

Women in the Life of the Church
A Position Paper Approved by the General Synod of the
Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church
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Everywhere there are winds of change in modern culture and society. In the secular world, time-honored role patterns for men and women have undergone considerable change as women have begun to fill roles which were traditionally reserved for men. The church has not been isolated from these changes and, because of this, the church is faced with both a danger and an opportunity. On the one hand, the church faces the ever-present temptation to conform to the dictates of modern culture. This must be resisted or else we shall fail to submit to the authority of God's Word. On the other hand, the church has the opportunity to reexamine issues that were long thought, perhaps wrongly, to have been settled. Through such reexamination, teachings of Scripture that have been hidden or distorted may be recovered and speak to us with a new power. This report will examine the role of women in the life of the church and the question of women serving in ordained church office.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

For nineteen hundred years, the church generally adhered to an understanding of Scripture as prohibiting the ordination of women to the church offices of minister/elder (*presbiteros*). Paul's injunction in 1 Timothy 2:12-15 was almost universally understood to proscribe women from exercising spiritual authority over men. Nevertheless, the role of women in the early church was substantial. In Romans 16:1-3, 6, 12, 13, 15, Paul mentions women who apparently were prominent in the church, including Phoebe (termed "a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea") and Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis (who are said to "work hard in the Lord"). In the post-New Testament period, female deacons were involved in ministries of prayer and charity, and they assisted with the baptism of women.

As we move toward the medieval period, however, the role of women was increasingly circumscribed by certain factors. Trends toward asceticism and celibacy led many to view women as a threat to male sanctification because of sexual temptation. Later in the medieval period, Aristotle's peculiar view of the female as a "defective male" also exercised some negative influence on the role and status of women.

For much of American history, the church's historic consensus regarding ordination was closely followed. In 1853, however, Antoinette Brown was ordained to the Congregational ministry (though she later became a Unitarian). By the early twentieth century, women were being ordained as ministers and evangelists in holiness and Pentecostal circles. The Northern Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) approved the ordination of female elders in 1930 and ministers in 1956. The Southern Presbyterian church (PCUS) opened all offices in 1964. As one examines these developments, one is struck by the lack of detailed interaction with the specific teachings of Scripture. Rather, one finds appeals to general principles of prudence and equity and to the ongoing experience of the church.¹

The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church discussed and debated these matters with vigor from the 1960's until the early 1980's. A key development was the defeat of a 1969 proposal to rewrite the *Form of Government* so as to open all offices to women. The 1969 General Synod declined to open the offices of elder and minister to women but did permit Sessions to allow women to serve in the office of deacon. Because the issues of the ordination of women to the eldership and the authority of the Bible were firmly linked in many people's

¹ See Frank Smith, "Petticoat Presbyterianism: A Century of Debate in American Presbyterianism on the Issue of the Ordination of Women," *Westminster Theological Journal* 51:1 (1989):51-76.

minds, another key stage was the General Synod's decisive declaration in 1979 that the Bible is to be regarded as the "Word of God without error in *all* that it teaches."² Many years of debate on the matter came to a head in 1981 when the General Synod declined once again to change the Form of Government and decided, moreover, to regard the matter as closed by refusing to appoint a study committee.

As things stand now, mainline Presbyterian and Reformed churches ordain women to all offices, while many more conservative and evangelical churches do not (e.g., the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America).³

The decided trend toward the ordination of women to the offices of minister and elder in the modern period requires some examination, and many reasons emerge. First, there are the larger Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment emphases on rational autonomy and social freedom, which have undercut concepts of biblical authority as well as notions of hierarchy and authority in social relationships.

Second, there is the broader trend toward functionalist anthropology (rooted in part in the Kantian pessimism of knowing the "thing in itself"), in which we do not describe the human being in terms of what it is, but what it does. In this light, then, the contention that men and women are essentially or spiritually equal and functionally different seems incoherent.

Third, there is the rhetorical tradition of the American civil rights movement, which has stressed equality of opportunity, and the freedom to fulfill functions. For Americans, freedom is the freedom to do, to perform, to serve. Any limitation or restriction on functional role is almost reflexively seen by many contemporary Americans as a diminution of human worth and dignity.

Fourth, there are the pervasive social and economic changes that have taken place in American society over the last sixty years. Women now serve in nearly every job and economic niche, and as women have moved into jobs and positions traditionally reserved for men, it is increasingly difficult to argue for any differentiation in role. Moreover, these economic changes helped to spawn a modern American feminist movement that was itself shaped by these developments, and which sought to shape the future by empowering women and interpreting social reality and historical texts (including the Bible) from a feminist point of view.

Fifth, there is the view of gender that characterizes much of the contemporary feminist movement, which holds that gender roles and identity are not rooted in transcendent reality or in a permanent "creation order," but rather are dynamic, socially constructed matters of convention. According to this view, gender roles and sexual affinities are purely human constructions which may be modified and even overturned. In addition, this point of view tends to affirm the functional interchangeability of the sexes, and the acceptability of a wide variety of sexual practices and "orientations."

Given these powerful social and intellectual forces, it was inevitable that the role of women generally, and the ordination of women to the eldership in particular, would become issues for the church. Moreover, such intellectual, cultural, and sociological influences powerfully and often unconsciously shape the way we read and interpret Scripture. They comprise the "plausibility structures" within which given positions and arguments will be viewed as more or less intelligible and compelling, and thus they affect the way we understand Scripture and undertake the ministry of the church.⁴ For this reason, any discussion of this issue must take into account the contemporary cultural context.

