

# **FINAL REPORT BY THE COMMITTEE ON WOMEN AND OFFICE**

**Submitted to the 1998 General Synod of the  
*Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*  
of the Netherlands**



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(Translator's note: *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* literally translates into Christian Reformed Churches, in which *churches* refers to individual congregations. Scripture quotations are from the Authorized Version. All quotations are printed in italics.)

### 1. Introduction

For quite some time already, churches of various persuasion and theological tradition have been faced with questions concerning access to ecclesiastical offices for women. Since this question has also surfaced at meetings of our own churches, the need has been felt for an unequivocal stance based on the Scriptures. The objective of this report is to provide the building blocks required to answer this question.

This report begins with a brief background that reviews positions adopted by churches at home and abroad. Reference is also made to views expressed within our own churches. We also review what history tells us about the role of women in the Church of Christ. Since the present offices derive from the Scriptures, we trace the historical route by which they have come down to us. This is followed by a review of hermeneutical issues. Relevant theological views are brought to bear on an exegesis of passages and concepts from both the Old and New Testaments. We end with a number of conclusions and recommendations.

#### 1.1 Mandate by the General Synod of Zierikzee 1995-96

General Synod was requested by the Regional Synod of the West to make a statement based on Scripture concerning the issue of women in office for the information of our own churches as well as discussions with other church denominations.<sup>1</sup> The discussion at General Synod focused on the following considerations: (1) questions with respect to women in office touch all of our churches; (2) the position of our churches held to be Scriptural has never been officially studied and adopted by General Synod; and (3) the question of women in office continues to surface within our churches and in discussions and correspondence with other Reformed churches, which necessitates a Scripturally-based explanation of our position with respect to the issue. In view of these considerations it was decided to appoint a Committee *with the mandate to produce a Scripturally-based account of our position with respect to women in office within the framework of the Reformed interpretation of the Scriptures, and to report back to the General Synod of 1998, to enable the latter to issue a statement based on Scripture concerning this issue for the benefit of our own churches and our interaction with other churches.*<sup>2</sup>

A number of delegates at General Synod wished to prevent that the Committee would be instructed to merely assemble a Scriptural foundation for the existing position, so that the outcome of the report would be a foregone conclusion. Other delegates emphasized the framework of the Reformed interpretation of the Scriptures and the fact that there has always

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<sup>1</sup> *Acta GS* (Acts of General Synod) 1995-96, art. 215, bijlage (appendix) 79 and 80.

<sup>2</sup> *Acta GS* (Acts of General Synod) 1995-96, p. 115.

been a definite view, whose Scriptural foundation, however, had not been clearly spelled out. The Committee's mandate was worded in such a way that neither of these views was precluded. Within the Committee this has led to a number of discussions about the correct interpretation of this mandate. In the end the Committee went to work in the conviction that an examination of existing positions can only proceed on the basis of careful reading of the Word of God.

## 1.2 Committee membership

General Synod appointed the following persons to serve on the Committee:

Ds. P. den Butter, Middelharnis (president)  
Drs. J.W. van Pelt, Wierden (secretary)  
Drs. G.L. Born, Amersfoort  
Ds. J. Groenleer, Amsterdam  
Ds. W. Kok, 's Gravenzande  
Mrs. G. van der Laan-de Boer, Nieuw-Amsterdam  
Drs. H. Korving, Kerkwerve  
Drs. R.W.J. Soeters, 's Gravendeel  
Mrs. Drs. A. Veldhuizen-de Greef, Bunschoten

(Ds. = *Dominus* = Minister  
Drs. = *Doctorandus* = Ph.D. candidate)

Mrs. Van der Laan-de Boer, who was initially appointed to be recording secretary, subsequently indicated that she wished to be relieved of this responsibility. Since no other Committee member was prepared to take on this role, it was agreed to invite Ds. M.J. Kater of Zeist to serve the Committee as recording secretary. He started in this position in January of 1997.

## 1.3 Meetings and approach

The Committee met 16 times. The first meeting was held 28 December 1995. In 1996 there were 4 meetings: on 23 May, 18 September, 11 October and 27 November. The number of meetings nearly doubled in 1997: the Committee met 7 times, namely on 4 February, 13 March, 8 April, 26 May, 15 September, 11 and 26 November. In the year of General Synod, 1998, 4 meetings were held: on 29 January, 6 and 13 March and finally 23 April. All of the meetings took place in the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk De Fontein* in Bunschoten. From the beginning the meetings were conducted by way of open discussions in which views were presented in the form of papers on specific topics. In summary, these papers covered pronouncements of churches at home and abroad regarding women in office; the historical and theological underpinnings of the present offices in our denomination based on Scripture; the role of women in the cultural and religious world of Old and New Testament times; prophecy; man as head; hermeneutical views with respect to the authority of Scripture, the relationship between culture and revelation, etc; and exegetical analysis of relevant Scripture passages. In the process of these discussions the treatment of hermeneutical views caused some dissension. Every attempt was made to continue to produce a joint report. When a minority of Committee members could not abide by the wording of the majority view, they

decided to file a separate report. This applies particularly to sections 5 and 6 as well as the resulting differences in conclusions and recommendations.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Background

This section presents a brief background with respect to the manner in which questions about women in office have arisen within our congregations and how these have been dealt with to date. We also summarize how other churches at home and abroad have arrived at their positions.

Since earlier pronouncements of General Synod concerning an individual church's (i.e. congregation's) right to vote, and the position of deacons within consistories have implications for a consideration of women in ecclesiastical office, related matters are explained.

### 2.1 Current reality

The discussion of women in office at the General Synod of the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* was proposed by the Regional Synod of the West (see above under Mandate). In view of social developments it was to be expected that the idea of female office bearers would be raised sooner or later. The social position of women has changed fundamentally in the course of the twentieth century. Both emancipation and feminism have contributed to this development. Society has accorded broad recognition to the equality and equal rights of men and women. This climate has fostered a natural interest in the position of women in the church.

Not only social, but also ecclesiastical and theological developments have raised the profile of women in office. There are churches both at home and abroad in which female office bearers have found a place. For a long time the gap between these churches and our own federation of churches was sufficiently large, that no need was felt for a formal pronouncement on these matters. This situation changed, when in 1982 the *Gereja Toraja Mamasa* (of Indonesia) decided to admit women to its offices.<sup>4</sup> The matter was also raised in interaction with churches abroad, e.g. the *Christian Reformed Church of North America*. In 1988 the *Landelijke Vergadering* (national meeting) of the *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken* set up a committee to investigate whether the office of deacon could be opened up to female members. Eventually in 1995 it was decided to leave it up to the local churches to appoint female deacons.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence of local collaboration between several *Nederlands Gereformeerde* and *Christelijke Gereformeerde* churches interest in the issue of women in office increased substantially. Reference must also be made to the *Landelijke Werkgroep Kerk en Vrouw* (national working group on church and women) whose mission it was to promote interest within the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* with respect to the place of women in the church.

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<sup>3</sup> See p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> See *Acta GS* (Acts of General Synod) 1986, art. 52, 135, bijlage (appendix) 15, 16 and 60; *Acta GS* (Acts of General Synod) 1989, art. 60, bijlage (appendix) 18 subsection 5.1.5; *Acta GS* (Acts of General Synod) 1992, appendix 7 subsection 5.1.3.3.6.

<sup>5</sup> *Acta LV NGK* (Acts of national assembly) 1994-95, pp. 26-40, 134ff.

Widely different views have come forward within our own federation of churches.<sup>6</sup> However, an official position in the form of a pronouncement of General Synod was never made. In view of the developments highlighted above a need for such a statement is now felt.

## 2.2 Situation in churches in the Netherlands

Several churches in the Netherlands have taken a definite position with respect to female office bearers. Here we will present the considerations and decisions for a number of them.

### *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church)

In the twentieth century the emergence of deaconesses spread around the world. Hospitals with deaconesses on staff usually were not officially connected with a particular church denomination. Yet there was support for the role of congregational deaconesses in the church. Had Phoebe not been a deaconess (Romans 16:1) and does the first letter of Paul to Timothy not confirm the existence of deaconesses (5:9, 11)? And how do we interpret Calvin's view regarding a twin-diaconate? These and similar arguments were regularly brought forward by ministers who argued in favour of women as deaconesses. Such support has not been limited to the *Hervormde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church), but has also emerged in circles associated with the *Afscheiding* and the *Doleantie* (separations from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1834 and 1886 respectively). The official recognition of deaconesses by the church was preceded by an examination of women's right to vote within the church. In the political environment women's suffrage was attained in 1919. The *classis* (assembly of neighbouring churches meeting for mutual counsel, oversight and support, consisting of ministers and elders) of Alkmaar brought the matter of women's suffrage to Synod as early as 1897, including a recommendation. The relevant Synod committee as well as Synod itself used the following arguments. Subsequently similar arguments have been encountered in other churches.

Arguments in favor:

- women would have an enriching influence
- women already contribute financially
- it is already possible to appoint female instructors of religion

Arguments opposed:

- 1 Corinthians 14
- civil law has precedence
- it creates friction within families

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<sup>6</sup> The most important items are the following: J. Hovius, *De positie van de vrouw in Christus' kerk* (the position of women in Christ's church), speech given at the transfer of the Rectorship of the Theological School of the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* at Apeldoorn, 19 September 1950, Sneek, 1950; W. van 't Spijker, "De positie van de vrouw in de kerk" (the position of women in the church), in *Ambtelijk Contact* (periodical for office bearers, 21), 1982, pp. 120-132; Studiegroep van chr. geref. theologen te Utrecht (study group of *Christelijke Gereformeerde* theologians at Utrecht), *Vrouwen in de dienst. Bijbelse studie naar de diensten in de Christelijke gemeente en de plaats van de vrouw daarbij* (women in service; Bible study on the services of women in the Christian church and the associated place of women), Utrecht, 1983; H. van Mulligen, "De positie van de vrouw in de kerk" (the position of women in the church), in: J.P. Versteeg (et al.), *De Geest schrijft wegen in de tijd. Opstellen over samen leven in kerk en wereld* (the Spirit marks paths in time. Essays on living together in church and world), Kampen, 1984, pp. 113-131; B. Loonstra, *De geloofwaardigheid van de Bijbel* (the trustworthiness of the Bible), Zoetermeer, 1994, pp. 46-48.

- it creates confusion
- there is little pressure from women themselves
- eventually they will seek office

No fundamental review ever took place. The matter was merely considered from the aspect of practicality. In the *Hervormde Kerk* women obtained the right to vote in 1923. However, the right to be elected was explicitly precluded. The church could only be governed by men. Already for a long time (since 1816) female instructors of religion (then referred to as catechism teachers) had been permitted to conduct home or hospital visits and to read Scripture lessons in public worship services. As early as 1924, in newly established congregations, having been a member for at least ten years, a female instructor of religion could be called upon to publicly preach the gospel, conduct worship and wedding services, and provide pastoral care. At the same time there was a possibility that she might be appointed assistant minister, authorized to conduct public worship services.

Since 1948 it has been possible for women to be appointed evangelist, youth leader, social worker, diaconal nursing practitioner and ecclesiastical deaconess. In the *Nieuwe Kerkorde* (new church order) of 1951 all this was classified under non-office responsibilities, called ministries. Women could also serve as pastoral assistant (who under certain conditions was also qualified to preach the gospel in worship services), assistant preacher (whereby she had the same authority as a minister, with the exception of e.g. the administration of sacraments and oversight) and as vicar.

The majority of a committee appointed by Synod in 1948 recommended in 1950 to open up all offices to women. A minority felt that women could only be teaching and ruling elders in exceptional circumstances. They also saw opportunities for women in the diaconate, so long as these remained within the scope of so-called services and did not involve the exercise of authority. When the reports of this committee were discussed, the focus was on the following questions: What was the authority aspect of the various offices? Could authority be reconciled with the role of women? Did the so-called silent passages of Scripture throw up any roadblocks? Meetings became bogged down in questions such as these. When the New Church Order (canon law) was adopted in 1951, offices were not yet opened up to women.

In 1954 the majority of local classis meetings felt that the complete exclusion of women from ecclesiastical offices was no longer tenable. The Synod then made less of an issue of whether the natural role of women precluded appointment to ecclesiastical office. The exercise of authority also received less attention. Furthermore, it was concluded that the silent passages of Scripture did not preclude the admittance of women to ecclesiastical office. Synod decided that in principle all offices should be offered to women. Proposals to change canon law were sent to the classes. At this point resistance arose among the laity. For pastoral reasons a majority of the 1955 Synod voted against giving women access to ecclesiastical office. Although a majority was in principle in favor of doing so, the matter was not further pursued as a result of vehement opposition on the part of an important number of classes.

In 1956 a committee was established to document exegetical, dogmatic and canon law decisions that would be required for a decision to admit women to ecclesiastical office. This committee completed its work in 1957. In 1958 Synod decided to give women full access to the offices of both elder and deacon. Access to the office of minister of the Word was granted

in principle, but was made subject to special dispensation under certain circumstances and for certain activities only. Synod asked that conscientious objections be respected. Women did not gain full access to the office of minister of the Word until 1966.

### *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*

Over the first few decades following the Doleantie the position of women received little or no attention. When in 1921 the churches of Zandvoort and Brussels on their own initiative granted women the right to vote, the matter was subsequently raised at the Synod of 1924. The Synod of 1927 discussed a report of a committee that had studied the matter. The majority of the committee was of the opinion that, although Scripture did not directly address the question of women's voting rights, it tended to reject rather than accept it. A minority had drawn the opposite conclusion and held that the office of all believers was at stake. The latter believed that it was not a matter of granting women the right to vote, but a matter of recognizing the right that they already had. Synod appointed a new committee to research whether voting implied authority to rule and whether the office of all believers applied differently to men and women. The Synod of 1930 concluded that the right to vote implied authority to rule. Scripture counsels rather against than in favor of women's right to vote. The Synod of 1952-53 occupied itself again with the right of women to vote. Shifts in attitude had occurred over time. The right to vote was no longer seen to imply authority to rule. The matter was left up to the churches.

The Synod of 1959-60 received a request to open the office of minister of the Word to women. This was rejected on the basis of inadequate argumentation. In 1961 the classis of Hoofddorp requested a statement in principle concerning the position of women in service to the church. This request was rejected on technical grounds. The Synod of 1963-64 received a similar request. It was decided to appoint a committee to investigate the matter. Did women have the right to serve in office? The committee's report spoke positively with respect to their contribution to the church. Its point of departure was equality of men and women according to Galatians 3:28. But they also recognized inequality. Reference was made to 1 Corinthians 14, 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and Genesis 1-3. Committee members, however, were of the view that Paul's pronouncements in part reflected the morality of his days. That situation no longer applied today. More fundamental criteria remained in force. The exercise of authority by women over men would be contrary to the norm. Reference was made to the *complementary nature* of the role of women. They were expected to function within their role as women and to complement men. This implied differentiation in terms of functions.

The Synod of 1965-66 stated in principle that the Spirit of Christ restored women to their full status as God's people (Galatians 3:28). Thus the Spirit integrated them fully into the work of advancing His church. Women could apply their talents by participating in the exercise of the offices of the church, which in their totality are called to lead the church. The admittance of women to ecclesiastical office was not viewed as violating Holy Scripture. The Synod of 1967-68 decided, however, not to implement the decision-in-principle of the preceding Synod, in view of potential objections from denominations with which it was linked through the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. According to the General Synod of 1969-70 no valid arguments had come out of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod to persuade it to retract the earlier decision-in-principle. The Reformed Ecumenical Synod of 1968 did declare that the Scriptures taught clearly and plainly that women must be excluded from the offices of ruling and teaching elders. But in Synod's judgment this declaration was not based on thorough

analysis. The offices were therefore definitively opened to women. Women were granted full status in line with their qualifications.

### *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken*

Within this denomination various practices had evolved. There were churches with female elders, and there were churches that had admitted women to the diaconate. There were still other churches that accepted neither.

In 1991 there appeared a study by the committee for *opening the diaconate to sisters of the church* which had been established by the Landelijke Vergadering (national meeting) of 1988. Although this report did not take a particular stand, it did identify contentious issues. In that connection the report discussed the way in which the Scriptures were used to support particular arguments. The Bible was considered to be authoritative, but in what sense? Biblicism that treated the Bible as a compendium of timeless truths was rejected. The intention of a Bible passage had to be ascertained. In this connection justice had to be done to the Scriptures as a whole. The report gave examples of decrees that definitely could not have been intended to be followed today. That had nothing to do with criticism of Scripture, but with the historical character of the Scriptures. There was seen to be a difference between standards that pertained to all time and instructions that applied to specific circumstances. In this light the question arose whether the New Testament directions regarding the role of women in the church still applied today. In Paul's writings two different strands of pronouncements can be distinguished:

1. male-female relationships characterized by a certain authority of the male over the female (1 Corinthians 11:3, 7-9; 14:34, 35; Ephesians 5:22-24; 1 Timothy 2:11-15);
2. male-female relationships characterized by the female's equal worth with the male (1 Corinthians 7:4; 11:10, 11; Galatians 3:8).

These two kinds of relationships could be reconciled, for example by saying that a man and a woman were equivalent but not equal. One could also take into account the context, for example by pointing out that the social and cultural position of women in those days did not always make it feasible for them to achieve their equality with men in Christ. All this was mentioned to illustrate that some passages of Scripture differed from each other and that some even appeared to contradict each other. In short, the simple statement *it says what it says* implied an oversimplification. The study report contained a chapter on ecclesiastical offices. A range of views concerning the office of deacon was reviewed. The report concluded that in the current situation of the *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken* there was no difference in principle between the office of deacon and the other offices. Just like the elder, the deacon (a) was called by God and was officially appointed within the church; (b) functioned as servant of Christ on behalf of Christ; (c) had a lasting appointment; (d) had a specific task and field of effort; (e) provided leadership in various forms that could be described as 'service'; and (f) was accountable to God. Two other chapters of the report discussed in detail the male-female relationship as presented by the Bible, with reference to relevant passages of Scripture.

In all aspects of life the Holy Spirit permitted women to hold their own place. The difference between male and female was not a matter of level. The question remained whether Scripture implied that calling a sister to an ecclesiastical office was wrong.



The Landelijke Vergadering (national meeting) of 1995 decided with 73 votes in favor, 11 votes opposed and 3 abstentions to leave it up to churches whether or not to admit women to the office of deacon. This decision was communicated to a number of other churches with which contact was maintained, with the request to receive it in a spirit of goodwill and brotherly trust.

The decision of 1995 was based on a detailed report of the committee for *opening up the office of deacon*. That report first dealt with the office of deacon per se. Ministry of mercy was seen to be part of the office of all believers. Deacons provided leadership and had the required authority. There was no difference in rank between ruling elders and deacons. There was only a distinction in terms of function. In the section on women and the diaconate reference was made to the context of social developments. The committee did not wish to concentrate on the negative aspects of social development, but also wanted to focus on positive aspects. The reading and interpretation of Scripture provided impetus for the study.

Proverbs 31:20 figured importantly in the report. It concerns a woman who in the context of her management of merchandise and estates obeys God's command to the rich to look after the needs of the poor. One type of reaction was: *That would make her an eminent candidate to serve as deacon in our churches.*<sup>7</sup> In the committee's view the well-known silent texts had to be viewed in a new light, because they had been written from a very specific point of view in a specific context and were not intended to provide general rules to be applied in all circumstances for all time.

### *Gereformeerde Kerken (Vrijgemaakt)*

As far as we know in this church women have no access to any office whatsoever, although a discussion of the matter has been initiated.

### 2.3 Women in office in churches abroad

In various churches abroad, with which our churches have (or have had) some contact, the question of women in office has also played a role.

These churches and their study reports are discussed next. They include *Die Gereformeerde Kerke in South Africa (GKSA)*, the *Reformed Churches of Australia (RCA)* and the *Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRC)*. A number of smaller denominations such as *Églises Réformées Évangéliques Indépendantes de France*, the *Igrejas Evangelicas Reformadas no Brasil* and the *Dutch Reformed Church in Sri Lanka* are not covered in this report. In the latter churches the offices were opened to women, but only because insufficient men were available to fill them. Decisions to do so, however, were not based on detailed study. This also applies to the *Gereja Toraja Mamamsa*, which has been asked a number of times by our own Synod to reconsider the matter.

### *Reformed Ecumenical Council*

Within the context of the international fellowship of churches of Reformed persuasion it is helpful to recall the views that have been brought forward within the Reformed Ecumenical

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<sup>7</sup> *Acta LV NGK* (Acts of national assembly), 1994-95, p. 118.

Council (REC).<sup>8</sup> Already in Grand Rapids in 1963 the question of women in office was raised at the REC. A committee was formed to study the matter. The meeting at Amsterdam (1968) stated that the clear and definite teaching of the Bible was that women were excluded from the offices of teaching and ruling elders. However, a committee was appointed to thoroughly research the entire question of ecclesiastical office in the New Testament in order to ascertain whether or not there was a fundamental, created, natural place and function of women that was subordinate to that of men.<sup>9</sup> In Melbourne (1972) the committee warned in its report against the danger that social, historical and cultural circumstances of the present time threatened to overwhelm the message of Scripture. With reference to 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:33b-37 the REC confirmed that women could not be admitted as ruling or teaching elders. It was further stated that there was no Scriptural proof that women had held the office of deacon.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, offices could not be opened to women. The meeting at Capetown (1976) maintained the position taken in 1968, namely that Scripture only admitted men to ecclesiastical offices. Subsequently the matter was dropped from the agenda of the REC. Developments in various member churches appear to have overtaken the decisions of the REC, although the latter have never been reviewed.

#### *International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC)*

At the General Synod of 1995 our own federation of churches decided to join the ICRC. The matter of women in office was raised within this ecumenical organization in a speech by Professor Dr. Soon Gil Hur given at a conference held in Seoul, South Korea, in 1997. Dr. Hur expressed the view that on Biblical grounds the offices of minister and elder could not be opened to women. However, according to him the Bible did not forbid women to function as deacons. In this connection Dr. Hur did distinguish between on the one hand deacons who are selected and ordained for life and on the other hand deacons who are appointed on an annual basis and not officially ordained and therefore are not members of consistory. He started from the situation in the church to which he belonged, namely the Presbyterian Church of Korea. In this church there are women among the non-ordained deacons, while deacons who have been ordained for life are exclusively men. This presentation therefore dealt with two types of deacon, something that was already advocated by Calvin. Although there was support for Dr. Hur's position, there was also criticism. Since the ICRC did not make a declaration with respect to this matter, it cannot be said that it took a particular stand.

#### *Die Gereformeerde Kerke van Suid-Africa (GKSA)*

The 1979 Synod of GKSA appointed a committee to study the place of women in the church. A preliminary report was presented in 1985, followed by a detailed follow-up report including several recommendations. With gratitude it was recognized that women actively applied their talents in the New Testament church. However, the Scriptures were taken to indicate that women did not serve in the special roles of minister of the Word or elder. Neither was there convincing evidence that women served in the diaconate.<sup>11</sup> The Synod did not accept a recommendation to sponsor a further study with respect to ecclesiastical offices in the New Testament. It was considered that the matter had been adequately dealt with already. A

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<sup>8</sup> Formerly Reformed Ecumenical Synod.

<sup>9</sup> *Acts of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod*, Amsterdam, 1968, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Acts of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod*, Melbourne, 1972, p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> *De Handelinge van die Drie-en-Veertigste Nasionale Sinode van die Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Africa* (Acts of the 43rd national synod of the Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Africa), pp. 519-522.

request presented at the 1994 Synod to review the decision of 1988 was turned down and the GKSA maintained its earlier position.

### *Reformed Churches of Australia (RCA)*

The committee appointed in 1985 to advise the Churches in the whole issue of the admittance of Christian women to the offices of the Church reported to the 1988 Synod that it had been unable to complete its assignment.<sup>12</sup> Only an interim report on hermeneutical principles was presented. The Synod of 1991 again learned from the committee appointed in 1988 that its assignment had not been entirely completed. The scope of the assignment was then reduced. At the Synod of 1994 a majority report considered the position of men as head to be fundamental in the selection of office bearers and that the concept of women in office threatened adherence to the confession. A minority report pleaded for the admittance of women to all offices. The Synod decided to accept the conclusion with respect to men as head of the majority report, but did not make a pronouncement regarding the question whether *women in office* was a confessional issue. A new study committee was appointed to investigate the exegetical basis for the possible admittance of women to the diaconate.<sup>13</sup>

### *Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRC)*

Unlike the GKSA and the RCA, the CRC has occupied itself intensively with the question of women in office over an extended period of time. Since the decision making process at annual synods was rather inconsistent and haphazard, uneasiness and serious division within the denomination ensued.

In 1970 Synod finally appointed a committee to study the practice of churches of the Reformed persuasion to exclude women from their offices. In 1973 this committee recommended to Synod to officially recognize *that the practice of excluding women from ecclesiastical office cannot conclusively be defended on Biblical grounds*.<sup>14</sup>

Synod refrained from making such a declaration, but decided to circulate this report to the individual congregations for reaction and appointed a new committee. This committee had to process a large number of mostly negative reactions from the member churches. The Synod of 1975 announced that the existing practice would be maintained unless imperative Biblical arguments demanded a different position. A new committee was appointed to research hermeneutical principles.

The result of the hermeneutical study, presented to the Synod of 1978, included the recommendation to open the office of deacon to women, since that would not violate the principle of the headship of man over woman. Accordingly Synod decided to admit women to the office of deacon. This pronouncement necessitated a revision of the Church Order.

In line with CRC practice, such a revision needed to be ratified at a subsequent Synod. The Synod of 1979, however, had to deal with a large number of overtures and letters in which it was requested to undo the decision of 1978. Consequently Synod decided to postpone the

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<sup>12</sup> *Acts of Synod of the Reformed Churches of Australia*, 1988, p. III-28.

*Acts of Synod of the Reformed Churches of Australia*, 1994, p. I-24.

<sup>14</sup> *Acts of Synod*, 1973, p. 588.

revision of the Church Order until a new study committee could present its report. That report was presented at the Synod of 1981. It consisted of a majority report and two minority reports. This resulted in such confusion that no decision could be made whatsoever, since none of the recommendations received majority support. Thereupon Synod decided to appoint a committee to ascertain what the Bible meant by referring to husband as head of wife and man as head of woman. The report of this committee, presented to the Synod of 1984, was not unanimous in terms of its conclusions and recommendations. In line with an earlier decision, Synod adopted a motion *allowing consistories to ordain qualified women to the office of deacon*.<sup>15</sup> The revision of the Church Order was also ratified.

This did not end the matter, however. The Synod of 1985 received a large number of requests to rescind the decision of 1984. A study committee was put to work. In the meantime a few congregations had proceeded to appoint female elders. The Synod of 1989 put an end to this. The subsequent year brought a great turn of events. The report of the committee appointed in 1987 came to the conclusion that earlier synods had inappropriately extended “the ‘headship principle’ from marriage to the church.” Synod then decided to delete the word *male* from article 3 of the Church Order, so that all confessing members of the Church who meet the biblical requirements are eligible to be elected to ecclesiastical offices. Ratification of this decision was to take place in 1991, prior to which the decision would be left in abeyance. Many objections were raised by member churches. The Synod of 1991 was of the view, however, that these objections were not sufficiently supported by convincing Biblical or confessional arguments, that the 1990 decision would have to be rescinded.

However, ratification of the revision of the Church Order – necessitated by the decision of 1990 – was postponed by one year. In addition, a new committee was appointed. The Synod of 1992 had to deal with both a majority and a minority report produced by the committee of advice. The minority report advised ratification of the Church Order. The majority report recommended against it. Synod decided not to ratify the change, but encouraged individual churches to “use the gifts of women members to the fullest extent possible in their local churches,” albeit apart from the offices.

These decisions did not solve anything either. As could have been expected, several overtures were presented at the Synod of 1993 to rescind the decision of 1992 and to proceed to ratify the revision of the Church Order. Synod rescinded the decision of 1992 in the sense that women would be admitted to all offices. However, ratification did not take place in 1994 because arguments had been presented which indicated that the Scriptures forbade women to serve in the offices of minister, elder and evangelist. However, the small margin whereby the decision was carried made it highly unlikely that it would be accepted at the congregational level and that calm would be restored. It was therefore not surprising that the subsequent Synod (1995) had to deal with a large number of requests to revise the previous decision. This time also there were both majority and minority reports from the committee of advice.

