

Report of
deputies
Male/Female in the Church

**Men and Women in the service
of the Gospel**

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**General Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated)
to be held at Ede 2014**

Translators' note:

This translation from Dutch into English has been carried out on behalf of the *Deputies for Relations with Churches Abroad* (deputaten BBK) of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands – liberated (GKv). The Dutch text however will be determining. The usual copyright restrictions apply.

From time to time, clarifying footnotes have been inserted by the translators alongside the text of the report. These footnotes are identified with the abbreviation “-tr.”

The following abbreviations and acronyms may appear in the body of the report or its footnotes:

- GKv – Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland – vrijgemaakt
- NGK – Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken
- CGK – Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken
- PKN – Protestantse Kerk in Nederland

Deputies appointed by previous synods of the GKv:

- BBK: Betrekkingen Buitenlandse Kerken (relations with churches abroad)
- DKE: Deputaten Kerkelijke Eenheid (Deputies for ecclesiastical union – within the Netherlands)
- GDD: Generaal Diaconaal Deputaatschap (General deputies for diaconal matters)
- HKO: Herziening Kerkenorde (Revision of the Church Order)
- OOG: Ondersteuning Ontwikkeling Gereformeerde kerken (support for church development)

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references and quotations are taken from the *New International Version of the Bible* (NIV), 1984 edition. References to and quotations from the Reformed Confessions, and a quotation from the Reformed Church Order are taken from the *Book of Praise of the Canadian Reformed Churches*, Winnipeg, Premier Publishing, 2008 edition.

Where possible, quotations from other works have used existing published translations, and are footnoted as such. Where existing translations were not available, the translations were carried out by the translators of this report themselves.

To the members of the General Synod

17 August 2013

Letter of submission attached to the report *Men and Women in the service of the Gospel*

Esteemed members of the General Synod,

Herewith we submit to you, for your discussion, the report of the Deputies *Male/Female in the Church*, appointed by the previous Synod.

We hope that this report may contribute to further reflection on the manner in which men and women are employed in the service of the Gospel. In our view, there is a need for broader reflection, together with other churches of the Reformed confession at home and abroad. The position we have developed may serve to clarify this reflection. We do not pretend to have presented the last word on this matter; however, we have attempted as deputies to bring the discussion concerning men and women in the church further. Deputy Dick Slump has indicated that he is unable to lend his support to this position; he sets out his view in the – attached – statement.

It goes without saying that we are heartily ready to provide further elaboration and to answer any questions. In anticipation of your discussion, we have resolved not to interact with earlier reactions to this report, such as in the press.

With kind greetings,

Harmke Vlieg-Kempe,
secretary

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1 Introduction

1.1 The task and its prior history

The General Synod (GS) of the Reformed Churches (liberated) in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Kerken – vrijgemaakt: GKv) decided in 2005 to appoint deputies with the name: *'Women in the Church'*. By means of a problem analysis, based in particular on empirical research, this committee was to produce an overview of questions and problems the churches have identified around the theme of 'women in the church'. It was also asked to develop a plan of action to arrive at a sound, Scripturally supported response to the questions and problems that the research would identify (Acts, GS 2005, Art 52).

These deputies submitted a report to GS 2008, which included an analysis with respect to the content of the problem, and the findings of a survey within the churches. In response, GS 2008 decided to undertake a three-strand investigation: (1) academic reflection, (2) reflection within the churches, (3) preparation of practical decisions for the short term.

Theological reflection that was conducted by the Theological University in Kampen led to the publication of Myriam Klinker-De Klerck's *Als vrouwen het Woord doen. Over Schriftgezag, hermeneutiek en het waarom van de apostolische instructie aan vrouwen* (TU-Bezinningsreeks 9; Barneveld: De Vuurbaak 2011). To support reflection within the churches, a discussion guide and an accompanying DVD on this subject were produced.

Having discussed these findings, GS 2011-2012 decided the following (Acts GS 2011, Art 29):

Decision 2:

To again appoint Deputies Male/Female in the Church, with the mandate:

- a. *To answer the following questions:*
 1. *Is it permissible, on the basis of Scripture, beside brothers, also to appoint sisters in the church to the office of deacon? Which consequences will the answer to this question have for the task and the responsibilities of deacons?*
 2. *Is it permissible, on the basis of Scripture, beside brothers, to appoint also sisters in the church to the offices of elder and minister?*
 3. *Given the answers to the above questions, which common statements and agreements are required and/or possible?*
- b. *Provide the churches, on request, with support in regard to reflection on this subject. In doing so, the deputies shall:*
 - *take as their starting point a Biblically-grounded view of the service of men and women within the church of Christ that is Biblically responsible, using study material that is already available;*
 - *take into account the outcomes of prior reflection and decisions of consistories;*
 - *pay careful attention to statements of related churches within and outside of the Netherlands;*
 - *take into account issues relating to church government, and questions arising from church planting projects;*
 - *in carrying out the various aspects of this mandate, obtain relevant information and advice from the Theological University and the various synodical deputies, in particular BBK, DKE, GDD, HKO and OOG*.*

* These initials refer to the following deputyships appointed by General Synods of the churches:

BBK: Betrekkingen Buitenlandse Kerken (relations with churches abroad)

DKE: Deputaten Kerkelijke Eenheid (Deputies for ecclesiastical union – within the Netherlands)

GDD: Generaal Diaconaal Deputaatschap (General deputies for diaconal matters)

HKO: Herziening Kerkenorde (Revision of the Church Order)

OOG: Ondersteuning Ontwikkeling Gereformeerde kerken (support for church development)

The executive of GS 2011 identified two matters that ought to have priority: to conclude properly the theological examination, by coming to a clear conclusion on the role of men and women, and to explore what, in terms of governance, would be wise, achievable and prudent.

Given this mandate, we (in consultation with the executive of GS 2011) interpreted our mandate as follows. We do not intend to repeat the reflection that has already taken place within and outside our churches. On the basis of material that is already available, we must provide answers to the questions we received in our mandate. In doing so, we are to give explicit attention to the manner in which these answers might be implemented within the churches.

This report brings together the work that the deputies have carried out between 2011 and 2013. We have made a conscious effort to produce a concise and readable text, so that a broader audience is able to read along with us. In addition, in five places we include a section entitled 'Discussion' (1.3, 3.4, 4.2, 5.2 and 6.5). We have done this to show that we are acutely aware of the questions that may arise, and to provide avenues to facilitate further discussion.

1.2 What is the problem?

In this section, we wish to begin by clarifying what precisely the problem is for which we are attempting to find a solution. This problem can be characterised as theological: how do we read the Bible? At the same time, this theological problem is partly engendered by social and cultural shifts, and by changes in the way church members think and live.

1.2.1 The social and cultural context

It is clear that compared to the past, both men and women have much more opportunity to participate fully in the breadth of social and community life at large. Girls can now study and pursue a career. Women exercise leadership and fulfil responsible tasks in all kinds of areas of life.

Within the GKv, too, we witness increasing activity of women in a range of functions. Previously women were involved in work with children, in leading women's associations, in carrying out pastoral visits and the like. Slowly but surely, however, there has been a shift towards women taking on that involve leadership and instruction. Currently, women carry out tasks within the GKv that previously were chiefly or exclusively reserved for men: they provide catechesis, they serve as secretaries for consistories, they carry out pastoral and diaconal activities, they manage the churches' material and financial affairs, and they sit on all kinds of committees, including calling committees and those that evaluate the sermons and other work done by the ministers. In addition, since GS 1993, women are able to participate in the election of elders, deacons and ministers.

