² After the start of the letter, normal for that time, Paul begins directly to discuss the doctrinal errors which are threatening the congregation. The letter ends with a section about people who are in error. The middle section of the letter consists in instructions meant for Timothy, but Paul is writing Timothy with an eye to the congregation Timothy is serving. The section where the so-called "remain silent" texts are located, chapter 2:8-15, contains moral instruction concerning congregational life and how the believers ought to relate to each other.

Chapter 2, in which Paul is instructing Timothy, begins with an appeal: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

The instructions which Paul gives starting at verse 8 are not unconnected with this appeal. You can see the appeal as the motivation for the instructions. The attitude of prayer of the men, and the clothing specifications for the women are to be of service to the plan of God, who desires that all people be saved and come to know the truth.

Paul says that he desires that this be true in every gathering. There is a difference of opinion about what the expression "every gathering" means. Does it mean "everywhere" or "in all the gatherings, wherever they may be"?⁷³ However this may be, the women must be modest, wise, and know how to behave. But nothing here in this context points to a subordinate position of the woman.

We read: "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. The saying

⁷¹ Houwelingen, P.H.R. van, *Timoteüs Titus, 'Pastorale instructiebrieven'*, (CNT), Kampen: 2009.

⁷² Houwelingen, P.H.R. van, *Timoteüs Titus, 'Pastorale instructiebrieven'*, (CNT), Kampen: 2009.

⁷³ Holwerda, D., *De Schrift opent een vergezicht*, Franeker: 2019, p. 660 "It seems to me most probable that Paul means 'every (regular) place of prayer,' including here in 1 Tim. 3:8."

Dorland, P., *Ambtsdrager M/V, Mogen vrouwen een kerkelijk ambt bekleden?*, Soest: 2013, p. 49 "Another objection is that the Greek expression for 'in every place' does not warrant thinking of gatherings here."

is trustworthy..." (1 Timothy 2:11-3:1a). (Note of the translator: the ESV connects 3:1a with the following verses in chapter 3, not with the previous verse)

Paul writes that a woman must allow herself to be taught "obediently" and "modestly." It is helpful here to look at the Greek. To begin: the Greek word that is used for teaching, or here "be taught" (*manthanein*) is the English "to learn." Here in verse 11 the idea is that of the disciple *learning*, about studying and taking part in the learning process.

Further, this learning process ought to take place obediently and modestly. "Obediently" is the translation of the Greek *hēsuchia*. This word indicates a restfulness which comes from inside you. In other places in his letters Paul uses this word to exhort church members to "restfulness" (see 1 Thessalonians 4:11 and 2 Thessalonians 3:12). "Modestly" is the translation of the Greek *hupotachè*. This word indicates here a pupil's receptive respect for an authoritative teacher. Paul urges the women to have an attitude which is necessary for learning, for receiving teaching. Receiving teaching is central. Here it is not fitting to be assertive or to have a know-it-all attitude. What's involved here is not a subordination which is has been structured into creation by God, but the acceptance of the place of a pupil: have an attitude of wanting to learn, that is, a receptive attitude. Just as for the men "praying with raised hands" does, the outward posture of women ought to be a reflection of their inward focus.

In verse 12 Paul goes on to write about another, although related, subject. In the Dutch New Bible Translation (NBV) we read, as we also read in the English ESV: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet." (additions of the translator) These translations can mislead us. For in the Greek the connection between verse 11 and 12 is much less prominent than in these Dutch and English translations (addition of the translator). In Dutch the sentence has "for I do not permit...", but in the Greek the "for" is absent, and the "she" ("a woman" in the ESV) does not refer to the "woman" in verse 11; Paul writes in verse 12 "the woman" again. Finally, the word for "to teach" in verse 12 another Greek word is used, namely *didaskein*, "to teach" in English. With respect to *receiving teaching* Paul says that this should take place obediently and modestly (verse 11). With respect to *giving teaching* by a woman, Paul says that she may not do this by herself, and that she may not have authority over men, and that she must be modest (verse 12).

Of crucial important here is the Greek word *authentēin* (Dutch NBV translation: "I do not permit a woman *herself* to teach or exercise authority over men"). A very accurate interpretation is needed here, for the verse plays a big role in the man, woman, and church office discussions. The word occurs just one time in the Bible. We know it well from non-Biblical Greek texts. In classical Greek the word has a special meaning: it refers to a murderer, originally even someone who has murdered one (or all) of his or her relatives. In later Greek it takes on the meaning of being a dictatorial ruler. Even later, the meaning shifts to "deciding things for oneself," "settle business by oneself," with the emphasis on "oneself," independently of another person. The connotation here is that someone is no longer following orders, but is himself or herself the boss, without being subordinate to someone else.⁷⁴

It is thus important to be aware of the aspects of meaning the word *authentēin* contains. Paul means here: doing something "on one's own authority," alone, and thus not with others, and on one's own initiative, not on the initiative of others. That is the meaning of verse 12: Paul is forbidding a highhanded, autonomous teaching by women, who act without regard for others or consulting others, or wanting to give an account for this action to anyone. In the context, this must have to do with the

⁷⁴ Holwerda, D., *De Schrift opent een vergezicht*, Kampen: Voorhoeve 1998, p. 682.

situation in Ephesus. Paul gives in passing an image of what was sometimes happening in Ephesus (1 Timothy 5:11 and 2 Timothy 3:6,7). According to Paul, men too are forbidden from acting or proclaiming the Word autonomously, on their own authority. This prohibition has been in force up till our day in the Reformed church order (see the Reformed churches (Liberated) Church Order, Art. A2.2, A3.2, B6.3). In giving these instructions, Paul is concerned as well that the good reputation of the congregation not be damaged in the opinion of outsiders (1 Timothy 3:7, 1 Timothy 5:14 and 1 Timothy 6:1).