Synod largely adopted the recommendations of the majority of the committee. The decision of 1995 has proven to be a crucial conclusion with far-reaching implications. Synod decided among other things that there were two different views with respect to women in office, both of which were Scripture-based and that a classis could decide to admit women to the offices

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<sup>15</sup> *Acts of Synod*, 1984, p. 472.

of minister, elder and evangelist within its own jurisdiction. It was stipulated that this regulation would be in force till the year 2000.<sup>16</sup>

#### 2.4 Relevant ecclesiastical pronouncements regarding women in office within our own federation of churches

At the level of Synod two issues have been addressed in the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* that touch upon questions regarding women in office. The first one is the place of deacons within consistory and the second one deals with the right to vote at the level of the local church.

The question concerning the place of deacons within consistory involved the relationship between the offices of elder and deacon. If the office of deacon were not equivalent to the office of elder, it would be conceivable that women could be admitted to the office of mercy, while the office of elder (and minister) would be reserved for men only. In such an environment matters of governance and discipline, teaching and ruling of the church would be exercised by men, while women would not find themselves in positions in which they would exercise authority over men.

As far as the right to vote at the local level was concerned, the issue was whether women could participate in elections for the special offices as organized by consistory. An answer to this question called for reflection on the place of women in the church.

##### *The place of deacons within consistory*

A discussion of the place of deacons within consistory was triggered by a speech given by Professor J. Hovius in 1951 to the ninth *Landelijke Diaconale Conferentie* (national diaconal conference). His view was that deacons were an integral part of consistory. According to him this needed to be embedded in the church order. With this speech he simultaneously set in motion the discussion about the possibility of deacons serving as delegates to broader church assemblies.

An overture was submitted by the Regional Synod of the West to the General Synod of Apeldoorn (1953) requesting clarification regarding the place of deacons in consistory. The then current professors at the *Theologische Hogeschool* (theological university) were requested to investigate the matter. They reported back through Professor J. Hovius at the General Synod of Apeldoorn (1956). The most important conclusions of the report by the professors were the following:

1. The threefold office of Christ was the root of the offices mentioned in Holy Scripture and the offices exercised in the churches of the Calvinistic Reformation. This implied in principle the unity of these offices.
2. The office instituted by Christ and further refined under the direction of the Holy Spirit was charged with the overall direction of the Church of Christ. There was nothing to indicate that deacons were excluded from that; to the contrary, Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3 placed bishops and deacons side by side.

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<sup>16</sup> *Acts of Synod*, 1995, pp 727-728.

3. Article 30 of the *N.G.B. (Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis, i.e. Belgic Confession of Faith)* states correctly that deacons are part of consistory.
4. The Church Order sometimes included deacons in consistory, and sometimes excluded them. This could lead to discrimination against the office of deacon, so that at times deacons were treated as ranking lower.
5. It was not right to admit deacons to the primary assembly of the church (i.e. consistory) while excluding them from the broader assemblies of the church.<sup>17</sup>

Based on an exegesis of Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3, it was discussed whether deacons shared in the care of the church of God, in the sense of taking part in giving overall direction to the business of the church. Synod declared that: *Since deacons form an integral part of consistory, it should be possible for them to be appointed delegate to the broader assemblies of the church, taking into account the special nature of their office.* A committee was appointed to work out the implications of the principle of equality for everyday church life.<sup>18</sup>

No further progress was made until the General Synod of Haarlem-Santpoort (1962). The implicit equality of the offices, proposed by the Regional Synod of the West, was rejected on formal grounds. The discussion focused on practical arrangements to enable deacons to be sent as delegates to broader assemblies and on the role that they could play there. In 1962 interim guidelines were drafted.<sup>19</sup> It took till 1968 before deacons appeared for the first time at General Synod, namely at Hilversum. Guidelines for the nomination of deacons as delegates to broader assemblies were finalized at the General Synod of Rotterdam (1971-72).<sup>20</sup>

The New Testament scholar Professor Dr. J. van Bruggen of the *Gereformeerd Vrijgemaakte Kerk* is of the opinion that the role of deacon is not an office and that deacons do not belong in assemblies of office bearers. He considers it an error that deacons have to some extent been drawn into the overall direction of the church.<sup>21</sup> However, van Bruggen pays insufficient attention to passages such as Acts 4:34-35, 37; 5:2. There it is clear that the work of deacons (like that of elders) in its own way was a continuation of part of the work done earlier by the apostles. Philippians 1:1 places bishops and deacons at the same level. In 1 Timothy 3 the same qualifications are required for deacons as for bishops and elders. The distinction between elders as *proper* office bearers and deacons as merely general helpers does not hold water. From the point of view of the history of the church the place of deacons within consistory should not be seen as a distortion but rather as a culmination of the development of the concept of ecclesiastical office that took shape in the Calvinistic branch of the Reformation in the Netherlands.

### *The right to vote of the local church*

The issue of women's right to vote and their place in the church was first raised at the General Synod of Zwolle/Apeldoorn (1965-66). The consistory of Amsterdam-West had indicated via an overture to be of the view that women ought not to be excluded from the

<sup>17</sup> *Acta GS* (Acts of General Synod) 1956, bijlage (appendix) XXXVI, p. 183ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Acta GS* (Acts of General Synod) 1956, p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> *Acta GS* (Acts of General Synod) 1962, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> See *Kerkorde* (Church Order) uitg. (edition) 1993, art. 41, subsection 1; art. 47; art. 50, subsection 1.

<sup>21</sup> J. van Bruggen, *Ambten in de apostolische kerk, een exegetisch mozaïek* (offices in the apostolic church, an exegetical mosaic), Kampen, 1984, pp. 110-116.

rights granted to all members by canon law.<sup>22</sup> Synod determined that further investigation was required and appointed a study group. It is noteworthy that Synod categorically rejected the terms active and passive voting rights, as having a secular-political connotation and not being applicable in the context of Christ's government of the church. Furthermore, it was strongly emphasized that the matter of the voting rights of the local church should be completely separated from the admittance of women to ecclesiastical office. In no uncertain terms Synod rejected the idea that the active participation of women in the election of office bearers could be interpreted as a small step towards women being elected to office. On the basis of both Scripture and confession this reasoning was not considered to be a viable option.

The General Synod of Hilversum (1968-69) was again confronted with the issue of voting rights of the local church. There was a great deal of interest in this issue. There were three overtures and four letters from local churches, classes, and an individual with various points of view with respect to divers sections of the report prepared by the study group that had been appointed. In the discussion at Synod it was decided that the committee's report required further work in a number of areas. The committee which had prepared the report for the discussion at Synod was asked to provide the missing elements. Three documents were presented, namely a majority report, a minority report and a memorandum by Professor J. Hovius. The minority report held that participation of women in the election of office bearers was an unacceptable exercise of church government, while the memorandum by Professor Hovius viewed the act of voting as the exercise of the authority to rule granted by Christ to the entire church. The majority report held that election should not be confused with governance. Furthermore, Scripture taught that women were not excluded from governance in every respect. See Genesis 1:26-28. Together with the man, the woman was called to exercise dominion over creation. In the church women regained the place assigned to them by God. *The apostolic admonition was only sounded in the case that the wife ruled over her husband.*<sup>23</sup> On the basis of the foregoing the committee concluded that there was a *fundamental difference* between the participation of women in the election of office bearers and women in office. Three different aspects were identified:

- a. The way in which office bearers are elected is not prescribed in Scripture and is of secondary importance. *But the qualifications that church members must meet to be elected are described with precision. These divine instructions are of fundamental and lasting significance. They are valid unconditionally, unchangeably and indefinitely.*
- b. In the process of election the local church acts collectively. In the process of being elected the individual believers come to the foreground.
- c. If voting were to be governance, we would be dealing with a form of governance that is completely different from the way in which the ecclesiastical offices provide leadership.

For these reasons, it was decided that the aspects of participating in the election of an office bearer and being elected to office oneself lay in an entirely different plane.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Acta GS* (Acts of General Synod) 1965-66, p. 105ff.

<sup>23</sup> *Acta Generale Synode* (Acts of General Synod), p. 327, with reference to 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:18; 1 Timothy 2:11-15; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1-16 and especially 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

<sup>24</sup> *Acta Generale Synode* (Acts of General Synod), 1968-69, p. 328.

Synod concluded *that participation by sisters of the church in the election of office bearers should not be considered to be a step in the direction of admitting women to ecclesiastical office*. The suggestion to add to this the phrase *which is not supported by Scripture* was not accepted by Synod, *not because Synod was of the opinion that Scripture did offer support for this view, but because the report did not specifically address this matter and it did not seem appropriate to incorporate in the conclusion an element that was not based on the report itself.*<sup>25</sup>

At the General Synod of Rotterdam (1971-72) no fewer than 20 objections were received against the decisions of the previous General Synod held at Hilversum (1968-69). The key question was whether participation in the election of office bearers was an act of governance. Synod decided to reject the objections, since participation in the election of office bearers was not interpreted as an act of governance. The report in which background was provided, received much appreciation and support at Synod, especially since it closed the door to women in office.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. History

From the start the Committee had in mind that it would be a good idea to incorporate in the final report a concise historical overview of the place of women in the Church of Christ. An initial review, however, revealed two potential stumbling blocks. To be able to address the place of women in the church through the ages, it was desirable to gain a perspective in the history of women in both church and society. It turned out that over the first few centuries of the history of the church no consistent picture could be formed with respect to the place of women in the church. Diversity was due partially to the influence of heretical movements and reactions to these, and partially to a variegated development within the church itself. As a result of this variability it was not feasible to draw a connected picture from the days of the New Testament through the first few centuries of the history of the church and from there to the present.

When called upon, Professor Dr. W. van 't Spijker communicated by letter that like Professor Dr. A.Th. van Deursen he considered the history of women, especially during the first few centuries of the Christian calendar, as an undeveloped area of research.<sup>27</sup> Few clear sources of information were available and interpretations varied.

The question was then raised to what extent the Reformation followed in the footsteps of the practices of the early church. The answer was that in their thinking the Reformers did not follow in the footsteps of the early church. One reason was that practices during the first few centuries of the history of the church were not clear. There was evidence of considerable differences between the churches of the East and the West. In the letter referred to above, Professor Dr. W. van 't Spijker further pointed out that the relations between the sexes were quite well established by the time of the Reformation. As a rule, women tended to remain in the background and men naturally accepted their position of prominence.

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<sup>25</sup> *Acta Generale Synode* (Acts of General Synod), 1968-69, p. 92.

<sup>26</sup> *Acta Generale Synode* (Acts of General Synod), 1971-72, p. 102ff.

<sup>27</sup> See *Akta Landelijke Vergadering, Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerk* (Acts of the national meeting of the NGK), 1994-95, p. 131.



For the above reasons it was decided to give up on the idea of summarizing the place of women in the church through history. Historical information about the place of women in the church and also the connection between women and ecclesiastical office are covered in the following section.

#### **4. Office: background and development**

The present offices of our own churches do not spring directly from the Old and New Testaments. Our ecclesiastical and theological tradition has modified the Biblical concepts. We first present an overview of the Biblical background of the current offices and subsequently their historical refinement.

##### 4.1 Background of the offices

The church of the New Testament found itself at another stage in the history of redemption than God's people in the Old Testament. Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit had fundamental significance for salvation and its administration and its form.

##### *Old Testament elements*

The history of redemption in the Old Testament covered many centuries. Throughout that long period of time there were a great variety of special ministries to which God called people, and for which He equipped them and gave them authority. These included principally kings, priests, prophets and elders of the people. The priestly office was restricted to the tribe of Levi and circumscribed by various directives contained in the Pentateuch. Saul was the first king of Israel. For this office the terms of reference were less detailed and numerous than for priests. The kingship was transferred to David and his descendants. Nevertheless, succession to the throne of David was not straightforward. As in the case of the priestly office, a historical line could be traced through the generations. In the case of the kingly office, this line was not restricted to a single tribe, although the great promises with respect to this office were only associated with David (2 Samuel 7:12-16). The break-up of the kingdom into separate realms of ten and two tribes and the subsequent history clouded the lineage of the royal family. In the case of the prophets there was no lineage at all. Generally speaking there was no succession from one prophet to another.<sup>28</sup> There were also very few terms of reference for prophets to adhere to. The characteristic role of the prophet was to preach the Word of God. The time frame and mode varied from prophet to prophet. Some of the prophets were tied to a particular location (2 Kings 2:15); 4:38), or served a particular king (1 Kings 22:12); they may be called institutional prophets. Others were so-called *free* prophets, i.e. without being tied to a particular place, a particular sanctuary or a particular person.

The role of elder among the people goes back so far, that its emergence predated record-keeping. Its content was never clearly described, but was always assumed to be understood. The elders represented the people (as a whole or in part); they exercised authority and

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<sup>28</sup> The well-known exception here was the succession of Elijah by Elisha (2 Kings 2). But precisely here it became clear that the succession of one prophet by another was far from automatic. Elijah could not make any promises with respect to Elisha's request for a double portion of Elijah's spirit.

influence in both political and religious respects. Following the exile, they constituted more and more an aristocratic elite that no longer represented the entire nation, but only the most prominent families. In New Testament times elders had certain responsibilities associated with the synagogue. Their authority pertained more to governance and administration than liturgical and spiritual functions. The role of the elder was to enforce the commandments of God in the lives of the people.

Turning to the position of women in this context, it is noteworthy that the people of Israel recognized prophetesses (Miriam, Exodus 15:20; Deborah, Judges 4:4; Huldah, 2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chronicles 34:22; Noadiah, Nehemiah 6:14; the prophetess, Isaiah 8:3), but not priestesses, queens or female elders.

On the whole the Old Testament does not develop a well-defined set of offices that can be found back in the New Testament. Only the Old Testament concept of elder can be linked to that in the New Testament, and the presbyter/elder role in the subsequent history of the church. However, one cannot speak of a gradual progression. In this regard, the Old Testament can only serve to reveal the origin of ecclesiastical offices and to offer a few very broad parameters. Especially in the case of the office of prophet the focus is placed on the great importance of God's call, which implies at the same time accountability to the God who calls. Apart from this calling there are aspects of authority and service. The common objective of all special ministries to which God calls, is to make room for and to communicate the Word of God in all of its fullness.

### *New Testament elements*

The elements from the Old and New Testaments come together in Christ. He was called by God to be Prophet, Priest and King. He preached the Word of God with authority and was Servant to all. He brought people into a new relationship with God. Christ was the special Bearer of the Spirit (John 3:34).

In the Roman-Hellenistic world of the first century after Christ there were certain words to indicate public office:

αρχή (archè) government, power, control, dominion  
δόξα (doxa) honor, renown, respect, good name  
τέλος (telos) goal, accomplishment, highest position in society  
τιμή (timè) honor, honorable position

These words, then well-known, indeed occurred in civil life, but not in the Church of Christ. In the church there was no place for self-glorification, rank, or control on the part of office bearers. Any tendency in that direction was avoided. The same held for the well-known sacral-cultic focus of the Old Testament. The one sacrifice that atoned for sin had already been made. The cultic service of priests was no longer required. The work to which God called in the New Testament church had to be understood first and foremost as resting on Christ and his redemptive work.

There were a multiplicity of words that indicated special positions in the church. That variegated multiplicity expressed the richness and variation of the work of the Spirit in the church.

ἀπόστολος (apostolos)	<i>apostle</i> ; emphasis on being sent by Christ and being eye and ear witnesses of His work (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11).
διακονία (diakonia)	<i>service</i> in imitation of the serving love of Christ for His church (passim).
διακονος (diakonos)	<i>minister</i> of the gospel and the church (2 Corinthians 3:6; Ephesians 3:7; Philippians 1:1).
διδάσκαλος (didaskalos)	<i>teacher</i> ; indicating the continuing activity of building up (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:2).
ἐνέργημα (energèma)	<i>work</i> [operation or activity?]; hereby the focus is less on the status of the office bearer as on the grace that is employed (1 Corinthians 12:6).
ἐξουσία (exousia)	right, <i>authority</i> (1 Corinthians 9:12 and 18; 2 Corinthians 10:8, 13:10; 2 Thessalonians 3:9)
ἐπίσκοπος (episkopos)	<i>bishop</i> ; must have regard for members of the church (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7).
οἰκονομία (oikonomia)	<i>service, administration</i> ; has the character of stewardship with accountability to the church and Christ (1 Corinthians 9:17; Ephesians 3:2; Colossians 1:25; 1 Timothy 1:4).
ποιμὴν (poimèn)	<i>shepherd</i> ; indicates care for the church (Ephesians 4:11).
πρεσβύτερος (presbyteros)	<i>elder</i> ; related to the well-known Jewish elder (1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5).
προφήτης (profètès)	<i>prophet</i> ; builds up, admonishes and encourages the church by speaking the Word of God (Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:10 and 28; Ephesians 4:11).
προϊστάμενος (proïstamenos)	<i>provide leadership</i> ; to lead the church to Christ (Romans 12:8; cf. κυβέρνησεις (kybernèseis) in 1 Corinthians 12:28).
χάρισμα (charisma)	<i>gift of grace</i> from Christ to His church (passim in the New Testament)

There are additional references to special services and positions in the New Testament, but they coincide with those listed above or overlap with them. The New Testament does not employ specifically female equivalents of the above terms, with the exception of *προφήτις* (the prophetess Hanna in Luke 2:36; and the false prophetess Jezebel in Revelation 2:20). The words *χάρισμα* (*charisma*) and *διακονία* (*diakonia*) are special. In the New Testament these two words are used to indicate what we presently refer to as office and work associated with the office.

*Charisma* is the gift of the Spirit to share with others the full salvation that Christ has earned for His Church. As a work that advances the church, charisma is not the prerogative of persons with a special calling, role or position in the church. All believers have received *charismata*. This does not necessarily imply extraordinary or conspicuous activities. All ministrations to one another that advances the church is *charisma*. Leadership or governance in office falls under the *charismata*, but so does mutual support in faith. The *charismata* demonstrate that the Holy Spirit is at work in the church. Since not all have received the same gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-10), the *charismata* demand to be complemented by each other, so that they can be applied in common and mutual interdependence. Thus the church is built up through the ministrations of believers to one another. The multiplicity of *charismata* has a core. In Romans 6:23 eternal life in Christ Jesus is called the *charisma* of God. All

other *charismata* exist only because they are based on this one *charisma*. The gift of God's grace is at the same time a mandate: grace activates and grace manifests itself in terms of service. In this connection it should be kept in mind, that the gift of *charisma* can never be viewed separate from its Giver, Jesus Christ. He Himself is present in the gift.

*Diakonia* means service in general. Aside from the general meaning, there is the specific meaning of table service, or more broadly: providing sustenance. In the New Testament *diakonia* became *the* term to qualify all service connected with ecclesiastical office. Table service was considered to be an inferior role by the Greeks. It was considered to be a humble task. In a culture where uninhibited self-development and self-realization were prominent goals to strive for, humble service was despised. Since precisely this term was selected to describe service in the New Testament, it is clear that service and not prominence characterized all work connected with ecclesiastical office. Humility eclipsed authority. There was a direct connection with the serving in office of the Lord Jesus Himself. The Saviour came, not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:35-45). However, service and authority were not mutually exclusive, neither in the case of Jesus Himself, nor in the case of His church. The fact that self-honor, prominence or achievement was to be avoided did not mean that no obedience was required. Obedience was not due to prominence of the position, but to the Word of God that reached the church through the service of the office bearer.

Those who were called to *diakonia* needed to work in the midst of the church and not aloof from the church. This did not deny that *diakonia* associated with the office had an element of authority. Again, this was not the result of a special eminence inherent in the office, but had to do with the authority of the Word of God with which the office bearers worked in the church in obedience and accountability to God who called them. The element of humility in *diakonia* radically and totally precluded the desire to rule over others. The important thing was that the dominion of Christ through His Spirit and Word would be established in the church. J.P. Versteeg has pointed out in this connection: *Service is representative of the office, when it is provided not only in addition to but also in support of the service of others. (...) In this way an office is the service of some in the church in support of the service of all others in the church. The service of everyone in the church calls for leadership. Service must be facilitated and obstacles in the path of service need to be removed. That comprises the service of the office.*<sup>29</sup>

*Charismata* can be extraordinary and striking gifts, but frequently they are also *ordinary* and inconspicuous. Neither the number (quantity) of *charismata* nor their ranking (quality) is important, but their use for the benefit of the strengthening the Body of Christ. One and the same Spirit distributes all of the *charismata*. There is indeed diversity of *charismata*, but their origin in the one source guarantees the unity of the church. *Diakonia* is a service cloaked in authority exercised within and simultaneously over the church. This *diakonia* may never be seen separate from God Himself, who calls people to this service, provides the associated authority and demands accountability.

The apostles were called and appointed by Jesus Himself. They had a unique position in the history of redemption as ear and eye witnesses of the work and the Person of Christ.

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<sup>29</sup> J.P. Versteeg, "Het karakter van het ambt volgens Efeziërs 4:7-16" (the nature of the office according to Ephesians 4:7-16), in J.P. Versteeg, *Geest, ambt en uitzicht* (Spirit, office and prospect), Kampen, 1989, pp. 67-96, quotation on p. 68.

Together they received at the Ascension the mandate: *Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you* (Matthew 28:19-20). Prior to Pentecost the place left open by Judas was filled by Matthias; subsequently Paul was added. Thus the number of the apostles reached a *numerus clausus*. Yet the gift and call from Him remains the basis for special service in the church, Ephesians 4:11-12: *And he gave some, apostles, and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.*

The office of apostle had a universal character in the sense that it included all spiritual and practical activities required to advance, expand and maintain the Kingdom of God. The heart of the work of the apostles was found in the preaching of the Word of God by means of evangelism and teaching. Furthermore, they were responsible for and provided leadership to the church in the broadest sense of the word (Acts 2ff.). As a result of the triumphant advance of the gospel it soon became necessary to appoint assistants. The apostles were no longer able to handle the workload to satisfaction. Acts 6 indicates that the apostles decided to focus on prayer and the preaching of the Word (verse 4). Seven deacons were elected by the church and ordained by the apostles to take over part of their workload.

In Acts 11:30 we come across the first reference to elders (*πρεσβύτεροι, presbyteroi*) of the church at Jerusalem. Their existence was apparently so self-evident that no further introduction or explanation was given. In the church of Jerusalem the elders together with the apostles formed a council in which they functioned as administrators of church finances and further participated in all deliberations on a basis of equality (Acts 15:6; 21:18). The elders in the church at Jerusalem played a role that was very similar to that in the Jewish faith. Subsequently, in the epistles of James and Peter they appeared as ministers of the church, pastors and teachers with authority in the areas of faith and discipline (*ἐπίσκοποι, episkopoi*). Therefore, within the New Testament itself we encounter a refinement of the single, universal office of apostle into a certain differentiation and division of responsibilities among elders (presbyters), elders (bishops) and deacons. The boundaries were not yet sharply defined. Gradually, however, three key words came into use to describe the special services provided within the church of the New Testament: preaching, pastorate and diaconate. However, the office bearers do not compete with the *charismata* of the church [with the congregation equipped with the *charismata*??]. The office bearers and church members complement each other and cooperate with each other. In this way the office bearers labor in the midst of the church backed up by the authority of the Word of God (Romans 10:14-15; 2 Corinthians 5:20).

It is well-known from the New Testament that Jesus treated women differently than was commonly practiced. Women followed and served Him and witnessed to Him. Subsequently it was reported that they offered hospitality to the church; they prophesied and participated in the service of the gospel. It cannot be stated with certainty, but it is generally considered probable that women functioned as deaconesses appointed and recognized by the church. Especially 1 Timothy 5:3-16 points in that direction (further *Tabitha* or *Dorcas*, Acts 9:36-43; *Phoebe*, Romans 16:1, 2; and probably also 1 Timothy 3:11 come to mind). There is no clarity with respect to the nature of the office in which these women served.

It can be concluded that the great diversity of functions, services and offices indicates that the Holy Spirit has provided the church with a rich and variegated apparatus to implant the Word

of Christ richly in the hearts of the membership (Colossians 1:16a). Christ did not just institute, impose and assign a few offices by decree. Through the guidance of His Spirit, He caused the offices to emerge as forms of continuing *διακονία* (*diakonia*) in the life of the church in service of the advancement of the Kingdom of God in and through the church.

The church did not in consequence turn into an autonomous generator of all kinds of offices. As covenantal community, the church was provided with offices and services through the Holy Spirit. Not every *χάρισμα* (*charisma*) is an office. The church of the New Testament was guided by the Holy Spirit to institute – in addition to (and subsequently in the place of) the apostles – ecclesiastical offices to project the richness of Christ for the strengthening of His body (Ephesians 4:8-16).

#### 4.2 Historical development of the offices

The offices as we know them today in churches of the Reformed persuasion cannot be directly linked to the Scriptures. In the development of the church and theology, an ongoing effort can be recognized to implement the Biblical instructions with respect to ecclesiastical offices in present reality, and vice versa to justify and correct existing arrangements on the basis of the Word of God.

##### *From the early centuries after Christ to the Middle Ages*

In the tradition of the Jewish synagogue the office of elder was largely administrative in nature. In the Christian church this office evolved into a combination of preaching and pastoral care, enabling the church to carry on the apostolic tradition. Gradually over the first few centuries after Christ a hierarchical clerical system of offices arose headed by bishops. Originally considered to be a *primus inter pares*, the *ἐπίσκοπος* (*episkopos*) became a monarchical ruler. The rule of the *ἐπίσκοπος* (*episkopos*) over the church came to be seen as a reflection of the rule of Christ over His church. In this situation the *πρεσβύτερος* (*presbyteros*) was no longer the equal of the *ἐπίσκοπος* (*episkopos*), but his delegate. In connection with the development of the theology of the sacrament and the concept of the church, the offices became sacralized: the presbyter became a priest and as such the deputy of the bishop who in turn was considered to be a high priest. The position of *διακονος* (*diakonos*) was reduced to that of assistant to the *ἐπίσκοπος* (*episkopos*) or the *πρεσβύτερος* (*prebyteros*) in the sacral worship service.

Deaconesses were encountered early in the history of the church. They carried out functions specifically in support of women, for example in (adult) baptism and pastoral visits to women living on their own. The reason why they subsequently disappeared from the scene was probably due to the marginalization of the office of deacon within the monarchical episcopacy. There is a view, based on the asceticism of widows referred to in 1 Timothy 5, that young women and even virgins were counted among the widows who were officially supported by the church for their special roles and functions. The history of the female diaconate is largely limited to these developments. What eventually remained was the purely virgin state which was withdrawn from everyday life behind the safe walls of monasteries.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> W. van 't Spijker, "Historisch overzicht" (historical overview), in D. Koole and Dr. W.H. Velema (ed.), *Zichtbare liefde van Christus. Het diakonaat in de gemeente* (visible love of Christ; the diaconate in the church), Kampen, 1991, p. 78.

Much emphasis came to be laid on the concept of succession in office. This succession was the guarantee that the *potestas* of the office could be maintained. Only a sacramentally ordained priest qualified for the line of succession from Peter to the pope of Rome. Only a sacramentally ordained priest was considered to have the authority within the context of the mass to present and sacrifice anew the body and blood of Christ. In the background was the thought that Christ rules over both the church and the world, but that in this connection He is represented in the ecclesiastical dignitaries through the power of the Holy Spirit. The secret of the church, the sacrament and the offices is the concept of representation by means of the hierarchy of the clergy headed up by the pope. In this way the work of the Holy Spirit is largely objectified and almost exclusively encapsulated in that part of the church that is considered to represent the Person of Christ and His teaching. This systematically eliminates all opportunities for believers to individually approach the source of truth and authority in the church without the involvement of pope, bishops and priests.

The subordination of the offices was further reinforced by the auricular confession. Confession was widely introduced in the ninth century. The fourth Lateral Council of Rome (1215) made periodical confession mandatory and considered it to be a sacrament. Instead of being rare, penance and confession of sin has become a regularly recurring event that is mandatory for all believers. It no longer takes place in public, but in the enclosure of the confessional, subject to secrecy. Confession has made the chasm between clergy and laity still bigger. In such a strongly hierarchical system of church and offices, the believer has no other option but obedience to and dependence on the clergy.

Of the charismatic structure of the church and the serving nature of the offices in the New Testament little remained in the western church by the time of the Reformation. As a result of clericalism and the sacralization of the offices every lay element disappeared from the governance of the church. Everything was concentrated in the sacrifice by the priest in the Eucharist. The hierarchical episcopal view of the offices crowded out the charismatic and diaconal structures of the church.

#### *From the Reformation to the Synod of Dordrecht*

The present office and church structures were developed at the time of the Reformation. As far as the Netherlands was concerned, the Synod of Dordrecht (Dort, 1618-1619) may be viewed as the culmination of this process. This Synod embedded in its Church Order four offices, namely minister of the Word, doctor ecclesiae, elder and deacon (article 2, Canons of Dort).