Increasingly, church members experience a tension between the opportunities available to women in society at large, and the comparatively restricted space for women in church life. This also leads to a tension between 'doctrine' – the official position of the churches in regard to the exclusion of women from the offices of the church – and 'life', the manner in which women put their gifts to work in the church, including instructional and leadership activities.

¹

The previous deputies, who examined whether women could be permitted to serve in the offices of elder, deacon or minister, have carried out an empirical investigation into this situation.

¹ *De Reformatie* devoted an entire issue to this matter (Vol 88, No 13, 14 June 2013)

A broad and thorough survey (in 2005) revealed that there is a range of views within our churches in relation to the role of women. Some of the findings of this survey:

1. Women participate in all kinds of ways in our churches;
2. Roughly half of our members have a positive view of women serving as deacons;
3. A minority of members have a positive view of women serving as elders or ministers;
4. The views of members correlate to some extent with their age and level of education;
5. There are differences of opinion and a degree of unease about the way in which Biblical prescriptions concerning men and women are to be understood.

Since 2005, no further empirical investigations concerning this subject have taken place. Some new developments have occurred, however, which have added to the urgency regarding the matter of 'women in office'.

Discussions with the deputies for the support of church development (OOG) have shown that in several church planting projects the matter of men-women-office is a significant issue. It is especially new believers for whom the exclusion of women from the offices is incomprehensible, and there is unease among 'church people' as to how established practice can be credibly defended. Where new congregations are instituted, choices are made that diverge from this practice. An example is the church plant project 'Stroom' in Amsterdam, where both men and women are active in the leadership team.

Discussions with other deputies reveal that they, too, are giving thought to the possibility of 'women in office'. In their 2010 report entitled *Schets Diakenschap*, the deputies GDD stated that there is no Biblical objection to allowing women to become deacons, provided the office of deacons is separated from tasks that involve ruling. There is a need to examine what the office of deaconess might be, and how it is to be carried out.

The deputies for the revision of the Church Order (HKO), in their first draft revision, proposed that the office of deacon be opened to women. Subsequently however, they withdrew this proposal; they did not see it as their task to have a decisive voice in this discussion.

There have been similar shifts in other churches within the Protestant tradition. Some of them have opened all offices to women. This has occurred in, for instance, the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN) and the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken (NGK).

In 2004, the NGK decided to admit women to the various offices (elders and ministers as well as deacons). The tendency within the NGK, which has both proponents and opponents of this decision, is to make an effort to find each other in these differences. In practice, attempts are made to come to an accommodation where these differences do not become a breaking point.

In 1998, after their deputies submitted separate majority and minority reports, the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken (CGK) decided not to admit women to the offices.

From our discussions with the deputies for relations with churches abroad (BBK), it was apparent that the manner in which overseas churches deal with this matter is strongly dependent on their local culture. In our sister churches in Canada, Australia and the USA, developments within the GKv on this point are viewed with great concern. They reproach their Dutch sister churches for being too much under the influence of the spirit of the time. In Latin America, this discussion has little if any attention. Churches in Asia, Africa and India often have women as deacons, but do not admit them to the ruling or teaching offices.

A general survey of our sister churches abroad shows that none of them have women in teaching or ruling offices, or are presently inclined to move in that direction.

1.2.2 The theological position

Whereas the social and cultural shifts, and changes in the ways of thinking and living of church members determine the context of this issue, the question itself finds its focal point in a theological discussion.

This discussion concerns the question whether in our day and age women may be admitted to (one of) the offices. Current developments reveal that on this point the Bible is understood in differing ways. A variety of points and arguments are advanced, such as the creation order, the effects of the fall into sin and of the redemption in Christ, and the questions as to what constitutes 'headship'. Much has already been written about these matters, also in orthodox circles. The point of departure is always taken in the reliability of the Scriptures; at the same time the biological and psychological differences between men and women are acknowledged, and the view that these differences are intended to be complementary is emphasised. All emphasise that men and women are equally sinful, and that both men and women need and receive grace in Christ. The differences in understanding – unavoidably – evoke the desire for renewed reflection on what the Bible tells us about the position of men and women.

More important, however, than the various arguments around 'may we?' or 'may we not?' is the underlying theological question which we could formulate as follows: "In what way do Biblical prescriptions, given in a concrete cultural situation, apply to our present situation?"

This (hermeneutical) question plays a role in all attempts to understand Scripture. It is to be regretted that our Confessions do not answer this question directly. The recognition, however, that the Word of God is the highest and final authority for disciples of Jesus Christ, is the most important starting point and anchor as we answer this question.

Nevertheless, this recognition does not yet provide us with a concrete solution to the question concerning men and women in the church.² A one-to-one application of Biblical prescriptions leads to tension and alienation, as the developments described above show. Uncertainty exists as to how these prescriptions are to be applied; we do not always know how the Word of God is to be applied in a new situation (see conclusion 5 of the survey described above). At the same time we are convinced that the Bible, even though it was not written in the 21st century, wants to be and is fully relevant in our present time and context. From this perspective we search in hope for ways to let Paul's prescriptions be meaningful in the Netherlands in our own time.

The question remains, then: "In what way do Biblical prescriptions, given in a concrete cultural situation, apply to our present situation?"

At the same time, it is part of our present *church* situation that the discussion concerning this question is accompanied by acute sensitivities. The results of the 2005 survey show that

² J.J. Schreuder, in his *Dienende mannen en vrouwen in het huwelijk en in de kerk* (Bedum: Woord en Wereld, 2010) dismisses certain lines of argument, but he does not describe his own hermeneutically responsible approach to the problem. He quite rightly articulates his point of departure as follows: "*Whenever we think about how the words of Scripture ought to be explained, and ask ourselves how God wants us to apply them, we begin a process in which we must listen to the words of a specific part of Scripture*" (p.14, our translation). Of course, it is self-evident that texts must be explained within the context of the Bible as a whole. H.J.C.C.J. Wilschut is more explicit in acknowledging that hermeneutical questions play a role in our reading of the Bible, but he pays virtually no attention to the relationship between the context of the Bible and that of the present-day reader, and his own perspective does not reflect this relationship either (*Vrouw en kerkelijk ambt. Een bijbelse verkenning*. Van Berkum, 2010, 9-16).

there are great differences of view within our churches concerning the position of women, differences which have obviously not been resolved: neither by successive reports of deputies, nor by the discussion and reflection that these reports set in motion.

After all, there are some for whom the simple asking of this question is virtually equivalent to Scripture criticism. Some of them have taken the *a priori* position that to them, any outcome in which women are admitted to any office is unacceptable. Others pay less attention than ever to decisions that are made at synodical level; they may, regardless of what is decided at a national level, do what seems good to them. As a result, the discussion is often not about the questions themselves, but only about the position they have (already) taken.³

In addition, the culture of discussion within our churches is not by definition characterised by an attitude of humility, in which the other is valued above oneself (Philippians 2:3). From both sides, caricatures sometimes play a role, which can strongly colour the discussion.

We also need to consider whether it is the task of a General Synod, in questions of this kind, to endorse or reject one particular view. This is all the more so when in taking a certain position, the Synod at the same time cuts a Gordian knot. Are the churches' interests truly served when the convictions of one (greater or lesser) part of the church are validated, and by so doing irrevocably alienating another (lesser or greater) part?