² *Minutes of the General Synod of the ARP Church* (1979): 23.

³ Two exceptions to this conservative consensus are the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and Christian Reformed Church in North America (both of which allow the ordination of women on *adiaphora* and libertarian/sociological grounds).

⁴ On the role of social "plausibility structures," see Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday), pp. 29-51.

II. THE BIBLICAL WITNESS ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Primary emphasis must be placed upon the witness of Holy Scripture—"the only rule of faith and obedience" (WLC 3). Here we look to the express teachings of the biblical writers, to the "good and necessary consequence" derived from those teachings (WCF I.6), and to the example and practice of the New Testament church. It is vitally important that we interpret Scripture carefully. This is no place for methods of interpretation that twist the message of Scripture or that are so esoteric that only a few scholars can understand them. This paper utilizes what may be called the "grammatical-historical-theological" method of interpretation, in which the rules of grammar and meaning which govern the text in question, the immediate and larger context of the passage, the historical situation to which the text was addressed, and the relation of the particular passage to the great overarching themes of Scripture are taken into account.

These comments concerning the method of interpretation are important because the correct interpretation of Scripture often takes a good deal of hard work. We are separated by over nineteen hundred years from the time that the New Testament texts were written and the world of today is very different from the world of St. Paul. We must often labor to reconstruct and understand the situation of the New Testament church. In addition, because the original New Testament text was written in Greek, there are sometimes translation difficulties. These challenges underscore the fact that the interpretation of Scripture must not be a purely individual matter. Rather, it is the responsibility of the whole church. God raises up leaders with gifts of interpreting and teaching his Word, and the laity is called to test what is taught by comparing it with Scripture itself (Acts 17:11).

We now turn to some key New Testament passages in which we find prescriptive teaching on the role of women and the nature of gender distinctions in the Christian community. Each of these passages makes a substantive contribution to the larger biblical perspective on the place of women in the church.

1 Corinthians 11:2-16—In this context Paul frames his teaching initially in terms of the implications of "headship" (the Greek term for "head" is *kephale*). While a complete theology of "headship" is not developed here, it involves a certain priority of the male which expresses itself in clear gender distinctions in appearance and role between male and female.

It is also important to note the reasons for this relationship of headship. First, it is rooted, Paul says, in the relationship between "Christ" and "God" (v. 3). That is, Paul sees an analogy or connection between the relationship of headship involving male and female, and the relationship between the incarnate Christ and the Father. Second, this relationship of headship is rooted in the order of creation (vv. 8-9), and here Paul cites both the chronological order of creation (the man was created first) and the reason for the creation of woman (as a helpmeet to the man) in Genesis 3. Because of this order of creation, Paul says (adding, enigmatically, "and because of the angels"⁵), "the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head." Paul goes on, however, to caution those who might draw wrong conclusions from this "headship" principle, pointing out that men and women are not independent of one another (vv. 11-12).

It is also apparent that the headship principle Paul articulates is not a matter of merely temporary or local significance. By rooting his teachings in the order of creation, Paul articulates a truth that transcends local need or peculiarity, and so Paul adds, "we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God" (v. 16). We should add, however, that while the principle of male headship transcends particular cultural context, it must also be contextualized in particular cultures. In other words, the concrete expression of the principle will depend to some degree upon the specific characteristics of a given

⁵ For a helpful treatment of this phrase, see James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 175-178.

culture. Thus, for example, Paul's injunction regarding head coverings in this passage is rightly regarded by many as an application of the general principle of headship to a specific cultural situation where head covering was invested with considerable symbolic significance.

1 Corinthians 14:33-40—Here again Paul focuses primarily on the different roles of men and women in the context of worship. His teaching in this passage, which enjoins “silence” on the part of women in church, is rooted in what he regards to be the teaching of Scripture (vv. 34, 36). Careful contextual exegesis is important here. It is most unlikely that Paul is speaking of a blanket prohibition against women speaking in church. In 11:5 he recognizes that women may pray and prophesy in church. Moreover, a blanket prohibition does not fit with the context here, which has to do with the correct use of prophecy and tongues.

The most reasonable explanation of this difficult passage, we believe, is that vv. 33b-36 refer to a situation involving the judging or weighing of prophecy referred to in v. 29. Here the prophetic utterances of the congregation were judged to ensure their agreement with the apostolic message. Apparently some women were attempting to participate in this judging process and so were participating in the exercise of spiritual authority in the church. This Paul regarded as an unacceptable violation of the principle of male headship. This interpretation is consistent with what Paul says elsewhere and it is consistent with the context.⁶

Galatians 3:28—This oft-quoted passage has been a crux of recent gender debates within the church. Paul writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Here it is critical to note the context. In Galatians as a whole, Paul is heralding the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Now that “faith has come” (v. 25), the old provisions of the law that strictly separated Jew and non-Jew have been superceded. In other words, Paul is speaking of unity and equality in justification and salvation. All people, whether Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free, male or female, come to God through faith in Christ Jesus. The old barriers have been broken down and all kinds of people now have equal access to God.

Here we have a powerful witness to the spiritual equality of male and female. At the same time, Paul apparently saw no conflict between this spiritual equality in salvation, and some differentiation of role and function between male and female. Those who view this passage as the basis for women's ordination to church office, are, at best, wrenching it out of context. Even more seriously, they are imposing distinctively modern

presuppositions regarding gender roles and the nature of equality upon the biblical text.⁷

⁶ See Hurley, *Man and Woman*, pp. 185-194. See also D. A. Carson, “‘Silent in the Churches’: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), pp. 140-153.