#### *Luther and the priesthood of all believers*

Luther opposed Roman Catholicism's deference to the hierarchically structured power and authority associated with ecclesiastical office (the result of sacralization and clericalism, mentioned above). Power and authority associated with 'divine right' was not to be sought in a succession of human beings, but only in the law and promise contained in the Word of God. The institution and functioning of ecclesiastical office was therefore considered to be founded directly on the authority of Christ, who advanced His work of redemption on earth through the preaching of justification by faith only.

An implication of the doctrine of justification was the strong emphasis placed by Luther on the priesthood of all believers. Justification made the believer a free human being who was only bound by the love of Christ. The secret of a life in freedom devoted to one's neighbour is to be found in the vicarious nature of redemption. Christ is the Redeemer, but He renews human beings to such an extent that every Christian becomes Christ to his neighbour.

By emphasizing the general priesthood of all believers, Luther radicalized thinking about both church and office. *He, who emerges from baptism, may boast that he has already been consecrated priest, bishop and pope, although not everyone is qualified to practice such offices* (quote from *The Open Letter to the Christian nobility*, 1520). The church is born through the Word. The preaching of the Word requires preachers. For the sake of order, the responsibility for preaching and the celebration of the sacraments needs to be entrusted to particular persons. Although all believers are qualified, and in personal interaction and emergencies were called to do so, *public* preaching is not to be practiced by everyone for the sake of order. Luther based the office of preaching on the general priesthood of all believers, but considered it to be a matter of order; at the same time he based the necessity for the office and its authority on its institution by Christ. It would not be correct to label this an ambivalent attitude towards the foundation of this office. His writings on this topic were connected with particular events and had a polemic flavor directed at both Roman Catholic theology and Anabaptists.

Apart from the office of preacher, Luther only recognized the office of deacon. In the Roman Catholic Church of those days a deacon was no more than a liturgical assistant to a priest. In the light of the New Testament Luther wanted to revise the diaconate with an emphasis on assistance to the poor and needy. However, little or nothing was achieved in terms of making the diaconate a responsibility of the church and its office bearers. Quite soon the care for the poor was left to the government, albeit with the support of ministers of the church. Diaconal care was considered to be the responsibility of a Christian government. The church was involved, but did not operate independently in this regard.

### *Zwingli, Oecolampadius and Bucer*

Like Luther, Zwingli also rejected the Roman Catholic concept of office. The authority of office was not guaranteed by hierarchy or succession, but only by the Word of God. This explained Zwingli's focus on the office of preaching. It was in Zürich that the first efforts were made towards a presbyterian Church Order. These are reflected in the *Züricher Ehericht* (Zürich marriage law), which quite soon evolved into *Sittengericht* (moral law). This code is based on Zwingli's theocratic ideas. These concepts were applied to the supervision of morals, whose objective was the Christianization of the life of the nation. In this connection, forced church attendance and the forced baptism of children was not seen to be an issue. There was no objection to the collaboration between the government and the church.

In Basel Oecolampadius had to deal with Anabaptists who rejected the church, because – among other reasons - no discipline was practiced. Oecolampadius agreed with them, and went on to fight for the enforcement of ecclesiastical discipline, which he sought to entrust to ministers supported by a college consisting of four members of Basel's city council and four members of the general population. In the latter he saw a revival of the presbyters of the days of the apostles. However, Basel's city council did not wish to leave discipline entirely to the church. Confusion arose, to the extent that several agencies enforcing discipline



functioned side by side. There was a nominal distinction between church and government, but the ecclesiastical office of presbyter existed only in theory.

Bucer's starting point was the church as a community governed by the Kingship of Christ through His Word and Spirit. In that community everyone is a member of Christ and an instrument of the Holy Spirit and participates in the special and redemptive work of the body of Christ. Every believer is thereto equipped with useful talents. No one is excluded from assignments in the community. The priesthood of all believers is here more pneumatologically oriented than in Luther. Since Bucer saw a close connection between office and charisma, he saw no conflict between the office as institution of Christ and as role of the priesthood of believers. The priesthood of believers and the service of ecclesiastical office come together in the presence of Christ in the church through the Spirit.

In this connection Bucer recognized two permanent types of office in the church, namely pastors-teachers and deacons. The pastorate and the diaconate were two functions that were always and everywhere required. There were also offices that the church could employ temporarily, until no longer required.

Initially Bucer followed in the footsteps of Zwingli and felt that matters of discipline and governance were not the responsibility of the church but of the government. Under the influence of Oecolampadius and in response to criticism from Baptists he changed his opinion around 1530. Eventually Bucer became convinced that ecclesiastical discipline is the third *nota ecclesiae* (mark of the church). The implementation of ecclesiastical discipline calls for elders in addition to ministers and deacons. When Bucer and Oecolampadius together needed to propose a Church Order for Ulm, they incorporated ecclesiastical discipline, including (1) the authority to exclude someone without having to consult the government, and (2) the establishment of a college of ecclesiastical discipline, in which the city council and the citizens were each represented by three persons, expanded by two of the ministers. The proposal included a separate college for the supervision of ministers with respect to their doctrine, life and performance in office, which was considered to be primarily the responsibility of the government in collaboration with ministers.

In Ulm nothing came of these proposals. The government absorbed all governance. But the concept itself lived on. Bucer made every effort to achieve its implementation in Strasbourg. A special office of governance was established, i.e. the *Kirchenpfleger* (church warden). However, bearers of this office – to the extent that they functioned at all – tended to be public servants rather than presbyters or pastors of the church as Bucer had envisaged. Although Bucer did continually encourage them to play this role, the results were disappointing; the government had no interest in ecclesiastical discipline and the *Kirchenpfleger* did not consider themselves to be ecclesiastical office bearers. In the end Bucer saw no other way but to establish *Christliche Gemeinschaften* (Christian communities) to satisfy the need for the maintenance of church discipline, albeit within small groups that accepted this on a completely voluntary basis. The office of elder functioned within these communities.

The reasons why Bucer deemed the office of elder to be necessary, were listed in his proposal for a church order for Hessen: (1) the ministers could not possibly supervise everyone: the objective was to bring the entire nation to obedience to the will of God; (2) an ecclesiastical board was required for the supervision of ministers; (3) a new dictatorship of the

clergy had to be avoided; (4) the office of elder guaranteed good relationships between the government and the church.

### *Calvin*

The detailed doctrine of the offices that we encounter in Calvin's work has been very influential. The organizational structure of churches of the Reformed persuasion as well as part of Presbyterianism derives largely from Calvin. Calvin's thinking about the offices is found especially in *Institutes* IV, 3 (1536-1559), *Ordonnances ecclésiastique* (1541) and his commentaries on Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. Calvin's doctrine with respect to ecclesiastical offices had a number of elements in common with the thinking of other Reformers. From a polemic point of view, there was a twin-focus on Roman Catholicism on the one hand and Anabaptist views on the other hand. He objected to an unbiblical distinction between clergy and laity in which the office became a position of authority in a hierarchically structured system. On the other hand he promoted the sanctification of the church. However, he did not consider ecclesiastical office (including governance and discipline) as a specialization of the priesthood of all believers, but as a special service to which someone was called and appointed. Therefore, according to Calvin, ecclesiastical offices neither were placed purely above the local church (Roman Catholics), nor emerged solely from within the local church (Anabaptists), but were placed simultaneously over the local church and in the midst of the local church, whereby the authority of the offices were constrained by the priesthood of all believers. Furthermore, Calvin (influenced especially by Bucer) brought the development process towards a fully functioning elder to a certain conclusion. Governance and discipline with respect to both doctrine and life of members of the church were not seen to be a responsibility of the government but of the church.

Following in the footsteps of Bucer, Calvin distinguished between temporary and permanent offices. Among the temporary offices he included apostles, prophets and evangelists, and among the permanent offices: pastors, teachers, elders and deacons (*Institutes* IV, 3, 4-9). The distinction between temporary and permanent offices provided Calvin with the opportunity to do full justice to the unique character of apostleship. As far as prophets and evangelists were concerned, he was very noncommittal. He associated these offices particularly with the time when the church and the local congregations were established. Once the institutional church was in place, these extraordinary offices ceased to be required. He allowed for the possibility that in periods of special need the extraordinary offices might be revived, but in his own time he did not see such a need.

The distinction between temporary and permanent offices is open to criticism. However, it should be kept in mind that Calvin saw the distinction between temporary and permanent offices as an extension of the distinction between office and charisma. An office is not of an incidental but lasting nature, characterized by calling, appointment and authority. In his time Calvin witnessed quite a number of caricatures of *prophets* among the Anabaptists. In his emphasis on church regulation one can recognize a reaction to the sometimes disorderly situations among the Anabaptist radicals.

In *Institutes* IV, 3, 9 Calvin spoke about two kinds of deacons. Some had a more administrative and financial role and others had more of a practical responsibility, for example the widows of 1 Timothy 5:9. In this context Calvin noted that in the days of the New

Testament women *could fill no other public office than to devote themselves to the care of the poor*. It is noteworthy that by distinguishing two types of deacons Calvin saw a possibility to recognize the widows of New Testament times and early church history, i.e. deaconesses.

Calvin was convinced that moral discipline was necessary, because otherwise the Word of God could not be done full justice in the lives of believers. This conviction deepened during his period with Bucer in Strasbourg. The right exercise of the power of the keys to forgive sins was not a matter that could be entrusted to a single person or only to ministers. In view of (1) the danger of a (renewed) control by the clergy; (2) the recognition of the necessity to involve the church in one way or another in governance in obedience to Jesus' command, Matthew 18:17; (3) impracticalities associated with the size of the churches and the considerable number of overt sinners, the need was felt for a number of people, to support the minister of the Word and share with him the responsibility for these matters. In this connection Calvin promoted the office of elder. This office was assigned equally much authority with respect to governance and discipline as the minister's.

Calvin did have trouble with the exegetical underpinnings of this college of elders and the indispensability of the office of elder. As was customary in those days, Geneva had a city council including the role of *censores morum*. Calvin tried to transfer this function to the structure of offices of the church. In his exegesis of Romans 12:8, 1 Corinthians 12:28 and 1 Timothy 5:17 he tried to lay the required Biblical foundation. Like Luther, Calvin considered the preaching of the Word to be the essential task of bishops and presbyters. Initially it prevented him from viewing ecclesiastical discipline as a typical role of presbyters. In Institutes IV, 3, 8 and IV, 11, 1 he referred to Romans 12:8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28, but in IV, 11, 1 he subsequently added an exegesis of 1 Timothy 5:17 which enabled him to think of two different kinds of elders: some having a role in the governance and discipline in the church; others being preoccupied with preaching and the administration of the sacraments. Here Calvin placed the presbyter-elder side by side with the presbyter-preacher.

It is obvious that Calvin's concept of elder was not based directly on an exegesis of the New Testament. The actual situation that evolved over time in Geneva and the explanation based on the Bible influenced each other in a way that cannot be reconstructed. Bucer and Calvin were convinced of the Scriptural nature of their theology of ecclesiastical office. That does not mean that the exegetical underpinnings of the office of elder were not open to criticism. Nevertheless, it must be granted that Calvin's form of church governance was fully based on the Scriptures and not marked by Biblicism. The three-fold office of preaching, pastorate and diaconate could eminently be defended on the basis of Scripture (see above). Although Calvin's juxtaposition of preacher, elder and deacon (also reflected in the Reformed confessions influenced by him) could not be found as such anywhere in the New Testament, it did attest to careful listening to what the Bible said about order in God's house, the church of the living God. See Acts 14:23; 20:17-32; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Peter 5:1-5.

The experience of Strasbourg and Geneva strongly influenced the growing conviction that the church required preachers, elders and deacons. Nevertheless, the Reformers never treated the number three as cast in stone, which was demonstrated by the ease with which Bucer and Calvin departed from that number. At times Bucer referred to merely two offices required by the church, namely the pastorate and the diaconate (discipline being included in pastorate). At other times he distinguished among three offices, namely the ministry of the

Word, the exercise of discipline and works of mercy. Sometimes there was reference to a fourth office, when that of doctor of theology – part of the teaching function – was treated separately. The same thing was true of Calvin. To him it was not a slavish adherence to a particular number, but a spiritual characterization of the functions of office. Those functions were all manifestations of the one vocation of *ministerium verbi divini* (see also article 30 of the *Belgic Confession of Faith* and articles 1 and 2 of the *Canons of Dort*).

#### *France, Emden, London, and Dort*

Calvin's theology of ecclesiastical office became the foundation for further elaboration. The church order of the French Protestant church was patterned after that of Geneva. Since the French church was separate from the government, its office bearers were purely ecclesiastical ministers. What Calvin had not yet achieved, became reality here, namely that elders fully participated in ecclesiastical assemblies.

John à Lasco worked initially in Emden and subsequently in London among fugitive Dutch Protestants. À Lasco viewed the offices more as special cases of the priesthood of all believers. For that reason he allowed the offices to emerge from within the church more so than was the case with Calvin. In consequence, à Lasco gave the individual congregation a much larger role in the governance of the church than Calvin. The individual congregation was actively involved in the election of office bearers, and had the right of recommendation for the special office as well as the right to elect office bearers nominated by consistory. Subsequently the congregation was also given the right of approbation. That was not the case with Calvin, and only marginally so with Bucer. More in line with Bucer than Calvin, à Lasco recognized only two offices, namely those of elder and deacon. The minister of the Word was considered to be an elder with a special task. Together the elders were responsible for the governance of the church and pastoral care. Teaching and ruling elders were consistently treated equally. In Geneva the elders were simultaneously public servants and consequently had authority; but by implication they were viewed as being outside the church. In London this was not the case because the elders emerged from within the church. À Lasco did not refer to the *potestas* of the offices, because it rested with the congregation. The congregation used the keys of the Kingdom of God; the offices merely provided leadership. This brought the local congregation and the offices closer together. The elder was no longer subject to a higher office but rather represented the church. Church governance was indeed the responsibility of the ministers of the Word together with the elders, but did not bypass the church as was the case with Calvin. As much as possible, the congregation was involved in governance.

In Emden and London, in the absence of a recalcitrant government the church's own theological insights could be given free scope. In Emden deacons occupied a position fully equivalent to that of elders, ministers and prophets. They also participated as delegates in broader ecclesiastical assemblies.

The Convent of Wezel (1568) closely followed Calvin and his concept of two kinds of diaconate. The employment of women in the care of the sick confirmed that. The Synod of Emden (1571) pronounced that *in every church the ministers, elders and deacons will meet in*

*consistory at least on a weekly basis ...*<sup>31</sup> In line with this pronouncement, the practice was established to also send ministers of the Word, elders and deacons to classes and regional synods.<sup>32</sup>

At the Synod of Dordrecht (1574) the question was raised whether deacons were part of consistory and whether they were obliged to attend consistory on a weekly basis just like the elders. Synod's answer was the following: *Article 6 of the Acts of the Synod of Emden is taken to imply that consistory includes ministers of the Word, elders and deacons. Ministers of the Word and elders will meet separately, so that deacons can meet on their own to deal with their care of the poor. However, in places where there are too few elders, deacons may be admitted if consistory so desires. And deacons will be expected to participate at the discretion of consistory.*<sup>33</sup> The first part of this decision was in line with the view of Emden. The subsequent part constituted a practical application. It was an ambiguous decision that for years led to differences of opinion. It would be an exaggeration to say that Dordrecht (1574) corrected Emden (1571). At the same time it is clear that the decision of 1574 was not just a clarification of the earlier pronouncement. The background was provided by a country that had just gained its independence. In many locations the government had confiscated diaconal resources inherited from the Roman Catholic era. Deacons were therefore exposed to government interference. They found themselves between a rock and a hard place. Their role evolved into some sort of semi-ecclesiastical, semi-civic function. It was therefore understandable that the church became more and more reluctant to give deacons a say in consistory business.

The Synod of Dordrecht (1619) addressed the role of deacons in article 25 of the *Church Order of Dort*. It was their responsibility to raise funds, to care for the poor and to visit and comfort all those who were in trouble; they were accountable to consistory and thus indirectly to the church. Article 37 of the Canons of Dort stated that consistory comprised ministers of the Word and elders. If the number of elders was too small, deacons could be included in consistory. Ministers could participate in meetings of deacons in order to exercise supervision. There was every indication that diaconal work was underappreciated, despite the fact that article 30 of the Belgic Confession of Faith saw deacons as being part of the council of the church. Thus the position of deacons on consistory became ambiguous.

G. Voetius classified deaconesses among the permanent support services of the church together with candidates for the ministry, comforters of the sick, catechism teachers, lay-readers and precentors. In this connection he referred to 1 Timothy 5:6 (widows); but necessity also played a role. It was not proper for deacons to visit new mothers, etc. In this regard Voetius followed in the footsteps of Calvin. According to Voetius it was not necessary to institute all of these support services in every church. He favored granting churches the freedom to institute such services as necessary. Voetius envisaged deaconesses as female assistants to deacons. They could be elected by the church, consistory or deacons (with the approval of consistory).

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<sup>31</sup> Artikel 6 van de *Acta van Emden* (article 76 of the Acts of Emden), quoted by F.L. Rutgers, *Acta van de Nederlandse Synoden der zestiende eeuw* (Acts of the Netherlands Synods of the sixteenth century), The Hague, 1889, p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> Rutgers, *ibid.*, pp. 108, 112.

<sup>33</sup> Rutgers, *ibid.*, p. 139.

## 5. Hermeneutical issues

Theological hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of Scripture. From the beginning theology considered the primary role of hermeneutics to be the establishment and application of rules for the exegesis (interpretation) of Scripture passages. In the twentieth century hermeneutics demanded a broader and more prominent role in the totality of theology. Various reasons come to mind, namely the emergence of modern Scripture criticism (calling into question its authority), modern historical research (archeological excavations and various discoveries in the Middle East pointing to numerous similarities between the content of the Bible and the culture and history of the nations surrounding Israel) and the emergence of modern theories of communication (calling attention to, among other things, potential impediments on the part of listeners to the proper understanding of a message).

For a long time exegesis and hermeneutics were strongly interrelated. Little or no distinction was made between them. However, over time, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, hermeneutics evolved gradually into an independent discipline, distinct from exegesis and subordinate to it. Thus hermeneutics became a theory to support exegesis. It is, however, not right to insert hermeneutics as an independent filter between the Scriptures and our hearts. However worthwhile it is to consider hermeneutical dimensions in the interpretation of Scripture, this does not detract from our confession *that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein*.<sup>34</sup> The meaning of the Scriptures is clear enough. Ultimately it is not hermeneutics but the testimony of the Holy Spirit that imparts and validates faith in the Scriptures.

Hermeneutics helps us to understand how the authority of Scripture operates in church and theology, and that we live in a different time and cultural context than the Bible authors. It can prevent incorrect interpretations of Scripture by opening our eyes to what we implicitly take for granted as children of our time. However, excessive hermeneutics can hinder direct and unprejudiced interaction with the Scriptures and overshadow the clarity of the Word of God. Within the framework of this report we need to clarify our position with respect to a number of hermeneutical questions concerning the authority of Scripture, the implications of the cultural context in which the Scriptures emerged (particularly the husband-wife relationship), and finally hermeneutical guidelines and their application.<sup>35</sup>

**Committee members sought to stay together as long as possible, also in the production of this report. This was indeed achieved in the first part of this report. In the part that dealt with hermeneutical issues – including the way in which insights and points of view were expressed – opinions diverged to such an extent that a joint report no longer proved feasible. Consequently beginning with section 5.1 there are two versions of the report, first the view of the majority, and then the position of a minority.**

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<sup>34</sup> *Belgic Confession of Faith*, article 7.

<sup>35</sup> Professor Dr. H.G.L. Peels has written a lucid article about the Reformed view of Scripture. Since we do not always specifically make reference to this article, it should be kept in mind that we have drawn on his explanation a great deal. See H.G.L. Peels, "Het Woord is leven – over de Heilige Schrift" (the Word is life – on the Holy Scriptures), in G. van den Brink, M. van Campen and J. van der Graaf (ed.), *Gegrond geloof. Kernpunten uit de geloofsleer. In bijbels, historisch en belijdend perspectief* (well-founded faith; essentials of the doctrine of faith; Biblical, historical and confessional perspectives), Zoetermeer 1996, pp. 52-92.

## 5.1 The authority of Scripture

The Scriptures are more than human words. The irrevocable conviction of the Reformed view of the Scriptures is that they represent the Word of God and that they have intrinsic authority. It is not the church that imputes religious authority to selected writings, but the Word itself that imposes its authority upon the church. The testimony of Scripture to itself, combined with the work of the Holy Spirit, demands an acceptance in faith of the entire Scriptures as being holy, authoritative and canonical (cf. Belgic Confession of Faith, article 5).

In listening to the Scriptures and reflecting on them, Reformed theology follows a unique approach. On the one hand it dismisses any treatment that downplays or rejects the nature of the Scriptures as the Word of God. In the latter view the Scriptures are interpreted to be the documentation of convictions and insights of people in Biblical times and thus of human origin. Or the Scriptures are seen as a collection of Christian truths about God, i.e. aspects of God and redemption conceived by human beings and cast into human language. On the other hand, Reformed theology also rejects fundamentalist and Biblicist views of Scripture, in which little or no attention is paid to historical-cultural settings and dimensions of the history of redemption. In this way the human aspect of the genesis of Scripture is completely ignored, infallibility is reduced to inerrancy and historical reliability is narrowed to a demand for historical precision.

Reformed theology pursues a third option. It is an approach in which loyal adherence to the authority of Scripture is combined with an understanding of the way in which Scripture exercises that authority, i.e. a recognition of both the nature and the scope of Scriptural authority. In the church, its confession and its theology, the well-known words of two passages of Scripture have proven to be of immense significance:

*2 Peter 1:19-21: We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day stars arise in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.* It is crucial to consider also the preceding verses 15-18. This brings out that the Word of God does not only comprise the prophetic word of the Old Testament, but equally so the apostolic word of the New Testament. Since the apostles were ear and eye witnesses, the church does not doubt the reliability of the gospel. The apostles did not rely on *cunningly devised fables*. The gospels and apostolic writings have acquired a normative status in close relationship with the books of the Old Testament.

*2 Timothy 3:16: All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.* Scripture is inspired by God (*θεόπνευστος, theopneustos*). The concept of *theopneusty* reflects better what is involved than the commonly used idea of *inspiration*.<sup>36</sup> In contrast with the word *inspiration*, *theopneusty* places a stronger focus on the work of the Holy Spirit in the provision and use of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are therefore a tremendous source of power (verse 15: *which*

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. J. van Genderen, *Beknopte gereformeerde dogmatiek* (concise reformed dogmatics), Kampen, 1992, p .85.

*are able to make thee wise unto salvation*), have a multifarious beneficial impact (verse 16: *is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*) and finally aim for a perfect goal (verse 17: *that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works*).

The passages quoted here deal with pronouncements of the prophets, promptings of the Holy Spirit, and the inspiration of the Word by God. In interpreting these passages a good deal of attention is given particularly to the relationship between the human and divine factors that played a role in the genesis of the Scriptures. Furthermore, it is explored what it means that Holy Scripture has its own history and is embedded in history. Biblicism with its rigid concept of infallibility and mechanical doctrine of inspiration ignores these questions and thus degrades the interpretation of Scripture. With his doctrine of *organic inspiration* H. Bavinck called attention to the theory that the Holy Spirit did not dictate word by word, but engaged the capabilities of the Bible authors and editors. This theory came close to the core of the mystery of the Bible. It recognized richly variegated differences among the human authors and at the same time ensured the unity of their writings, in the sense that they are all equally *theopneustic*, i.e. inspired by God.

The basis for the recognition of the divine character and authority of the Scriptures is not only the testimony of the Holy Spirit, but also the trustworthiness of the Bible itself. The testimony of the Holy Spirit instills the confidence that these books of the Bible are the Word of God, which is normative for faith and life. *He sent down the same Spirit, by whose power he had dispensed the Word, to complete his work by the efficacious affirmation of the Word* (J. Calvin, Institutes, I, 9, 3).

## 5.2 Cultural context and current significance

As a result of the gap between our own cultural situation and that of the authors of the Bible it is important to place stages of the history of redemption in their historical-cultural settings. Despite changing dispensations and evolving cultures there are certain elements in the Scriptures that retain their validity. In this connection we think of the significance of redemption (portrayed in different forms in the Old and New Testaments but with equal content) and the existence of the church (from the beginning to the end of the world, but in a form that changes through history, *Belgic Confession of Faith*, article 27, *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 21 from question and answer 54). Reformed theology has always referred to creation ordinances. Thanks to the general goodness of God, following the fall into sin He did not give up to perdition the good creation ordinance. In the history of redemption the creation ordinances were not abandoned or destroyed, but came into their own. The creative structures that God embedded in man and the world, achieve the goals set by Him.

The creation of man as husband and wife is part of God's good creation. In the history of redemption and evolving cultural circumstances, the relationship between husband and wife at the beginning of creation cannot be ignored. In reading the Bible the conviction could arise that certain rules no longer apply in today's cultural context. However, such a conclusion should not be based solely on changing cultural circumstances themselves.

Certain guidelines can be deduced from the Scriptures:



1. In the first place, as a consequence of the redemptive historical progression of their fulfillment in Christ, there are regulations and customs of the Old Testament that have taken on a different significance for the church of today (e.g. the temple worship involving sacrifices and priests, food regulations and laws for purification).
2. On the other hand, there are standards and rules in the Scriptures that remain in force regardless of cultural context (e.g. the Decalogue which applies to all of life, the command to love one another and the demand for holiness).
3. Finally, there are creation ordinances, mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments that reflect permanent standards established by God (e.g. the institution of a day of rest and the relationship between husband and wife).

It is a precious fact that God has given us His Word over a long period of time through changing historical and cultural circumstances. It is, however, incorrect to say that the cultural and social factors of those days prevented God from revealing His true will. God's revelation is not limited to a particular historical-cultural context. Its relevance is not restricted to the social-cultural context in which it emerged. The Bible is not so embedded in the human understanding and social order of earlier days that its message vanishes with those historical circumstances. Although both prophets and apostles reflected the understanding, norms and morals of their days, there is no need to replace their words with current insights to keep their message relevant and acceptable to modern man. In the latter case contemporary culture and science would be used as a yardstick to determine which parts of the Bible remain valid and useful for doctrine and faith. Such a stand is incompatible with the Reformed view of the Scriptures.

Saying that cultural circumstances prevented Jesus from appointing female apostles or Paul from entrusting the governance of the church to women, ignores their attitude to the culture of their days. It implies that they lacked the courage or the vision to run counter to existing customs. This is not confirmed by the Scriptures: Jesus associated with tax collectors and sinners, spoke with a Samaritan woman, healed on the Sabbath Day and criticized the lawyers in public whenever he had reasons to do so. Paul never felt ashamed of the gospel of Christ, despite the fact that it was considered to be *foolishness and a stumbling block* (1 Corinthians 1:23) and he did not hesitate to publicly challenge an apostle of high reputation such as Peter regarding a situation in which the latter did not conduct himself properly (Galatians 2:11-14).

From Paul we have pronouncements that resemble the then current rabbinical style of argumentation. (*Mosquitoes were created before men* is a well-known rabbinical expression to teach people humility. What we find in 1 Timothy 2:12-14 may have that sort of flavor: *But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.*) In this connection it should be kept in mind that Paul did not speak as a rabbi but as an apostle in the name and the authority of His Sender. Similarities in style do not give us the right to ignore Paul's words as being culturally tarnished. Even though the way in which Paul used the Old Testament was coloured by Jewish-Rabbinical hermeneutics of that time, it did not diminish the truth expressed by the apostle.

Sometimes slavery is mentioned as an example of a culturally determined phenomenon found in the Bible, subsequently rejected by the church on solid grounds. Paul said to slaves that

they should be subservient to their masters (Ephesians 6:5-8, Colossians 3:22-25). If this pronouncement of the apostle is considered to be restricted to a particular time and therefore irrelevant for today, the same thing could then be said of many other passages. A number of considerations can clarify that the temporal context of Scripture does not restrict its relevance over time. In the first place, God did not ordain slavery at the time of creation. References to slaves and rules for slaves merely recognized relationships that existed in those days, without condoning them. Furthermore, Paul placed Onesimus and his master Philemon together before God as brothers in Christ (Philemon: 16). Despite the fact that there is nowhere in the Scriptures an explicit and general prohibition against slavery, it is nevertheless clear that mutual brotherly love is not consistent with a strictly repressive attitude towards slaves. Paul instructed slaves to obey their masters, not because this was the only way to survive, but because the new relationship with God in heaven placed the earthly work relationship in a new light. This instruction, based on a situation that no longer characterizes western civilization, remains relevant to the current relationship between employer and employee.