These considerations have led us to articulate (in relatively few pages) a position that in our view is – on the basis of Scripture – possible and responsible, even though we follow a path in our argumentation and conclusions that is different from what has been commonly accepted in our churches. We intend, in this manner, to further the discussion.

1.3 Discussion

The first point of discussion that comes to mind is the notion that if one would only take the Bible seriously, there really is no problem. Obedience to what the Bible prescribes will solve the problem. The Bible speaks clearly about the manner in which women might function in the church: they can carry out all sorts of tasks and functions, but they are not called to the (ruling) office. Our churches have always taken this position, with an express desire to be obedient to Scripture. Some will accept this position joyfully; others will have more difficulty with it. The latter case is then just a pastoral problem – and no more than that.

In the view of the deputies, this presentation touches a very sensitive point. Is it true that the problem man-woman-office is in essence a pastoral problem, because Scripture is unequivocal, and therefore its interpretation leaves no room for discussion? Or is the problem a real one, where our reading of Scripture places us before questions that demand a resolution?

In our view, the uncertainty surrounding this question (how must we read the Scriptures in addressing the question whether or not women may be admitted to (one of) the offices?) is a real uncertainty.

It is clear, in the context of church plant initiatives (such as 'Stroom'), contacts with other churches (such as the NGK), and the prior history of our deputyship, that the answers that were provided earlier no longer satisfy a number of church members. Coming to a carefully weighed decision is therefore urgent. This implies a reflection on the current interpretation of Biblical data and its continuing tenability. Our report is characterized by an attitude of investigation, which is open to the possibility of other interpretations than the traditional

³ See for example, the provocative article of the sociologist W.H. Dekker: "Zo gauw mogelijk stemmen", *Kontekstueel* 27/1 (2012): 5-8.

one. We do so boldly, given that the light of the Word of God will shine in every time (see for example Psalm 119:105, II Peter 1:19), constantly bringing old and new treasures to light (Matthew 13:52), but not always in the same manner.

The Bible itself is a history of revelation, in which the Old Testament is continually interpreted (for example by Paul) with a view to Christ, also in non-Jewish contexts. ⁴

It must also be said that some New Testament prescriptions do not always carry the same (eternal) weight. No-one thinks it strange that we no longer practice the holy kiss (even though it was quite common in the New Testament church: Romans 16:16; I Corinthians 16:20; II Corinthians 13:12; I Thessalonians 5:26; I Peter 5:4), and we no longer expect elderly widows to have washed the feet of the saints, or younger widows to remarry and have children (I Timothy 5:10,14, see also John 13:14-15). “Just do obediently what the Bible says”, as we sometimes hear it, may appear to be a simple and easy-to-use rule of thumb, but in reality it is an oversimplification. The American philosopher Wolterstorff, who stands in the Reformed tradition, has warned against an arbitrary use of Bible texts, and a selective application of principles in regard to the relation between men and women. ⁵

The Bible has been not come down to us from heaven by parachute. It is a real given that it has been read differently within changing contexts. This fits with the Reformed point of departure that no human writings and no human tradition may stand above the Word of God (Article 7, Belgic Confession). We cannot *a priori* exclude the possibility that a manner of Bible reading in relation to men-women-office, which up till now has enjoyed the churches’ sanction, might not, in a changing context, lead to a different conclusion. When we read Scripture itself, carefully and with Spirit-led self-reflection, we may trust that the Spirit will show us the way. This is true, not only for the choices we make regarding the content of the position of women within the church, but also about the manner in which we deal with our differences in regard to those choices.

1.4 The structure of this report

Our mandate was to provide an answer to the question whether it is permissible, on the basis of Scripture, beside brothers, also to appoint sisters in the church to the office of deacon, elder and minister.

We are of the opinion that the first two questions that GS 2011 asked belong inseparably together at a fundamental level; practical considerations, however, may well make it reasonable to distinguish between these offices. We also understand the urgency that is expressed in these questions. In the current situation in the churches, opinions concerning the relation between men and women are sometimes diametrically opposed. In this situation, an unequivocal ‘yes’ or ‘no’ is quite unlikely to provide a real solution. It could so easily happen that such a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ is followed by a fierce dispute, in which attention is paid only to its practical implementation, and a substantive discussion concerning the underlying vision hardly takes place.

For this reason, it is difficult to provide a clear answer to the question: which common statements and agreements would be required and/or possible? More than anything else, there is a continuing need for reflection on the manner in which the Bible is (or perhaps

⁴ Richard B. Gaffin, “The vitality of Reformed dogmatics”, in: J.M. Batteau e.a. (eds.), *The Vitality of Reformed Theology. Proceedings of the International Theological Congress June 20-24th 1994 Noordwijkerhout, The Netherlands* (Kampen: Kok, 1994), 16-50. In Hebrews. 1:1-2 he identifies three ‘interrelated factors’: revelation as a historic process; the diversity inherent in this process, and the eschatological orientation to Christ. [25]

⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Bible and Women. Another Look at the ‘Conservative’ Position”, in: *Hearing the Call. Liturgy, Justice, Church, and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 202-209.

should be) read. In addition, we as churches must be able to show how much room there is to conduct such a conversation. In this post Christian society, a typically Christian manner of discussion must characterize us in our conversation.

For these reasons, we, proceeding from our responsibility as deputies, have chosen to set out our view in this report, in the hope that this will be thoroughly discussed in the churches, both at home and abroad. Hence, we have intentionally exercised restraint in the formulation of the attached recommendations. The material that was presented earlier by (among others) previous deputies has been digested and used, but their work has not been repeated. Our report is structured as follows:

1. Introduction.
2. In the discussion whether women may or may not be ordained to (one of) the offices, the use of certain Scripture passages and Scriptural data will necessarily play a principal and historic role. Therefore, we will begin by reading a number of relevant Bible texts in the context of our present-day 21st century Western European society. After all, this is the context in which God has placed us. This will also indicate the reach of this report, without making any judgements about what has previously been said about this subject.
3. Directly linked to this, we will evaluate this manner of reading the Bible, and give an accounting of it. In this, we will use material as it was developed in the discussions with the NGK.
4. Next, we intend to engage in reflection on the Bible passages under examination.
5. Then, we will articulate questions that may arise when we realize that the answers we offer refer to the *offices* in the church. What does our view of the office mean for the question whether or not women may serve in them?
6. We also wish to discuss how we ought to deal with the differences of view concerning this matter. Regardless of our report and the decisions the General Synod might make – the differences will remain. The third question/instruction for our deputies deals with this aspect.
7. Finally, we wish to provide some directions for further discussion concerning this matter.

2 The Bible: texts and lines

We would like to begin this section by discussing a number of Bible texts that have a bearing on the theme of women in office. In this discussion, passages and information from Scripture that are relevant because of their principle and historical content play an important role. It would go too far to provide an exhaustive overview. Moreover, that has been done many times before. We will limit ourselves to a selection of Bible texts that in our view are relevant to the context of the 21st-century Western society in which we live. Further, we will make a number of clarifying comments.

2.1 Man and woman in Genesis 1-4

In Genesis 1, which describes the creation, we read:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (vs.26-28).

In the next chapter the creation of man and woman are described from a different perspective. Here we read that God considers: *"It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him"* (Genesis 2:16). And when at last the woman is given to the man, the man sings for joy about the deep life communion between man and woman: this is how they have been given to each other.