The interpretation which is often given of this verse, to the effect that it is concerned with ruling or giving leadership in general, can thus not be derived from the Greek word used here, *authentēin*, (Dutch NBV translation: "herself"). If he had meant that, Paul would most probably have chosen another word, as occurs in other places in the New Testament (*archein, exousia, prohistania*). Paul's word choice is important for understanding what Paul wants to make clear to Timothy. Paul's not talking about giving leadership in general, and also not, in general, about a woman who is ruling over a (arbitrary) man. The word used in verse 11, "*huptachè*," is used in contrast with the word "*authentēo*" in verse 12.⁷⁵

The continuing text in 1 Timothy 2: instruction and motivation

In 1 Timothy 2:8-10 Paul adds, as we have seen, words about motivation to his words of instruction. The same thing happens in verse 13 and 14: after the instruction about imparting teaching to others, Paul gives motivation for his instruction. To do this Paul uses a temporal argument. The question is: do we have to read this as an appeal to creation order, and thus silence all opposing arguments? That would be strange, since Paul mentions the Fall together with creation. The Bible and our confessions speak against an "order of rank related to the Fall" in human relationships (Ezekiel 18:20, Belgic Confession, Art. 15).

Paul does not formulate a principle here, but refutes the arguments which women presented in their struggle for power. In verse 12 it is, namely, a case of highhanded, autonomous activity. No one way act in such a way, including the men. The women in verse 12 have probably another ambition. It is striking that Paul mentions Eve by name here, since when she was created, she didn't yet have that name. One possible explanation of why Paul does this here, is that he's reacting to what is happening in Ephesus. It seems quite plausible that the women of Ephesus are appealing to Eve. That's why Paul unexpectedly mentions Eve, the mother of all the living. Paul wants to indicate that women cannot appeal to Eve in order to achieve power.

Paul quotes Eve herself in verse 14 (see Genesis 3:13). He says, in other words: women, you may appeal to Eve, but listen to what Eve herself says about this. Paul positions Adam and Eve over against each other. That is fitting by the use of the word *authentēin*. In Ephesus the women were beginning to have competition with the men. Paraphrasing what we read in verse 14: you may point to Eve as proof that women are the ones who deserve to teach. But the chronological order at creation militates against that thought. Moreover, Eve became the transgressor, as she herself admitted. This, while she could have known better than to do what she did.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Holwerda, D., *De Schrift opent een vergezicht*, Franeker: 2019, p. 497 – 498 "Then it is most probable, indeed, that we must regard the contrast 'living in complete subordination'-'authentēin' in 1 Tim. 2 as having exactly the same meaning as in the text in Proclus; in other words, that in the Bible text it is a matter of a woman who liberates herself from being a woman in subordination, and herself starts to decide things without recognizing her husband in this; and not about a woman who rules over a (arbitrary) man. See 1 Tim. 2:8-15 and Titus 2:1-10." This comparison supports Holwerda's conclusion.

⁷⁶ Dorland, P., *Ambtsdrager M/V, Mogen vrouwen een kerkelijk ambt bekleden?*, Soest: 2013.

When you bring verse 15 into the picture, it becomes clearer that Paul is showing that the appeal which women are making to Eve's example is nonsense. In verse 15 Paul states, namely, what the real situation is. This verse does not belong any longer to the motivating factors of verse 12, but still is connected to that section. The women seem to be linking their situation in Ephesus with Genesis. Paul turns this around, by linking Genesis to the situation in Ephesus: "Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control" (1 Timothy 2:15).

It is a striking sentence, even more because there in the Greek the beginning of the sentence is in the singular, while the second half is in the plural. Most of the Bible translations don't show this difference. The Dutch Naardense Bible *does* translate it this way, with the singular at the start, and the plural in the second half (as does the English ESV; note of the translator).

All the manuscripts of the original Greek have this singular/plural construction, which most probably was current in the Greek. There is only *one* woman in the whole world who credits her salvation to having children, that is Eve. The first part of the sentence refers to her, in the singular. The second part of the sentence, in the plural, is concerned with the women who are mentioned in verse 12. According to Paul, they may be saved by the Gospel Timothy is bringing. They are saved by a faith which works through love. This latter attitude is so much different than the attitude the women in Ephesus are demonstrating.

Finally, Paul writes: "The saying is trustworthy" (1 Timothy 3:1a) (note of the translator: as we have mentioned, the ESV connect these words not with the previous text, but with the following one). This is a formulation which always is used as a confirmation of what is previous, when words about salvation are used. This is indeed the case in 2:15.

Take note: the "remain silent" texts and the right of women to vote
The General Synod of Ommen (1993) made a decision about the right of women to vote in congregational elections. You can read Article 24, decision 3, grounds 1d, of that decision, as indicating that women are not allowed to be an elder or a minister. But the GS Ommen did not declare these grounds involved with the exegesis of the texts of 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, and 1 Timothy 2, to be eternally valid. That is, furthermore, not the task of a Synod. A Synod is to make decisions, based on grounds, for the sake of church practice, but does not canonize any particular exegesis (see also the Minutes (Acta) of GS Berkel and Rodenrijs (1996), Art. 29, decision 3, grounds 2).

Conclusion

The General Synod of Meppel (2017) decided that, Biblically speaking, there is room for women to be admitted to the church offices. In the considerations which led to that decision, the so-called "remain silent" texts were not ignored.⁷⁷ However, in the grounds you cannot find a discussion of the exegesis of these texts. That has led to a lot of confusion. In particular, the phrase that these two texts are "too controversial" to categorically exclude women from the teaching and ruling office, gave the impression that they didn't play any role in the decision making.