Placing too much emphasis on the cultural context of the Bible creates a hermeneutical obstacle to the understanding of God's revelation that in turn encourages an uncritical treatment of our own cultural environment. The concrete form in which the Scriptures have come to us, remains tied to its historical context in a manner that does not lend itself to refined analysis. This must be carefully kept in mind out of reverence to God who chose this form of revelation. All the same, the Word given in the one-time historical situation remains a rule of conduct for all ages in all kinds of new situations, given that it is carefully translated, interpreted and continually made relevant to the current time.

### 5.3 Hermeneutical rules and their application

Within the framework of this report it is not feasible to provide a complete overview of the Reformed view of Scripture. Its key principles can be captured in a small number of hermeneutical rules.

#### *1. Scripture is the Word of God:*

The testimony of Scripture to itself must be done full justice in interpreting it: the God-given Word of life has come so near as to be audible to people. To the believer this Word has full authority with respect to both doctrine and life. It demands a believing, expectant attitude of listening, in which bowing to the authority of Scripture is the deepest motive (cf. *Belgic Confession of Faith*, articles 2-7). It involves a disposition nurtured by the Spirit expressed in the words *Speak; for thy servant heareth* (1 Samuel 3:10).

#### *2. An understanding of Scripture is not possible without complete dependence on the Holy Spirit as the great interpreter of Scripture:*

The Holy Spirit has moved the authors of the Bible and can therefore be considered to be the ultimate Author of the Bible. The witness of the Spirit to the heart of man convinces him of the authority and truth of the Word. The light of the Holy Spirit is indispensable in the understanding of God's Word, because natural man is not capable of discerning spiritual matters (1 Corinthians 2:14). According to Christ's promise, the Spirit will lead those who belong to Him in all truth (John 14:26; 16:12-15). It is not without significance that the prayer for the presence of the Holy Spirit figures so prominently in worship services. Before the

Scriptures are opened, prayer is required to request the guidance of the Spirit. That is not merely a liturgical formality. In the understanding of the Scriptures we are utterly dependent on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### *3. Scripture interprets itself:*

No tradition, intellectual brilliance or scientific discovery has precedence in the interpretation of a Scriptural passage, but only Scripture itself. In the interpretation of difficult or obscure passages insight is sought through a comparison with other Scripture passages. A passage may not be approached in isolation, but must be considered against the background of the immediate context and against the broader framework of the entire Scriptures. This is not to deny that a comparison with extraneous material could well be beneficial and illuminating. One must be very careful when making such efforts, because Scripture can only be viewed, judged and interpreted properly in its own light.

### *4. The Scriptures have a core and a periphery*

Not everything in Scripture is of equal significance. There are matters of major significance and those of minor significance, a core and a periphery. The core of Scripture is the coming of the Kingdom of God and the revelation of Jesus Christ as Redeemer of the world (John 5:39; 2 Timothy 3:16ff.). A significant text such as John 3:16 touches the core of the gospel, while the reference to Paul's cloak which he left behind in Troas (2 Timothy 4:13) is more in the periphery. Paul summarizes the core of his preaching of the gospel with the words that he has concentrated entirely on *Jesus Christ and him crucified* (1 Corinthians 2:2). Luke wrote that the Saviour himself explained to the disciples of Emmaus that the entire Scriptures pointed to Him (Luke 24:27). These few examples already indicate that the Scriptures are characterized by both unity and convergence. The Bible does not merely consist of a number of independent quotations and passages. The Scriptures represent the coherent teaching of the redemption work of God, focused on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A focus on the core of Scripture does not imply a diminution in the message of the Bible. It rather indicates the centre of gravity of the message of the Bible. The distinction between core and periphery may not be abused, for example, by considering love to be the core (summary) of the law and treating the actual commandments as less authoritative periphery. Core and periphery are interconnected. It is, however, important to read Scripture from the core to the periphery and not vice versa. This avoids a fragmented, legalistic and Biblicist usage of Scripture. It recognizes the particular position of each Scripture passage in relationship to the central message of the Bible: the Word of God has been given to us so that we might have faith and life eternal (John 20:31; Romans 1:16ff.).

### *5. The message of Scripture is embedded in time*

Holy Scripture is embedded in time and seeks to be understood with reference to its historical background. To express it this way, does not diminish Scriptural authority, but rather expresses reverence for the way in which the Holy Spirit has provided Scripture. God did not reveal Himself in a timeless manner, but entered into history. Those who seek to interpret the text of the Bible apart from its historical context do not understand Scripture and run the danger of abusing the Word of God.

To do justice to the Scriptures, it is necessary to do justice to the specific context in which the Word has come to us and which has become part and parcel of the witness of Scripture. It is important to understand the words against the background of their historic-cultural context, to be able to look subsequently for their significance for today. In that connection it is necessary to realize that although this revelation did enter into history, it did transcend it. To be able to understand today the words which were once given to us, it is and remains very important to read Scripture with a focus on the enduring actions of God. Not human reasoning but Scripture itself always has the last word.

#### *6. Scripture demands a redemptive historical interpretation*

Not everything was revealed all at once. There is a progression in the history of the revelation of Scripture (cf. Hebrews 1:1; *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 6, question and answer 19, and *Belgic Confession of Faith*, article 25). This needs to be taken into account in the interpretation of passages from the Old and New Testaments. The exegesis of the history of redemption does not have a monopoly in this regard. Alongside the progression of God's redemption in history there is also the relationship with the God of redemption. There are books in the Bible in which the historical perspective is of little or no consequence (e.g. the Song of Solomon and Proverbs).

#### *7. The interpretation of Scripture must take into account distinctions of literary form*

Scripture exhibits a great variety of literary form. Examples include: statutes, proverbs, laments, prophetic writings, gospels, apostolic epistles and apocalypses. Every type of literature demands a unique approach. A psalm of praise cannot be read as a lament and an apocalypse not as an informative announcement.

The hermeneutical criteria listed above do not represent formulas that generate a closed system with mathematical precision. They are guidelines for exegesis in which questions may remain. In the meetings of the Committee this has frequently been proven to be the case. The interpretation and translation of Scripture frequently result in questions that do not always receive unequivocal answers. Differences in experience between the authors of the Bible and modern man should therefore not be exaggerated, because that leads to artificial problems with respect to the interpretation of Scripture. On the other hand, problems should not be denied or belittled either. Only a careful listening to Scripture itself in the awareness of dependence on God, will lead to an understanding of the intention of the Spirit.

## **6. Exegesis**

In both the Old and New Testaments practices and concepts are encountered that have a bearing on passages pertaining to women and their position in the Church of Christ. An exegetical explanation is now presented on the basis of the Reformed view of Scripture summarized in the above hermeneutical observations.

### 6.1 Practices, concepts and passages from the Old Testament

Genesis 1-3 presents the good creation of the first man and woman as well as their fall into sin and its implications. Following a number of exegetical remarks focused on these

chapters, a concise overview is presented concerning the position of women in general in Old Testament times. Finally we address the role of prophetess.

### *Genesis 1-3*

The creative work of God is presented in both Genesis 1 and 2. They are not two different, contradictory histories, but two complementary testimonies. The following is said regarding the first man and woman: Genesis 1:26-27: *And 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 fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.*

Noteworthy is the transition from the singular to the plural: *Let us make man ... and God created man ... male and female created he them*. Right from the beginning it was apparently not the intention to create a single human being (cf. Genesis 2:18). Immediately after the announcement of the creation of man after God's image, there followed the distinction between the man and the woman made by God: He created the one human being in two sexes. This implies among other things the mutual relationship and unity of man and woman – not as a tragic fate or a curse – but as a gift and mandate provided by God's goodness.

The precise significance of man as image of God has been the subject of much discussion among theologians. It is sufficiently clear that the concept of representation is here of fundamental significance.

Man represented God in creation and he acted on behalf of God. Therefore it was added that man exercised dominion over the remainder of creation. Apart from concepts such as representative and ruler in the place of God, the words *image of God* also indicates that man found himself in a Father-child relationship with God. Man was therefore both viceroy and child. As viceroy he ruled on behalf of God; as child he lived with God. His mandate was to reflect the glory of God as His image. He therefore did not just possess the image of God, but also was the image of God. God desired the distinction between the sexes. The woman shared in carrying the image of God no less than the man (cf. Genesis 5:1ff.). Together they were viceroy and child, called to fulfill, rule and preserve God's creation in both nature and culture.

### *Genesis 2:18-25*

*And the LORD God said, it is not good, that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. And out of ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. And the LORD caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother,*

*and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.*

It was not good for the man to be alone; therefore he received from God's hand the woman beside him. In contrast to ancient-eastern creation myths in which the creation of the woman was not referred to separately, this is a striking event in the Bible. God gave Adam a helper who suited him. This does not imply that Adam took precedence over Eve. The focus is on equality. The fact that the woman is referred to as a helper should not be interpreted to imply an inferior position (the woman as an attendant to the man). It has been said of God that He is the Helper of His people (Psalm 33:20; 70:6; 115:11; 124:8). Being a helper is the woman's grandeur and not her misery. The characterization of the woman as helper actually implies the helplessness of man.

Apart from the equality and unity of the man and the woman, Genesis 2 also offers an additional perspective: the proper place of each one. Professor H.G.L. Peels speaks in this connection of both a primary and a secondary perspective. Aside from the question whether or not we can indeed speak of primary and secondary perspectives, the conclusion of Peels is absolutely correct: that both perspectives derive from creation and not the fall into sin.<sup>37</sup>

Genesis 2 brings out the priority (not the superiority) of the man. The man was created first, while the woman was taken from the man. The man received the mandate to keep and work the garden. The man and not the woman received a helper from God; the man gave his wife a name; the man took the initiative to accept the woman. It is noteworthy that the man was first called to account although the woman sinned first. This reflects an order that was subsequently adopted by the apostles in the New Testament (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:8 and 1 Timothy 2:13).

Genesis 3 tells us how sin perverted the good order of God's creation. The relationship with God was broken: man became afraid of God and hid himself (Genesis 3:10). Instead of having dominion over the earth, man had to struggle to obtain food from the earth with pain and difficulty (Genesis 3:17), mostly thorns and thistles were harvested (Genesis 3:18) and finally the earth became the grave to which man had to return (Genesis 3:19). Bringing children into the world involved risks coupled with pain and trouble (Genesis 3:16). The mutual relationship which husband and wife enjoyed became a relationship marked by lust and domination. The woman became slavishly dependent on the man, longed for him (not to be viewed necessarily negatively as a desire for power or sex, but also as a longing for protection and harmony). The man in turn no longer treated his wife consistently as his help of equal worth, but unfortunately only too often as subordinate.

It is important to note, that this was not the order instituted by God, but a description of the consequences of sin. Sin destroyed the harmony of Genesis 2, resulting in a power struggle for the man, the suppression of the woman and an ocean of pain and trouble for both. The initial harmony vanished. Genesis 3 did not imply a standard but a consequence. Neither the thorns and the thistles nor the dominion of man over woman can be viewed as an order desired by God. The dominion of man over animals is a mandate from God; the dominion of

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<sup>37</sup> Professor Dr. H.G.L. Peels, *Man en vrouw, beeld van God?* Inleiding gehouden op de bijeenkomst van de Landelijke Werkgroep Kerk en Vrouw in april 1996 (man and woman, image of God? speech given at the meeting of the national work group on church and women).

the man over the woman is a consequence of sin. The shattered harmony can be recognized in the words of Adam. Whereas in Genesis 2:23 he spoke of his wife as in a wedding song, in Genesis 3:12 she became merely *the woman whom thou gavest to be with me*. The wedding song had faded away.

The broken relationships arising from the fall into sin is no license to indulge in sin. The dominion of the man over the woman does not imply a divine approval of tyrannical violence. It has an element of resistance to the worst of evil. The original creation ordinance needs to be continually kept in mind in the understanding of *dominion*. In the Old Testament the coming Messiah was described as Ruler (Micah 5:2). The way in which Jesus interpreted this can be read in the New Testament. It is not a repressive but a beneficial dominion.

### *The position of women in the Old Testament*

With respect to the position of women in the Old Testament, two perspectives may be recognized, namely degradation as a consequence of sin and the faithfulness of God.

The entire ancient eastern world treated women as being subordinate from both a social and legal point of view. Israel was no exception. Polygamy, prostitution, injustice and absolute obedience of wife to husband were not unheard of. The husband was the *ba'al*, the lord of the wife. In Hebrew the word *ādōn* or *ba'al* was a technical term describing the male role within marriage. (For *ādōn* see: Genesis 18:12; Judges 19:26-27; 1 Kings 1:17; Psalm 45:12. For *ba'al* see: Exodus 21:3, 22; Deuteronomy 24:4; 2 Samuel 11:26; Proverbs 12:4; 31:11, 23, 28; Joel 1:8; cf. Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 3:14; 31:32. The related verb *ba'al* = *to marry* in Hebrew literally meant: becoming lord: Deuteronomy 21:13; 24:1; Isaiah 62:5; Malachi 2:11. In that context the wife could even be referred to as the one who was lorded over = *b<sup>e</sup>ūlāh*: Genesis 20:3; Deuteronomy 22:22; Isaiah 54:1; 62:4-5). This terminology indicated a relationship of authority within marriage. In a sense the wife was in the power of the husband and was subject to him. The Decalogue grouped the wife together with other possessions of the husband, Exodus 20:17. However, she was never put at the same level as a slave woman. Although the de facto position of many (married) women was better than might be expected on the basis of law, in a formal legal sense a wife was subordinate to her husband.

Although it is beyond doubt that the Old Testament had a strong preference for monogamy (Deuteronomy 17:17), polygamy persisted. Divorce was easier to obtain for men than for women. A woman could enjoy broad respect as a mother; but a childless woman was mocked and despised. The objective of marriage was to have children. Fertility was considered to be a special blessing from God. This was reinforced by the blessing given by family, friends and acquaintances to the bride (Genesis 24:60). The joy of possessing children was expressed in many different ways. The lack of children was accompanied by great sorrow and a certain degree of shame. The curse of childlessness hung as a sword above the head of a woman. A delay in pregnancy was viewed as a sign of God's wrath. A connection was seen between sin and infertility (Genesis 20:18). Usually the wife was considered to be the guilty one.

In addition to the aspects of the relationship between husbands and wives referred to above, there also was recognition of God's faithfulness and a definitely positive appreciation of women. Motherhood was thought to be the destiny of women. Through their children they acquired social status and a firm foundation for their sense of dignity. Having children was

also viewed very positively within religious life. It implied that God had been merciful to the mother. Nevertheless the sex of the child made a difference. Following the birth of a son, the mother was considered to be *unclean* for 7 plus 33 days, but in the case of a daughter 14 plus 66 days. During the second phase (33 of the 66 days) women were permitted to meet people, but were not allowed to touch anything holy and could not enter the sanctuary (Leviticus 12:4). Despite this difference children were expected to honor both their father and their mother. A married woman had an important place within the family. In the Decalogue children owed their mother as much respect as their father (Exodus 20:12). A child even had to be put to death when it cursed its father or mother (Exodus 21:17).

In everyday life in Israel a married woman enjoyed considerable freedom, more so than other eastern women. They spoke and dealt with men in public (1 Samuel 25:18ff; 2 Samuel 14:1ff; 20:16ff.). They participated in celebrations at feasts and in parades (Exodus 15:20; 1 Samuel 18:6ff.). They were present at sacrificial and festive meals (Exodus 12:3, 4; Deuteronomy 16:4). Scripture also referred to a number of wise women, for example the woman from Tekoah who was brought out by Joab to persuade the king to permit his son to return home (2 Samuel 14) and the woman from Abel-beth-maacha, who through her actions prevented the destruction of the city (2 Samuel 20:14-22). Further come to mind the wise women referred to in Jeremiah 9:17 and the women who *were wise hearted* to make cloth for the tabernacle (Exodus 35:25). Abigail saved her family home from destruction through her wise actions (1 Samuel 25:2-42).

It is a good idea to consider also the position of widows. They lived under various circumstances. There were those who were poor and those who were well-to-do depending on what their husbands had left them. Because of the legal framework, and sometimes greed and injustice, widows frequently suffered and needed to call upon judges for help (2 Kings 4:1-7). Psalm 68:6 called God the Father of orphans and the judge of widows. In general it can be stated that God in many respects took the side of widows and defended them in His laws.

While all of Israel was expected to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6), only men were appointed to the service in and around the sanctuary. Although there was no place for women in these services, from a religious point of view they were more appreciated in Israel than in the surrounding nations. In Israel women were involved in the reading of the law (Deuteronomy 31:12; Nehemiah 8:3), in festive activities (Exodus 12:3; Deuteronomy 16:11, 14; Ezra 10:1), in performing certain tasks at the entrance to the tent of meeting (Exodus 38:8; 1 Samuel 2:22) and as members of the temple choir (Ezra 2:65; Nehemiah 7:67).

Respect for women in Old Testament Israel was no coincidence. It reflected the objective of God's creation that both men and women, created in His image and likeness, were to fully realize their potential as people of God, living in His presence and responsible for each other.

### *Prophetesses in the Old Testament*

In the Old Testament, prophecy was portrayed in rich, variegated colours. A distinction may be made among prophets who wrote down God's Word as inspired by the Holy Spirit, leaders of the people who were simultaneously referred to as prophet or prophetess (Moses, Samuel, Deborah and David) and finally persons whose prophetic labor was recorded by others



(Elijah, Elisha and the prophetess Huldah). Prophecy could pertain to the future, but could also enlighten the past with a focus on the present. Prophecy was proclamation of the Word of God including various elements such as admonishment, comfort, chastisement, praise and adoration.

In a number of places in the Old Testament reference was made to women who prophesied. In Exodus 15:20, *Miriam*, the sister of Aaron and Moses, was called a prophetess. She led women in festive rejoicing following the safe passage through the Red Sea and praised the mighty deeds of redemption wrought by the LORD. In Numbers 12:2 she pointed out that God had also spoken through her (although the circumstances in which she did so were deplorable). In Micah 6:4 Miriam was mentioned beside Moses and Aaron as someone sent by God to lead His people out of Egypt. It is, however, clear that Miriam's leadership was only incidentally referred to in the Old Testament.

Judges 4:4 referred to the prophetess Deborah. Aside from prophetess she was also a judge. She spoke the Word of God with authority. Together with Barak she chanted the praise of God. The LORD gave them the victory and delivered them from Jabin, king of Canaan. Deborah's role in these events was noteworthy. She only accompanied Barak at his explicit request (Judges 4:8-9). As a consequence of the weakness and reluctance of men, the glory of that day was ascribed to a woman, not Deborah but Jael (Judges 4:17ff.). Deborah did not absorb the leadership, but she stood up to be *a mother in Israel* (Judges 5:7). Hebrews 11:32 mentions Barak, but not Deborah.

In 2 Kings 22:14 and 2 Chronicles 34:22 reference is made to *Huldah*. She employed the well-known prophetic opening words: *Thus saith the LORD*. People came to her for advice and wisdom concerning the will of God for their lives. She was married to Sallum, the keeper of the king's wardrobe. Why the delegation from King Josiah consulted a woman and bypassed other prophets who most likely lived and worked in Jerusalem at that time, is not clear. According to Jewish tradition, the two southern gates to the temple mountain were named after the prophetess Huldah, the so-called Huldah gates. This indicates that her influence was great not only in her lifetime, but persisted for a long time afterwards.

The prophetess *Noadiah* is mentioned in Nehemiah 6:14. Nehemiah's attempts to rebuild the walls were frustrated. The prophet Shemaiah tried to convince Nehemiah to seek shelter in the temple. But Nehemiah refused to act against God's command. In verse 14 we find Nehemiah's complaint to God in which he mentioned, apart from Tobiah and Sanballat, the prophetess Noadiah and other prophets, because they tried to make Nehemiah afraid.

In Isaiah 8:3 the wife of Isaiah was called a prophetess. It is not clear whether this was the usual title of the wife of a prophet, or whether she was a prophetess in her own right. No additional information was given about her.

From what was said about the prophetesses listed above, it cannot be concluded that women occupied permanent, official, leading positions among the people. They were indeed employed by God to make known His will. It is noteworthy, that prophets, aside from the prophetic work that they performed at home, were also sent out, while prophetesses did not go out to preach the Word of God, but instead had people come to them for advice (cf. Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14).

## 6.1 Practices, concepts and passages from the New Testament

In the New Testament we encounter women around Jesus, with the apostles and in the church. A general overview of the position of women in the New Testament is followed by a more detailed discussion of a number of passages which indicate what kinds of tasks women performed. This in turn is followed by an exegesis of passages that describe the position of women in the Church of Christ as well as the relationship between men and women.

### *6.2.1 Women in the New Testament*

#### In general

It is not simple to get a clear picture of the position of women in public and religious life in the Roman Empire during the time of the New Testament. In the eastern regions society remained strongly patriarchic and women occupied a subordinate position. The more western regions gave a different impression. There women generally enjoyed greater freedom and enjoyed virtually the same status as men.

It is certain that in Greece a girl was considered to be of lower status than a boy. The education of girls fell far short of the formation of boys. Once a girl married, she was entirely within the power of her husband. The life of a married woman was largely restricted to the family home. A married woman did not show herself outdoors unless accompanied by a male or female slave. She enjoyed no rights within public life. The chief virtue of a woman was to obey, to keep silent and to be submissive. It was different for *hetaerae*. A *hetaera* was a public woman, who behaved as the equal of men; she was an emancipated woman, who did not allow herself to be ordered around. She had succeeded in acquiring a position on an equal footing with men, also in public life.

In Roman culture the position of women was originally hardly different. However, under the influence of the Stoics and mystery-religions, which sought to eliminate all differences among people, the position of women improved gradually. They were less submissive; they obtained more rights; they could even attain positions in public life in which they exercised authority over others.

#### The Jewish tradition

Among the Jews the position of women, relative to the Old Testament times had not improved. Women continued to occupy a subordinate position. That was especially apparent in Jewish divorce law. The right to divorce rested almost exclusively with men and could be exercised almost at will. For example, Rabbi Meir gave permission for divorce if women ate outdoors or failed to cover their heads when outdoors, while Rabbi Akiva gave permission if men met women more beautiful than their own. Women had far fewer opportunities for divorce. The subordinate position of women was also underscored by the prohibition in the Talmud to instruct women in the law.<sup>38</sup> This was reflected in the fact that women had a completely unimportant role in the synagogue. They were not counted towards the *minyan*, the prescribed quorum of ten men to permit a synagogue service to proceed. Women could not give an oath either, and their testimony had no validity before the law. Men did not

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<sup>38</sup> H.L. Strack – P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, Band 3, p. 468.

discuss religious matters with their wives. Men were required to thank God in their daily morning prayer that He had not allowed them to be born as a gentile, a woman or a slave. As far as is known, this prayer went back to a pronouncement of Rabbi Jehuda, circa A.D. 150.<sup>39</sup>

## Christ and the position of women

In many ways Jesus broke with the subordination of women. This is already apparent in the genealogy of Matthew 1. It included the names of several women. That would have been highly unusual among Jews.

The attitude of Christ to women was striking. The value of women to Jesus was equivalent to that of men; both were creatures of God. This equal treatment of women and men came through in the conversation with the Samaritan woman, which surprised the disciples (John 4:27). The Saviour spoke also with women in other places in the gospels (including Mark 5:34; Luke 11:27-28; 13:12; 23:27-31). He ate and drank with harlots and allowed Mary to anoint his feet (John 12:3). In Luke 13:16 Christ referred to a woman, whom He called a daughter of Abraham, just as He called Zacchaeus a son of Abraham in Luke 19:9.

The equality of men and women in the eyes of Christ also appeared in the way in which He took the latter into protection at the point of marriage and divorce, including Matthew 5:32 and 19:1ff. He indicated that women could not be treated as possessions of men, to be employed as they saw fit. Women had a right to be treated with respect.

In His interaction with women Jesus gave an example to His disciples. Rabbis avoided contact with women because they considered women a danger to men, i.e. potential temptation to sin. Jesus intimated that women should not be avoided, but that men should subject their thoughts and lusts to the laws of the Kingdom of Heaven. Also the physical and spiritual assistance that He gave to women, demonstrated His view that they were not subordinate to men. The gospels provided many examples of women healed by Jesus. Women were included among those who put their faith in Jesus and publicly confessed that faith. At one time He praised the faith of a woman (Matthew 15:28), as He did in another situation for a man (Luke 7:9). As part of His work as Saviour, Jesus accepted that in helping women He sometimes became Levitically unclean, for example in the case of the hemorrhaging woman, when she touched his cloak (Mark 5:28).

The way in which Jesus involved women in His work demonstrated how much He esteemed them. In His teaching He did not only use women as examples, but He also spoke directly to them, contrary to the general practice of his days (Luke 10:38-42). Women served Jesus (Luke 8:3) and followed Him, although this undoubtedly must have appeared incomprehensible to many. Women were also permitted to pass on the Word of God. In the beginning of the gospel we encounter the Song of Mary, the testimony of Elizabeth and the words of Anna. At the end women were made messengers of the resurrection of Christ. That is remarkable, considering that among the Jews the testimony of women had no validity. Jesus did, however, employ such testimony.

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<sup>39</sup> K.H. Schelke, *Der Geist und die Braut. Frauen in der Bible* (the Spirit and the bride; women in the Bible). Düsseldorf, 1977, p. 54.

Everything confirms that Jesus recognized women as full-fledged human beings. In this way He acted contrary to all kinds of prejudices of His time. Nevertheless, differences remained. In this connection the question arises why Christ only selected men from among His followers to be appointed apostles.

G. Huls was of the opinion that Jesus did not wish to be a revolutionary. For that reason He retained many cultural and social practices – including the relationship between men and women – although at the same time it must be granted that with His message of redemption He *attacked the core of distorted relationships, which subsequently implicitly led to the overthrow of such practices.*<sup>40</sup> This type of reasoning is not tenable. It can be demonstrated with numerous examples that Jesus did not hesitate to run counter to certain customs. He healed the sick on the Sabbath Day (Mark 1:21-28). He spoke with a woman in public (Matthew 9:11). He accepted a tax collector as a disciple (Matthew 9:9). He cleansed the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). He indeed did not feel inhibited by cultural prejudices.

What reason could Jesus then have had to select men only as His apostles? Undoubtedly the theme of the number of twelve tribes of Israel played an important role. From the perspective of the history of redemption the number twelve was seen to represent the nation of Israel. It was that nation, which had from the beginning the calling to proclaim God's salvation to the world (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6). However, the theme of representation by itself does not explain why there were no women among the twelve. In contrast to the non-Jews, women were found among Jesus' followers right from the beginning. Also when the vacancy left by Judas needed to be filled, no women were nominated. The replacement had to come from among the circle of men who had accompanied Jesus (Acts 1:21; cf. subsequently the seven in Acts 6:3). The equality of men and women recognized by Jesus apparently did not imply that every task to which a man could be called in God's Kingdom could also be performed by a woman.

### The apostles and the position of women

The way in which Jesus approached women and gave them a place in His Kingdom, was imitated by the apostles. There was no discrepancy between Jesus' approach to women and that of the apostles. This was demonstrated quite early in the life of the church following Pentecost. In Acts 1 women are present in the circle of disciples to prayerfully await the coming of the promised Spirit. They were obviously present as full-fledged believers and were not seated separately as was the case in the synagogue. In agreement with the prophecy of Joel men and women shared together in being filled with the Holy Spirit. Like Christ, the apostles preached the gospel also to women. Acts 16:13 is in this regard quite telling: Paul found himself in a circle of exclusively women to bring to them the message of God's grace. Sometimes women were the first converts, for example, Lydia (Acts 16:15) and Damaris (Acts 17:34).

Women were quite quickly given full recognition in the church. They were given full scope to deploy their activities, for example as Dorcas did (Acts 9:36). Examples of what women did include the following: opening their homes to meetings of the church (Acts 12:12), serving the saints (1 Corinthians 16:15), practising hospitality (Acts 18:2; 1 Timothy 5:10), washing the feet of the saints (1 Timothy 5:10) and helping the oppressed (1 Timothy 5:10). All these

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<sup>40</sup> G. Huls, *De vrouw in de kerk* (woman in the church), Baarn, 1965, p. 24.

activities were of great importance for the proper functioning of the life of the church. Women were also involved in the spreading of the gospel. We can think of Prisc(ill)a, who like her husband Aquila, was indicated by Paul as *helper* (Romans 16:3); Phebe, who was referred to as *servant* (Romans 16:1); Euodias and Syntyche, who were called *women who labored with me* (Philippians 4:2-3); the daughters of Phillip the evangelist, of whom was written that they *prophesied* (Acts 21:9); and others. Women actively participated in worship services (1 Corinthians 11:5); they received the gift of the Holy Spirit; widows played an official role (1 Timothy 5:1-16; there were prophetesses (Acts 21:9); and women were included in salutations.