Thus, mankind together, male *and* female, and individually, as man and as woman, will show the image of God. The fact that God speaks in the plural here ("Let us...") has from the first exegesis been related to God-the-Triune. Mankind (individually and together) is the image of this God-in-relationship. The fact that this has consequences for mutual relationships among mankind in general is theologically no longer in dispute. Still, the implications of this truth for the concrete relationships between man and woman have had relatively little attention.⁶ What then, are those consequences? As we ponder the concrete applications of this question there is a risk that we may reason back from our own conceptions or our own expectations of man-woman relationships to God Himself.⁷

Some things are clear enough. To begin with, the first chapters of Genesis describe the relationship between man and woman before the Fall as a relationship of equals. The fact that the LORD God calls the woman 'a helper' (ch 2:16) could be taken to suggest an order of rank in the relationship. Still, from other Old Testament texts, it is clear that the Hebrew *ezer* (helper) is also used for God, who with his mighty power comes to the aid of people.⁸ In Genesis 2, then, the word points out that man and woman form such a complementary union that together they are enabled to fulfil their life's purpose under the blessing of God: to be

⁶ A significant exception is Almatine Leene's dissertation: *Triniteit, antropologie en ecclesiologie. Een kritisch onderzoek naar implicaties van de godsleer voor de positie van mannen en vrouwen in de kerk* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn *Motief*, 2013).

⁷ Leene points to this danger, p.24. She herself makes an effort to reason in the opposite direction.

⁸ Timothy and Kathy Keller "The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitments with the Wisdom of God" (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011).

fruitful, to populate the earth, and to have dominion over it (Genesis 1:28). In this way, they together are the image of God, in which there is no order of rank.

It is clear from the account of the fall into sin that after man and woman have transgressed the command of God, this shared calling can only be partly fulfilled, and then only with the most intense effort. They have broken their life-communion, and shame for each other raises barriers between man and woman. It is only with the help of God that their communion can be restored. The differences between man and woman are abundantly clear. It is only *together in their difference* that they will be able to deal with life in its brokenness since Genesis 3, and then only when they orient themselves on God Himself. During the centuries that followed, this relationship has been embodied and trialled in a broad variety of social and cultural patterns and practices. The heart of what Genesis tells us about how man and woman can order their lives lies, not first of all in an order of ranking, but in a unity-in-faithfulness in which this communion takes shape. All social relationship between male and female, whether inside or outside of marriage, that does not do justice to this shared communion as creatures, also fail to do justice to this core.

What we read in Genesis about a certain ‘creation order’ is open to discussion.⁹ Within Reformed ethics, this expression has long had the colour of a certain pattern for living that the sovereign God has imposed on his creatures.¹⁰ The expression ‘creation order’ itself may not actually be found in the Bible, but faith in the Creator, who literally gives form and order to his creation, is thoroughly Biblical.¹¹ As Creator, He also determines and establishes relationships between people: those between parents and children, between men and women, as well as relationships in society and political life. The fact that people themselves shape these divinely created relationships is part of their own responsibility and freedom.¹² This is also true about the concrete form of the relationship between man and woman. Later in this chapter, we will come back to how this is given shape in the New Testament.

2.2 Man and woman in the rest of the Old Testament

Within the framework of this report, all the Biblical lines about the relation between man and woman cannot be traced. It is clear, however, that the position of man and woman, certainly in the earlier parts of the Old Testament, is coloured by the culture in which the history of God’s salvation unfolds. We think of aspects such as polygamy, arranged marriages, provision for widows, laws regarding sexuality, and the like. When certain situations are described in the Bible, or even when in these situations God makes certain stipulations, that does not by definition imply God’s permission or command for us.

⁹ In relation to this paragraph, see Hans Schaeffer, *Createdness and Ethics. The Doctrine of Creation and Theological Ethics in the Theology of Colin E. Gunton and Oswald Bayer* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006).

¹⁰ “‘Moral world order’ is to be understood as an ordering, established and maintained by God himself, to which His creatures, gifted with self-awareness and self-determination, ought to submit themselves” W. Geesink, *Gereformeerde Ethiek* [Vol. I] (Kampen: Kok, 1931), 190.

¹¹ Leene describes ‘creation order’ in terms of ‘rank order’, and then concludes: “The discussion above shows that there is no reference here to a ‘creation order’. And even if this were to be so, it is still open to question whether such an order ought to be upheld.” (p 206.) This conclusion appears to us to be premature.

¹² “A form of living must develop, in which both men and women can respond to their deepest destiny. It asks, as it were, to listen to Scripture, which points this way.” G.C. den Hertog, “De ene onderdanigheid is de andere niet. Enige hermeneutische overwegingen rond de man-vrouwverhouding in bijbels licht”, in: J.M. Aarnoudse e.a., *Vrouwen op en zij-spoor? Emancipatie van de vrouw en het verstaan van de Schrift in gereformeerd perspectief* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1998), 246-269 [262].

In the Old Testament law, God explicitly extended his protection to women. For example, Deuteronomy 22:25-27 tells us that whoever rapes a woman in the open field must be put to death. It must be said, however, that in this regard the Old Testament does not differ from other laws that applied in the context of the ancient Near East.¹³

It is remarkable that a number of women are mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, as Matthew presents it. What do these women have in common? In spite of - or perhaps because of - their tragic circumstances, these four women, mentioned by name, filled an initiating role in the Old Testament. They contributed to the progress of the history of Israel, even to decisive turning points in this history. Wim Weren points out that Matthew ascribes a similar role to Mary also.¹⁴

As we draw together the lines of the Old Testament, we see that on the one hand the Bible aligns with the culture of its time, while on the other hand the Lord confronts it in a critical and restorative manner.

2.3 The hardest sayings of Paul

To begin with, we present Paul's three hardest sayings, as regards the relationship between men and women. In order, these are: the man as head of the woman; the command to be silent; and the prohibition to teach.¹⁵

- I Corinthians 11:3-16 (reproduced in part)

³...I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. ⁵**But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head—it is the same as having her head shaved.** ⁶For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then **she should cover her head.**

⁷A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. [...] ¹⁶If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

The man as head of the woman: this is part of the succession: woman – man – Christ – God. This series not only reflects the ordering as Paul sees it from his position as an apostle, but also the vertical ordering of Greco-Roman society. Man and woman each have their own place in this social hierarchy. Within this ranking there is indeed a degree of authority. Paul has a double meaning in mind here for the expression 'head' (the visible part of any person, the part that sticks out, so to speak). The man may not 'cover' Christ. For the woman, the

¹³ Compare Carol Pratt Bradley, "Women in Hebrew and Ancient Near Eastern Law", *Studia Antiqua* 3/1 (2003): 3-46. It is all the more striking that S. van Ruller concludes, with considerable understatement: "It is remarkable how few cases of rape resulted in a conviction a century ago: during the period 1896-1905 an average of 5.5 annually in all of the Netherlands. A powerful selection mechanism must have been at work." ("Straftoemeting in 1900 en nu. De delicten diefstal en geweld", *Justitiële Verkenningen* 25/9 [1999], 124-133). Just what this selection mechanism may have been, he does not say, but there can be no doubt that a certain conception of the relation between men and women had an influence.

¹⁴ Wim Weren, "Vijf vrouwen aan de wieg van Jezus", in: *Vensters op Jezus. Methoden in de uitleg van de evangeliën* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1998, tweede druk 1999), 164-177.