⁷ NT scholar Vern Poythress rightly argues that Galatians 3:28 can only be said to teach women's ordination if we read into the passage “a social theory about the abstract interchangeability of individuals.” Vern Poythress, “The Church as Family: Why Male Leadership in the Family Requires Male Leadership in the Church,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), pp. 233-247 (quote is from p. 509, note 8). Regarding the alleged tension between notions of spiritual equality before God and social hierarchy, NT scholar Madeleine Boucher writes, “To be precise, the tension did not exist in first-century thought, and it is not present in the texts themselves. The tension arises from modern man's inability to hold these two ideas together.” Quoted in Robert W. Yarbrough, “The Hermeneutics of 1 Timothy 2:9-15,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, edited by Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), p. 182.

Ephesians 5:21-33—Paul introduces this larger section dealing with various social relationships (wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters) by instructing his readers to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21). That is, there are social contexts where Christians must acknowledge and submit to the authority of others.⁸

In the context of marriage, Paul teaches that the wife is to submit to her husband. Here again, the concept of “headship” is introduced. The wife submits to the husband “as to the Lord” (v. 22) because “the husband is the head (*kephale*) of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (v. 23). Moreover, just “as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (v. 24). Here, interestingly, the headship of the husband is grounded, not in the order of creation (as in 1 Corinthians), but in redemption, and more specifically, in the relationship between Christ and the church.

1 Timothy 2:11-15—Here once again Paul draws a functional distinction between male and female in the context of worship and life in the church, declaring that women “should learn in quietness and full submission” (v. 11), and adding, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent” (v. 12). Paul then proceeds to ground this instruction in the order of creation in Genesis 2 (“Adam was formed first,” v. 13), and in the Fall narrative from Genesis 3 (“it was the woman who was deceived,” v. 14).

For obvious reasons, both sides in the ordination debate regard this as a crucial text, and much ink has been spilled during the last thirty or so years over the interpretation of this passage. Evangelical feminists have sought to overturn the traditional reading of this passage by suggesting (on highly speculative grounds) that it addresses a situation peculiar to Ephesus, and that Paul is therefore not stating a general principle for all time, or that the Greek phrase often translated “to teach or to have authority” may be rendered differently (e.g., “to teach in a domineering way”). In our judgment, these efforts at reinterpretation have been unsuccessful.⁹

1 Peter 3:1-7—Although the term “head” is not used here, this passage obviously occupies the same conceptual universe as the Pauline passages we have examined. Here Peter enjoins wives to be submissive to their husbands, arguing that this is consistent with the practice of saintly Old Testament women such as Sarah (vv. 5-6), that God is pleased by such behavior (v. 4), and that this may well win over husbands who are not yet Christians (v. 1).

From this survey, we conclude that there is a consistent and pervasive line of teaching in the New Testament recognizing the importance of some functional difference between men and women in the home and in the church. The principle of “headship” applies to both home and church, according to the New Testament writers, and this headship involves a priority of authority and responsibility on the part of the male. Moreover, this teaching is grounded, not in temporary circumstances or in the effects of the Fall, but in the order of creation and in the redemptive relationship between Christ and the church. At the same time, in a passage (remarkable for its time) speaking of equality in justification (Galatians 3:28), Paul strongly affirms the spiritual equality of the sexes.

⁸ See Hurley, *Man and Woman*, p. 144. Hurley rightly points out that the Greek word translated “submit” in this passage (*hypotasso*) invariably has the sense of “submission to authority.” For this reason, the popular argument that here Paul is enjoining a “mutual submission” of husband and wife to the needs of one another (with neither partner possessing a decisive leadership role) is lexically weak.

⁹ See section III below.

A crucial question emerges however. Why do the New Testament writers insist so on this functional differentiation of the sexes? We must note in this context that the functional differences between male and female in the context of church office rather clearly have to do with the Scriptural writers' concern to protect the structure of the marriage relationship, a point that is underscored by the close relationship of male headship in family and church (in texts such as 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:33-40), and by the analogous relationship between husband/wife and Christ/church (Ephesians 5:22-33). Doubtless the presence of women serving in positions of spiritual leadership can undermine the God-ordained role of spiritual headship that their husbands (and other husbands) are to play.

But can more be said? A broader rationale for the biblical teaching on headship may emerge from the larger context of the Pastoral epistles and from the insights of social science. A pervasive concern for Paul in these books is the preservation of the apostolic tradition, the sound doctrine that was so vital to the life and health of the church (see, e.g., 1 Timothy 1:3-11; 4:1-2, 6, 16; 6:3-5, 20-21). Sometimes, Paul indicates, it is necessary to identify essential doctrinal teachings and to discipline those who fall into error. But what, we might ask, does this have to do with women as ministers or elders in the church? Here we must observe that men and women, while both are remarkably capable and gifted, are nevertheless different in some respects.¹⁰ It is often acknowledged (by feminists and non-feminists alike) that women are more relational and nurturing in their behavior, and that relationships are, in general, more important to women than to men. It is not surprising, then, that Paul would exclude women from a church office where a primary responsibility is the exclusion of error (and those propagating it) from the church.¹¹

To be sure, this principle of headship and the functional differentiation it entails have sometimes been misinterpreted and distorted. First, the church has often made the mistake of explaining these differences in terms of women's alleged psychological or spiritual inferiority. While such pejorative explanations and interpretations should, in our judgment, be rejected, we also must not overreact to these problems by rejecting any notion of functional difference rooted in divine constitution and reflective of genuine differences of inclination and interest on the part of women and men.