Redemption through Christ made it possible for men and women to once again function as God had originally intended. Through redemption in Christ the image of God was restored. That had consequences for all aspects of humanity. In the Church of Christ something of the glory of the original creation ordinance was revived, despite sin which continued to be a factor. Yet equality, involvement and appreciation obviously did not imply that women were not given the same positions as men.

### The church and the position of women

To consider more closely the position occupied by women in the time of the New Testament, it is necessary to pay more thorough attention to passages that referred to women and the work that they did.

#### Prisca (Priscilla) – fellow worker

Several times Priscilla (also called Prisca), together with her husband Aquila, provided Paul with great support. For a period of time Paul enjoyed their hospitality (Acts 18:3). Later on they made their home available to the church (1 Corinthians 16:19). Paul referred to them with great appreciation. He called them his *helpers* in Christ Jesus who supported God's Kingdom at the risk of their own lives (Romans 16:3-4). Of this couple it has also been recorded, that they carefully informed the well-spoken preacher Apollos with respect to the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 18:26).

Priscilla was called *fellow worker* (Greek: *συνεργός*). Paul used that terminology for men as well as women. Sometimes it referred to a leading position such as in the case of Timothy (Romans 16:21), Apollos (1 Corinthians 3:5), Titus (2 Corinthians 8:23), Epaphras (Philemon: 24). On the basis of this terminology some extravagant conclusions have sometimes been drawn with respect to Priscilla. Further investigation reveals, however, that it is a rather vague word without specific significance. Someone could be fellow worker in various ways and thus make a contribution to the furtherance of the gospel. Some collaborated in the preaching of the gospel, such as Timothy, Titus and Apollos. Of others this cannot be said with certainty, while they were yet referred to as collaborators, such as Urbanus (Romans 16:9, Jesus Justus (Colossians 4:10) and others. There is nothing to suggest that the term fellow worker referred to an officially recognized position in the Church of Christ. As far as the clarification of the gospel is concerned, which Priscilla together with Aquila presented to Apollos (Acts 18:26), it must be pointed out that this did not constitute a form of public instruction in a position of authority and leadership.

Furthermore, what was done by Priscilla has subsequently been done by many other women without the status of official office. Professor Dr. W. van 't Spijker has listed several women from the history of the church, *without whom the history of the Reformation could not have been written*.<sup>41</sup>

#### Euodias and Syntyche – fellow laborers

In Philippians 4:2-3 Paul mentioned the names of two women, Euodias and Syntyche, of whom he said that they had struggled together with him and whom he considered to be his fellow laborers. Who these women were, is impossible to determine. Outside of this passage they are not mentioned in the New Testament. What they did, can only be deduced from the double reference that Paul made to them: those who *struggled* and *worked* side by side with me.

As pointed out above, fellow laborer or fellow worker was a vague term. It described collaboration in the broadest sense of the word. In Romans 15:30 Paul spoke about *striving* with him in prayer. In Philippians 1:27 he spoke about *striving together for the faith of the gospel*. The meaning of this was so broad that it could apply to a wide range of activities of the church.

#### Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis – to labor in the LORD

In Romans 16 Paul mentioned a number of women of whom he said that they had done difficult work for the LORD: Mary (Romans 16:6), Tryphena and Tryphosa (verse 12) and Persis (verse 12). It concerned work that was described as difficult labor that called for tireless persistence (2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:27; 2 Timothy 2:6; Revelation 2:3).

#### Junia(s) – apostle?

Romans 16:7 refers to Andronicus and Junia(s), as men *who are of note among the apostles*. Some believe that the female form Junia should be read instead of the male form Junias. From a grammatical point of view, it would then be possible to read *among apostles of note* instead of *of note among the apostles*. The argument would be that the male form of the name, Junias, was hardly known, while the female name Junia was more common at that time.

The argument is not very convincing, for neither name turns up much in the Greek literature known to us. Even if Junia were a woman, that in itself would not prove that she was an apostle. There is no compelling grammatical reason to interpret verse 7 other than that the persons referred to were known and respected within the circle of apostles.

#### The daughters of Phillip – prophetesses

Acts 21:8-9 indicates that Paul stayed for some time at the home of Phillip, the evangelist, who lived in Caesarea. This Phillip had four unmarried daughters, of whom it was said that

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<sup>41</sup> W. van 't Spijker, "De Positie van de Vrouw in de Kerk" (the position of women in the church), in *Ambtelijk Contact* (21), 1982, p. 131.

they prophesied. However, it was not only said of the daughters of Phillip that they prophesied; 1 Corinthians 11 implies that prophesying women were not uncommon.

The question is how this prophesying should be interpreted. Does it imply authoritative teaching and preaching? This question is addressed further below. It is, however, impossible to determine whether the form of prophecy referred to in Acts 21 was performed in public gatherings of the church or within private groups.

It is further noteworthy that although Phillip's daughters possessed the charisma of prophecy, the prophecy concerning the imminent imprisonment of Paul was not pronounced by one of them, but by another prophet who came to visit Phillip. This prophet, Agabus, was a man.

#### Phebe – *diakonos*

In Romans 16:1-2 Paul provided a reference for Phebe, whom he called a *δiakonos* (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchrea. The question is what was meant by this term. In the New Testament it was used in the specific sense of someone who had been officially appointed to the service of mercy in the church (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 12). However, the word *diakonos* also frequently was no more than a general indication of a person who served in one way or another, without having been officially appointed. It cannot be determined with certainty in which sense Paul used the word *diakonos* with respect to Phebe. There are some who lean in the direction of an office officially recognized by the church.<sup>42</sup> In view of the uncertainty with respect to the status and the content of Phebe's work it must be concluded that there is insufficient evidence to determine the relationship between *deaconess* in Romans 16:1 and *deacons* in 1 Timothy 3:8ff.

#### Widows – 1 Timothy 5

1 Timothy 5:9ff. refers to widows who could be called upon to perform certain functions in the church, given that they met certain qualifications. These qualifications, explicitly given in verse 10, suggested that reference was made to widows whose lives offered definite proof of piety. Furthermore, Paul indicated that he was thinking of older widows. He also explained why he excluded younger widows (verse 11ff.). The question is whether *widows* here referred to a certain category of church women who served in some official capacity.

The qualifications expected from these women suggest that their role was in the area of works of compassion. The fact that Paul referred to this type of work separately must mean that it could not be identified with that of elders and deacons.

#### Women – 1 Timothy 3:11

In Timothy 3 Paul writes about the qualifications to be met by those who serve the church. In verses 2 to 7 he focuses on bishops and elders and in verses 8 to 13 on deacons. In between there is a reference to women. What women does the apostle have in mind? The context makes clear that he cannot possibly think of all women in the church. Paul's main focus is elders and deacons. Consequently a consideration of women in general at that point

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<sup>42</sup> For example, W. Steenbergen, "Bijbelse achtergronden" (Biblical backgrounds), in D. Koole and W.H. Velema (ed.), *Zichtbare liefde van Christus* (visible love of Christ), p. 40.

is unlikely. Does he mean the wives of deacons, as some translations suggest (e.g. *their wives*, in the Authorized Version)? This view is open to criticism. In the first place the possessive pronoun *their* does not appear in the original text. Furthermore, it would appear to be outside Paul's train of thought to suddenly switch the attention to the wives of deacons. It is therefore most likely that the women referred to in 1 Timothy 3:11 belonged to a third category, apart from the elders and deacons mentioned by Paul. It had to do with a group of women who had been called to a special function in the church.

In view of the clear parallel between the prerequisites for deacons (verse 8) and those for women (verse 11) it may have involved activities closely connected with diaconal work. The relationship between deacons of the church and these women cannot be inferred from this particular passage of Scripture. It may reflect the practice in the early Christian church in which deacons were assisted by deaconesses in certain activities. It suggests that there are two categories of deacon: one type of deacon who handles all aspects of diaconal work including leadership, and another type of deacon who focuses on practical work under the direction of the former.<sup>43</sup>

### 6.2.2 Exegetical comments on a number of key passages

In addition to the above, there are other passages in the New Testament that are of fundamental significance in the understanding of the position of women in the Church of Christ. The following passages will be discussed: 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, Galatians 3, Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2.

#### 6.2.2.1 1 Corinthians 11 and 14

In 1 Corinthians 14:34 Paul speaks about women having to keep silent in church, while in 1 Corinthians 11:5 he gives instructions regarding praying and prophesying by women. The question is what significance both passages have and how these pronouncements are related.

1 Corinthians 11:5: *But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.*

1 Corinthians 14:34-35: *Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.*

An interpretation of these passages must answer the following questions: Does Paul impose an absolute command of silence or not? Is his admonishment directed to all women or not? What kind of speech is prohibited? What does Paul mean when he refers to the law?

An absolute rule?

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. section 4.2 of this report where it is explained how Calvin and Voetius interpreted these Scripture passages.



If 1 Corinthians 14:34ff. were an absolute prohibition, it would contradict 1 Corinthians 11:5. It is impossible to reconcile that on the one hand women should be silent in the meeting of the church and on the other hand they are permitted to prophesy. This difficulty cannot be resolved by supposing that in 1 Corinthians 11 a different kind of prophecy is meant than in 1 Corinthians 14. There is no evidence to support this. Prophecy is referred to as a gift of the Spirit, distinguished from other forms of speaking through the Spirit (verse 8, wisdom, knowledge). In short, to prophesy is to speak through the Spirit, but not all speaking through the Spirit is prophecy. In 1 Corinthians 14:14-19 prophecy is also distinguished from prayer, singing and thanksgiving. The difference with speaking in tongues has to do with understandability and (in connection with that) the constructive nature of prophecy. The peculiar nature of prophecy is that it is based on revelation (1 Corinthians 14:30).

At home or in the public worship service?

It is doubtful that Paul permits prayer and prophecy at home (1 Corinthians 11) but not in public gatherings of the church (1 Corinthians 14). The broader context of 1 Corinthians 11 explicitly refers to the meetings of the church (1 Corinthians 11:16-17). The same thing is true of 1 Corinthians 14. It specifically refers to a meeting of the church (1 Corinthians 14:34). Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 14 places prophecy as well as speaking in tongues directly in the context of the worship service. The nature of Paul's admonishment presupposes a public worship service: Those who speak in tongues only benefit themselves, but those who prophesy also benefit others. In this connection it needs to be remembered that congregations frequently met in people's homes in New Testament times.

The relationship between men and women

Overall, it should be kept in mind that the intention of 1 Corinthians 11 is not primarily to discuss praying and prophesying by women; the focus is on a much broader matter, namely the relationship between men and women in the church. The apostle Paul seeks to base the appropriate relationship between men and women in the church on the relationship between men and women ordained by God when He created them (1 Corinthians 11:8ff, cf. 11ff.). The concept of the man being the head of the woman is closely related to this.

Is the question here, how a married woman is to behave herself in church in the presence of her husband? Or is the focus on the relationship between men and women in general? A comparison with 1 Corinthians 11:3 throws light on this. There it is said with emphasis and without qualification that Christ is the Head of every man (Greek: παντὸς ἀνδρὸς). It is logical to interpret the second half of that sentence (*the head of the woman is the man*) as being similarly a general rule: Just as Christ is the Head of every man, so men exercise headship over women.

This general statement can also be applied to marriage in the sense that the husband is the head of his own wife (cf. Ephesians 5:23). In this way a particular situation is subject to a general rule, which is not restricted to marriage only. In the reference to the creation of Adam and Eve (1 Corinthians 11:8ff.) the general perspective and the perspective of marriage appear to coincide, for the first people were not only the first man and woman but also the first couple. What is Paul's intention in 1 Corinthians 11? In verse 5 he speaks of every woman (Greek: πάντα γυναῖκα). Consequently the rules with respect to praying and prophesying as well

as coverage for the head are not limited to married women only, but apply to all women of the church.

#### Possible explanations of the contrast between 1 Corinthians 11 and 14

Is there not some tension between what Paul permits in 1 Corinthians 11 and prohibits in 1 Corinthians 14? Several possible solutions have been offered.

The most extreme solution is the view that Paul simply contradicts himself. This suggestion is not satisfactory. It is impossible to accept that within a few chapters of the same epistle the apostle would express two totally contradictory opinions.

An equally unsatisfactory solution is to suppose that in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul issues a rule and in 1 Corinthians 11 makes a concession. This view necessitates the conclusion that 1 Corinthians 14:37 (*that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord*) cannot be applied strictly. By accepting this option, the reliability of apostolic authority is unacceptably undermined.

The feminist view of E.S. Fiorenza is that Paul anticipated resistance to the restrictions that he placed on women (restrictions that he would have borrowed from the Jewish-Hellenistic propaganda tradition) and for which he (inappropriately) appealed to the authority of God to cover himself from subsequent criticism. It should not be surprising that this option cannot be accepted by those who adhere to the Reformed view of Scripture.

The view of Calvin was as follows: 1 Corinthians 11 referred to the relationship between men and women, particularly *outward propriety and decorum*. From the point of view of propriety the apostle demanded that women cover their heads. As far as the comment is concerned that it is strange that Paul first forbade women to prophesy with their heads uncovered and subsequently prohibited them from speaking altogether in worship services, Calvin suggested that although Paul disapproved of women prophesying in the first place, he delayed his explanation to chapter 14, since this matter was not the focus of chapter 11. This explanation does not do justice to 1 Corinthians 11 either, because prayer and prophecy by women were not there referred to as matters at issue.

#### What kind of speaking was forbidden?

When speaking in church is forbidden (1 Corinthians 14), what kind of speaking is forbidden? The verb used for speaking in 1 Corinthians 14:34 (Greek: *λαλειν*) has such a broad interpretation, that it has sometimes been argued that what is meant is that women were chatting about all kinds of subjects in church. Verse 35, however, makes clear that the apostle has something else in mind. He does not say that only talkative women should keep quiet (might there not have been talkative men as well?), but he forbids all women to speak. If Paul intended to eliminate senseless and unnecessary talk in church through his instructions, he could have been expected to encourage women to say something useful and edifying instead of making small talk. The apostle does not do that, however. He clearly indicates that women should be silent.

In light of 1 Corinthians 11:5 it is clear that this cannot be viewed as an absolute command to be silent or an absolute prohibition to speak on the part of women. It would be absurd to

imply, for example, that women should be prohibited from singing or praying. 1 Corinthians 11 implies that women could even participate in prophesying. It is a certain type of speaking that is forbidden to them. How should that be interpreted?

Many have pointed out that teaching in the early Christian church sometimes took the question-and-answer form of dialogue. Acts 20:7ff. is thought to be an example of that (cf. Acts 17:2, 17ff.). Paul must have meant that women in church were excluded from such discussions. It has sometimes been suggested that the Corinthian women may have come with particularly difficult questions which embarrassed their husbands. By seeking to outdo their husbands they ignored their proper place. Paul forbade this domineering and disturbing behaviour of Corinthian women.<sup>44</sup> This explanation raises the question whether timely questions that are not disruptive, competitive or pedantic have been permissible. If this Scripture passage merely means to prevent married women from publicly embarrassing their husbands – implying that they are not prohibited from orderly speech – this would apply even more so to unmarried women. The issue, however, is not that in these verses Paul indicates limits within which the speaking of women is acceptable or not, but he commands them to be silent. Put differently, he prohibits a qualified kind of speaking. The nature and significance of this apostolic instruction reaches beyond marriage relationships among members of the church in Corinth. It affects the order that God wants to see maintained in all churches, based on relationships of authority embedded in creation. The following considerations lead to this conviction.

It is not indicated in 1 Corinthians 14:34 to whom the women have to be obedient. The explanation of 1 Corinthians 11:3ff. given above refers to the position of women relative to men assigned by God in creation. Since verse 35 refers to their own husbands, it is clear that these rules apply in the first place to married women. It must be kept in mind, however, that the marriage relationship at home is the general model for the church, as became apparent in the discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:3, 8ff.

The interpretation that explains speaking as interrupting questions appears to be primarily implied by verse 35, which says that women ought to raise their questions at home. However, it is not only a matter of interrupting questions, but any form of speech that implies, by both tone and content, a desire to dominate. It is equally improper and unspiritual for a woman to embarrass her husband with unseemly questions at home. What the apostle objects to, is disturbance of the order that God has prescribed for the relationship between husband and wife. Whatever in this connection would disturb the order at home would definitely do so in church. Therefore it does not make sense to say that the command to be silent applies to married women only and not to women in general.

#### A measure to keep order?

It is possible to treat 1 Corinthians 14:34 as a measure to keep order (verse 40 indicates by way of summary that Paul's instructions indeed apply to order in the church), but only in terms of overall order. Paul does not merely wish to correct a particular incident in Corinth, but seeks to lead this church back to the order desired by God for all churches. This order includes that women are to respect the place assigned to them by God (verse 33). That order

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<sup>44</sup> This explanation is offered by C. den Boer, *Man en vrouw in bijbels perspectief* (men and women in the perspective of the Bible), Kampen, 1985, p. 107ff.

is disturbed by their speaking in church. The way in which the women of Corinth spoke up, disturbed the order and undermined authority.

Every form of speech that disturbs the order and undermines authority is forbidden. In the context it is explained that God is not a God of confusion, but of peace (verse 33). Order, anchored in the relationship between men and women as embedded in creation, is not to be disturbed in defiance of the leadership of the church. An appeal to the Spirit and gifts of the Spirit does not destroy this order. Women are not excluded from the gifts of the Spirit. However, it remains forbidden to them to gain so much prominence in the church, that the order given by God would be broken. God supports the leadership of the church with a structure of authority, founded in creation. Those structures of authority are of a lasting nature. Therefore, the leadership of the church was ordained to be assigned to men. The verb *hypotassomai* (Greek: *ὑποτάσσομαι*, verse 34) here means: to submit oneself obediently to the *taxis* (Greek: *τάξις*, order, verse 40) instituted and desired by God.

It is not clear how in Corinth public worship services were conducted, what form and content prophecy took and how it was related to the provision of leadership and the instruction in apostolic doctrine. Probably the distinction between what today would be called permanent offices and vanishing gifts played a larger role than many would like to believe. The reception and passing along of prophecy was an incidental activity; giving leadership to the church was (and is) an ongoing responsibility. Regardless of the question whether prophecy is to be thought of as a gift that like apostleship was only associated with the founding of the Christian church (Ephesians 2:20), it is clear that although the apostle does see women sharing in special gifts of the Spirit, he does not assign to them an ongoing role in the leadership and authoritative teaching of the church. Despite numerous differences among the churches of his time, Paul instructs the church of Corinth to conform itself to the good order maintained in all churches as far as the relationship between men and women is concerned. This is a general command.

Consequently, in verse 35 the apostle calls it a *shame* for women to speak in the church. F.J. Pop and many others interpret that as a reference to the then current code of behaviour. According to this view Paul cloaks this sense of propriety with a degree of theological legitimacy. By referring to Calvin, who considers this to be a relatively minor matter, they imply that customs are subject to change over time. However, this view does not do justice to either Paul or Calvin. In his commentary on verse 34, Calvin declares unequivocally that the teaching office is not open to women. His reference to 'a matter of minor concern' in verse 35 does not pertain to the access of women to the office of teaching, but to the way in which they can present questions. In that regard, nothing is prohibited except a lack of propriety and edification. Even if the code of behaviour makes it shameful for women to speak in church, the apostle has a far more fundamental objection, namely that authoritative speaking by women contravenes God's order (verse 33) and God's law (verse 34). That makes such behaviour shameful (verse 35).

Although it may not be clear to everyone that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 refers to public worship services, there is no doubt in the case of 1 Corinthians 14. The repeated use of the phrase *in the church* in verses 33, 34 and 35 and the contrast with the home environment (for the formulation of questions) indicate in unequivocal terms, that the apostle specifically forbids the women of Corinth to speak in church in such a way as to threaten the order and relationship of authority instituted by God. Prophets had to know their place, by speaking in

turn, and by being willing to step back in favor of others. Women also needed to know their place: they had no role in public speaking or teaching in the church. Authoritative teaching and speaking in church was done by men; this qualified form of speaking was forbidden for women.

### Two pillars of the command to be silent

The prohibition to speak in this particular way in church rests on two pillars, namely an appeal to the law (verse 34) and an appeal to Paul's apostolic authority (verse 37) with which he passes on Christ's command. Paul claims apostolic authority for the instructions given in the preceding passage.

It is important to note that, although these instructions are applied to the Corinthian situation, they are not exclusively intended for Corinth. The apostle admonishes this church not to maneuver itself into an exclusive position relative to churches in other locations. This becomes all the more clear when the end of verse 33 is viewed as the beginning of verse 34. What he passes on to the church of Corinth in terms of admonishment (i.e. command of the Lord) is in complete agreement with the situation in other churches. 1 Corinthians 14 therefore does not address a special case, but the good order that needs to rule in every church of Christ.

What does Paul mean with his appeal to the law? The word *nomos* (Greek: νόμος) can have more than one interpretation. However, we agree with Professor Van Genderen that explaining the phrase *as also saith the law* is not a matter of first listing five possibilities (the five books of Moses, the entire Old Testament, apostolic admonishments, Roman law, Jewish regulations) and then setting the law aside altogether by saying that it is not entirely clear what Paul means! *The apostle definitely refers to a norm given by God and not a human law or norm.*<sup>45</sup> We must think of the Old Testament. In Romans 3:19 and 1 Corinthians 9:8 we encounter similar expressions. When Paul employs the phrase *as also saith the law*, in the latter text he clearly refers to the law of Moses and in the former text to the entire Old Testament (see the multiplicity of quotations from the Old Testament in verses 9-18). Already in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul referred to the law, namely in verse 21. The quotation given there was from Deuteronomy 28:49 and Isaiah 28:11. The expression *in the law it is written*, in referring back to the Old Testament, occurred more often in Paul's writings. There is, however, no specific text or passage in the Old Testament which says that women should be silent. There is a good deal of support for saying that Paul here continues to have in mind, the previously discussed relationship between men and women in connection with good order in the church, namely the order instituted by God in the creation of the man and the woman (1 Corinthians 11:8ff.; Genesis 1:26ff.; Genesis 2:18ff.). It is also possible that Paul is not thinking of a single text or passage, but of the testimony of the Old Testament as a whole.

Therefore the appeal to the law does not refer to rabbinical traditions or practices associated with the synagogue; Paul's appeal to the law has the character of an appeal to an authoritative norm to which all possible objections and rebuttals of the church of Corinth are subject.

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<sup>45</sup> J. van Genderen, "Vrouwen in de dienst = vrouwen in het ambt" (women in service = women in office)? *Ambtelijk Contact* (24), 1985, p. 416.

### 6.2.2.2 Galatians 3

The broader context of Galatians 3 gives the perspective of Galatians 3:28, where it says that all believers are one in Christ.

Based on Galatians 2:15-21 Paul points in Galatians 3:1-18 to justification by faith in Christ as the only way of salvation. *The just shall live by faith* (verse 11). This chapter warns against Judaists, who attempted to win over the Galatians –largely of gentile origin (Galatians 4:8ff.) – to another (legalistic) gospel (Galatians 1:6ff.).

Paul contrasts faith with the works of the law (verses 3, 5, 10). Ultimately it comes down to the question whether man is justified by his own works or by the work of Christ. The preaching of faith (verses 2, 5) is the preaching of the gospel (verse 8), which places Christ's work central. He bore the curse of the law (verse 13). That opened the way for an appeal to faith in Him. Even Abraham was justified by this faith, and everyone (regardless of whether they descended from the Jews or not; see verses 4 and 8) who has the same faith shares in the same blessing (verse 9). This blessing in Christ (verse 14) stands over against the curse of the law (verse 13).

The subsequent pericope Galatians 3:19-29 deals with the same theme, now focused, however, on the relationship between the law and faith. On the one hand the law and faith are contrasted with each other, namely when *the law* refers to an attempt to be justified before God on the basis of works. On the other hand, Paul maintains the significance of the law as having a pedagogical function to lead believers – by way of discovery – to Christ, with Whom we are united through faith. In verses 27 to 29 Paul speaks of this union of believers with Christ.

Galatians 3:27-29: *For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

Paul's point is that all are *justified by faith* (verse 24), regardless of nationality, social status or sex. All are *children of God* (verse 26), *have put on Christ* (verse 27), and are *heirs according to the promise* (verse 29). This focuses on the relationship with God. Through faith men and women have the same relationship to God through Christ. In Galatians 3:8ff. Paul points out that gentiles can share in the same blessing promised to Abraham. Galatians 4:7 says that all believers are no longer slaves (servants) but children of God.

The unity of men and women in Christ raises the question as to what practical consequences these words of Paul have. It is sometimes believed that the apostle himself was unable to recognize all of the implications of this new unity for the churches. In his life Paul would only have been able to concentrate on the first stage, namely the equality of Jews and Greeks. He would not have been able to reach the subsequent stage of the equality of men and women. Entirely different is the view of those who consider Paul to be one of the most revolutionary authors of antiquity because of his radical position in support of the emancipation of women and the recognition of their equality.

The view that Paul himself never quite managed to work out the implications of the practical consequences of his conviction expressed in Galatians 3:28 (because he would not have lived long enough or was prevented by social and other factors) must be rejected as being incorrect. For the focus here was not on equality but on the unity of men and women as far their relationship to God is concerned. That union is not just a goal to strive for far into the future, but it is the reality in which believers already now may rejoice in the present.

The threesome of Jew-Greek, slave-free and man-woman also appeared in non-Biblical literature. Even if Paul employs a known threesome, it is clear that the distinction between a slave and a freeman is a different distinction than between a Jew and a gentile or between a man and a woman. Paul wants to say, that whatever distinctions there are among people, in Christ all believers are one. In faith they are together united with Christ and no one is excluded on the basis of social status, lineage or sex. That is how people are to accept one another within the church and no one has the right to think more highly of himself on the basis of social status, lineage or sex.

#### Unity in faith – unity in functions?

Does unity in faith imply unity of functions? It is an important question whether the unity of believers confessed in Galatians 3:28 implied ipso facto that everyone could be called to the same tasks and functions in the church. Does soteriological unity also imply functional unity? This view is taken by those who assign hermeneutical priority to Galatians 3 with reference to other Scripture passages. However, the context does not explicitly address this matter. Therefore one needs to be cautious in drawing conclusions.

A comparison with 1 Corinthians 12 is illuminating. It is noteworthy that in both Galatians 3:28 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 Paul explicitly refers to the spiritual unity of the Church of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 he mentions two of the three categories found in Galatians 3:28. Jews and Greeks, slaves and freemen are all baptized through one Spirit into one body. The purport of this text is comparable to that of Galatians 3:28. Within the one church the Holy Spirit distributes different gifts. However, not everyone is called to the same tasks. There can be unity in the church and at the same time relationships of authority, which God has instituted in the church and wishes to see honored (1 Corinthians 12:28ff.). The unity of faith within the church instituted by the Spirit is not threatened by the relationships of authority which are needed to lead the church and care for it. It is no problem to the apostle that from that point of view women are excluded from roles of leadership (1 Corinthians 14:33-35). There is no evidence that the proclaimed unity is threatened by regulations concerning church leadership. This unity enables the order instituted by God to operate without generating positions of inferiority or superiority.

It has been correctly pointed out that there is a difference in the way in which Galatians 3:28 juxtaposes the three categories. The pairs of words Jew or Greek and slave or freeman are not followed by man or woman (*aner* or *gunè*) but *male* and *female* (*arsèn* and *thèlus*). Although this particular usage of words does not fundamentally influence the interpretation of this verse, it does make clear that the three pairs of words are considered to be equivalent. They are three totally unique categories. In contrast to the distinction between Jews and gentiles, and between slaves and freemen there is the distinction between male and female instituted by God Himself in creation. Paul's usage of words reminds us of Genesis 1:27 (via the Septuagint). He distinguishes this pair of words from the other pairs of words. While the

other distinctions arose following the fall into sin, the distinction between male and female belonged to creation. The relationships and order instituted and desired by God in creation (Genesis 2) are not denied or undermined by Paul. It is preferable to speak of relationships sanctified by Christ. This does not eliminate every distinction to the extent that being-male or being-female would be no longer of interest to the church. It underscores that the uniqueness of men and women separately can only exist within the unity bestowed by Christ through the Spirit and on the foundation of the order embedded by God in creation.