⁷⁷ For an overview of the material that has contributed to these decisions, see: <https://www.onderwegonline.nl/vrouw-in-het-ambt>

For this reason this report gives extensive attention to 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2. We want to show: it is, Biblically speaking, responsible to read these texts in this way. We are submitting this possible exegesis to the churches, and are praying that the Holy Spirit will give us the wisdom which is needed to, together, understand God's Word. It is our conviction that the Synod of Meppel decided to open the church offices to women on the basis of a responsible way of reading the Bible.

Appendix

1. "You read it there plain and simple, don't you?"

Initial summary

"You read it there plain and simple, don't you?" This reaction of Bible readers to the subject man, woman, and church office, is in itself understandable. As we read the Bible, you can easily get the impression that men have a more important position than women.

However, whoever takes the time to read the Bible more carefully should realize that it came into being in a completely different time and culture than that in which he or she lives today. A secondary position of the woman, seen from cultural context of the Bible, is self-evident. While in the Bible there is no call for a direct revolution against the existing social relationships, in that context the woman is certainly given protection, and that with emphasis.

In this way the Bible functions as a counterweight, with an observable impact on the concrete position of women.

Introduction

Chapter 1 shows that the relationship between man and woman at creation is characterized by equality, distinction, and unity. With God's announcement of punishment after the Fall into sin came the man's domination of the woman. Since then God has been working with "slow haste" to restore the good relations between man and woman.

By saying this not everything has been said. There is also the reality of a culture in which the man-woman relations have taken shape. Salvation has a history. What does this mean for reading and interpreting the Bible on this subject? When views change, people can wonder: how is it possible that we've always read these texts differently? And you can't avoid the fact that Jesus only appointed male apostles, and Paul only male elders, can you?

I. The Bible and context

A well-known rule for the reading the Bible is that we have to read it "contextually." What we mean by that can be easily illustrated by the example of the position of the earth in the cosmos. Five hundred years ago everyone thought that the sun revolved around the earth (the geocentric cosmology). That was the way people read the Bible, too: the earth is fixed, built on an unmovable foundation, and on the earth rests the firmament of the heavens, above which the heaven of heavens is located, the place where God's throne is to be found. The sun, the moon, and the stars revolve in their orbits around the earth, as God has decreed.

Thanks to people like Copernicus, we now know that because the earth is revolving around its axis, it *looks like* the sun, the planets, and the stars are revolving around the earth, but that in reality the earth, just like all the other planets, revolves around the sun. Not the earth, but the sun is at the center of our solar system (the heliocentric cosmology). For the church this discovery meant a culture shock.

However, doing justice to the Biblical text means to take into account, emphatically, that God revealed His Word first to Israel, thus in language and terms from the Near East, and in relation to images which were understandable at that time.

It is in relation to these images that God speaks in a liberating way: contextually. That it to say, He both adjusts to, as well as opposes, current views. He transforms and transcends them, and makes it in this

way possible to understand, from very diverse backgrounds, His revelation, and to serve Him. In this way His Word has full expressive power in our own lives today.

What does this mean regarding man-woman relations in the Old and New Testament? We must realize that the LORD in Genesis 1-3 tells about the first human couple and about the creation of the world and humanity. The foundational lines which are drawn there, at the beginning the history of the world and salvation history, are of great importance. At the same time we must realize, as we read, that God revealed this first of all to the Israel of that day. Genesis 1-3 cannot be lifted out of its context. These chapters have to be read, first of all, literarily, canonically, and also culturally, in connection with the stories about the marriages of the patriarchs and the legislation about marriage and sexuality in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

"The factual answer to the question about the authority of the Bible regarding these kind of issues (the abolition of slavery, another view of poverty as social injustice, the view of the place of the woman in society and church, the view of marriage, fertility, relations, of physical and mental limitations, of ecology) is seen to be given in a continual interaction between culture, context, and the Bible."⁷⁸

This starting point leads to a striking perspective on man-woman relations.

First of all: the Biblical texts do not, in the first place, think at all in terms of the individual (the man) over against the other (the woman). Both are, together, created in God's image, but are representatives as "the human being," and "the living one," again and again of a greater whole, humanity. That is to be seen from how both are called, but also by the way in which Genesis 5 and 1 Chronicles 1 portray the beginning of humanity.

Whoever reads this in the context of the patriarch stories and the legislation of the Pentateuch discovers that no individual in Israel can be seen separately from his or her family, and from the "father," the person who is head of the family.

Whoever, in reading, weighs the meaning of this context, sees how the cultural environment of the text resounds in it. In the unsafe society of the ancient world, it is scarcely possible for the individual to survive without being imbedded in greater whole. Certainly the relatively weak, such as women and children, need the physical and economic protection of the men and of a greater whole. The "house of the father" (and, infrequently, "of the mother," Genesis 24:28) offers that protection, and, self-evidently, there a man is at the head. In this way, Adam was head of the first family.

In this cultural context the secondary position of the woman in the Bible is truly something self-evident, a presupposition. And that's why it is so that this self-evidently secondary position of the woman is assumed in all kinds of passages.

In our time and culture, we live in a society in which the government and the legal system function so robustly that, on that basis, safety can be guaranteed. We no longer have "extended families," not to mention a "pater familias," who with regard to the safety and well-being of all involved has the right to decide, for example, about marriages and other relationships.

We think in the first place from the standpoint of the individual human being, who has been created in God's image. Man and woman form now a primary social unit. Their living together is an individual decision, with or without it being made explicit to and supported by a broader social and church setting. Women occupy social positions at all levels. Christians have, legitimately, no objection to this.

⁷⁸ Van den Brink, G., van der Kooij, C., *Christelijke dogmatiek*, Zoetermeer: 2012.

To get a good idea of this subject, we proceed, in the following pages, to describe a number of differences, determined by time and culture, regarding the relations between men and women.