¹⁵ In our treatment of these statements of Paul, we draw on material from *Ongemakkelijke teksten van Paulus* (eds. Rob van Houwelingen en Reinier Sonneveld; Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn *Motief*, 2012), by Myriam Klinker-De Klerck. A condensed version of the relevant chapters may be found in Appendix 1 of this report. We thank the editor, the publisher and the author for their cooperation. Compare the well-known book *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, by Walter C. Kaiser Jr., F.F. Bruce a.o. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

wedding veil, also worn in public after the marriage, covers her head. Paul presents this within the framework of honour and shame, an important pair of concepts in ancient times: the woman is the honour of her spouse. Were a woman to remove her head covering, her wedding veil (the symbol of her propriety and innocence), she puts her husband to shame, and she erases the distinction between man and woman. The behaviour of his spouse has an effect on the public image of the man. And when she does so, she brings shame upon the image and glory of God, which in turn reflects negatively on the church of Christ ¹⁶. Therefore, says Paul: women and men, honour your head (in both senses of the word)!

- I Corinthians 14:34-35

³⁴ *Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. ³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.*

This text appears to contradict the previous one. In the former, women were permitted to speak and to prophesy, provided at least that they covered their head. Now, in this text, they are forbidden to speak. This should not be read as an absolute prohibition to speak; here, Paul is talking about the contribution that women might make during the discussion of prophecy in the assembly. His argument to enjoin women to be silent is that of the submission, or obedience (here, the Greek has the verb *hupotassein*) of a woman with respect to her husband. The male head of the household was the *paterfamilias*. Inside the house as well as outside, everyone is required to submit to the ranked ordering of society, says Paul. That is also what the law says, he argues, even though it is unclear what he is referring to. He may have an oral interpretation of the Torah in mind.

Here too, we encounter the motif of honour and shame. It would be shameful for a (married) woman to carry on a discussion in the assembly, that is in public. In addition, Paul speaks of good order in the church (v.40), and the fact that the same rule applies in all the congregations of the saints (v. 33). Paul also has a missionary motivation in mind: after all, the Christian assembly had a public character (ch 14:23).

- I Timothy 2:11-14

¹¹ *A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.*

Paul requires – and he does so with apostolic authority – that women, during the instruction in doctrine that occurs when the congregation assembles, assume an obedient attitude. They do so in submission (the Greek uses the verb *hupotassein*), quiet and unassuming, rather than dominating the proceedings. A woman may accept instruction, but she may not herself instruct, for that is an exercise of authority, which would cause unrest. It would turn the world on its head; Paul illustrates that by referring to the history of the first human couple: their order of creation is at the same time an order of rank. Even though Eve was created second, she was the first to transgress the command of God in Paradise¹⁷.

2.4 Other New Testament texts

In addition to those mentioned above, other texts play an important role in setting out how the New Testament gives shape to the relationship between man and woman.

¹⁶ Of course, Paul does not deny that the woman too is the image of God; his point here, however, is that she is the glory of her husband.

¹⁷ See also: P.H.R. van Houwelingen, *Timoteüs en Titus. Pastorale instructiebrieven* (CNT; Kampen: Kok, 2009, 2nd edition 2012), 70-84 [78].

- Galatians 3:28
There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
- Ephesians 5:21-33
²¹Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²²Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰for we are members of his body. ³¹“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³²This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

At first reading, these texts of Paul appear to apply less directly to the matter of ‘women in office’. Still, the same prescriptions and motifs return here also: the requirement that the woman ought to submit herself to the male and acknowledge his authority. At the same time, these passages speak of ‘mutual submission: *‘submit to one another’*, and *‘male and female ... are all one in Christ Jesus’*’.

Galatians 3 explicitly speaks of ‘male and female’ (Greek: *arsen kai thèlu*), not ‘man and woman’. This points back to Genesis 1:27: *‘male and female he created them’*. In Paul’s letter, then, the situation before the fall resonates, when male and female expressed the image of God, unaffected and unconstrained by sin. It is also clear from Galatians 3, that what were thought - in the experience and culture of the time - to be insurmountable differences between various social groups, are relativized in Christ. In Him, a unity was established that brought about radical changes in the character of prevailing social relationships.¹⁸

In relation to Ephesians 5, it is striking that more is said about married men and women: the husband too is shown his place in a loving relationship with his wife. Here too, just as in I Corinthians 11, a direct connection is made between the headship of the husband and the headship of Christ.

The new underlying motif for the mutual relationships described here is the fact that the relationship between the man and the woman in marriage corresponds to and is symbolic of the relationship between Christ and his church. Here too, it is clear that something that was unthinkable within the social environment of the day has become a reality in the Christian church: slaves and masters, men and women are one in Christ Jesus. As the mutual relationship between husband and wife in marriage is worked out, the wife assumes the role of ‘receiver’; the husband that of ‘giver’. The husband reflects Christ in his attitude of love, self-giving and priesthood. And the wife reflects the church in her receiving and receptive attitude.

¹⁸ “Every person, whether male or female, is called to give expression, before the face of God, to ‘submission’, as the place where their new life assumes its form”. Den Hertog, p 263.

The same motif returns in, for example, Colossians 3 and I Peter 3. Here it becomes clear that the relationship between husband and wife within the Christian church can exert a salutary radiance towards the outside world.

2.5 In conclusion

In conclusion, it is striking that in regard to the relationship between husband and wife the New Testament displays a clear pattern: the wife ought to submit to her husband, and the husband must love his wife and respect her.¹⁹ This is a consistent and univocal message. At the same time, texts that do not touch on this mutual relationship show greater diversity.

It is clear that Paul forbids excessive adornment and a dominant attitude in a woman. She must behave modestly and quietly. That leaves no room for her to teach or exercise authority over a man. It is not altogether clear, however, how this is to be applied in practice. A woman may pray and prophesy, but she may not interpret prophecy or give instruction. But what exactly does that mean, in practice?

In order to answer this question it is important to examine the arguments behind each of these prescriptions, namely...

- ... a prevailing Christian style of living ('this is our practice');
- ... the relationship between husband (man) and wife (woman), which reflects the relationship between Christ and his church;
- ... the Old Testament: creation, the fall into sin, the requirements of the Law;
- ... what is generally regarded as honourable or shameful;
- ... the progress of the Gospel in the world, or the protection of the church against error.

Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, at the end of her booklet *Als vrouwen het woord doen*, describes the interplay between these arguments, and comes to the following conclusions:

1. The central argument is consistently the required submission of the woman (wife) in relation to the man (husband).
2. This is motivated in terms of notions such as honour and shame, of reverence for God and for Christ, of references to the Old Testament and of the attracting influence of this submission. For Paul, all of these motivations form a coherent whole.
3. The manner in which a wife might dishonour her husband is determined by the cultural customs of the time. Conforming to the existing order is salutary for the spread of the Gospel among outsiders.²⁰

2.6 Connection and content

Bible texts, whether from the Old or the New Testament, connect in a particular fashion to the culture of their own time and place, also when they engage critically with it.

In confirming the subordinate position of the woman, Paul makes connections with prevailing moral standards. He exhorts women to love their husbands and children, and to look after their households (see also I Timothy 5:14; Titus 2:4-5). Paul's contrast between the excessive adornment and the virtuous restraint of wives was not uncommon (compare I Timothy 2:9-10). At the same time, Paul uses typically Christian notions in his argument, such as reverence for God and for Christ, references to the Old Testament (creation, the fall and the Law), and the prevention of unnecessary criticism by outsiders.

¹⁹ The discussion whether this text refers exclusively to husbands or wives or that it addresses men and women more broadly ought not to be driven to extremes. During New Testament times, marriage was probably the prevailing situation for men and women generally. See the discussion by Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, *Herderlijke regel of inburgeringscursus?, Een bijdrage aan het onderzoek naar de ethische richtlijnen in 1 Timoteüs en Titus* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Academic, 2013), 40-42.