Second, some have wrongly and tragically used the principle of male headship as a justification for domineering and abusive behavior by men against women. Here we must remember that a primary biblical model for understanding the character of male headship is the relationship of Christ and the church, and more specifically Christ's self-sacrifice, loving nurture, and protection of the church (Ephesians 5:22-33). To be sure, biblical headship involves a God-given authority and responsibility, but this authority and responsibility must be exercised in a loving and selfless manner. In addition, the church has a responsibility to teach on this issue and, where possible, to protect women and children from this tragic distortion of the biblical principle of male headship through diaconal ministry to families in crisis and through the exercise of church discipline against abusers.¹²

III. THE FEMINIST/EGALITARIAN REJOINDER

¹⁰ See, e.g., Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men, and Language : A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1993). On biological differences between men and women, see Gregg Johnson, "The Biological Basis for Gender-Specific Behavior," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), pp. 280-293.

¹¹ See Thomas R. Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15: A Dialogue with Scholarship," in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), p. 145.

¹² On this larger issue, see Steven Tracy, "Headship with a Heart: How Biblical Patriarchy Actually Prevents Abuse," *Christianity Today* (February 2003): 50-54.

The period from about 1970 to the present has witnessed the publication of many works arguing for the ordination of women to all offices in the church. While space precludes a detailed survey of such writings in this paper, it is useful in this context to note a number of recurring theological, interpretive, and rhetorical strategies.

Content Criticism—Some forthright individuals recognize the nature and content of New Testament teaching on the issue of gender roles, but then go on to argue that such passages are not authentically apostolic (the Pastoral Epistles are often dismissed as deutero-Pauline) or that Paul and Peter were simply mistaken in their teachings that forbid certain roles or functions to women. Such teachings, it is argued, conflict with our current culturally accepted standards of justice and equity, or with an alleged “emancipatory strain” within Scripture itself, and must therefore be rejected.¹³

Many evangelicals, however, have found this approach less than acceptable in that it overtly compromises the church’s historic doctrine of biblical authority. As will be evident below, biblical authority may also be compromised in more subtle ways.

The Arguments from Giftedness and Calling—It is often argued that women possess the requisite natural and spiritual gifts for ministry, and that they therefore should be allowed to utilize these gifts in the context of ordained ministry as ministers and elders. But, while Paul speaks eloquently to the remarkable giftedness of the members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:4-7), and while we do not question the giftedness of Christian women, it is also the case that spiritual gifts can be exercised in a wide variety of situations and contexts. The same Apostle who affirms the giftedness of all members of the body of Christ also enjoins certain functional differences.

A somewhat similar argument is proposed by those who maintain that some women experience a subjective sense of calling to ministry, and that such movements of the Spirit should not be challenged or rejected by the church. While we recognize the sentimental appeal of this argument (and the personal awkwardness involved in the church’s sometimes necessary task of challenging an individual’s claim of vocation), we regard it as most dangerous to the church in that it elevates private subjective experience above the clear teachings of Scripture. Nearly anything we wish to do may be supported in this fashion.

The Appeal to General Principle—As noted earlier, many view Galatians 3:28 as the bulwark of the case for ordaining women to all church offices. Paul’s statement that in Christ “there is . . . neither male nor female” is understood to imply that any role differentiation on the basis of gender is inconsistent with the biblical witness. We have already seen, however, that the context of Galatians 3:28 has to do with spiritual equality in justification before God, and Paul’s extensive elaboration of role differences should suggest to us that the Apostle himself saw no contradiction between spiritual equality before God and some difference in function and role.

As noted earlier, we believe that Galatians 3:28 can only be made to “teach” women’s ordination when the notion of “equality” is fleshed out with modern, post-Enlightenment content presupposing that equality entails functional interchangeability. But this, in turn, raises an important question of interpretive methodology. Do we allow passages that are more clear to illumine those that are less clear, or do we take passages

¹³ 13The term “content criticism” comes from the German *Sachkritik*, and denotes the rejection of what is acknowledged to be the intended meaning of the text. Examples include Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 112-113, who sees the Apostle’s teaching as containing as two different and fundamentally incompatible perspectives—Jewish subordinationism and Christian egalitarianism. The former, Jewett contends, must be rejected. More recently, Clarence Boomsma, *Male and Female, One in Christ: New Testament Teaching on Women in Office* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), has argued that Paul’s exegesis of the creation narratives in 1 Timothy 2 is mistaken.

that are less clear, fill them with our own meaning, and then use them to subvert the teaching of relatively clear and unambiguous passages? Our Westminster Confession of Faith clearly articulates the former principle (WCF I.9).

The Appeal to Progressive Revelation or Progressive Understanding—It is often argued that the views of the biblical writers reflect a particular point in time, but that the Spirit has since led the church into a deeper knowledge of truth and that our interpretation of Scripture must take this progression in moral sensibility into account. Slavery is often cited in this connection. In Ephesians 6 Paul tells slaves to obey their masters immediately after he has told women to be subject to their husbands. The church no longer affirms slavery and, as a matter of justice, it should no longer affirm the subordination of women either.