There are other places in which Paul reaches back to the creation of man and woman (1 Timothy 2:13ff.), to indicate their distinct position in the management of church life. As far as the management of church life is concerned, the New Testament places no specific restrictions on gentiles or slaves in terms of who can be called to spiritual leadership in the church. In contrast with the other pairs of words, the male-female relationship does go back to the creation ordinance, and is not ignored within the church, but obeyed and sanctified. Short of adopting his terminology, a connection can here be made with an element of truth in the argument of Professor J. Hovius, who used Galatians 3 to distinguish between the essential and accidental aspects of belonging to the Church of Christ.<sup>46</sup>

### 6.2.2.3 Ephesians 5

Special attention is required for the passage of Ephesians 5:21-33. It belongs to what has sometimes been called the *Household Codes*. In these codes everyday life is placed in the light of the gospel and the corresponding renewal of life (cf. Colossians 3:14-4:1; 1 Timothy 2:9-15; Titus 2:4-5; 1 Peter 3:1-6). The rules concerning the home target certain groups in the church, which are each addressed in their own situation. The form of these admonishments is related to the onetime Jewish-Hellenistic tradition, but their content differs in the sense that they refer to Christ as Redeemer and Lord.<sup>47</sup>

#### Ephesians 5:21-33

*Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the Head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.*

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<sup>46</sup> J. Hovius, *De positie van de vrouw in Christus' kerk* (the position of women in the church of Christ), Sneek, 1950, p. 12ff.

<sup>47</sup> See L. Floor, *Efeziërs. Eén in Christus* (Ephesians: One in Christ; series CNT), Kampen, 1995, p. 187ff.



The internal cohesion of verses 18-22 is fundamental to the interpretation of this pericope. In Ephesians 5:18 Paul admonished his readers not to be drunk with an excess of wine, but rather to be filled with the Holy Spirit. From verse 19 on he shows four ways in which this can be done (four successive participles):

1. *speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs* (verse 19)
2. *singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord* (verse 19)
3. *giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ* (verse 20)
4. *submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God* (verse 21).

Therefore submission to one another in verse 21 is related to being filled with the Holy Spirit. Several exegetes see the mutual submission of verse 21 as an introduction to the subsequent verses. Thus mutual submission becomes a theme that is worked out in greater detail in Ephesians 5:22-6:9. A problem with this view is that although in verses 22ff. Paul does identify subjects, the aspect of mutual submission is absent. Furthermore, in view of the connection with verse 18 it is less a matter of mutual submission than a matter of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Mutual submission reflects the equality of all believers before God in terms of having received grace. But the equality before God does not imply that all receive an equal task. In marriage, the family and society there are relationships in which there is an aspect of submission. Being filled with the Holy Spirit has to be reflected in the way in which people function within those various relationships: (1) wives with respect to husbands (5:22-33), (2) children with respect to their parents (6:1-4), and (3) slaves with respect to their masters (6:5-9). In each example of subordination Paul describes how the person with the authority has to behave. In the first example about husband and wife, the apostle provides extra detail and makes a comparison with the relationship between Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:23 indicates why the wife has to subject herself to her husband. The man is the head of his wife just as Christ is the Head of His church. The term authority does not occur in this context, but in view of the man *being head*, there is an element of authority. This conclusion rejects the view that *being head* merely implies *source* or *origin*. The word *head* (Greek: κεφαλή) – even if it can have the sense of source or origin – carries exclusively a connotation of authority in the literature from the first few centuries after Christ that is known to us.<sup>48</sup> When Paul used it earlier in the epistle to the Ephesians (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15), he implied that Christ had authority and power over His church. In this connection it is good to recall what the apostle writes in 1 Corinthians 11. There Paul calls the man *the image and glory of God* and the woman *the glory of man* (1 Corinthians 11:7). The man is *the head of the woman* (1 Corinthians 11:3). These pronouncements are of great importance, but may not be used to suggest that women are inferior to men. Verses 11 and 12 of 1 Corinthians 11 indicate the contrary. Both men and women carry God's image and execute the mandate of creation. But in their mutual relationship there is the structure of *head* and *glory*. This order is maintained, even if both are *in Christ*.

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<sup>48</sup> See J. Piper, W. Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, Wheaton, 1991, Appendix 1: The meaning of *Kephale*, p. 425-468. Cf. H.W. House, *The Role of Women in Ministry Today*, Grand Rapids, 1995, pp. 28-33.

Returning to Ephesians 5, Paul calls the husband *the head of the wife* and to the wife he says that she has to *revere her husband* (cf. verses 23 and 33). It is noteworthy that he does not instruct the husband to subject his wife to him, but that he says to the wife that she has to submit herself to her husband. It is therefore her action and from that it may be concluded that also to Paul women are equal to men. Just as in the church people submit themselves to each other, so married women are called to submit to their own husbands. Since the submission of a wife to her husband is closely related to the man *being head*, it may be concluded that the wife has to subject herself wherever this *headship* applies, also within the family of God. This is also the train of thought of the apostle in 1 Timothy 2:11 and 12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34ff.

In verse 25 Paul speaks to the husband. He does not focus on the best way to rule his wife, but on the love which the husband owes to his wife. The apostle addresses the motivating factor that is to prevent that the husband would abuse his position. In verses 25-33 Paul further elaborates his comparison between Christ and the husband, but this time with respect to Christ being *Saviour*. As Saviour, Christ loved his church so much, that He died for her. A husband cannot save his wife, but he is admonished to imitate the implicit love of Christ. This point is further emphasized by the image of the head (the husband) and the body (the wife).

It is obvious that head and body need, love and care for each other. This implies that the role of the husband includes nourishing and treasuring his wife. The way in which Christ as Head of the church personifies love, is that He (preeminently!) is the one *who emptied Himself, took upon Himself the form of a servant and humbled Himself to death on the cross* (Philippians 2:7-8). This reality of serving love is fundamental to believers for mutual relationships within and beyond the church.

#### 6.2.2.4 1 Timothy 2

In this epistle Paul warns against false teachers (1 Timothy 1:3-11; 18-20; 4:1-10; 5:11-15; 6:3-10; 20-21). Also the instructions that Paul gives to Timothy in chapter 2, is related to the call to resist false teaching. What exactly the nature of this false teaching was can no longer be determined. There is, however, no doubt that the false teachers had a certain influence on the women of the church (1 Timothy 5:11-15; cf. also 2 Timothy 3:6-7).

Whether Paul prohibits women from teaching, because they have allowed themselves to be persuaded to spread false teaching in the church, cannot be inferred from this passage. The false teachers whom Paul mentions by name in the Pastoral Epistles, are all men (1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 2:17-18; 4:14). Even if women have participated in the spreading of false teaching, Paul only forbids (all) women to teach, instead of forbidding everyone (men and women) from spreading false doctrine. Paul's prohibition to women to teach is therefore not given out of reaction to their possible involvement in the spreading of false doctrine.

#### 1 Timothy 2: 1-7

In these verses Paul admonishes Timothy to make intercession for all people, including kings and other people in important positions in society. This passage is possibly placed against the background of part of the false teaching that Paul opposes in this epistle. Whatever the background of these admonishments was, it is generally accepted that prayers took place in the worship service of the church.

## 1 Timothy 2:8-15

*I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety.*

I will therefore ...

With verse 8 begins a new pericope, which nevertheless is related to the preceding one. What has been said about prayer triggers further admonishment to men. They have to pray with clean hands, and hearts (it may be added). Anger and quarreling (also translated as doubting) hinders prayer. Perhaps we should include discord that arose in the church as a result of false teaching, which had to be avoided. Aside from this possible cause of anger and quarreling, it is a general truth that prayers have no effect when hearts are filled with anger.

Noteworthy is the strong expression at the beginning of verse 8, namely *I will* (Greek: *βοῦλομαι*). It indicates that to Paul it is more than just a personal preference. In view of the emphasis with which the apostle points to his apostolic authority in verse 7, verse 8 will also have to be understood within the same context as an expression of his authority: Paul uses his apostolic authority to issue instructions regarding prayer in the worship services of the church. They are instructions to be followed by all churches, wherever they were located (verse 8: every where, Greek: *ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ*).<sup>49</sup> This makes clear that Paul's instructions have significance beyond particular persons and places.

To the women

Following the admonishment to men, Paul also has some words for the women. Since the train of thought carries on, the opening words *I will* need to be kept in mind, in the sense of: Similarly *I will* that women .... It is important to determine, whom Paul means with *women* (verse 9). Does he refer to women in general, or spouses? The Greek word used, *gunè* (Greek: *γυνή*), can mean either *woman* or *married woman* depending on the context.<sup>50</sup> Explanatory clauses, which could imply that only married women are addressed, are altogether missing in 1 Timothy 2:9ff.

There is a view that the instructions regarding the wearing of jewelry and hairdos are equally culturally oriented as the prohibition for women to teach. It would accordingly be inconsistent to consider the one and not the other of normative and permanent applicability. Paul's

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<sup>49</sup> A parallel can be found in 1 Corinthians 1:2. The church at Corinth was distinguished from all believers who called on the Name of Christ .....

<sup>50</sup> Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:2, 12; 1 Corinthians 14:35; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Galatians 4:27; Ephesians 5:22; 1 Timothy 3:2, 12; 5:9; Titus 1:6; 2:5.

prohibition against women teaching and ruling over men is indeed as culturally determined as his instructions regarding their appearance. This type of reasoning suggests that the appearance of women to the apostle was a matter of equal importance as teaching of the church. It is further incorrect to believe that Paul's remarks about the appearance of women have no message for us today. Excessive attention to appearance and clothing is always disturbing in a worship service. Women should rather dress appropriately. Thus the apostle expresses a principle that remains valid today. An important (and not isolated) aspect of Scripture is ignored if it is believed that these admonishments only held in Paul's culture and not our own. Paul summarizes the importance of the entire epistle in 1 Timothy 3:15. The apostle has instructions for men as well as women as to how to conduct themselves in the house of God, namely in a holy manner.

### Teaching and being taught

Verse 11 refers to women in general. They are to let themselves be taught with due submission. The question is where the emphasis lies: Is it a matter of women having to (and being permitted to) be taught (from God's Word, in church), or is it a matter of the way in which they are to receive that teaching (silently, with due submission)?

Verses 11 and 12 could be interpreted to mean that those women have been unable to withstand the influence of false teachers because they lack or have fallen behind in knowledge. In that case, they could be permitted to teach again (verse 12) once their lack of knowledge has been corrected (verse 11). However, this interpretation ignores what Paul really says. He does not write that he forbids women to teach until they are sufficiently qualified. Permission to teach cannot be inferred from the requirement to be taught. Paul specifically denies them this task. There is no indication whatsoever that this prohibition is given conditionally. There is support for saying that in verse 11 the emphasis lies not so much on the fact that women are permitted to be present during teaching from God's Word, but that the apostle wants to indicate how they are to behave themselves in that situation.

The words *in silence* in verse 11 (Greek: *ἐν ἥσυχία*) form a contrast with the teaching that is forbidden in verse 12. This does not indicate a repressive silence in the sense of dead silence, but the listening attitude of a student receiving instruction in contrast with the function of teaching. Being taught has to be undergone *with all subjection*. Is this meant to be submission to God, the church, sound doctrine, the social structure of those days, or those who taught the women? Once again, in light of the contrast between verses 11 and 12, it is most obvious to think of submission to men, over whom women are not permitted to rule. However, the focus is on submission associated with teaching and being taught.

There are two things that the apostle forbids women to do, namely teaching and exercising authority over men. Teaching is mentioned right at the beginning of verse 12, in contrast to learning in verse 11. While learning is permitted, teaching is not. This teaching refers to authoritative, public preaching of Christ's word and work, i.e. the official instruction in the Christian faith. This is the special role of elders in protecting sound doctrine from the influence of false teachers and thus safeguarding the apostolic tradition. For that purpose a bishop has to be qualified to teach (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; 2 Timothy 2:2). Paul first impresses upon Timothy to ensure that no other doctrine is taught (1 Timothy 1:3). Paul himself is referred to as a teacher to the gentiles (1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11; cf. Galatians 1:12).

Timothy also has to pass on this good and sound doctrine (1 Timothy 4:6, 11, 13, 16; 6:2; cf. 2 Timothy 4:2ff, Titus 1:9, 11; 2:7ff.).

This activity of teaching (Greek: *διδάσκειν*) is not permitted to be performed by women. Hereby the apostle definitely has the venue of the church in mind. The example of Priscilla together with her husband Aquila teaching Apollos was not in conflict with this prohibition (Acts 18:26), because it did not take place in the worship service. Neither was there a problem with the fact that Timothy had received instruction from his mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5) who taught him the Word of God – profitable for doctrine (*didaskalia*, 2 Timothy 3:16) – both by word and example as part of his upbringing. In that sense all believers are to teach one another (Colossians 3:16).

### Dominion and authority

Women are not permitted to rule over men. Just as they are not allowed to teach (Greek: *διδάσκειν*) in verse 12, neither are they permitted to exercise authority (Greek: *αύθεντειν* *άνδρός*). Although this latter Greek expression occurs only once in the New Testament, a thorough study of words leads to no other conclusion than that *authetein* (Greek: *αύθεντειν*) in 1 Timothy 2:12 has a connotation of authority.<sup>51</sup> The verbs *to rule*, *to dominate*, *to force*, *to influence something/somebody in a forceful manner*, *to exercise authority over someone*, present some of the nuances that can be ascertained in various contexts in which this Greek expression is found. In a negative sense it can also mean *to question or mock someone's authority*. A further linguistic comment is that the verbs *to teach* (Greek: *διδάσκειν*) and *to exercise authority* (Greek: *αύθεντειν*), when connected by the word *nor* (Greek: *οὐδέ*), must both have either a positive or a negative connotation; it is not possible for one of them to have a positive connotation and the other a negative connotation. Therefore, the verse must mean either *I do not permit women to teach false doctrine nor to dominate men* (negative formulation) or *I do not permit women to teach or to exercise authority over men* (positive formulation).

Verse 13 provides the explanation why women are prohibited to teach and to exercise authority over men. The word *for* (Greek: *γάρ*) is used to provide a reason. To the apostle the sequence of the creation of Adam and Eve is an obvious explanation of the differences in position and responsibility between men and women. Just as in 1 Corinthians 11:8ff, on the basis of Genesis 2, the apostle takes it that the creation ordinance of the man and the woman implies different positions for each. In referring back to creation, Paul refers to the order instituted by God, which is to be respected indefinitely. That women can not exercise authority in church is therefore not a consequence of sin, and does not refer back to the fall into sin. It has to do with the relative position that God assigned to men and women from the beginning as part of the good (not the fallen) creation.

### Adam and Eve

While verse 13 refers back to creation, verse 14 refers back to the fall into sin. This has led some to believe that the apostle focused here on women who are spreading false teaching,

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<sup>51</sup> H. Scott Baldwin, "A Difficult Word: *αύθεντειν* in 1 Timothy 2:12." In A.J. Köstenberger, Th.R. Schreiner and H. Scott Baldwin (editors), *Women in the Church. A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, Grand Rapids, 1995, pp. 65-80 and Appendix 2, *αύθεντειν* in Ancient Greek Literature, pp. 269-305.

by comparing them to Eve. Adam received God's command directly, and Eve indirectly. Eve sinned because she was not aware of God's command and similarly the women of Ephesus (where Timothy worked at that time) were deceived by false teachers, and in turn passed on a false doctrine. According to this view, Paul reacts to a specific situation. Once these women, who – like Eve – have been deceived by false teachers, receive the right instruction, the prohibition to teach lapses.

In the discussion of verses 11 and 12 above, it was rejected that Paul was only thinking of women who spread false teaching. Furthermore, although Genesis 3 does indicate that Eve was deceived, it does not say that she had misinformed Adam. The idea that she lacked the right knowledge would imply that Adam had informed her incorrectly or incompletely. Nothing in the situation prior to the fall into sin would support that. It is not logical to suppose that Paul encourages men to teach women, being aware that Adam incompletely or incorrectly informed Eve!

Verse 14 refers to the deception of Eve by Satan. She who had been created (second) from Adam, to be his helper, was the first to fall into sin and offered her husband the worst possible help. In Paul's writings no trace can be found of the thought that women are more easily deceived and more prone to stray than men. That could be used as an excuse. This is not the view of Genesis 3. Eve was merely addressed in terms of what she had done.

Adam was created first, and then Eve. Yet Eve was first to transgress, having been deceived by Satan. In this way she rejected the leadership of her husband and exercised authority over him. Eve acted without consultation and independently of Adam. She made no attempt to fight the work of the devil in unity with Adam and to remain true to God's commands. Instead of accepting the position assigned to her by God, she abandoned it. Through temptation she fell into sin. If this (classical) interpretation is correct, it confirms that verses 13 and 14 are not aimed at a particular occasion, but have general applicability and validity in barring women from holding teaching offices in the church. The conclusion of 1 Timothy 2 in verse 15 represents less a climax than a winding down of Paul's argument. The words *being saved* (Greek: *σωθήσεται*) – placed towards the front of the sentence – imply the all-inclusive salvation of the human being. In contrast to the woman's transgression, this points to her redemption. Although she has abandoned her place, there is restoration. She does have to resume her position within God's will. It is not to dominate her husband, but to give loving care to her (husband) and children. *Childbearing* (Greek: *τεκνογονία*) must be viewed as one example of specific roles to which women are called in distinction from men. Possibly in the background there also was the false teaching of exaggerated apocalyptic expectation which prohibited marriage (1 Timothy 4:1-5). Perhaps the women had made derogatory comments about having children. In that case Paul implicitly corrects these false teachers and explicitly points to the place for women ordained by God. They are to pursue this calling, persevering in the Christian virtues of faith, love, holiness and moderation.

## 7. Conclusions

Looking back over the course followed in this study report, it is clear that *women in office* is a complex subject. It cannot be discussed without bringing to bear fundamental Biblical, theological, ecclesiastical and confessional perspectives. In the background figures the question whether the position adopted by our federation of churches in the past – although no

official pronouncement had been made – was indeed Scripturally correct and responsible. The issues that confront our churches today and that will affect future developments deserve close attention.

As a consequence of social and ecclesiastical developments, interest in questions relating to *women in office* has increased dramatically. The position of women in society has drastically changed from the past. Against this background the question arises whether certain pronouncements in Scripture only pertain to the social and cultural circumstances of its time, or whether they have a lasting validity. The answer to this question is inseparable from a view of the authority of Scripture. The authority which God's Word has for the doctrine and life of the church touches the core of both faith and theology. Furthermore, there is the question as to what is meant by office. This implicitly raises the question with respect to the Scriptural content of the structure of offices maintained by churches that are considered to be of the Reformed persuasion. This spells out the great importance of the material discussed.

The overview of the exchange of information with churches at home and abroad indicates that the issue of *women in office* occupies many of them. It is undeniable that an inconsistent approach on the part of churches to the position of women in the church has engendered a great deal of confusion and unrest.

The Committee received the mandate to provide a Scripture-based account of the church's position with respect to women in office, within the framework of the Reformed view of Scripture. This mandate included the question whether women could serve within the current structure of offices of our denomination. It did not fall within the framework of this mandate to investigate what positions women could occupy apart from this structure of offices. However, this study report does include evidence to suggest that the scope offered by Scripture and history since the Reformation for the role of women in the church has not been fully utilized by our denomination. Further study along these lines is recommended. The Committee believes, however, that first a fundamental pronouncement is required with respect to the question whether or not women can serve in office.

### *1. Equality of the offices*

Earlier pronouncements by Synods of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken with respect to the offices of elder and deacon can be summarized in a few conclusions:

1. The equality of the offices is directly taught by Scripture; the conviction that the offices of the church are rooted in the offices of Christ implies their fundamental unity.
2. The current specific offices have developed from a single general office through a historical process. Therefore, the overall leadership of the church is the joint responsibility of elders and deacons.
3. The confession (especially *Belgic Confession of Faith*, articles 30 and 31) and canon law (*Canons of Dort*, articles 16, 23 and 25) are not unanimous with respect to the position of deacons. The cause of this may be sought in the complex relationship between church and government.
4. On the basis of the general *office* or the priesthood of all believers no conclusions can be drawn with respect to special offices. All believers share more or less in the gifts of the Spirit. Apart from certain gifts of the Holy Spirit, special offices require a special calling and certain qualifications.

5. According to pronouncements of the General Synod of Hilversum (1968-69) women are not excluded from every form of governance, and neither is the command to be silent absolute. Scripture only rejects situations in which women would exercise authority over men.<sup>52</sup>

## *II. Historical roots of the offices*

Early church history has little to say with respect to the position of women in the Church of Christ as perceived by the Reformation and adopted by our denomination.

The ecclesiastical offices as we know them today did not directly come from the New Testament. Differences reflect historical development. In summary, the following may be concluded in this regard:

- a. Listening to the New Testament, choosing a position between Roman Catholic and Anabaptist views, and struggling with relationships with governments, the Reformation developed a structure of offices in which preaching, pastorate and diaconate found a place within and for the church. In this view with respect to the offices was expressed: (1) both the structure of offices and the structure of charismata of the church, (2) the nature of the office as *service* (Greek: *διακονία*, *diakonia*), which is opposed to any form of hierarchical or sacral organization.
- b. The structure of offices as it has come down to us historically from the Reformation, has a recognizably Biblical character but is not canonical (in the sense that no changes or improvements could be allowed).
- c. The equality of the offices makes it impossible (and untenable) to consider giving women access to a single office. They should either be given access to all offices or none.
- d. Considering the historical development of offices in our own federation of churches, it appears that the arguments, on the basis of which women were excluded from serving in those offices, did not include the concept that women would not be able or would be less able than men to hold those offices because they lacked certain gifts; the reason was to do justice to God's Word, which includes the principle that women may not exercise authority over men.
- e. In the days of the New Testament and the early Christian church, women served in functions officially recognized by the church (deaconesses; those caring for widows and the needy). Although desired by Calvin and Voetius, the Reformed branch of the Reformation never reached the point of recognizing the role of deaconesses in canon law as a lasting, regulated function within the church.
- f. Against the background of the historical development of concepts from Scripture and the Reformed confessions a legitimate question is whether aside from the permanent offices there is room for permanent support services in the church. If this were to be the case, then it could be considered whether women could also serve in those permanent functions, once appointed by the churches in an appropriate manner. The nature of support service would preclude the exercise of any form of authority over men. On the other hand, the permanent nature of the support service would bring out its significance.

## *III. Hermeneutics and exegesis*

Differences in insight regarding the question, whether women can serve in ecclesiastical office or not, reflect differences in the understanding (hermeneutics) and interpretation

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<sup>52</sup> *Acta GS* (Acts of General Synod), 1968/69, 217, 220 and appendix LXXXI.



(exegesis) of Scripture. From the perspective of classical Reformed theology this report is based on the recognition of the divine nature and authority of Scripture, to which faith defers with respect and confidence.

As far as hermeneutics is concerned, despite changing historical and cultural circumstances, perspectives can be discovered according to which the Holy Spirit makes the Word of God alive in the present with full and rich significance. Three perspectives are indicated:

1. The unique nature of a Scripture passage must be seen in the broader framework of the fulfillment of the history of redemption in Christ and the progress of His kingdom.
2. There are lasting norms, values and commands in Scripture that remain in force regardless of cultural context.
3. God's faithfulness and goodness are revealed in the creation ordinances as lasting paradigms instituted by God.

The exegesis of passages of the Old and New Testaments indicates:

- a. The absolute equality of men and women as image of God since the creation of man.
- b. The particular position of men and women in their mutual relationships both inside and outside marriage.
- c. The disintegration of the relationship between men and women brought about by sin.
- d. The restoration of the relationship between husband and wife in Christ.
- e. In the equality of men and women as image of God, the husband is the head of his wife, and the wife is the glory of her husband. This cannot be reversed. In creation, redemption and restoration God has instituted an order which remains valid.
- f. The equality of men and women as believers does not imply that women are given the same tasks as men in Christ's church.
- g. The relationship between men and women, as instituted by God in creation, is not abrogated in the church, but honored and hallowed.
- h. Women cannot hold official, leadership offices in the church. This is not the consequence of patriarchic relationships mindlessly incorporated in Scripture, but reflects the relative positions of men and women embedded in creation and restoration.

#### *IV. Overall conclusion*

On the basis of our understanding and interpretation of Scripture, within the framework of the Reformed view of Scripture and the offices, it is concluded that the offices cannot be opened up to women. This point of view does not detract from the conviction that within the church women are to be considered as full members of the body of Christ. The equality of men and women does not detract from the differences between their positions based on the order instituted by God between men and women in creation and restoration.

### **8. Recommendation**

The Committee makes the following proposal to General Synod:

General Synod, considering

1. that – in part due to social developments – the issue of the position of women in the church has become urgent and that this question is being (has been) reviewed by various churches (at home and abroad) with which our denomination has maintained relations;
2. that to date our denomination has not explicitly dealt with this issue, although General Synod of 1968 implicitly addressed it in the context of the churches' right to vote;
3. that in the past (1956) our denomination concluded, on the basis of the Reformed view of the offices, that the existing offices were equivalent;
4. that the Reformed view of the offices implies not only that the offices proceed from the gifts bestowed by the Lord on members of the church, but also that a separate calling is required to serve in office;
5. that the classical Reformed view of the offices has not recognized female office bearers;
6. that the way in which some churches have dealt with the issue of the position of women in the church, demonstrates that an inconsistent and unclear approach leads to tensions and confusion within the denomination;

is of the view

1. that our churches would benefit from an unequivocal reply to the question whether the offices may be opened up to sisters of the church;
2. that the reply to this question is closely related to the question as to how the ecclesiastical office must be understood;
3. that this answer is equally closely connected with our view of the authority of Holy Scripture;
4. that according to the Reformed view of the offices the ecclesiastical office is in part characterized as having authority;
5. that on the basis of the equivalence of the offices it is not possible to open up only one of the offices and not the others to sisters of the church;
6. that Scripture teaches that men and women have been created completely equal to each other;
7. that Scripture teaches also that men and women have each received a unique position, which as a lasting creation ordinance, redemption and restoration may not be abrogated, but must be honored;
8. that Scripture teaches norms, values and commands which remain in force regardless of cultural context and that what is said about the position of women in the church belongs to this category;
9. that on the basis of the entirety of Holy Scripture no other conclusion can be drawn than that in the Church of Christ women cannot hold office;

declares:

that within the framework of the Reformed view of Scripture and the offices it is impossible to open the offices to sisters of the church.

On behalf of the Committee,  
Ds. P. den Butter, chairman  
Drs. J.W. van Pelt, secretary

## MINORITY REPORT

Starting with section 5.1 of the Majority Report, Committee members Drs. G.L. Born, Ds. J. Groenleer and Drs. R.W.J. Soeters are of a different opinion. Their views are reported below.

### 5.1 Authority of Scripture

*In 2 Peter 1:19-21 we read: We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.* And in 2 Timothy 3:16 the apostle Paul wrote: *All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.* The Scriptures are more than human words. It is the sure conviction of the Reformed confession, that the Scriptures are the Word of God and that they therefore have authority of their own. The Scriptures themselves also witness to that effect.

However, in the passages referred to, there is reference to both *men of God speaking* (or: men speaking of God) and *moved by the Holy Ghost and given by inspiration of God*. In interpreting these words, much attention has been paid to the relative contributions of the human and divine aspects in the emergence of the Scriptures. A further question is what it means that the Scriptures have emerged over time and have historical dimensions.

In this context, Reformed theology follows an approach of its own. On the one hand it rejects any treatment of the Scriptures that minimizes or denies their nature as the Word of God. In the latter case, the Scriptures are viewed as documentation anchored in history and therefore a human product. Or they are viewed as a collection of Christian truths about God, i.e. aspects of God and redemption thought up by people and cast in human language, i.e. the classical version of the Christian concept of God.

On the other hand Reformed theology also rejects fundamentalist and Biblicist views of Scripture, in which little or no attention is paid to historical-cultural settings and historical relationships. Passages are then quoted and applied as *Word of God* without any reference to time. In this way the human aspect of the genesis of Scripture is completely ignored, infallibility is reduced to inerrancy and historical reliability is narrowed to a demand for historical precision.

Reformed theology feels compelled to pursue a third option. It is an approach in which loyal adherence to the authority of Scripture is coupled with an understanding of the way in which the Scriptures exercise their authority, i.e. a recognition of the nature and scope of Scriptural authority. In other words, the confession of the reality of the authority of the Scriptures cannot be emphasized without describing the process of this authority. With his doctrine of organic inspiration H. Bavinck called attention to the theory that God did not dictate word by word, but that the Spirit caused people (Bible authors and editors) to write down the Word of God. This theory does justice to the very special character of the Scriptures. On the one hand there is regard for differences among Bible authors, while on the other hand the unity of the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God is maintained.