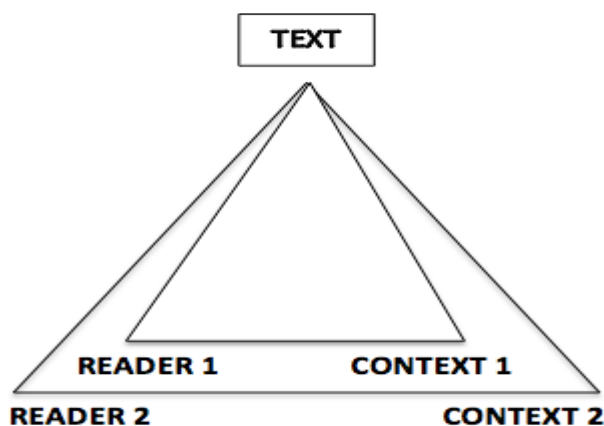
²⁰ Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, *Als vrouwen het Woord doen. Over Schriftgezag, hermeneutiek en het waarom van de apostolische instructie aan vrouwen* (TU-Bezinningsreeks 9; Barneveld: De Vuurbaak 2011).

Hence, we see that the central argument (the required subordination of the woman (wife) in relation to the man (husband) is presented as a distinctively Christian realization of prevailing cultural patterns, with a view to the progress of the Gospel.

3 Hermeneutical considerations

3.1 Text, reader, context

The fact that we are or become conscious of the specific manner in which we read the Bible is described in technical terms as 'hermeneutical awareness'. For the sake of clarity, we emphasise: this is not a new manner of dealing with the Bible. Reflection on the search for meaning has always been taking place. Previously, however, that happened less explicitly. At the present time, the process of coming to an understanding of meaning is itself being examined and described; that is what we call 'hermeneutics'. It is, of course, impossible to cover all the details of this process in a Deputies' report.²¹ We will limit ourselves to a broad outline.



The diagram above shows, in schematic form, what happens when Christians read the Bible. The smaller triangle represents the text in its original context, and for its first readers. In the larger triangle, the text is still central, but in a different context. We too are readers, and the text functions in our context also. There are many examples of such larger triangles: such as the time of Luther, the Netherlands in 1950, or Kenya today. The diagram aims to show how the reading of a text develops during the passage of time.

The order of the triangles is very important. The meaning of the text within the smaller triangle must be ascertained first, before coming to its meaning in the larger triangle. It is important, therefore, to make a distinction between the two. Sometimes, the reader may allow the two triangles to coincide; to do so could lead to two errors.

The first error is to apply the smaller triangle (the meaning of the text in its original context) directly to our situation; the second error is to begin with the larger triangle (the meaning of the text in our context) and to interpret this back to the earlier situation.

We will focus on the apostle Paul. Usually Paul does not simply state his personal opinion (sometimes he does, for instance in I Corinthians 7:12 and 40); he writes as apostle of Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 14:36,37). Still, it is important to be aware of the difference between our context and that of Paul. For our present topic, this plays out in at least five different aspects, which we set out below.

²¹ Anyone who wishes to read more about the reading of the Bible across the centuries is directed to the twin volumes of Arie Zwiep: *Tussen tekst en lezer. Een historische inleiding in de bijbelse hermeneutiek* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2009 and 2013).

- a. Paul's prescriptions in I Timothy 2 concerning the behaviour of men and women stand within the framework of the male-female relationship. That is why both categories are addressed, first separately and then in their mutual relationship. Where Paul, in his context, warns against dominant behaviour of women towards men, in our culture we are more likely to warn against domination of women by men.
- b. Paul's prescription is one for the church, but what he strives for in the church is substantially no different from what leading moral philosophers of his time also advocated. The stipulation that women ought to be silent in church was consistent with the accepted and prevailing social situation of his time (aside from a libertarian women's movement coming from Rome). In our time, this command runs counter to the accepted social situation.
- c. A great difference between the culture in New Testament times and ours is that then people thought collectively, while today we are much more inclined towards individualism. People lived more strongly as part of one single community, while today we participate in a range of social contexts. Today, we much more easily make our own decisions in all sorts of situations, and we are much less likely to be led by established moral tradition.
- d. Mediterranean culture in the time of the New Testament (and to a certain extent still today) was stamped by the polarity of honour and disgrace, in which the distinction between men and women played a key role. In our culture, equality comes first (compare Galatians 3:28). Hence: whoever behaved in a 'disorderly' manner, especially in the relationship between men and women, brought disgrace upon the whole community. The same thing was true within the church, the *familia* of God.
- e. Since the separation of church and state, the church has been pushed aside, out of the public domain. Paul, with his prescriptions in the first century AD, was still able to make links with a non-Christian environment. In the 21st century however, with these same prescriptions we create or strengthen an isolation from society that might unnecessarily hinder the progress of the proclamation of the Gospel.

Paul appears to have a two-fold drive in motivating his prescriptions, On the one hand, he draws on the account of creation, explicitly referring to the history of Genesis 1-3. We should keep in mind that in doing so he aims to preserve the established order, *both* in the *church* and in *society*. Paul sees the church as an ideal society, a pioneering outpost, as it were, of the Kingdom, where the good order of God is to be learned and practised in the actual life of society.

On the other hand, he also uses practical arguments that play a more implicit role. He has regard for the internal structure of the church (peace and order) as well as its external, missionary influence (its public image, what is honourable/shameful).

Two kinds of motivations can therefore be distinguished, and in the concrete application of Paul's instructions in ever-changing contexts, it is important to understand what drives him. Apparently, Paul was sufficiently flexible in his thinking (pastorally, rhetorically and theologically) that for him the various motivations were not mutually exclusive but supported and complemented each other.²²

In our (greatly changed) context as regards man-woman relationships, these motivations could easily become a hindrance to each other. This could happen, for example, with the Biblical concept of 'submission' (Greek: *hupotassein*). Paul understood this term within the framework of a certain ordering of society, while today it evokes a negative perception of the church among outsiders.

²² Compare T.E. van Spanje, *Inconsistentie bij Paulus? Een confrontatie met het werk van Heikki Räisänen* (Kampen: Kok, 1996).

3.2 Reflecting upon the process of understanding

In their report to General Synod 2011, the Deputies for Church Unity (DKE) articulated a view of hermeneutics that we would like to bring in here. One of the arguments that played a role in the discussions between the NGK and GKv, and certainly one that has relevance to the question whether women may serve in the offices, was that of 'credibility'. The Deputies write that the application of Biblical prescriptions in our own time must be 'credible':

"Not in the sense of credibility before the forum of today's culture: the Gospel will always be a folly and an offence, and when we live from the word of God we may always arrive at a position that runs counter to prevailing culture (whatever that may be). Rather, in the sense of personal or ecclesiastical credibility: honestly and with integrity avoiding a selective application of Scripture. Our application of Biblical prescriptions may not limit itself to certain aspects of life, when these prescriptions also apply to one or more other domains. The authors of the VOP report (The report of the NGK concerning women in office) believe that the credibility of an appeal to Scripture is at stake when on the one hand women in the church and in society – with broad support – fill various leading roles, engage in instructional and pastoral activities, serve in calling committees, evaluate sermons, speak at congregational meetings, etc, while on the other hand the offices in the church are closed to them. And this while an appeal to the direct meaning of Paul's words could also be applied to these other tasks and activities. The expression 'credibility', when used in the context of women in office, ought to be understood in this sense, and explicitly not as 'credibility' before the forum of today's world." (p.61).²³