One problem here is that the New Testament does not affirm the institution of slavery. Paul does tell slaves to be obedient to their masters for reasons of prudence so that so that the gospel message might not be discredited, but nowhere does he ground the institution of slavery in the created order or in redemption as he does the male-female relationship. The danger of this “progressive interpretation” is that it invites us simply to baptize our own cultural biases as the “Spirit’s work.” In addition, this approach also ultimately involves content criticism of the teachings of Scripture in that it pits the “Spirit” against the “letter,” and it implicitly denies the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* that is enshrined in our Confession of Faith (WCF I.6, 10).

A variation of this approach maintains that while the New Testament still contains vestiges of patriarchy, it also contains teachings that move beyond it, and that it is the church’s task to build on these emancipatory passages (such as Galatians 3:28). In so doing, feminist interpreters pit Scripture against Scripture and thus undermine the authority of the Bible.¹⁴

The Appeal to Temporary Situation—Many have suggested that Paul’s injunctions regarding male headship and the role of women in the church are responses to particular and temporary situations, and therefore his instructions are not permanently binding. For example, some argue that the pagan religion of the city of Ephesus was dominated by women, and that Paul’s instructions in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 are directed against an unhealthy monopoly of the religious cultus by females. Thus, while it was imprudent at that time for Ephesian women to exercise authority in the church, this instruction is not binding on the church as a whole.¹⁵

However attractive this approach may be in the contemporary ideological climate, it is, nevertheless, fraught with problems. First, the picture painted of a “proto-feminist” Ephesus is so speculative and out of keeping with what we know of the Graeco-Roman world of the first century as to border on the bizarre. It certainly has not been substantiated by detailed study of the inscriptional evidence from Ephesus itself.¹⁶ Second, the reasons adduced by Paul (the order of creation and deception in the Fall) transcend the alleged problems in Ephesus. Finally, what Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is of a piece with his statements in the Corinthian correspondence. We are thus driven to

¹⁴ See the helpful discussion of this argument in Guenther Haas, “Patriarchy as an Evil that God Tolerated: Analysis and Implications for the Authority of Scripture,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38/3 (1995): 321-336.

¹⁵ See Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

¹⁶ The most extensive refutation of the Kroegers’ contextual argument is found in Stephen M. Baugh, “The Apostle Among the Amazons,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994): 153-171; and “A Foreign World: Ephesus in the First Century,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, edited by Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), pp. 13-52.

the conclusion that Paul's injunctions in this passage are not an ad hoc response to a particular and temporary situation, but rather are intended to express God's will for the church in general.

The Polemic Against Authority—While it is popular in some circles to argue that church office is a matter of service rather than authority (and that Paul's teaching that women ought not to exercise authority over a man is moot), the connotation of authority cannot be removed from most if not all of the New Testament passages dealing with the role of the elder (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17; etc.). Our fear is that those who pose this false dilemma are simply reading into the New Testament the modern suspicion of power and authority in general.

The Appeal to Redemptive History and Eschatology—Some have suggested that the principle of male headship and the functional hierarchy it entails are results of the Fall, and that the work of Christ has introduced a dramatically new and egalitarian situation. Galatians 3:28 is often cited as the banner text for this new situation. Here, of course, we must again note that Paul does not primarily ground male headship and priority in the post-Fall situation (although the Fall narrative is referenced in 1 Timothy 2:14), but in the (pre-Fall) order of creation (1 Corinthians 11:3-9; 1 Timothy 2:13), in the relationship between the incarnate Mediator and God (1 Corinthians 11:3), and in the church's experience of redemption in Christ (Ephesians 5:23-24). Furthermore, Paul himself was writing in the post-resurrection context, and yet he teaches the continuing relevance of headship and functional difference.

Another approach contends that the relationship of male and female should be understood, not from the standpoint of creation, but from that of the future (utilizing a so-called "eschatological hermeneutic"). Because marriage and, presumably, the hierarchy it entails will cease with the eschaton (Luke 20:35), and because the coming of the Kingdom of God has a present as well as a future dimension, we should, it is argued, view the overturning of gender distinctions as a goal toward which Christians must strive.¹⁷ At least two problems with this "eschatological hermeneutic" approach must be noted in this context. First, it pits the creational order against eschatology in a way that the biblical writers do not. The New Testament consistently stresses the continuing relevance of creational norms and distinctions, which we ignore to our peril. Second, this interpretive approach is a "blunt instrument" in that it lacks definition and controls imposed by Scripture. Nearly anything we desire could, in principle, be justified on such grounds.¹⁸ As utilized in the context of the women's ordination debate, this so-called "eschatological hermeneutic" is little more than an excuse to evade clear biblical mandates.

The Appeal to *Adiaphora*—Still others argue for the ordination of women to all offices by minimizing the importance of the issue, and suggesting that it is a matter where liberty should be allowed. In 1990, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church, for example, described the question as a "Church Order matter" rather than a "creedal issue," and declared that "synod permit churches to use their discretion in utilizing the gifts of

¹⁷ See, e.g., Report 26, *Agenda for Synod 1990* (Grand Rapids: The Christian Reformed Church in North America), pp. 327-329. See also the insightful critique of this approach by John Bolt, "Eschatological Hermeneutics, Women's Ordination, and the Reformed Tradition," *Calvin Theological Journal* 26 (1991): 370-388.