II. The difference between the Biblical and the contemporary age

Roles

In the time of the Bible

The woman was seen in the time of the Bible, above all, as a (potential) mother; her longing to be a mother is central. Think, for example, of the despair of Lot's daughters, which motivated them to have children by their father (Genesis 19:32), or Rachel's tremendous relief when she, by stealth, managed to get pregnant and have children (Genesis 30:3). The task of the woman was to bear and to raise children, and to run the household. Read Psalm 113: "He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children" (vs. 9), and Psalm 128: "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table" (vs. 3).

The present day

In our day, in contrast, motherhood and marriage are a possibility, by choice, for the woman. Man and woman earn their living together, and care for the children together.

Inclusivity

In the time of the Bible

The wife was at that time not called by her own name, but seen and treated as an extension of her husband. Noah--*with his wife*--and his sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth--*with their wives*--went into the ark (Genesis 7:13). At the time of the Exodus out of Egypt, 600,000 *men* were involved. The fact that the women and children were not counted with the men, does not alter the story here.

The present day

In our day, married women do not like to be seen or introduced as just the "wife of...", as if they are not themselves someone and do not have their own identity. When we count people today, the women and children are seen as completely equal in value to the men. The Netherlands has around 17 million *inhabitants* (men, women, and children); the Reformed churches (Liberated) have about 110,000 *members*, counting everyone (men, women, and children).

Inequality

In the time of the Bible

Wives in the time of the Bible were subordinate to their husbands and Sarah, who called her husband Abraham "Lord," is presented as an example (1 Peter 3:6).⁷⁹

Men did not speak in public with women. Think about the amazement felt by Jesus' disciples when they came to discover that He was involved in a conversation with a woman (John 4:27).

When women bore a daughter, they were twice as long "unclean" (two weeks and 66 days) as required after the birth of a son (one week and 33 days). The value in money of a human life was specified as 50 silver shekels for a man, and 30 silver shekels for a woman (Leviticus 27).

The present day

Today, if a wife would voluntarily call her husband "Lord," and treat him as such, this would be perceived as very strange. The fact that men from other cultures sometimes refuse to shake the hand of a woman, in The Netherlands, is seen as negative and undesirable, let alone if they would refuse to speak to women.

⁷⁹ See further the remarks of footnote 76.

Covenant

In the time of the Bible

God made a covenant with Abraham. Hereby He gave Abraham the charge to circumcise all the men and the boys: Abraham's own sons, but also the sons of his slaves, and the sons of foreigners who been bought (Genesis 17:12).

The present day

Baptism, the sign of the new covenant, is administered to boys and men *and* to girls and women.⁸⁰

Polygamy

In the time of the Bible

Polygamy was common. Elkana had two wives (1 Samuel 1:2). Abraham had three (Genesis 16:1,3; 25:1). Jacob had four (Genesis 29:30; 30:9). Gideon had many wives (Judges 8:30). Living as one of the wives in such a relationship was in many cases difficult and arduous.

The present day

Polygamy is illegal in The Netherlands.

Marriage and divorce

In the time of the Bible

In Bible times a father could give away his daughter in marriage, or "sell" her. Caleb promised: "Whoever strikes Kiriath-sepher and captures it, to him will I give Achsah my daughter as wife." (Joshua 15:16). The bridegroom would pay a certain amount of money for his bride, after which she became his property, and was obliged to obey him. Men would choose a woman to marry, but the reverse was not the case. Only the wives were required to be faithful in marriage. With a few exceptions, only the husbands had the right to dismiss their wives with a "bill of divorce" (Deuteronomy 22:19; 24:1).

The present day

Women may and are able to date, to ask a man to marry them, and to apply for a divorce.

Possessions

In the time of the Bible

A wife was regarded as the possession of her husband, and was treated accordingly. Thus we hear

Jacob saying to Laban: " Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed" (Genesis 29:21), and we read further at the time of Moses: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's" (Exodus 20:17), and: "...but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you" (Deuteronomy 20:14).

In the present day

We would not even think of putting our wives in a list of our possessions.

⁸⁰ Without equating baptism and circumcision, "the administration of baptism to girls and women shows in a definite manner the superiority of the New Testament dispensation above the Old Testament dispensation."
<https://www.refoweb.nl/vragenrubriek/19480/besnijdenis-alleen-voor-jongens/>

Worship services

In the time of the Bible

At that time, the worship services were above all an activity for men. Women were allowed to enter only the forecourt of the temple, and in the synagogues there was a separate area reserved for them. Men have the duty to go three times a year to God's house, not the women. There was a separate area reserved for them there, and they were not allowed to sit with the men. As well, the many rituals regarding "cleanliness" often had as a result that the women were excluded from participating in the worship services. The religious vows which the women pledged only had validity when the vows were confirmed by their husbands or fathers (Numbers 30:2).

In the present day

Women participate fully in all activities in church.

III. The Bible on men and women

The society in which we live today is strongly oriented to the individual, with equal rights, equal opportunity, and self-development for each (autonomous) person. With regard to many issues involved here, the Bible, and especially Genesis 1-3, emphatically opposes the tendencies of such an individualistic society. Christians are called to let themselves be guided by God's revelation. With our emphasis on the individual, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that we, as human beings and as humanity, are strongly *connected* to each other, and that God has intended this to be so. This applies, without a doubt, to God's new family, of which Christ is the head, and which is oriented to His future.

Further, marriage between one man and one woman has had a special place, from the beginning, and on the road to God's kingdom, in spite of the brokenness caused by the Fall. Jesus emphasizes this Himself, once again. Here, *unity* is what counts, and hereby the interest of the other is placed above that of one's own family, career, or anything else.

The big question is: what do we do with the secondary position of the woman which is presumed in many Bible texts?