Together with DKE we point to the danger that our Christian attitude could be unnecessarily incongruent with the culture in which we live. Together with DKE we wish to posit that on the one hand the Word of God stands critically opposed to our culture, but on the other hand seeks connection with, and seeks entry into, every culture: *"The prevailing culture might act as a filter that obscures our view of God's purpose and will; it might also act as a lens, by which we gain a sharper view of God's will for here and now. Personal, societal and cultural circumstances can both close and open Scripture for us. They may darken our understanding of Scripture, and hence of God's will (think of contemporary views concerning marriage, sexuality and more generally the dominant focus on the self)²⁴. However, they may also throw new light on (the understanding of) Scripture, and open our eyes for things that we failed to see earlier (think of changed views concerning slavery, race relations and the environment)." (p.61)*

Sometimes, the word 'hermeneutical' evokes negative associations, as if the readers at any particular moment can read their own preferences into the Bible. Hermeneutics, however, is no magic wand.²⁵ Hence, we see it as important that we, together with DKE, understand hermeneutics as *"... critical reflection on the totality of the process of understanding the text, including exegesis. Exegesis, then, is the craft of text interpretation, one element of the whole process of understanding. In all of this, we believe in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who leads us in the truth, enlightens our minds and gives us insight into the Word of God. This process of understanding does not depend on our hermeneutics. Nevertheless, hermeneutics can assist us in critically examining this process of understanding and where necessary enhancing it. In this process of understanding we may distinguish a number of different readings of the text." (p.62)²⁶.*

²³ *Rapport deputaten kerkelijke eenheid 2011, bijlage 9 ('Overeenstemming over hermeneutische uitgangspunten')..*

²⁴ *Idem*

²⁵ A. Noordegraaf, *Leesbril of toverstaf. Over het verstaan en vertolken van de Bijbel* (Reformatie Reeks; Kampen: Kok Voorhoeve, 1991). He describes the interplay between text and situation.

²⁶ Report Deputies for ecclesiastical union 2011, 62.

The Deputies distinguish three such readings:

- The primary reading: a direct reading of the text, within the context of one's own church and faith situation. This comes before both triangles in our terminology.
- The first rereading: the reading of the text from within the context (literary and historical) in which it was first written. This corresponds to the 'smaller triangle' in our terminology.
- The second rereading: the reading of the text with a view to the present context of the reader. This corresponds to the 'larger triangle' in our terminology. Taking into account what was discovered in the first rereading, and steadfastly praying for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, we seek out the meaning of the text for today.

"the understanding of the text in its present meaning is then the result of a constant back-and-forth movement between the various contexts, in which the text as a given(!) retains its primacy with respect to the reader, and in which the Spirit gradually teaches us, together with all the saints, to discern what really matters." (p.62)²⁷.

3.3 What does God want to say to us?

Paul's context and culture were different from ours. In relation to Paul's prescription that women must cover their heads in worship, it is generally taken as self-evident within the GKv that there is no need for such covering in our culture. But why is that, actually? In ultra-orthodox circles, women do cover their heads, at least in worship, because they see that as a lasting Biblical command. There is no evidence, however, that the Bible restricts this command to the worship service.

Differences in context and culture must be read, identified and discussed; this is well-understood in the Reformed tradition. For example, in his treatment of the fifth commandment, dr. J Douma already pointed out that the Bible uses the one word for 'to obey' (*hupotassein*) within a range of authority relationships: parents-children, husband-wife; masters-servants; rulers-subjects. He writes:

"This kind of usage indicates that similar relationships were put on the same level in earlier times and probably treated in that way as well. But now that is no longer the case."

Douma then refers to Bavinck. In regard to the marriage relationship, Douma writes:

*"Instead of a wife 'rendering obedience to' her husband, we have come to speak of a wife 'following her husband's leading'. The latter expression harvests the good fruit of both modern emancipation movements and of the Scripturally described relationship between husband and wife."*²⁸

In 2001, dr. J van Bruggen spoke about the expression 'subject to'. In Paul's context it was easy to use the concept of subjection to express the notion that a wife must be faithful to her spouse. In our time and in our Western culture, the word 'subjection' gives rise to misunderstanding: may one, on the basis of Scripture, conclude that women are not only to be faithful to their husbands, but must also choose to take a role within that marriage that is characterised as 'submission'? According to Van Bruggen, it was simply Paul's intention that the love of Christ was to be given its place within marriage.²⁹

²⁷ Idem.

²⁸ J Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, tr. N.D. Kloosterman (Philipsburg NJ: PR Publishing, 1996), 182- 183. The criticism of M. te Velde (Proposition XV of his doctoral dissertation, 1988), where he, in opposition to Douma, states that Paul's prescriptions were not rooted in the contemporary culture but in God's commands for his church, fails to do justice to the intrinsic relationships between the commands of God and contemporary culture.

²⁹ 'Hermeneutics and the Bible', *Proceedings ICRC 2001*. (Dr. J. Douma served as professor of ethics (1970-1997) and dr. J. van Bruggen (1967-2001) as professor of New Testament, both at the Theological University of the GKv at Kampen, the Netherlands – tr.)

We conclude that here, in the practice of reading the Bible, both Douma and van Bruggen have taken into account the space and distance between Paul's time on the one hand, and ours on the other. That is also the line we follow in our report.

3.4 Discussion

The chief question we must answer here is: does 'hermeneutics' then not mean that we, in our own reading framework, begin to lord it over the power and the authority of the Bible as the Word of God? The underlying thought being that the Bible (and not culture) must always have the last word, and that Paul's apostolic authority reaches across the horizon of his own time.

As fully justified as this question may be – for indeed, the danger exists that readers project their own thinking frameworks upon the Bible – we wish to remove every possible misunderstanding by stating *a priori* that for us the authority of the Bible and the apostle Paul are not open to discussion. On the contrary, we are attempting to do justice to what the Bible itself gives us as context.

Paul, after all, does not prescribe a collection of rules in isolation; rather, he provides various motivations for them. The apostolic prescriptions are not given in isolation: they are directed to the context of Paul's time. These prescriptions show how the apostles, taking their starting point in the communion with Christ, strove to set out their position within the social context of their time, so that within this context they might follow Christ. For us as 21st century readers of the Bible, it is not only Paul's instructions themselves that are directive, but also the manner in which Paul dealt with his own context, and his focus on following Christ. By listening carefully to Paul's instruction, proceeding from our communion with Christ, and in our present situation, we come to ethical rules for living and ecclesiastical agreements.

The answer to our question concerning Reformed hermeneutics may already be found in the previous paragraph. Reformed hermeneutics does not aim to bridge the imagined gap between 'then' and 'now'; it is a necessary element of reflection on the process of understanding. It is a sign of honest and adult use of the Bible to give account to ourselves and to others: this is the manner in which we want to and must read the Bible. Whoever does not wish to give explicit account at this point, will himself run the risk of implicitly forcing his own thinking framework upon the Holy Scriptures.

The Christian Church has always searched the Word of God to see what he has to say to us in our time. K. Schilder already defined 'ethics' as: '*the science of the constant grounds, the changing dispensations, and the relevant concrete specificity of man's obligation towards God's revealed will*'.³⁰ When we fail to take this distinction into account, the danger of a biblicism lurks, in which differences in context and culture only play an implicit role. We, who ourselves are bound to and determined by our own time, are only attempting to give explicit account of this process of understanding.