¹⁸ A point made with vigor by James De Jong, *CTS in Focus* 8:2 (Winter 1990-91): 5 (quoted in Bolt, "Eschatological Hermeneutics," 372): "While Reformed hermeneutics works within the canon of Scripture, what is the origin of this hermeneutical emphasis on eschatology applied to history beyond the canon? . . . What open-ended applications (homosexual practice, euthanasia, abortion on demand, extra-marital sex, etc.) is it likely to attract in the future? What biblical prescriptions have been placed on it?"

women members in all the offices of the church.”¹⁹ In similar fashion, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has declared that it “does not believe that the issue of the ordination of women is an essential of the faith,” and it goes on in its church motto to distinguish between “essentials” and “nonessentials”: “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”²⁰

At root, this approach holds that the ordination of women to the eldership is a matter of indifference (*adiaphora*), or that it is so peripheral to the central mission of the church that differences of opinion and practice should be allowed. We also observe that this approach is often used in situations where considerable disagreement exists within a church, and this strategy is thought to offer a way beyond the impasse. But is this a satisfactory solution? We think not, and for the following reasons. While we recognize that there are matters essential to the existence of the church, and that there are genuine matters of indifference, we also recognize a third category--matters that are important and even crucial to the health of the family, the church, and society as a whole.²¹ We believe that the gender distinctions taught so clearly in Scripture fall into this third category. Furthermore, we believe that the authority of Scripture is compromised when certain teachings are declared “non-essential” on such insubstantial grounds.

The Appeal to Grammar and Lexicography—Another strategy used is to focus on the meaning of biblical terms and/or the grammatical relationships within which those terms are used. Two particular matters have been extensively discussed—the meaning of the term translated “head” (*kephale*) in Ephesians 5, and the meaning of the phrase translated “to teach or to have authority” in 1 Timothy 2:12.

In connection with Ephesians 5, it is argued that the Greek word *kephale* should be understood as “source” rather than “authority,” and that the notion of hierarchy is therefore not present in these passages. This matter has been extensively explored over the last twenty years. We have learned that the meaning of *kephale* as “leader,” “ruler,” or “authority over” is well attested in the New Testament and the broader environment, while the evidence for *kephale* as “source” in the New Testament period is almost nil.²² Moreover, the notion of “authority over” is implicit in 1 Corinthians 11 and is quite explicit in Ephesians 5. In other words, the idea of hierarchy/authority is present no matter how *kephale* is translated.

Similar moves are made in connection with 1 Timothy 2. Here it is argued by some that in v. 12 Paul really means “I do not permit a woman to teach error or to domineer over a man.” Others suggest that Paul means, “I do not allow a woman to teach in a domineering way.” The second is virtually impossible for grammatical reasons.²³ The first is linguistically possible, and so it is argued that the problem here was not women teaching or exercising authority in general, but rather a particular group of domineering and wrongheaded women in Ephesus. There are two major problems with

¹⁹ *Acts of Synod 1990* (Grand Rapids: The Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1990), pp. 654-658.

²⁰ “Position Paper on the Ordination of Women” (adopted, June 1984), The Evangelical Presbyterian Church (<http://www.epc.org/ppordin.htm>).

²¹ On the place of this third category in Calvin’s ecclesiology, see David Anderson Bowen, “John Calvin’s Ecclesiological Adiaphorism: Distinguishing the “Indifferent,” the “Essential,” and the “Important” in His Thought and Practice, 1547-1559” (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1985).

²² See Wayne Grudem, “The Meaning of *Kephal* (“Head”): A Response to Recent Studies,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), pp. 425-468.

²³ As Köstenberger rightly notes, the Greek connector *oude* (often translated “and not,” “nor,” or “neither”) is a coordinating conjunction rather than a subordinating conjunction. Andreas J. Köstenberger, “A Complex Sentence Structure in 1 Timothy 2:12,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, edited by Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), pp. 90-91.

this suggestion. First, in support of his teaching Paul appeals to the creation order and Eve's involvement in the Fall (matters that lie well outside the immediate situation in Ephesus). Second, the word for teach, when used in this fashion, is always positive in the Pauline writings. If Paul wanted to say they were teaching wrongly, he could easily have done so.²⁴ Finally, when we recall that what Paul says here coheres with what is taught elsewhere in the New Testament, we are driven to conclude that this revisionist line of interpretation is exegetically flawed.

The Appeal to Particular Exception—It is sometimes asserted that the restrictive texts in the New Testament cannot mean what they appear to say because there are exceptions in the Old and the New Testaments. Here we might mention the example of Deborah in the book of Judges,²⁵ the presence of female prophets in various contexts (it is clear in the New Testament that both men and women prophesied, but it seems that the content of these prophecies was to be judged by the church leadership), and the curious reference to Junia in Romans 16:7: “Greet Andronicus and Junia(s), my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles.” Because some ancient manuscripts render the name as “Junia” (feminine form), a question emerges: do we have here a reference to a female apostle? Three matters need to be dealt with.²⁶ First, was Junia(s) a woman? Older and many contemporary translations rendered the name as male (“Junias”) but a good text-critical case can be made for the feminine reading. Second, was she prominent among the apostles or “held in regard by the apostles”? Both are possible, but the first is a more natural translation of the Greek. Third, what does Paul mean by “apostle”? New Testament scholars now generally recognize that the Greek word *apostolos* is used in a narrower and a broader sense—sometimes it refers narrowly to the twelve plus Paul who were special representatives of Christ and witnesses of the resurrection. Sometimes, however, it is used more broadly of one who is “sent out” on a mission or task.²⁷ In this context (assuming the feminine form “Junia”), we think it probable that Andronicus and Junia were a husband and wife missionary team.