IV. Adapting and transforming

Exegetically speaking, there is justification in seeing the more patriarchal relationships at the time of the patriarchs and in the early church as being in fact sinful, the result of the curse in Genesis 3 (see chapter 1 of this report for this point). It is furthermore striking that, on the one hand, the Scripture does not directly call for a direct revolution against the existing social relationships, but, on the other hand, emphatically calls for the protection of women in this context. In the Scripture, we see preeminently that humanity is the image of God, and that, in Christ, there is neither man nor woman. The Scripture functions hereby as a counterweight, with observable impact on the concrete position of women.

In this connection the comparison with yeast is vividly made.⁸¹ Yeast works unseen and its effect is only to be seen later. The kingdom of heaven is active as yeast in society. Society is not blown up with a lot of noise, but, in a hidden way, the beneficial activity of the Gospel works slowly in its development, and gradually produces fruit.

Now we would like to show something of this from texts in the Old and New Testaments.

⁸¹ See the report Men and women and church office, "Serving together," (M/V en ambt 'Samen dienen') Meppel:2017

The Old Testament

- a) In Exodus 21:1-6 there are all kinds of regulations concerning slaves. These instructions are comparable to what we know from extra-Biblical, ancient Near Eastern law regulations. It seems as if God's people took something from these. God does not say here: "You should be totally different"; that wouldn't have worked. He allowed His people to live in the midst of an existing culture, in which slaves had a social place. Rather, God works, liberatingly, step by step, in changing evil slave practices. He restrains slavery. He gives, indeed, regulations concerning slavery, but then in combination with the sign of the covenant: the sabbath year as the space for celebrating freedom with God. And it was forbidden to treat a fellow Israelite as a slave!
- b) In Exodus 21:7-11 we see something similar. There exists a culture with certain rules. This culture is miles away from our own. Someone can sell his own daughter! A rich owner can subsequently have his way with the daughter of someone else. Apparently, our God does not explicitly forbid these things. But in 21:10-11 we read: don't allow her to be someone without any rights. You may not neglect her, but must provide her food and protection. Here too we see that, on the one hand, God adapts to an existing culture, and that, on the other hand, He corrects it by providing protection to the weak.
- c) In Numbers 5 we read about legislation which has to do with jealousy. In the eyes of a Dutch person, in the year 2020, this is a ceremony which is very unfriendly to women: what do you mean, a provision only for men who suspect their wives of something? Wouldn't the other way around to be more expected? Nevertheless, in the Israel of that day it must have been a liberating and gracious provision. In the laws of Hammurabi, a wife had to be thrown into water, and if she floated, she was proven innocent. In an age when women couldn't swim, this was thus a death penalty. Numbers 5 keeps the matter within the home, and gives the wife all the room she needs to be proven innocent. In the same way, there are more examples in the Mosaic legislation which can be given in which a tendency to a strong criticism of society is expressed (expressing support for those who are unprotected and those without rights, criticizing the concentration of power and power in a few, against exploitation, implicitly against slavery, etc.). The Torah shows continually that God is a God of redemption and deliverance. That is good news for women!
- d) In the Old Testament men are clearly more prominently at center stage than women. The leadership roles of prophet, priest, and king are almost without exception fulfilled by men. However, exceptions--"premonitions of Pentecost"--are to be seen. Moses' sister Miriam takes the stage as a prophetess (Exodus 15:20-21). "Miriam is the first woman in the Bible who gets the title of prophet, and that, even before Moses gets that title."⁸² Deborah is called to be a prophetess and a judge (Judges 4:4-10), and Huldah as a prophetess (2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chronicles 34:22-28). Hannah speaks prophetically in her prayer/song (1 Samuel 2:1-10), pointing to a new age in which Israel is going to be ruled by a king. Nowhere does Scripture come with excuses for this leading role for women. Their leadership is accepted by the people gratefully and in a natural manner. "When God breaks into the structure of the patriarchal world, that can mean that He appoints women as prophets or judges."⁸³

⁸² Jagersma, H., *Verklaring van de Hebreeuwse bijbel*, Exodus I, Kampen: 1999.

⁸³ Goldingay, J., *Exodus en Leviticus voor iedereen*, Franeker: 2010.

- e) While God initiates the old covenant, we see from many facets that this is not God's final will for His people.

We hear repeatedly from the prophets that God is going to do "something new" for His people, something which will surpass anything He has done in the past. God even announces through the mouth of Jeremiah (31:31-34) that He is coming with a new covenant for Israel, one which will be different than the covenant which He made when He led them out of Egypt. God proclaims through the mouth of Joel (2:28-32) that in that day He will pour out His Spirit on *both men and women, sons and daughters*, so that all of them will prophecy. Ezekiel (11:19-20; 36:26-27) speaks of an age of renewal in which God will make His people more obedient by giving them, men and women, "living hearts" instead of "hearts of stone." Isaiah, too, speaks clearly about the coming, new age. The new age will be more inclusive, because the "servant of the LORD" (49:6) will be light and will bring salvation, to Jews and Gentiles alike. God's coming salvation includes eunuchs and foreigners as well (56:1-8), those who under the law were excluded (Leviticus 21:17-23; Deuteronomy 23:1-9).

The way in which the New Testament writers use these Old Testament prophecies (see Hebrews 8:7-13; Acts 2:16-21; 2 Corinthians 3:1-3; Acts 13:47) makes clear that they clearly understood that these prophecies would be fulfilled when the new covenant had made its entrance.

- f) In the Song of Solomon 2:16 and 6:3 we read: "My beloved is mine, and I am his (...) I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." Here husband and wife have "ownership rights" over each other. It gives us a glimpse of how God meant things to be in the beginning. "Husband and wife feel strongly attached to each other, they fit each other, and complement each other, in accordance with God's purpose (see Genesis 2:22-23)."⁸⁴

The New Testament

- a) Over against the marriage relationship in the time of the Bible, in which the wife was subordinate to her husband, in the New Testament God paints a portrait, too, of the special dynamics between a husband and a wife in their relationship. Hereby we are struck by the positive, loving light shed on the wife, who, just as at the beginning, exists in a completely mutual and equal relation to her husband.