## 5.2 Cultural context and current significance

*It is the special character of Holy Scripture that it is embedded in time and seeks to be understood with reference to its historical context. This is the way that the Spirit has chosen for the genesis of Scripture; God did not reveal Himself in a timeless manner, but by entering into history.*<sup>53</sup> The foregoing statement implies at least two things. In the first place, it means that the time dimension of the Scriptures is not their *fate*. That would imply that it cannot be helped that this is the way it is because the Scriptures would be subject to the same fate as every other (human) document. No, on the contrary, the time dimension referred to is not a fate, but the sovereign choice of God to reveal Himself. This was the approach chosen by God. God wished to come to us human beings precisely in this way. In the second place, this time dimension means that the genesis of the Word of God represents an entry into historical, human reality with all of the associated ramifications. The Scriptures have historical contours and it is important to keep these in focus. The implication of this *dependence on time* is two-fold, namely the will of God to reveal Himself in the Scriptures in complete dependence on people in their historical situation and (the implied) close relationship between the Scriptures and people in their historical situation. The connection with the human element is made in theopneusty, in which the Word of God takes on human form.

It is obvious that this intimate involvement of people in the genesis of the Scriptures the Word of God can easily lead to misunderstanding. In the first place there is the misunderstanding of limitation, as though the Word of God in some sense were dependent on its human element. In the second place there is the concept of synergy, namely the idea that God and man have both contributed to the genesis of the Scriptures. Thus the Scriptures would be partly divine and partly human in nature. In the third place there is the idea that the Scriptures are wrapped up in time, so that a distinction is made between their essential content and their form embedded in time. The danger of suppressing the nature of revelation of the Scriptures is apparent here. A degree of arbitrariness in the process of discernment is also difficult to avoid. After all, such objections are usually associated with the so-called accommodation theory, i.e., that in the Scriptures God adapts Himself to human measures and norms.

Even this brief classification indicates, that every systematic interpretation which seeks to force a sharp distinction between the human and divine aspects of the Scriptures, easily deteriorates into arbitrariness and or suppression (diminution) of the divine aspect. Furthermore, as we saw earlier, viewing the Scriptures as exclusively divine or (vice versa) as exclusively human does not do justice to the way in which God desired to reveal Himself.

Nevertheless, the significance of what, since Bavinck, has been called *organic inspiration* remains. In the genesis of the Scriptures, it has pleased God to employ human beings. This employment was more than just mechanical. It is recognizable and identifiable everywhere in the Scriptures. People were involved with their entire personalities in the documentation of Gods Word (including their historical and cultural context).

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<sup>53</sup> H.G.L. Peels, "Het Woord is leven – over the Heilige Schrift" (the Word is life – regarding Holy Scripture), in G. van den Brink, M. van Campen and J. van der Graaf (ed.), *Geground Geloof. Kernpunten uit de geloofsleer* (well-founded faith; key elements of the doctrine of faith). In *Bijbels, historisch en belijdend perspectief* (Biblical, historical and confessional perspective). Zoetermeer, 1996, p. 83.

In view of the discrepancy between our own cultural situation and that of the Bible authors, but also in view of the sometimes great variation in time and circumstances among the books of the Bible, it is a good idea to consider the connection between *then* and *now*. How does the Word for people of that time and that place come alive to people of today? What is the constant element? Can we maintain the relevance of the Scriptures only through certain fixations (e.g. creation ordinances) or – vice versa – denials (e.g. the influence of Rabbinical theology on Paul; the impact of the patriarchal environment that was naturally reflected in the men who provided leadership in the Old and New Testaments)? We do not believe so. The relevance of the Scriptures is more reflected in the great continuum of the Scriptures, namely that which connects the creation, redemption and completion, i.e. the faithfulness of God. This faithfulness is apparent in God's acts in history, namely in His covenantal faithfulness to Israel and in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. By recalling these deeds, i.e. by looking back to God's actions in history, in Israel and in Jesus Christ, we become aware of the deeds of God in the midst of our world of sin and death. When we place ourselves in the field of influence of Word and Spirit, a longing wells up for what is new, for what can only come from God. Embedment in time means, that in our own situation we also find ourselves in the tension between the past of the cross and the resurrection, and the future of the Kingdom – in a history, which was torn open by the Word and which focused on God's coming Kingdom.

There are additional reasons why the embedment of the Scriptures in time and culture need not surprise us. There is undoubtedly a connection between the genesis of the Word of God and the whole of the redemptive work of God, although the genesis of the Scriptures is not entirely identical to the incarnation of the Word. The apostle John characterized that redemptive work very meaningfully with the words: *The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us ...*<sup>54</sup> The *form of a servant* was recognized in the text of the Scriptures. The apostle Paul said of Christ: *Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death even the death of the cross.*<sup>55</sup> We similarly know the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures only in *the form of a servant*, not in the contours of a supernatural miracle, but in the *human* form of words and Scriptures. Yet there can be no doubt that the *Belgic Confession of Faith* emphatically confessed *this Word of God* (article 3), *all these books* (article 5) and *those Holy Scriptures* (article 7) to be *holy* and *canonical* (article 4), that they *fully contain the will of God* and that *whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein* (article 7).

The quotations from the confession given above touch a very fundamental aspect of thinking about the interpretation of the Scriptures and the nature of Scriptural authority, namely its relationship with the content of the Scriptures. Thinking about the authority of the Scriptures can only proceed on the basis of their content. The Scriptures do not constitute a number of unrelated quotations and passages. The Scriptures form a totality. However diverse, they represent the coherent announcement of the redemptive work of God, concentrated on God acting together with and through Israel and the Lord Jesus Christ. It is this perspective that must be kept in mind in all discussions of the nature of Scriptural authority.

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<sup>54</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>55</sup> Philippians 2:6-8.

The Bible authors themselves gave us direction in this regard. They provided us with a particular perspective, a vista to read and understand the Scriptures. The apostle Paul wrote: *For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*<sup>56</sup> Already in his prologue, the apostle John left no doubt about his focus. He said: *The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.*<sup>57</sup> And Luke said that the Saviour Himself clearly explained to the disciples of Emmaus what the Scriptures meant: *And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.*<sup>58</sup> Already these few examples indicate that the Scriptures display connectivity and concentration. The Scriptures preach the redemptive work of God, concentrated in the one act with and through Israel, and in the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who lose track of that will misunderstand the Scriptures. There is definitely something like a *summary of religion* (Calvin). There is a core and a periphery. Confusion between the two leads to misunderstanding and falsehood. A focus on the core of Scripture does not imply a diminution of its message. It rather indicates the centre of gravity of the message of the Bible. Things are grouped together in a specific way, namely related to the Lord Jesus Christ and redemption in Him. He is the way, the truth and the life.<sup>59</sup> His cross and resurrection are the foundation of reality. Indeed, they are the new reality.<sup>60</sup>

That is how the Scriptures bring their own message! Those who wish to interpret the Scriptures must enter the field of influence of the Scriptures. Within this field of influence one cannot take a position of onlooker or outsider. Before we engage the Scriptures in conversation, the Scriptures engage us in conversation – even in a critical manner. Luther referred to this when he said that the Word of God comes to us like an opponent. And Paul wrote: *For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.*<sup>61</sup> Before we can interpret passages, the passages interpret us.

That says something about what has the highest authority. Hermeneutics does not have priority, but the Scriptures themselves as instrument of the Holy Spirit do. Hermeneutics remains dependent on the Spirit. Only within the work of that Spirit does it have its place in interpretation and analysis of the Scriptures. It only has a serving role. It is completely dependent on the Holy Spirit. It is not without significance that the prayer for the presence of the Holy Spirit figures so prominently in worship services. We ask for the Spirit who leads in all truth. We do so before the Scriptures are opened. That is not a liturgical formality, but an expression of dependence. In the understanding of the Scriptures we are utterly dependent on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the objective of hermeneutics (in service to the Word and the church) cannot be to develop a system – a sort of explanatory canon that we only need to apply to interpret the Scriptures. If it is the case that the Scriptures speak for themselves, then like the poet of

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<sup>56</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:2.

<sup>57</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>58</sup> Luke 24:27.

<sup>59</sup> John 14:6.

<sup>60</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:16-17.

<sup>61</sup> Hebrews 4:12-13.

Psalm 119 we need merely ask: *Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law. I am a stranger in the earth: hide not thy commandments from me.*<sup>62</sup>

Hermeneutics and exegesis offer no specific recipe, and do not handle the key that fits all doors of Bible interpretation.

In interpreting the Scriptures, which are embedded in both time and culture, we need only choose a position within them. We do so, while keeping in mind the following perspectives:

1. that the Scriptures are God's Word;
2. that we completely depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit;
3. that the Scriptures explain themselves;
4. that the Scriptures have a core and a periphery;
5. that the message of the Scriptures is embedded in time;
6. that the Scriptures demand an interpretation based on the history of redemption;
7. that we need to deal with various literary styles in the Scriptures.

In hermeneutics these perspectives are related with each other. Thus we look for the meaning of passages. We also give an account of the approach taken and the choices made. That is the only sensible approach for us human beings. It is also a necessary approach, because the Scriptures plead to be interpreted and we are accountable for our interpretation. People remain human – also in the interpretation of the Scriptures. Hermeneutics is a human occupation. We cannot do without praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Only in this way – namely by reading the Scriptures in their own context and thus accepting them in their condemning and liberating power – can the Scriptures be understood in our own time and situation.

## **6. Exegesis**

### 6.1 Old Testament

The story of creation is told in the first chapter of the Bible. It tells us one of the most fundamental things about man, namely that he is the bearer of the image of God. In Genesis 1:26-27 we read: *And 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 fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.* No matter how much is said about *in our image, after our likeness*, at least that much is clear that the most essential part of the image of God implies having dominion over creation on behalf of God at his command. Man is the representative, the mandatary of God. People are office bearers, i.e. created and called by God to rule appropriately over creation in His service. In ruling over created reality the human being resembles God, just as a child resembles its father.

Man being the image of God, is not mentioned here as a property of mankind in general, as a sort of collective (i.e. the human species). On the contrary, being the image of God is first and foremost true of each individual. People, as they reveal themselves to us in history, are

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<sup>62</sup> Psalm 119:18-19.

bearers of God's image. That was undoubtedly the intention of the transition from the singular to the plural in verses 26 and 27: *God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.* There was no distinction, also not (not even?) between men and women. Both shared in equal measure in being image-bearer of God. Both were mandataries, office bearers on God's behalf and at his command, as far as dominion over created reality was concerned.

That men and women were both image bearers of God was not little underscored by the Hebrew words employed here: *zakar* (man) and *n qeba* (woman). Both words emphasized the sexual aspect of man. We would therefore prefer the translation: *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.* (Translator's note: The Dutch translation has: man and woman created he them.) That translation brings out more sharply, that the distinction in terms of sex did not offer scope for discrimination on the basis of sex, not from a religious point of view either. Man and woman, the one no more or less than the other, the other not over or under the one, were equally the image of God. Together they were viceroy and child of God, called to fulfill, rule and guard God's creation. That defined the position of man, both male and female, in creation. It was a position under the sovereignty of God. Man was completely dependent on God. At the same time it was said of this relatively insignificant human being, that he was made nearly divine, that he was *crowned with glory and honor*, and that he rules over creation. He was the viceroy of creation, the image of God.<sup>63</sup> God placed man in the garden to till and to keep it.<sup>64</sup>

It might be said that in Genesis 2 the camera focused sharply on this man-in-the-garden. A great deal has been said about the relationship between the first two chapters of Genesis. At times it was believed that there were two distinct stories of creation. In that connection, several differences between the chapters were pointed out. At times it was believed that each pericope had its own significance. To us it does not appear correct to think of Genesis 2 as a second story of creation following upon Genesis 1, or separate from it. It is better to say that in the first few chapters of Genesis the basic relationships of the created reality were sketched from two different perspectives. In the one case the focus was on the entire creation, with man viewed as the top of the pyramid of creation (Genesis 1). In the other case the focus fell within the framework of created reality, with man viewed as the centre of the circle of creation (Genesis 2). The focus of this study report is particularly on man in relation to the other (fellow) human being, i.e. man and woman.

The latter situation is pictured in verses 18 to 25. The focus of this passage is undoubtedly the marriage relationship between husband and wife. When the Bible author says of the woman that God brought her to the man (verse 22), that is different from the preceding perspective. Was it also not said of the animals that God brought them to the man (verse 19)? Then it said that it was to see what he would call them (verse 19). Those same words then sounded differently. It has been pointed out in this connection, that here God Himself brought the bride to her husband. Verse 24, here inserted by the Bible author, underscored this: *Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.* The focus here was not so much on how the woman was created, but especially on the strong and mutual bond of equality between husband and wife. Just as we are not to imagine that God literally formed man as a doll of clay into which He

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Psalm 8:3-8.

<sup>64</sup> Genesis 2:8 and 15.



breathed the breath of life (Genesis 2:7) – neither should we imagine that God literally formed the woman out of a rib of the man (Genesis 2:22). The story here was told in a human way. The first thing was that man was part of created reality and was connected to it with every fiber of his being.<sup>65</sup> Man was an earthling who received life's breath, i.e. life itself from God.

Subsequently it is said of the woman that she was of the same genus as the man, related to him as fellow human being. The woman was given to man as fellow human being, helper and partner.<sup>66</sup> It is noteworthy, that the word that is used here in Hebrew for *help* (verse 20) is the masculine word *ézer* (helper). That is the more remarkable if we consider that the female form of that word was well-known in Hebrew and not at all uncommon. Consequently, this word does not have a second-rate connotation. The LORD was also frequently called Israel's help in the Old Testament. Husband and wife were to help each other and were equal in terms of ability. The Hebrew word *kenègdo*, that is translated as *meet for him* (i.e. who suits him, verse 18) emphasizes that. It means as much as *over against him*. That is the translation that we prefer.

This is how creation was completed. The earth was ready. Man and his fellow human being were there as mandataries of God. Husband and wife lived together as equal human beings in God's presence. History could begin. The vulnerability (nakedness) of husband and wife to each other was not perceived as shame or threat. That was not surprising, for where love is perfect, there is no fear (1 John 4:17-18). Equality and harmony did not collapse until the man and the woman became unfaithful to God and each other.

In Genesis 3 we are told how sin perverted the good order of God's creation. Things virtually turned into their opposites. The relationship with God was disturbed, as the man became afraid of God and hid himself (3:10). Instead of having dominion over the earth, man acquired his food with pain and trouble (3:17), mostly thorns and thistles were harvested (3:18) and finally the earth was going to be a grave for man to return to (3:19), in the sense of dust returning to dust and ashes returning to ashes. The (mutual) relationship of partnership in which the man and the woman stood, turned into a relationship mostly marked by lust and domination (3:16). Bearing children involved risk, coupled with pain and difficulty (3:16).

It is good to note that we are not dealing here with an institution of God, but with a description of the consequences of sin. Genesis 3 reveals no norm but a consequence. Neither the thorns and thistles nor the domination of man over woman could be viewed as a state desired by God. Dominion of man over animals was a mandate from God, but the domination of men over women was the consequence of sin.

In this way, the first few chapters of the Bible picture the contours of our history:

(a) God's purpose for us human beings and His mandate to us to manage created reality as good stewards in His service, in which men and women as bearers of God's image stood as good partners beside and across from each other, and (b) the deterioration and dislocation brought about by sin. All relationships were disturbed: the relationship with God, the relationship with creation and the relationship between husband and wife. God, however,

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<sup>65</sup> It was undoubtedly the intention of the Bible author that we were to recognize the similarity in sound between the words *adam* (man) and *adama* (the earth).

<sup>66</sup> One only needs to pay attention to the words *bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman (isjah), because she was taken out of Man (isj, verse 23)*, which express both relationship and equality.

remained faithful. He sought man: Where art thou? (3:9). In his faithfulness, the LORD sought ways of reconciliation and maintained His responsibility for us human beings.

Considering the position of women in the Old Testament, the following two perspectives remain visible: the deterioration due to sin and – also – the faithfulness of God. The position of women in the entire eastern, Semitic world has been subordinate from both a social and a judicial point of view. Israel did not constitute an exception to this. And it was especially the marriage relationship in which the judicial inequality came to the fore. The husband was the *baal*, the lord, of his wife. In a sense the wife was in the power of her husband, and was subject to him, as *pater familias*. Although one can say without doubt that the Old Testament had a strong preference for monogamy, polygamy persisted. Divorce was far easier for men than for women to obtain. Although a woman might enjoy great respect as mother, a childless woman was subject to mockery and scorn. In short, a considerable number of Jewish documents give proof of a certain amount of contempt for the position of women. And although it must be admitted that the actual situation of many married women was better than would have been expected on the basis of current law, women trailed far behind men in a formal judicial sense. Israel was part of the ancient eastern culture, also as far as the patriarchal structure of society was concerned.

From a religious point of view the position of women in the Old Testament was more favorable. Women had access to the holy places (Miriam, Hannah); like the men they were permitted to listen to the public reading of the law (Deuteronomy 31:12; Nehemiah 8:3); they said prayers and made vows (Hannah); they prophesied (Deborah, Huldah); appearances of God occurred also to them (Hagar, Sarah). Women in Israel frequently enjoyed respect and esteem (Miriam, Jael, Esther, Ruth). In prophecy the relationship between husband and wife was not infrequently employed as image of the way in which God treated His people (cf. Hosea). The prophecy of Joel said that God would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh young and old, master and servant, male and female (Joel 2:28ff.). This respect for women in the religion of Israel was no coincidence. It was related to the purpose of God's creation that both the man and the woman, created after His image and in His likeness, would be office bearers of God, equal to each other and equally accountable to God for their actions.

Nevertheless, it appears that judicial and social discrimination against women increasingly affected their religious position. In the redemption of vows they were valued considerably less than their male counterparts in the faith (Leviticus 27); in cultic ceremonies they were discriminated against (Leviticus 6:22; 7:6); in the enumeration of the Levites only the male members of the tribe were counted (Number 3:40); and the presence of women was ignored in the establishment of a quorum (ten men) to authorize a synagogue service to proceed.

Solomon provided his Egyptian wife with a home of her own, because he felt that a woman should not approach the holy location of the ark (2 Chronicles 8:11). Although this verse is not entirely clear, the focus here was probably more on women per se rather than the fact that she was an Egyptian (gentile) woman. In Hebrew it does not say *my wife* (as in the Authorized Version), but *(for) me a woman shall not dwell in the house of David*. That reflected a cultic perspective. Was not a woman more frequently cultically impure than men? For that reason there was in the temple of Herod a special court for women. Women were confined to a small corner of the cultic life of Israel. And the sad culmination of this discrimination was the prayer in the Talmud that said: *God be praised, because He did not*

*make me a gentile, because He did not make me a woman, because He did not make me a slave.*

## 6.2 New Testament

Although we do not find anywhere in the New Testament a general pronouncement of Jesus concerning the position of women, it is sufficiently clear, that the way in which the Saviour treated women and interacted with them, anticipated the subsequent, famous statement of the apostle Paul: *For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.*<sup>67</sup> The Saviour approached women in a very open (and sometimes also unusual) way: the Samaritan woman, the sinner, Martha and Mary, the Canaanite woman, and Mary Magdalena. The close circle of disciples included many women. Actually that should not surprise us. The entire conduct of the Lord Jesus Christ revealed that in Him the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Creator of heaven and earth addressed both man and the world in a new and decisive manner. His reply to the anxious question of John the Baptist: *Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?* brings that out: *Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.*<sup>68</sup> In and through the Lord Jesus Christ the (re)creative and reconciling power of the God of Israel was revealed. It is no surprise, that in the midst of all degradation and subordination, women also regained the position and mandate given to them in creation, namely that they as (fellow) bearers of the image of God retook their place in reality. To say it in the words of Paul: *Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*<sup>69</sup>

In the passage from Galatians quoted above, the apostle Paul wrote about this new development that came with Christ, and its significance for the life of the church. These words may indeed be viewed as one of the *loci classici* of Paul's writings when it comes to the erasure of boundaries that separate people: Jews and gentiles, slaves and freemen, men and women.<sup>70</sup>

In these words, Paul expressed one of the most characteristic features of the structure of the church. In that structure there was no place for identifying people with a lesser share in God's redemption. The word *one* implied the obliteration of all rankings. Distinctions evaporated. *That was different under the old dispensation. Then there was a wall of separation between Jews and Greeks, and no less between slaves and freemen, and between men and women. For Greeks as such there was no place within the people of God. A Greek first had to convert to Judaism, and then as proselyte still only occupied a subordinate position. This was not only true in the social sense, but also from a religious perspective. Even where God's redemption applied to everyone, the position of one person in the service of God was*

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<sup>67</sup> Galatians 3:26-28.

<sup>68</sup> Matthew 11:3-5.

<sup>69</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17.

<sup>70</sup> Other, strongly related words from the epistles of Paul are 1 Corinthians 12:13 (*For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit*) and Colossians 3:11 (*Where – i.e. in the new human being – there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all*).

*subordinate to that of another. All of this changed in the new dispensation. Everyone, Jew or gentile, slave or freeman, man or woman could now within the church be at the same level in the service of God. Are not all one in Christ within the church?*<sup>71</sup> This unity in Christ needs to be experienced and practiced in the church. 1 Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:26-28 and Colossians 3:11 do not only discuss the personal relationship with God, but equally the well-functioning of the church. The salvation that has come in and through Christ gives the church its unique structure and creates other, new relationships.

Those new relationships became noticeable in all churches of the New Testament. Women were the first to hear the news of the resurrection, to greet the resurrected Saviour and to pass on the news of the resurrection. There were also many women among the first people to be converted, e.g. Damaris in Athens (Acts 17:39) and Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:14). Women had an important position in the life of the church and did a great deal of work for the Kingdom of God. The married couple Aquila and Prisca (Priscilla) may be mentioned first. They were named together as often as six times. Four times Prisca (Priscilla) was mentioned first (see Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Romans 16:3; II Timothy 4:19, 1Corinthians 16:19). Paul referred to them as *fellow laborers in Christ, who have for my life laid down their necks* (Romans 16:4). Other fellow workers were also referred to, e.g. Phebe, the deaconess of Cenchrea (Romans 16:1). Further can be mentioned Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis (Romans 16:6, 12). Paul mentioned still other women by name and with honor, and they were counted by him among his fellow laborers (Philippians 4:2). All of this proves that in the churches of Jesus Christ there was appreciation for the (new) place and position of women. Paul's characterization of the new reality in Christ in Galatians 3:28 – that it was no longer a matter of Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female, but a matter of all being one in Christ – became visible in the practice of the life of the church. The context in which the word *one* was used here, points out explicitly, that it had to do with the way in which people were authorized to function in the church. It is therefore inappropriate to separate people's personal relationship with God from the way in which they function in the church. The unity in Christ does not only refer to salvation-in-the-narrower-sense (participating in the grace of Christ), but also to salvation-in-the-broader-sense (its application in the structure of the church). The one implies the other.

J. Hovius distinguished between the personal relationship of Christians to God on the one hand and their role in the church on the other hand. He called the former the essential perspective of belonging to the Church of Christ and the latter the accidental perspective.<sup>72</sup> *The essential dimension constitutes being God's child, i.e. sharing in the treasures and gifts of Christ, sharing in His redemption and one day being forever with the Lord in His Father's house. In this essential dimension of membership in Christ's church men and women are equal. Without sharing in this essential dimension, one cannot be saved, but one can indeed be saved without sharing in the accidental dimension. The accidental aspect has to do with the organizational life of the church and the offices instituted by God. In the accidental aspect men and women do not have equal rights. Women must submit to the (dominating) leadership of men.*

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<sup>71</sup> J.P. Versteeg, *Kijk of de kerk. De structuur van de gemeente volgens het Nieuwe Testament* (view of the church; the structure of the church according to the New Testament), Kampen, 1985, pp. 11-12.

<sup>72</sup> J. Hovius, *De positie van de vrouw in Christus' kerk* (the position of women in Christ's church), pp. 12ff.

A number of objections can be raised to Hovius' distinction between essential and accidental perspectives. In the first place, this distinction is not Scriptural. It is philosophical rather than Scriptural. In the second place, it has nothing to do with ecclesiastical office, but is based on a view with respect to the marriage relationship between husband and wife. The position of women in the Church of Christ was inferred from their position in marriage. Assumed to be subordinate to their husbands in marriage, they were also considered to be unequal to men as far as ecclesiastical office was concerned. *In the accidental aspect men and women do not have equal rights. Women must submit to the ruling leadership of men. This implies that our churches can never admit women to the special offices of minister, elder and deacon.*<sup>73</sup>

H.G.L. Peels made a similar distinction, employing the terms primary and secondary. His position could be summarized as follows: There is a primary perspective of the absolute equality of both men and women as creatures before God (Genesis 1), and there is a secondary perspective of the mutual relationship between husband and wife and their unique positions (Genesis 2). These two perspectives do not detract from each other, but a certain alignment (not order of rank) can be recognized. The secondary perspective is evident especially in the New Testament, and particularly in the epistles of Paul, in terms of head and helper. Although a good part of Paul's writings may specifically reflect his own time and situation, it is the case that: *In this way God has embedded a specific order in creation, redemption and restoration, which remains in effect. This provides the foundation for the normative pronouncements of the apostles. Whatever the situation in our church may be, we continually need to take into account this fundamental information from Scripture regarding the identity of men and women and their mutual relationships. That has implications, also for the issue of women in office.*<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, two perspectives are presented in Scripture, namely a perspective of equality between men and women, and a perspective of inequality, inferiority and subordination. However, in our view, these two perspectives do not belong together as essential and accidental, primary and secondary, and as both emerging from the same act of creation of God (according to Peels). Those perspectives have different origins and are opposed to each other. The one perspective originates in the good creation of God, who created both man and woman in His image and likeness, perfectly equal in the single context of the mandate of creation (Genesis 1 and 2). The other perspective emanated from sin and degradation, in which the man degenerated into the master of the woman within marriage, law and society, and the woman was pushed into a dependent, secondary position in society and (in some cases) religion, implying fewer rights.

Unfortunately, in the turbulence of culture and history, the latter perspective has only too often detracted from the first. As a result of the confusion and intransigence of our sinful and broken reality, the approach of the Word of God in history can therefore be characterized as a *via crucis*. The Scriptures bear witness to that way of the cross. On the one hand they preach the new creation in Christ, in Whom God loves this world and reconciles it with Him. At the same time this world remains a sinful world whose social order is not impaired and eliminated. The Word of God witnesses in the midst of that tension. It renews people and

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<sup>73</sup> J. Hovius, *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>74</sup> Professor Dr. H.G.L. Peels, *Man en vrouw, beeld van God?* Inleiding gehouden op de bijeenkomst van de Landelijke Werkgroep Kerk en Vrouw in april 1996 (man and woman, image of God? speech given at the meeting of the national work group on church and women). See especially chapters 2, 9 and 10.

clears roads. That becomes reality, however, only by way of the cross. That tension can be recognized in the Scriptures.

### 6.3 The position of women in church and the worship service

#### 6.3.1 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

This Bible passage deals with the order of the worship service, namely the way in which women were to pray and prophesy. The leadership of women in terms of prayer and prophecy in the worship service per se is not the focus, but only the way in which this is done. The main issue is the headdress or hairdo of women. The way in which the headdress of women is prepared needs to reflect moderation. Extravagance has no place in the worship service. The way in which a person presents herself (himself) in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is not without significance. Everything that takes place in a worship service needs to reflect simplicity, moderation and humility.

*(Verse 2) Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you. (3) But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. (4) Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered dishonoreth his head. (5) But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head; for that is even all one as if she were shaven. (6) For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn; but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. (7) For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. (8) For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. (9) Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. (10) For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels. (11) Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. (12) For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God. (13) Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray into God uncovered? (14) Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? (15) But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given her for a covering. (16) But if any man may seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.*

(a) Following a (somewhat ironic?) introductory verse (*I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you*), in verse 3 Paul raises an issue, which he has not raised before (*I would have you know*). This is followed by a triad among God, Christ, man and woman: *the head of every man is Christ; the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God*. The Greek word *kephalè* (head, a translation of the Hebrew word *rosj*) means especially origin: God is the origin of Christ, Christ is the origin of man, and man is the origin of the woman. It is clear that the focus here is not on subordination, although the word head could have that connotation.<sup>75</sup> Here, however, the emphasis is more on origin than on authority.

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. Ephesians 1:22 (*And has put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church ...*) and Colossians 2:10 (*... And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power*).