What are we to make of this situation? The proliferation of theological and interpretive arguments for the ordination of women to all offices in the church over the last thirty years, and the novelty of these arguments in the larger historical context suggest to us that this trend is driven, not by new and compelling insights into the meaning of Scripture, but by a desire that the church’s practice be conformed to contemporary cultural and ideological trends. Moreover, the strained and even tendentious character of many of these arguments suggests that some proponents of women’s ordination have imbibed the post-modern notion of scholarship as a “political act” rather than a quest for truth.

IV. DOES THIS ISSUE REALLY MATTER?

We have already seen that the arguments for women’s ordination to all offices tend to undermine, both explicitly and implicitly, the doctrine of the full authority of Scripture. These factors compel us to recognize that the theological integrity of the church is at stake. But there are practical

²⁴ For a thorough analysis of these matters, see H. Scott Baldwin, “A Difficult Word: *authenteo* in 1 Timothy 2:12,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, edited by Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), pp. 65-80; and Andreas J. Köstenberger, “A Complex Sentence Structure in 1 Timothy 2:12,” in the same volume, pp. 81-103.

²⁵ Interestingly, this narrative seems more concerned about the problem of male abdication of responsibility (by Barak) than the propriety of female leadership.

²⁶ Our treatment here follows Hurley, *Man and Woman*, pp. 121-122.

²⁷ See Paul W. Barnett, “Apostle,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993): 45-51.

implications as well—most notably having to do with the unity of the church and the integrity of the family structure.

First of all, the unity of the church is threatened in that moves to ordain women to the offices of minister and elder in the context of Presbyterian polity will eventually result in the exclusion of those who cannot, for reasons of conscience, assent to the new policy. W. B. Evans has written:

While traditionalists have often been tolerant of progressive thinking, they themselves are often not tolerated once women's ordination is instantiated in a denomination. That has been the trend in the Church of Scotland, the PCUSA and elsewhere. The pattern here is for conservatives to be grandfathered for a time, but sooner or later ordination requirements are rewritten to include support for women's ordination. This is due primarily, not to liberal meanspiritedness, but to the logic of Reformed polity. The offices of minister and elder are the foundation of the polity, and everybody has to own the polity, to accept the ground rules of the game. Reformed churches cannot tolerate the presence of those who would challenge, even implicitly, the legitimacy of a large group of officeholders.²⁸

Second, the challenge to the biblical doctrine of male headship that is part of the argument for the ordination of women to the eldership poses a potentially devastating threat to the family structure. The New Testament writers underscore this point in two ways—by explicitly applying the headship principle to the family structure (e.g., Ephesians 5:22-33), and by repeatedly representing the church and the family as analogous (Ephesians 5:31-32; 1 Timothy 5:1-2; etc.).²⁹ Vern Poythress writes,

Maintaining male leadership in the church is not a matter of indifference. Evil effects inevitably arise when we deviate from God's pattern.Because of the close relation between family and church, godly family life stimulates appreciation of God as our heavenly Father, and appreciation of God stimulates godly family life. Both are enhanced by the example of mature, fatherly leaders within the church. Conversely, disintegration of household order within the church adversely affects both our consciousness of being in God's family and the quality of love within Christian families.³⁰

It is important for us to recognize that the debates over the ordination of women to the offices of minister and elder are part of a much larger secular-derived pattern of thought challenging the notion of divinely ordained social and behavioral norms. This challenge has involved the exaltation of individual rights and autonomy at the expense of corporate responsibilities and the interests of community. It is difficult to imagine any community, including the family, operating without structures of authority and obedience, and yet this is precisely what the feminist polemic against headship recommends. The contemporary crisis of the American family structure involving high divorce rates, rising illegitimacy, increasing numbers of children being raised in single-parent families—much of which has transpired since the 1960's—must be seen as, in part at least, the result of these trends.

²⁸ Evans, "NAPARC Community," p. 5.

²⁹ On the larger implications of this analogy, see Vern Sheridan Poythress, "The Church as Family: Why Male Leadership in the Family Requires Male Leadership in the Church," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), pp. 233-247.

³⁰ Poythress, "Church as Family," p. 245. For concrete findings regarding the effect of role deviations on children, see George Alan Rekers, *Shaping Your Child's Sexual Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982).

V. THE NATURE OF MINISTRY AND CHURCH OFFICE

It is important, first of all, to recognize the distinctive nature and character of the two offices of elder and deacon. The office of elder was instituted by God through the apostles to provide for the leadership of individual churches which the apostles had founded (Acts 14:23), and the qualifications for holding the office of elder are given in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). A prevalent metaphor in the New Testament for the role of elder is that of the "shepherd" guarding the flock (Acts 20:28-29; 1 Peter 5:1-5). As shepherds, the elders are to instruct through the teaching and preaching of the Word (1 Timothy 5:17), to lead by the example of a holy life (1 Peter 5:3), and to protect the church from "wolves" through the practice of church discipline (Acts 20:29-31). It is clear that this shepherding function involves the exercise of spiritual headship and authority and that this authority implies responsibility before God for the souls of those entrusted to the care of the elders (Hebrews 13:17).³¹

Although the term "deacon" (*diakonos*) is not used in Acts 6:1-6, the office itself probably had its beginnings here as the leaders of the Jerusalem church sought to meet the temporal needs of church members. These deacons were entrusted with the task of providing for the daily distribution of food to the needy in the church. Although the New Testament gives us few further hints as to the role of deacons, only elders are addressed as "overseers" or "shepherds" of the church and so it seems that the elders are responsible for spiritual oversight and guidance while the deacons are given the task of attending to the temporal needs of the church.