1 Corinthians 7:3 and 4: "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does."

The most intimate contact between husband and wife is portrayed by Paul as one of complete mutuality. This reminds us of the way in which God created man and woman: as a unity of two. "Not an authority structure, but becoming one flesh with each other, is definitive here."⁸⁵ "Paul uses the striking verb 'to have authority' (over each other's body): this verb is taken from legislation concerned with the rights of property, and indicates that someone has administrative rights over something (...) This is a somewhat strange verb to use for a marriage. If Paul had only said that the husband is entitled to use the body of his wife, then we could think of the mentality of the dominant husband against which the feminism of this age has protested

⁸⁴ Brink, van den, G., Bette, J.C., Zwiép, A.W., *Studiecommentaar Oude Testament*, Veenendaal: 2012.

⁸⁵ Anderson, R.D., *1 Korintiërs. Orde op zaken in een jonge stadskerk*, Kampen: 2008

against so stridently. But this association is totally excluded, because immediately the converse is presented: the wife is entitled to use the body of her husband."⁸⁶

Ephesians 5:21: "...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Paul's call to mutually accept the authority of each other provides, precisely because of its mutuality, space, in an exceptional way, for the wife, certainly when he also later adds that husband must serve their wives in love, following the example of Christ's love for the church. "Subjecting yourself, subordinating yourselves to one another, must take place."⁸⁷

Matthew 5:28: "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Jesus uncovers how intensely evil is rooted in people and in society. Sinning against the seventh commandment is shown to be something evil, making women victims because the evil resides in the hearts of men.

1 Timothy 3:2: "Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach..." By means of this instruction, Paul is continuing his criticism of society, by in fact forbidding polygamy in the congregation of Christ.

- a) Jesus prepared the renewed appreciation of the position of the woman in the Christian congregation. In His approach to women, we find not one trace of slighting or discrimination. In contrast with the Jewish tradition, Matthew mentions five women in Jesus' genealogy (Matthew 1:1-17). Only men occur in Jewish genealogies (see Genesis. 5; Ezra 2). Luke, as well, mentions exclusively men (Luke 3:23-38). Jesus goes against the Rabbinic custom of not associating with women. To the astonishment of the disciples He carries on a conversation with a woman from Samaria (John 4:27), whom he moreover sends out as the first missionary witness (4:41-42). "The fact in itself that Jesus associated with a woman was for the standards of that time extraordinary."⁸⁸ "It is remarkable that Jesus was also involved with the liberation of women. This may be seen as something peripheral, nevertheless we see here that Jesus, in contrast with those of his time, does honor this woman, does speak with her."⁸⁹ By touching women, He is guilty, according to the views of the Rabbis, of numerous transgressions against the moral order: the mother-in-law of Peter (Matthew 8:14 f.), the bent-over woman (Luke 13:10-17), the daughter of Jairus (Matthew 9:25). He permits himself to be anointed by a woman of questionable morals (Luke 7:36-50). He associates in a free and natural way with women: Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42; John 11). He proclaims to unconverted scribes that tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God before they do (Matthew 21:13). Next to the small circles of the thirteen, Jesus had gathered a bigger group of 70 apostles around Him, among which men *and* women. Concerning the latter, we know how they travelled with Jesus through the land, and cared for Him out of their own means. They were present at His crucifixion, and waited in the upper room for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church: Mary of Magdalene, Joanna, the

⁸⁶ Bruggen, J. van, *Het huwelijk gewogen 1 Korinthe 7*, Groningen: 1984

⁸⁷ Leeuwen, J.A.C., *Paulus' zendbrieven aan Efeze, Colosse, Filemon en Thessalonica* (KNT-Bottenburg), Amsterdam: 1926. For the rest, the Dutch NBV translates incorrectly here "*accepting one another's authority*." This gives a false impression of what is meant here with the word *hypotassomai*: "to show respect." The same thing occurs in the NBV translation of Eph. 5:22,24, while here in verse 33 this *hypotassomai* is expressed as *phobeomai*, "to show respect, awe." See Col. 3:18, Tit. 2:5, 1 Pet. 3:1,5.

⁸⁸ Ridderbos, H., *Het evangelie naar Johannes*, Kampen: 1987.

⁸⁹ Grosheide, F.W., *Het heilig evangelie volgens Johannes* (KNT-Bottenburg), Amsterdam: 1950.

wife of Herod's household manager, Susanna, and many others (Luke 8:2-3). To a few of them the risen Lord showed Himself, as the very first to see Him after His resurrection, and afterwards they were the first who were privileged to tell this to the apostles (Matthew 28:9).