(b) This concept of origin provides the apostle Paul with the key argument that in prayer and prophecy in church men and women need to present themselves differently. *Kephalè* as origin emphasizes both relationship and distinction. That relationship is expressed in the words image (*eikoon*) and glory (*doxa*). The origin is both recognizable and visible, just as God's glory is visible in the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:14), and just as in man both glory and the image of God are visible (Genesis 1:26-27, Psalm 8:6), so is the glory of the man recognizable in the woman (*bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh, Woman*, Genesis 2:23). At the same time *kephalè* puts the focus on distinction. It is probably not a coincidence that the word *homoiosis* (likeness) employed in Genesis is missing here. Paul wishes to emphasize the distinction between men and women. That is emphasized in verses 4 through 6. It is very important to Paul that in church men and women are and remain recognizable in their masculinity and femininity. We could say that Paul focuses especially on creature distinctions, without denying the new eschatological reality that has come with and in Christ.

(c) The reference to Genesis 2 confirms this (*For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man*). The point here is that the woman (*isja*) was created by God out of the man (*isj*). Therefore in her role in church she can not deny her femininity. Neither is the man to deny his masculinity. The man and the woman depend on each other. They need each other. The man can not manage without the woman and she is there for him. The sentence, *for this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels*, is very difficult to fathom. Any explanation – and there are many around – remains speculative.<sup>76</sup>

(d) In verses 11 and 12 Paul puts the preceding remarks in Christological perspective. Despite all creature distinctions the man and the woman belong together and depend on each other. Although the words *en kurio* (in the Lord) do not detract from the creature differences between the man and the woman, they do indicate that in the Lord they are perfectly equal. Protology and eschatology are not in conflict with each other, but belong together. Men and women are both members of the body of Christ. They celebrate the liturgy together. They work with and for each other. Galatians 3:28 and 1 Corinthians 11 do not exclude each other. On the contrary, in Christ the man and the woman belong together and depend on each other.

(e) At the end of the pericope Paul simply refers back to the current norms of decency, to whatever seemed natural. *Shorn or shaven* hair is a shame for women (verses 5, 6, 14 and 15). It is noteworthy, that elements borrowed from creation, Christology, going morals and nature are all mixed together. That is especially noteworthy, because in verse 16 Paul closed his argument rather abruptly with an appeal to morals (*prepon*) and nature (*phusis*), and points out that it is advisable for the Corinthians to follow suit. The fact that also in the New Testament Christian and secular elements are employed side by side shows that in everyday life not everything needs to be given a Christian tint to be ethically acceptable.

In summary, also in this pericope the focus is on good order in the worship service. In this connection a number of things stand out. In the first place, Paul does not question that women lead in prayer and prophecy in worship services. Furthermore, he places a good deal

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<sup>76</sup> E. Kähler, *Die Frau in den paulinischen Briefen. Unter besondere Berücksichtigung des Begriffes der Unterordnung* (women in the epistles of Paul; under special consideration of the concept of submission), Zürich, 1960, p. 59, gives a good overview of the very different and sometimes very speculative interpretation of this verse.

of emphasis on decency, namely that the way in which women participate in prayer and prophecy has to do justice to their femininity. In the third place, for that reason Paul refers to the tradition of creation, the existing morals and nature. Finally, both the participation of women in prayer and prophecy in the worship service and the way in which that is done, are influenced by being *in the Lord* (verse 11) and everything comes from God (verse 12).

### 6.3.2 1 Corinthians 14

Chapter 14 of the first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians deals with the conduct of church services. Putting it more precisely, it focuses on how best to employ the gifts of the Holy Spirit in worship services. The term *edification* plays a major role throughout the chapter (verses 2, 3, 4, 12, 17, 26). The main purpose of all gifts provided by God as well as the worship services is the edification of the church (Ephesians 4:12).<sup>77</sup> The gifts of the Holy Spirit rarely benefit exclusively the person who receives them, but mostly the church as a whole (1 Corinthians 12:7).<sup>78</sup> And because of this purpose to advance the church, it is explained in the first part of chapter 14 (verses 1-15), that the gift of speaking in tongues needs to take second seat relative to prophecy in the whole of the worship service. Comprehension, insight, intellect and interpretation are of much greater value for the advancement of the church than the self-confirmation of speaking in tongues which transpires between a human heart and God in heaven.

With this we make the transition to the second part of this chapter, namely verses 26-40. In that passage Paul delves in some detail into what happens in the worship services of the church. The connection with the preceding material is clear, namely that the wealth of gifts and their manifestations are given by God to the church to strengthen it in its entirety. And because of that purpose, the strengthening of the church, there needs to be order in worship services. Paul applies that to three aspects of the worship service, namely speaking in tongues (verses 27-28), prophecy (29-33) and women addressing the church (verses 34-35). In each of these three examples Paul uses the word *silence*.

After what has been said it is clear why Paul restricts speaking in tongues (*two, or at most three*), and even prohibits it in the absence of interpretation. Such speaking only causes confusion and imprecision. It does not build up. It is better for such persons to keep this quiet between God and their hearts. The same is true of prophecy. Here he also institutes a limit (*two or three*) and a regulation (*if any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace*). Paul justifies this restriction by referring to the peace of God – shalom that does not tolerate disorder (literally: disarrangement). This is followed by the third example, namely that of women having to be silent.

*(Verse 33) As in all churches of the saints: (34) Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also the law says. (35) And if they will learn any thin, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. (36) What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? (37) If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the*

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<sup>77</sup> With respect to the gift of the offices it says there: ... *For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ....*

<sup>78</sup> There it says: *But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.*



*commandments of the Lord. (38) But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant. (39) Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. (40) Let all things be done decently and in order.*

Once again there is a restriction, namely that women had to be silent in church. They are not to speak. What is meant with that speaking becomes clear in verse 35 (finding out something). In this connection we focus on a number of things.

(a) It is not a matter of women not being permitted to speak in church services. It does not say that. Does not everyone have something to say (verse 26)? It also is clear from 1 Timothy 2 that women in Corinth prayed in the worship services with their hands lifted up. Also in chapter 11:5 Paul says that women can pray and prophesy in church, but not with their heads uncovered. This is not a general order to be silent, but a discouragement of public interruptions and questions for clarification.

(b) Besides, these women were married. They could ask their husbands for clarifications at home.

(c) Subsequently Paul gives the reason for this silence, namely that they are subordinate under the law. This raises two difficulties. The first one is the Bible translation. That translation suggests that women are subordinate to someone. However, the verb *hypotassomai* also means to submit oneself to (*hypo*) a certain order (*taxis*). With this order Paul means undoubtedly the good and edifying conduct of the worship service. Just as those who speak in tongues and those who prophesy, the (married) women have to be silent if their speaking would disturb the edifying character of the worship service. The second difficulty is the word *nomos* (law). It is not entirely clear how we are to interpret this reference to the law (*tora*). Could it be a reference to Genesis 3:16? Strack-Billerbeck has pointed out that the traditional morals also counted as *Tora*.<sup>79</sup>

(d) Finally Paul says that this kind of speaking of the women is shameful. This refers to a general norm of decency in society. It simply does not look right. Paul gives no other explanation. Calvin has pointed out that these were matters of relatively minor importance. People's sense of decorum changed over time. It was generally not wise to run counter to the general idea of propriety. The speaking of women in church was not to represent provocation. One could not defy generally accepted taboos.

(e) At the end of the pericope Paul admonishes everyone in the church not to behave arrogantly. They themselves are not the source of their faith. They have to obey God's command by conducting themselves in an orderly manner. That command means that everything (including prophecy and speaking in tongues!) is subject to the rule of decency and the generally accepted order (*taxis*).<sup>80</sup>

In summary: This Scripture passage does not deal primarily with the position of women in the church or – even less so – the question whether women can hold ecclesiastical office. Paul's

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<sup>79</sup> For the many possible explanations of the word *nomos*, cf. F.J. Pop, *De eerste brief van Paulus aan de Korinthiërs* (the first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians), Nijkerk, 1965, pp. 339-340.

<sup>80</sup> In the old world the word order (*taxis*) referred to the normal order of everything in life (an army's order of battle, the order of a calendar, the structure of a speech, etc.), i.e. everything that was neat, decent, and respectable.

focus here is on the orderly and edifying conduct of worship services. Disturbing elements need to be avoided. For that reason silence is called for in certain situations (the speaking in tongues without interpretation, prophecy and revelation all mixed together, and the disruptive questions for clarification asked by married women). As far as women are concerned, Paul appeals principally to this one rule. Furthermore, he addresses the general feeling of what was considered acceptable in society. In Greece of his days it was not proper for wives to interrupt their husbands in public to ask for clarifications.

### 6.3.3 1 Timothy 2

This chapter also deals with worship services of the church. A very important element of the worship service is prayer, namely the intercession and thanksgiving for all people, in particular those who in the external world carry special responsibilities. That is what Paul starts the chapter with: *I exhort thee therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.* This is a beautiful sentence that indicates that the worship service takes place in the midst of reality, the social and political environment of life. That prayer is a door to mankind and the world. It is at the same time an open door to the Lord in heaven! (8) *I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. (9) In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array;(10) but (which becometh professing godliness) with good works. (11) Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. (12) But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. (13) For Adam was first formed, then Eve. (14) And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. (15) Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety.*

In verses 8 to 12 Paul focuses on the way in which this intercession for people and the world ought to take place in church. He places the emphasis on the good order of prayer and stresses that approaching God in prayer (people prayed with hands lifted up<sup>81</sup>) ought to be reflected in our lives and our hearts. Hearts and lives need to be holy, dedicated to God's service. We may also think here of Psalm 24 (3-4): *Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that has clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.* Prayer should never be a demonstration or self-glorification. On the contrary, our prayers need to be marked by humility and modesty. For the sake of modesty Paul makes an appeal to both men and women. As far as the latter are concerned, the following aspects stand out:

(a) *In like manner also*, writes Paul. This should be read as: Again, I insist that in prayer women be dressed in suitable clothing. As in 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul takes it for granted that women as much as men lead intercessions out loud in worship services. In the case of women he appeals especially to their modesty and sobriety, which he considers to be marks of piety. In the way that Paul formulates his admonishment can be recognized the ideals of sobriety and chastity of Hellenistic and Roman society. He feels that ostentatious, extravagant clothing and makeup only distract from the business at hand, namely the grace

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. Psalm 141:2: *Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.*

and salvation of God. That is especially the case when a woman has to lead the intercessions. Only restraint can mark her dedication to God's cause.

(b) Having pointed out that extravagant clothing and makeup do not belong in church services – by focusing the attention on the women themselves instead of God's work and salvation – Paul broadens that admonishment to saying that women are not permitted to teach in church, but on the contrary are to submit themselves to teaching. They are not to exercise authority over men.

The expression *not to usurp authority over men* makes clear that Paul does not pronounce a general prohibition against teaching by women. *Authentein* means *to act arbitrarily*. It has a dramatic, demonstrative connotation. It implies tipping the scale in the opposite direction. The new and liberating redemption of women in Christ – namely that in Christ discrimination against them relative to men has been eliminated – in Corinth has deteriorated into an unrestrained public demand that they be given their rightful place. Paul says that the worship service is not to be abused in this manner.

It is not a general prohibition for women to teach. That would have been in conflict with what Paul wrote in Titus 2:3, where it says that (older) women have to teach and do pastoral work among younger women. It has been thought that 'women' here refers to the (older) widows who apparently had a special role in the early church (1 Timothy 5:1-10). Finally, in this same epistle reference is made to women as deaconesses (1 Timothy 3:11). The word (*their*) inserted in some Bible translations to suggest that we should read: wives of deacons and elders, does not appear in the original text and can be omitted in light of the parallel nature of this passage. At any rate, there does not appear to be any reason to think of a general prohibition for women to teach.

(c) There is still another reason why it is not necessary to think of a general prohibition for women to teach. The verb *authentein* (to exercise authority, to assert oneself) sounds all the more daring, if we assume that Paul here also has especially married women in mind (cf. verse 15). Public teaching in worship services could easily be interpreted as (*demonstratively*) *exercising authority over men*. And that was so contrary to what was viewed in society of those days as a good marriage relationship between husband and wife that it rather hindered than prospered the advancement of the gospel. Not surprisingly, Paul admonishes (married) women to practice restraint. Freedom in Christ should not deteriorate into demonstrations. In support of his admonishment, Paul employs arguments that had to do with the submission of a woman to her husband within marriage and family life.

(d) No heavy-duty theological consequences need to be inferred from Paul's appeal to the creation ordinance and the fall into sin in verses 13 and 14. In the first place, this appeal is rather isolated within the entirety of Paul's epistles. Furthermore, Paul merely refers back to the general belief of antiquity that what came earlier had precedence over what came later. Compare the Jewish admonishment to a proud person: *The mosquito preceded you in creation; whence is your pride?* It is noteworthy in this connection, that when he says that not Adam but Eve had permitted herself to be deceived, he does not appeal to the curse that was placed on the woman in Genesis 3:16! Besides, elsewhere in Paul's epistles (Romans 5:12-21) Adam is indeed identified as one who sinned and transgressed the command.

(e) The interpretation of verse 16 does present significant problems. Especially the connection between *bearing children* and *being saved* is difficult to fathom for us. At any rate, the *bearing of children* cannot be viewed as a means to *being saved*. Perhaps this passage has to do with Paul's opposition to emerging asceticism whereby marriage and sexuality are viewed as being degrading.<sup>82</sup>

By way of summary: In this passage the focus is not on the position of women in the church or on whether women could serve in office. Here also, the objective of Paul's admonishment is the good order and attitude of those who led in public prayer in worship services. The prohibition of women to *teach* is not based on their femininity, but rather their married status. That implies a certain (subordinate) relationship to their husbands. It is the reality of that relationship that lies behind Paul's admonishment.

## 7. Marriage relationships

### 7.1 Ephesians 5:21-33

In contrast to the above passages, the background of Ephesians 5:21-33 is not the worship service or the liturgy. This passage belongs to what we tend to refer to as *the Household Codes*. These Codes are a special phenomenon. Their purpose is to place the experience of every day life under the scrutiny of the Gospel. They bring the social reality including the current relationships and morals within the sphere of the Gospel. The words *en kurioi* (in the Lord) employed in the Codes should not be viewed as supporting and confirming the contemporary social order. On the contrary, these words place everyday practice under the eyes and the critique of the Lord. Not only church life, but also ordinary life takes place under God's eyes! The Codes translate marriage and family, work relationships and social reality into situations that affect salvation in Christ.

Do these Codes target the Christianization of life? Do they convert marriage into a Christian marriage, the family into a Christian family and the (work) relationship between slave and master into a Christian relationship? That is rather doubtful. However, it is a fact that these realities cannot remain isolated realities, exclusively subject to legalities and spheres of influence of contemporary culture and society. It is not the social order that determines the way in which people are to interact, but the reality of Christ. In other words, belonging to Christ has implications for the way in which we interact. That also is the intention of the apostolic admonishment in Ephesians with respect to the (marriage) relationship of husband and wife.

*(Verse 21) Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. (22) Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. (23) For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. (24) Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. (25) Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; (26) that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, (27) that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. (28) So ought men to love their*

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<sup>82</sup> Cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-5.

wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. (29) For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nouresheth it, even as the Lord the church: (30) for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. (31) For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. (32) This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. (33) Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.

For a proper understanding of this pericope (verses 22-33), the close connection with verses 18 to 21 needs to be kept in mind. This is implied by a string of present participles in verses 19 to 22. Verse 22 is connected to this string of verses, because it is the first verse that lacks that form of verb. This verse only makes good and logical sense, when the present participle of the preceding verse *hypo-tassimeno*i (submitting oneself) is added.

(Verse 18) *And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; (19) (1) speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, (2) singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; (20) (3) giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; (21) (4) submitting yourselves on to another in the fear of God, (22) (5) wives, (submitting) yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.*

The intention of Paul's admonishment is clear, namely that the fear of Christ moves everyone in the congregation into an attitude of mutual submission, so that wives also have to submit to their husbands. This pericope shows that the reality of Christ is of fundamental importance for the (marriage) relationship of wives and husbands. It is this reality that gives true quality to this relationship, namely mutual service and submission. The relationship between Christ and the church is the great example for marriage relationships. Actually, *example* is an inappropriate word here. It suggests that the example that Christ gave in his relationship to the church is to be copied in marriage relationships. But that can not be the case. The relationship between Christ and the church has a unique character. Christ being the Head of the church and Christ's sacrifice on the cross are unique dimensions. These can not be imitated. The husband is not Christ and the wife is not the church. Therefore, the husband is not the head of his wife in the same way that Christ is the Head of the church. Neither is the relationship of the wife to the husband identical to that of the church to Christ. How could it ever be? What is said here in the Codes is that the existing social relationships (husband-wife, master-slave) need to be brought within the sphere of influence of the gospel.

Those social relationships are not thereby denied. In the culture of that time, women simply were subordinate to their husbands, and slaves simply were the complete property of their masters. Paul starts out from this reality. It is the basis of his admonishment, which said that it could not be helped. At the same time this reality is exposed to criticism. The point of comparison is the manner in which Christ is the Head of His church. Christ is the Head of His church, in that He preeminently is the One *who emptied Himself, took upon Himself the form of a servant and humbled Himself to death on the cross ...* (Philippians 2:7-8).<sup>83</sup> On the basis of this reality of the Christian faith, relationships among people in the Church of Christ (also

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. Philippians 2:9-11: *Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

relationships that by their nature are very unequal within certain cultures) can only find their true fulfillment in mutual submission and service, love and respect.<sup>84</sup>

This pericope clearly brings out what is characteristic of the Household Codes, namely that although social relationships were neither denied nor instantly corrected, they did fall under the critique of the Gospel!

## 8. Conclusions

Reflection on the position of women in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is not simple, especially since it concerns the question whether or not the offices of the church should be made accessible to women. Biblical, theological and ecclesiastical perspectives are brought to bear on the subject. The latter is definitely the case, because the current reflection takes place against the background of the position held to date by our churches, although not officially expressed in public pronouncements.

The Committee was given *the mandate to produce a Scripturally-based account of our position with respect to women in office within the framework of the Reformed tradition.*<sup>85</sup> Time and again, Committee members discussed this mandate in depth. Some of the members were of the view that the mandate merely meant to assemble the Scriptural underpinnings of the current position with respect to women and ecclesiastical office. Others were of the view that the mandate to the Committee not only concerned the underpinnings of the present position, but also the question whether or not women may hold office. Following lengthy discussion it was decided to keep open the possibility *that the existing view is untenable or may need to be adjusted.*<sup>86</sup> The signatories to this (minority) report have specifically considered these questions in their write-up.

A number of delegates at General Synod wished to prevent that the Committee would be instructed to merely assemble a Scriptural foundation for a pre-existing position, so that the outcome of the report would be a foregone conclusion. Other delegates emphasized the framework of the Reformed interpretation of the Scriptures and the fact that there has always been a definite view, whose Scriptural foundation, however, had not been spelled out. The Committee's mandate was worded in such a way that neither of these views was precluded. Within the Committee this has led to a number of discussions about the correct interpretation of this mandate. In the end the Committee went to work in the conviction that an examination of existing positions of the church could only proceed on the basis of careful reading of the Word of God.

### 8.1 Equality of the offices

As far as ecclesiastical office in general and the offices of elder and deacon in particular are concerned the following points are made:

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<sup>84</sup> That is how we prefer to translate the verb *fobein* (verse 33). A whole range of translations are feasible, varying from fear, fright to respect, deference. The latter appear the more correct.

<sup>85</sup> Instruction to the Committee according to article 231 of the *Acta, Generale Synode* (Acts of General Synod), 1995.

<sup>86</sup> Minutes of the third meeting of the Committee studying women and office, 18 September 1996.

1. The structure of the church is charismatic: All believers, both men and women, share in the gifts of the Holy Spirit and are equally involved in the functioning of the church, albeit each in their own way.<sup>87</sup>
2. The offices are focused on the charismata and not vice versa. Charismata have been given to all believers, but the offices only to some who are expected to serve all.
3. The offices, as we know them, are all rooted in (the offices) of Christ. In that sense we can speak of the unity of the offices and their equality in principle.
4. On the basis of the equality and unity of the offices, the overall governance of a congregation of our churches has been assigned to elders and deacons together, although the confession (articles 30 and 31 and canon law are not unanimous regarding the position of deacons).
5. The equality and unity of the offices makes it impossible (and unacceptable) to consider opening only one office (e.g. the office of deacon) to women. Opening one of the offices to women implies preparedness in principle to open all offices to them.

## 8.2 History and offices

The ecclesiastical offices as we know them today have not come down to us directly from the New Testament. They have evolved over time. With respect to this process of development, the following may be pointed out:

1. In the time of the New Testament and the early church women served in officially recognized functions (deaconess, widow, and prophetess).
2. Although desired by Calvin and Voetius, the function of deaconess was not assigned a permanent place – recognized in canon law and regulated – in the Reformed branch of the Reformation.
3. Listening to the New Testament, to some extent adjusting to the structure of municipal government, and (especially) rejecting Roman Catholic and Baptist views, a structure of offices evolved within the (Calvinistic) Reformation in which preaching, pastorate and diaconate received recognition.
4. This structure of offices (1) supports the charismatic nature of the church and (2) by characterizing offices as service (*dakonia*), rejects every form of hierarchy and sacralization.

## 8.3 Exegesis and hermeneutics

Differences in response to the question whether or not women can serve in ecclesiastical offices, (in part) reflect differences in exegesis and hermeneutics. Therefore we list here a few concluding remarks concerning both of these.

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<sup>87</sup> For the relationship between charisma and office, see J.P.Versteeg, *Kijk of de kerk. De structuur van de gemeente volgens het Nieuwe Testament* (view of the church; the structure of the church according to the New Testament), Kampen, 1985, pp. 22ff.

### 8.3.1 Old Testament

1. Men and women have been created completely equal by God. They both share equally in being image bearers of God. They are both called to have dominion over the created reality on behalf of God.
2. This equality of men and women also holds with respect to marriage relationships. This relationship is best characterized as a partnership. The husband is dependent on his wife. The wife is given to him as helper and partner.
3. Sin perverted the good order of God's creation. The (mutual) partnership (marriage) relationship of man and woman deteriorated into a relationship characterized by lust and domination.
4. However, God remained faithful to the purpose of His creation. The signs of his faithfulness were apparent throughout the Old Testament, also with respect to the position of women in the church. The (Pentecost) prophecy of Joel (2:28) was a striking example of that.
5. It nevertheless turned out that the position of women in Israel, especially in terms of marriage, was clearly characterized by legal inequality. This social and legal discrimination also carried through into religion.

### 8.3.2 New Testament

1. God's restoring and redeeming power, especially in the church, was revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. The salvation brought in and through Him gave the church its unique structure and different, new relationships.
2. Women regained a place in the worship service and the work of the church. Everything indicated that in the churches of Jesus Christ the (new) role of women was recognized. The words of Paul in Galatians 3:8 became reality in the work of the churches.
3. This breakthrough of the redemption in Christ implied criticism of the position of women in the world of the New Testament. Especially the nature of marriage relationships of those days frustrated the development of new relationships in Christ.
4. Especially the [so-called] Household Codes helped in the understanding of the new relationships. With the words *in the Lord*, they exposed social relationships (e.g. slave-master, men-women) to fundamental critique. However, they did not eliminate the existing relationships in one fell swoop.
5. Similarly in the Scriptures there was a continuing tension between the good order of God on the one hand and the cultural and social reality on the other hand.

### *Hermeneutics*



1. It is not the objective of this report to summarize Biblical hermeneutics. Yet the interpretation of the Scripture passages referred to above permit a number of conclusions that reflect a hermeneutical relationship.
2. In the Bible passages discussed above, the question arose as to how the new reality revealed in and through Christ (and the implied position of women in the church and in worship services, cf. Galatians 3:28) was related to the position of women in the culture and society of those days.
3. It turns out that although the existing position of women inherent in culture and society was criticized and new relationships emerged, the existing relationship between husband and wife was not immediately corrected. The latter relationship persisted and had to be taken into account, also in the apostle's admonishment.
4. It may therefore be concluded that the new reality revealed in and through Christ entered into culture and society in the form of yeast: it ferments the entire dough (Luke 13:20-21), but it did so organically. This required time and growth.
5. Therefore, on the one hand the words *in the Lord*, on the [so-called] Household Codes, foreshadowed the new reality in Christ, while on the other hand the full reality in Christ had not yet been fully attained. The former reality marked by sin and brokenness persisted and continued to make itself felt.<sup>88</sup>
6. The fact that in the New Testament – even in the life of the Church of Christ – there remained a certain degree of inequality in the position of women in relationship to men, in our judgment reflected the discrepancy between the new life in Christ and the old ways of the culture and society of then.
7. This discrepancy makes it impossible to apply the position of women in the New Testament directly to our own situation. Today we need to ask anew what the reality in Christ (cf. Galatians 3:28) means for the position of women, in part relative to today's culture and society.

## 9. Final conclusion

1. Strictly speaking, the Bible passages discussed above do not apply directly to the issue of women in office. Instead, they deal with the overall position of women in the church and its worship services.
2. Therefore, these passages do not preclude women from holding ecclesiastical office (deacon, elder and minister of the Word).

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<sup>88</sup> Cf. J.P. Versteeg, *Het heden van de toekomst. Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar aan de Theologische Hogeschool van de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland te Apeldoorn op 16 januari 1969* (the present of the future; speech given at the inauguration of the author as professor at the Theological University of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands at Apeldoorn, 16 January 1969), Kampen 1969. What Versteeg says there about the Spirit as first-fruit and the nature of the implicit connection between the present and the future, is very helpful for the interpretation of the Bible passages discussed here.

## **10. Recommendation**

It is recommended that Synod declare that giving women access to ecclesiastical offices to women is neither in conflict with what is taught by Scripture as the Word of God, nor with the church's confession which is based on Scripture.

G.L. Born

J. Groenleer

R.W.J. Soeters

## 1998 Synod decision re Women and Office

Synod made the following pronouncement:

General Synod, having studied the final report of the Committee dealing with issues concerning access of women to ecclesiastical office;

considering

1. that General Synod is called to evaluate the work of the Committee in the light of the mandate given to it by General Synod of 1995;
2. that the Committee, in executing this mandate, experienced some difficulty in interpreting the latter;
3. that the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* in the past (1956), on the basis of the Reformed view with respect to ecclesiastical offices declared them to be equivalent;
4. that the offices, as they presently function in the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* have not been derived directly from the Old and New Testaments, but indeed have Scriptural roots;
5. that the Reformed view with respect to the offices implies that they not only derive from the gifts that the Lord has bestowed upon the church, but that in addition to having received various gifts from the Holy Spirit, require a special call in order to be able to serve in office;
6. that the classical Reformed view with respect to the offices has not given women access to ecclesiastical offices;
7. that it is of the utmost importance that the churches remain unanimous with respect to the issue of women in office;

being of the view

1. that the Committee decided correctly that the possibility must be kept open that the existing view might be untenable or might have to be adapted;
2. that the study carried out by the Committee confirmed that the structure of offices as practised by the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* is scripturally sound;
3. that it nevertheless is a question whether in practice ecclesiastical life in the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* does adequate justice to the great diversity of gifts and ministries with which the Holy Spirit has equipped the New Testament church;
4. that it is unfortunate that the Committee could not come up with a unanimous view with respect to the hermeneutics and exegesis of the Scripture passages at issue;
5. that the difference between the majority and minority positions on the Committee largely reflects a different assessment of the relationship between revelation and culture/history;
6. that the view of the majority of Committee members – in contrast to that of the minority – is a sound and convincing foundation for the position that has all along been considered to be scriptural within the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*;
7. that all of Holy Scripture teaches clearly that the authoritative leadership of the church rightfully belongs to men and not women;

pronounces

that the position with respect to women in office that has always been held by the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* is scripturally sound;

and decides

1. to thank the Committee for its thorough study and report;
2. to appoint a study committee to investigate to what extent (adequate) justice is being done to the great diversity of gifts and ministries with which the Holy Spirit has equipped both men and women in the church of the New Testament, and on the basis of this investigation to formulate recommendations to General Synod of 2001, taking into account the pronouncement of General Synod of 1998 that the view with respect to women in office that has always been held within the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* is scripturally sound;
3. to give the Executive Committee of General Synod the mandate:
  - a. to prepare the Committee's report for publication in collaboration with the pre-advisers and
    1. to send copies to the member churches;
    2. to make copies available to church members and interested parties;
  - b. to send a pastoral letter to the member churches in which:
    1. the pronouncement of General Synod is explained;
    2. the member churches are encouraged to utilize the services of sisters of the church to the extent possible;
    3. the member churches are encouraged to maintain the unity of the denomination with respect to matters pertaining to women in office.