The polity or organizational structure of congregations in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church recognizes this scriptural distinction between the functions of elders and deacons. The Session is made up of the teaching elder or pastor and the ruling elders and it meets regularly to attend to the spiritual shepherding and overall leadership of the church. The Diaconate meets as a body to address the temporal needs of the local church.³² The elders and deacons meet together periodically to ensure that the total ministry program of the church may be administered in a decent and orderly way.

At the same time, we must recognize that a discussion of the offices of elder and deacon does not exhaust the notion of "ministry" in the church. As Scripture teaches, and as our *Form of Government* affirms, all Christians are called to the ministry of the church: "Every member of the Body of Christ has a ministry to fulfill as the church seeks to realize its mission in the world. The Christian's total life should be regarded as the exercise of his ministry" (*FOG* IV.A.2). Thus, some Reformed theologians have gone so far as to speak of a "general office" of all believers. While this language of a "general office" is perhaps problematic, we nevertheless affirm a key truth it contains—that all Christians are to be about the business of ministry. Moreover, we believe that this notion is useful for understanding the crucial role of women in the church. It helps us to recognize that, while women may be precluded from certain teaching and ruling functions, they are not barred from *ministry*.

VI. WHAT MAY WOMEN DO?

As we seek to apply the teachings of scripture to our contemporary situation in the church, we must recognize that both sides in the debate over women's ordination face the danger of going beyond what Scripture teaches. On the one hand, those favoring women's ordination to all offices are clearly more permissive than Scripture allows. On the other hand, those opposed

³¹ Hurley, *Man and Woman*, pp. 224-225.

³² The *Form of Government* reflects this biblical distinction of offices, speaking of the office of deacon as one of "sympathy and service" (*FOG* VII.A.1), while the elders are to "exercise government and discipline" (VIII.B.1) and "to guard and promote the spiritual welfare of the congregation" (VIII.B.2).

to women's ordination often face the temptation, out of reaction to the excesses of the contemporary situation, to be more restrictive than Scripture requires. We believe that a principle of generosity should prevail, and that clear and compelling Scriptural warrant must be required if women are to be excluded from functions in the church. Moreover, we believe that the church should encourage and support the ministry of women to the greatest extent permitted by Scripture.

Women as Elders and Ministers?—The qualifications for serving as an elder or minister are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Because the qualifications are phrased in male terms and because of the teaching in the previous chapter (1 Timothy 2:11-15) that "a woman is not to teach or to have authority over a man," the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church has rightly concluded that Scripture does not permit women to serve in the office of elder, and that the role of spiritually authoritative teaching and discipline in the church is reserved for male leadership.

Women in the Diaconate—As noted above, the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1969 allowed the Session of each congregation to decide whether to allow women to stand for election to the Diaconate. To be sure, there is some diversity of opinion (rooted in different exegetical conclusions regarding particular texts and in somewhat differing theologies of office and ministry) within the church on this matter, but we believe that both positions can be advocated in a manner that honors and affirms the full authority of Scripture and the confessional standards of the church. Given the fact and character of this diversity of opinion, we believe that the current policy is one which promotes the peace and purity of the church, and that it should be continued. We also believe that the biblical distinction between the offices of elder and deacon, as affirmed by our *Form of Government*, should be recognized and preserved.

Women as Teachers and Leaders?—The complexity of the biblical materials must be taken into account here. One the one hand, Paul declares: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man" (1 Timothy 2:12). On the other hand, women were permitted to edify the congregation through prophecy (1 Corinthians 11:5), and women did on occasion instruct men in more informal contexts (e.g., Acts 18:26). From this we conclude that Paul's prohibition on women teaching men and leading is not absolute, but rather that *certain types* of teaching and leadership functions are proscribed for women.³³ More specifically, we believe that those activities of teaching and leadership which are closely associated with the principle of male headship in the church (e.g., the offices of elder and minister) are inappropriate for women.

The path of wisdom in applying this biblical principle to specific situations clearly will involve analysis not only of the type of activity involved, but also the public perception of that activity. Another key factor here is motive. Women ought not to be placed in certain roles, or to seek such roles, where the intention is to subvert the principle of male headship or the polity of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.

We believe that there is a broad range of activity open to women in the church—as missionaries, Sunday School teachers, Directors of Christian Education, discussion leaders, youth workers, music and choir directors, counselors, church administrators, and so forth—and that the church has been blessed by such efforts and activities of women. At the same time, we believe that this fact underscores the crucial need for Sessions of local churches to fulfill their responsibility by actively teaching and overseeing the

³³ Here we echo the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood's 1988 "Danvers Statement": "In the church, redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation; nevertheless, some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men."

teaching ministries of the church.

VII. CONCLUSION

This report is presented with the fervent hope that the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church may reach unity and consensus on a topic that has proven to be divisive for many other denominations. It is our prayer that our church will be obedient to God's inerrant Word and that it will continue to benefit from and be blessed by the gifts of women as exercised in a manner consistent with the teachings of Scripture. As always, the path of obedience and the path of blessing are one and the same.

Respectfully submitted,

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