- c) In accordance with the prophecy in Joel 3:1 and its fulfillment "in the last days" (Acts 2:17-18), Paul points often to the gifts of the Spirit which Christians are receiving in the new covenant (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11; 27-30; Ephesians 4:7-13). Belonging to these gifts were also "teaching," "giving leadership," of which Paul emphatically says that they have been given to "all" (1 Corinthians 12:7; see also 1 Corinthians 12:27; Romans 12:3; Ephesians 5:7). What is the use of a gift if it cannot be put into practice?
- d) Just as Joel had prophesied, both men *and* women receive the Spirit in the new covenant, who enables them to prophesy (Acts 2:17-18). The prophetic utterances of Mary and Elizabeth were registered (Luke 1:39-56), and through them God teaches the church still. The same thing is true of the prophetess Anna (forming a duo with Simeon). In Corinth men and women prophesied (1 Corinthians 11:5), and the daughters of Philip received the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9). "The Greek verb indicates first of all a function."⁹⁰ "They had the gift of prophecy, and thus a task in leading the congregation."⁹¹
 In Exodus 19:5-7 God promises to Israel that, if they keep His covenant, they will be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." In the New Testament this promise is applied to the church, one time with the emphasis on the priestly aspect (1 Peter 2:4-10), and another time with emphasis on the kingly aspect (Revelation 5:10; see Revelation 1:6).
 In agreement with this and other texts, the catechism does not distinguish between male and female members who share in the anointing in Christ, and who confess His name. It calls each one of them "a living sacrifice of thankfulness to him... (and will) hereafter reign with him eternally over all creatures" (Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 32). Thus women participate, just as men do, in all aspects of the "office of all believers."
- e) Women receive in the new covenant many leadership tasks (perhaps to be understood in terms of church office?), in a way that far transcends the service of women in the old covenant, including the proclamation of the Gospel.
 Paul mentions different female fellow workers in this proclamation. First of all he mentions Prisca (Romans 16:3). It is striking that in four of the six places where this woman, together with husband, is named, she is mentioned first: Acts 18:18,26; Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19. (The order is reversed in Acts 18:2 and 1 Corinthians 16:19). She also gives "catechism class," together with her husband, to Apollos (Acts 18:26). "This couple takes on a pioneering role."⁹² "...in supporting and working together with the apostle in Gospel-proclaiming activity, she had no purely passive role."⁹³ "...In the service of the Gospel, she did not have a 'place at the back' in the work."⁹⁴ Further we can mention Euodia and Syntyche, who "have labored side by side with me (Paul) in the Gospel together" (Philippians 4:3).

If we translate "proclamation of the Gospel," instead of "the Gospel," we are not being unfair to the text, for it is based on New Testament usage. See especially 1 Thessalonians 3:2, and further, for

⁹⁰ Eck, J. van, *Handelingen De wereld in het geding* (CNT), Kampen: 2003.

⁹¹ Grosheide, F.W., *De handelingen der apostelen II*, Amsterdam: 1948

⁹² Bruggen, J. van, *Romeinen. Christenen tussen stad en synagoge*, (CNT), Kampen: 2006.

⁹³ Greijdanus, S., *De brief van den apostel Paulus aan de gemeente te Rome I*, (CNT). Amsterdam: 1933.

⁹⁴ Jager, H.J., *Enige opmerkingen over Romeinen. Collegedictaat*, Kampen: 1978.

example, Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 8:18; 10:14; Philippians 2:22; 4:15. Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis are called those who "worked hard for the Lord" (Romans 16:6,12). These examples are important, not only because they show commendable zeal on the part of these women, but especially because Paul uses these words ("worked hard") for those who have a leadership task in the churches (1 Thessalonians 5:12), including the work of preaching and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17).

Prof. D. Holwerda, Professor in Greek language and literature at the University of Groningen, remarked in this connection: "It has puzzled me that people try to escape the force of this use of language by stating that 'the Gospel' doesn't have to mean 'preaching the Gospel,' asserting that the cited text proves nothing regarding the activity of the women in preaching. Their service could have been limited to, let's say, buttering bread for sandwiches and sewing buttons for the (male) preachers of the Gospel. But this, in my opinion, is to abuse the text. We read that Euodia and Syntyche 'labored side by side' (!) with Paul in the Gospel, 'together with (or as the Dutch 1951 NBG translation says, "next to"; isn't that something different than "under"?) Clemens and the rest of my fellow workers.' While it is true that we don't know more about Clemens, we do know who Paul calls 'fellow workers' (in the Gospel). They are: Timothy (1 Thess. 3:2; Rom. 16:21), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23), Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus (Col. 4:10,11), Prisca (!) and Aquila (Rom. 16:3), Demas and Luke (Philem. 24), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), Philemon (Philem. 1), and Urbanus (Rom. 16:9). With respect to by far the most of them it is certain (see for Epaphroditus, for example, Col. 1:7) that they were directly involved in the actual activity of the Gospel. To understand this in contemporary missionary terms: they were guru's, not chauffeurs. Otherwise, Paul would not have longed for the Christians to 'be subject to such as these, and to every (!) worker and laborer' (1 Cor. 16:16). A minister asks this regarding his elders, but not for his gardener (however the latter indirectly can be of service to the Gospel). So: what gives us the right, if we see women also included in this company, to suddenly think of help of a totally different sort?"⁹⁵

All these specific examples of women in leadership roles in the age of the new covenant support the notion that the baptismal confession of Galatians 3:28 functioned powerfully in the church. Women shared not only in salvation, but were, surprisingly enough, and to a high degree also involved in essential leadership tasks in the early church.
"Women had a prominent place in Paul's setting."⁹⁶

It is a miracle of grace that a third of all the names mentioned are women. From the beginning the church assigned an essential place to women, their ministry was of vital importance. They received a status which no other religion in the world has ever assigned to them."⁹⁷
"Women occupy an importance place. Paul calls them his fellow workers, without ever giving the impression that they had a lower position than men."⁹⁸

As an argument against the "yeast idea" there has often been the response that Jesus only appointed men as apostles, and that Paul only designated and appointed male elders (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). But was there an expectation that this practice would be continued? Would that have been in harmony with what the New Testament has to say about the new status and role of women in the age of the new covenant? It doesn't seem to have been the case at all.

⁹⁵ Holwerda, D., *De Schrift opent een vergezicht*, Franeker: 2019.

⁹⁶ Stott, J., *De boodschap van Romeinen* (BSV), Hoenderloo: 2009.

⁹⁷ Pawson, D., *Een toelichting op de brief aan de Romeinen*, Putten: 2015.

⁹⁸ Wright, T., *Paulus voor iedereen*, Franeker: 2011.

"From the fact that Christ did not appoint women to be apostles, people have drawn the conclusion that women are not candidates for church offices. Supposedly, this would be an extension of the Old Testament practice, whereby there were no priestesses. However, this argument is very disputable. For the twelve apostles represent the new covenant community of the church, as the twelve patriarchs, the sons of Jacob, represented the ancient people of God. In order to give this symbolism its proper impact on the Jews, it was necessary that the apostles be men, because, in the Jewish mind of that time, women couldn't represent anything or anyone.

Furthermore, the Rabbi and his disciples formed a complete life-and-work community, so that the presence of women was naturally excluded, and the choice of women would only damage the cause of Jesus.

Finally, it is very debatable whether a direct line can be drawn from the twelve apostles to the later office-bearers of the church, or not."⁹⁹

Conclusion

The movements within the Old and New Testaments, described above, help us to understand why Paul was hesitant regarding a dominant leadership position for women. At the same time, in the light of Scripture they can help us to positively appreciate the increased possibilities of self-development for women in contemporary Western culture. Under the influence of the surrounding culture, the Scripture presumes and makes use of the subordinate position of women. At the same time, we see, from the critical tendencies in many Bible passage regarding its own context, and, naturally, especially the relationships in the beginning, that Scripture does not oppose opening the church offices to women.

"Christianity is not bound to a particular culture or its expressions. Christians adapt to the cultural particularities of their surroundings as long as these cultural expressions do not hinder them from serving Christ, and they are not forced to worship other expressions which the culture presents. This explains their attitude toward slavery, toward politics, toward rules for eating and clothing. We must see the selection of church office-bearers in this perspective: in the context in which we live, who can do these tasks the best? We must also see gender and sexuality in this perspective. In a patriarchal culture, in which women cannot have leadership functions, Christians may not demonstratively appoint women to such positions, just as little as they would agitate to liberate the slaves. This would block the sight of what it means to have true freedom as a Christian, who is not dependent on his or her social status. It means, as well, that in another culture, in which women have another position, they can certainly be called to a church office. In every situation we should ask: who is the best candidate?"¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Wentsel, B., *Dogmatiek 3a, God en mens verzoend*, Kampen: 1987.

¹⁰⁰ Beek, van de A., *Lichaam en Geest van Christus. De theologie van de kerk en van de Heilige Geest*, Zoetermeer: 2012.

Final Thoughts

You have just read the committee report "Serve each other sincerely from the heart." The question follows naturally: how should we proceed?

Well, first of all, addressing this question is emphatically the task of the General Synod of Goes (2020). For it is clear that a large number of churches have expressed objections to, and asked for a revision of, the Men and Women and Church Office decisions of the previous Synod of Meppel (2017). The latter Synod decided that, in the light of Scripture, there was room to allow women, also, to all the church offices.

Therefore, women may serve in the office of deacon, elder, and minister. It is now the task of the representatives to the General Synod of Goes to evaluate the questions and the requests to revisions, regarding this decision, and to make a statement about them. They are also the people who finally have to answer the question: how should we proceed?

At the same time, the things that happen at the Synod involve the churches in the federation. That's why we want to help you, as an involved church member, or perhaps an office-bearer, to discover what the Bible does and doesn't say about the position of men and women in the church. It's possible that you have been following, with great interest, the discussion about men and women and church office for a long time. In short, this committee report is first of all meant to accompany and assist in the treatment of the revision requests at the General Synod, but, further, we want to serve all of our church councils and church members with it.

In this report, we have tried to listen carefully to what the Bible says about how men and women have been intended to be by God, and how they are to be mobilized in having a role in His plan of salvation. Further, against this background, we examined what this means for their position in relation to the carrying out of the church offices as we know them in the church. On the basis of its findings, the committee has come to the conclusion that, in its opinion, as seen from Scripture, men *and* women are called in serve each other in all things, that we cannot speak of one person being superior or inferior, or of a Biblical directive that men are superior to women, but rather that they are both, in the same way, able to be committed to carry out all kinds of church tasks, including the church offices.

But then... Does this now mean that all churches must feel obligated to placing women in church offices? No, the committee is convinced that every congregation has its own responsibility here. What the committee is presenting, in this report, is a Scriptural substantiation of this view, based on a cohesive exegesis of what is said in the Bible about the position of men and women in the church. This exegesis is not exclusive, and does not pretend to be offering the final and definitive verdict on this issue.

Is that possible? To have *one* Bible, and yet *two* possible conclusions which lead to different results? Can these two conclusions and these diverse results exist next to each other? We have two reactions to this question.

In the first place, we would like to point to that which Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13:9,10) and to the Ephesians (Ephesians 3:17-21). Paul makes clear to the Corinthians, and also to us, that our knowledge is deficient and our prophesying limited. We will not be able to understand everything, for only "when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away." For now we may find our

way with the encouraging words of Paul to the Ephesians: "that you... may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." Through these words we see how true it is that we need each other, and that we must keep on working together in order to understand, more and more, the enormous range of Christ's love.

In the second place we would like to point to the relatively minor importance of this subject in relation to God's plan of salvation for creation and humanity. In this report we affirm that the question of whether women can be church office-bearers or not does not touch the heart of Christian faith. It concerns the organization of the church in our time, nothing more, and also nothing less. Our faith does not depend on it. On the other hand, we are certainly spurred on to resolve our differences of opinion in this area within the unity of the church.

It is our prayer that this report may help the churches of our federation, and every one of us, personally, in the area of the theme of men and women and church offices, to together find a way which does justice to what the Bible says, and, in Christ, remain connected and committed to each other. Then we are truly one in Christ, chosen and called to serve each other sincerely from the heart.

*I long to serve you sincerely
and to be like Christ to you,
Pray that I may find grace
so you can be like Him to me.*

*Then perfection will come,
when we stand before Him and sing,
If we have followed the path
of Christ's love and suffering.*

(The church songbook "Revival" (*Opwekking*) 378)