³⁰ Quoted in J. Douma: *Responsible conduct: Christian Principles and Ethics*, tr. N.D. Kloosterman (Philipsburg NJ; ,2003), 71

4. Meaning for today

4.1 Difference in context

When we, with an explicit hermeneutical awareness, revisit Paul's most important texts, taking into account the difference in context between then and now, we notice the following:

To a significant extent, Paul stays in line with what in his context were prevailing social norms. He confirms the subordinate position of women, in the church as well as in society (see 2.2). More to the point: with respect to *women*, Paul aligns with prevailing social norms. His reason for this is that the progress of the Gospel should not be hindered. With respect to *men*, Paul critically confronts (generally) prevailing social practice. For outsiders, however, that would not create offence. In *both* cases, then, Paul was motivated by the manner in which Christians were regarded by outsiders.

God's Word does not simply and uncritically take over the culture in which it arose. Sometimes, Paul was stricter than prevailing custom, for example in his insistence upon fidelity in marriage for men (I Timothy 3:2,12; Titus 1:6). In addition, he regarded the mutuality within the marriage relationship as very important (I Corinthians 7:2-5; Ephesians 5:21). In various ways, Paul is motivated here by the Old Testament, where God orders human society. Hence, we find an important critical moment in Scripture when we place the texts given in chapter 2 of this report next to those texts that critically confront the culture of Paul's time, such as Galatians 3:28.³¹

This manner of Bible reading aims, on the one hand, to do justice to the first triangle (see the diagram in Chapter 3). The text's first audience, in their own culture, understood the text this way: the manner in which the church functions ought not to give offence; rather, it must win outsiders for the Gospel.

Next to that, we wish to do justice to the second triangle: when we, in our context and culture read these texts, we conclude that the key aspects of what they say to us about the relationship between men and women are these:

- In almost all cases, the texts deal with husband and wife in marriage
- God demands unconditional faithfulness in marriage, and forbids any distortion of the husband-wife relationship through domineering behaviour
- In setting out the relationships between men and women in the church, God asks attention for what in the prevailing culture may or may not give offence
- It is God's will that the relationship of Christ and his church is reflected in the Christian realization of the husband-wife relationship, so that it might carry out a witness into the world
- Here, Paul sometimes makes reference to the Old Testament (creation, the fall, the law)
- In this witness towards outsiders, we may not impose additional conditions upon the man woman-relationship (conditions that in our culture would give unnecessary offence)
- Where the Gospel necessarily critically confronts trends in our culture, we must make clear that this confrontation truly touches upon the heart of the Gospel

To sum up, Paul employs a whole palette of directions and arguments. He does not indicate which of them for him carries the greatest weight. It is clear, however, that as Christians we must take all of his arguments into account. In doing so, our obligation to follow Christ sets the tone and direction.

This palette can be compared with the way in which Scripture values and sometimes relativizes the family relationships created by God. In some cases, Jesus did so himself (Matthew 10:35; 19:28-30; 22; Mark 1:20; 3:31-35; Luke 9:57-62). Even Paul's well-known word that there is '*neither ... male nor female*', since believers are all one in Christ Jesus

³¹ Klinker-De Klerck, *Herderlijke regel of inburgeringscursus?*, 156.

(Galatians 3:28) relativizes the God-given differences between the sexes. At its core, this relativization goes back to Deuteronomy 13:7-12, where it is clear that the first and greatest commandment – God above all – is the norm and regulative principle for all other relationships. Wherever and whenever other relationships form a hindrance to following the Lord, they must be set aside; otherwise they have become a form of idolatry. The radical relativization of all earthly relationships goes back to God's command to love him *above all else*.

On the other hand, we find clear indications in the New Testament that family and kinship are very important. Jesus, referring to the explicit commentary in Genesis 2:24 on the creation of man and woman (*'Therefore...'*), affirms the value of marriage (Matthew 9:4-7). And with an appeal to the command of God, Christ affirms the value of the parent-child relationship (Matthew 15:4-5). The apostle Paul, too, affirms these created structures (Ephesians 5:21-33 and 6:1-9; Colossians 3:18-19 and 3:21-4:6).

To sum up, God wants to use the (marriage and family) relationships he created to accomplish the work and progress of his Kingdom. In this everyone must put God in the first place. To do otherwise would be a form of idolatry: one would have to make choices.

We use this comparison to show that, as highly as God values the relationships he created, they could stand in the way of the progress of his Kingdom. In such cases, it would not be right to hold on to those relationships at the cost of following Christ. In the same way, cultural patterns in regard to male-female relationships can be fully used and employed as the stream-bed in which the Kingdom of God finds its way.

However, where such cultural patterns obscure the view of God's Kingdom as the restoration and completion of creation, and become a hindrance to following Christ, they must be dealt with critically. *Mutatis mutandis*, this twofold process of alignment and confrontation also applies to the role patterns that have become established in the church.

What really matters is that the church is to proclaim the Gospel: the Lord has truly risen! Christ himself first entrusted this task to Mary Magdalene (John 20:17-18): she was the one who had to bring the apostles together with this message. And just before his ascension, Christ said to his apostles: *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Matthew 28:19-20). In the pursuit of the spread of this Gospel we see the activity of a 'deacon' named Phoebe (Romans 16:1). Without great commotion, much changes for the disciples of Christ, in order that the Gospel might make progress.

It is not contrary to, but rather in line with Scripture when we, in our situation, attempt to do the same: where beneficial, we align with our culture; where necessary we confront it. Paul employs a whole palette of arguments. We see no reason to give greater weight to, for example, his reference to Adam and Eve in Paradise than to his argument based on the concepts of honour and disgrace.³² Paul's prescriptions concerning the male-female relationships are inseparably linked to the cultural situation of his time. For all times, the crucial matter is and remains: the proclamation of the Gospel in and by the church. In our contemporary Western context, men and women may participate on an equal level. This does not imply that we go along uncritically with unbiblical egalitarian thinking; instead, it is an attempt to actualize what men and women, with their own distinct gifts, can mean in the service of the Gospel.

³² See Klinker-De Klerck, *Als vrouwen het Woord doen*, 133-134, where she speaks of "a complex of motivations".

4.2 Discussion

But isn't it so that Paul, especially in I Timothy 2, argues on the basis of a lasting creation order? The order that God established for man and woman at the beginning of history cannot be subject to cultural change, can it?

We wish to address this question with three interrelated observations.

To begin with: When Paul briefly refers back to the story of Adam and Eve in paradise, he has three situations in mind: creation (Genesis 2), as well as the fall and redemption (Genesis 3). He interrelates these three situations. An appeal to creation must therefore always take into account that we cannot simply know or recognize this situation as such in a sinful world. Male-female relations, because of the curse in paradise, will always be a very sensitive matter. And Paul's use of terminology from before the fall is found specifically where he explains the restoration brought about by Jesus Christ, as we saw in our discussion of Galatians 3:28.

Second: Paul uses the story of creation as a comparative argument. In I Timothy 2 he does not appeal to a specific given from Scripture ('Scripture says...'); instead he recalls the story of Adam and Eve as an historic event: creation, fall, redemption. Such a reference to an historic event, even an event that lies at the beginning of history, is not a normative appeal to the commands of God. In a similar manner, Peter holds up to his female readers the example of Sarah, who called her husband 'my master' (I Peter 3:5-6; see Genesis 18:12). In I Timothy 2:13 ("*For Adam was formed first, then Eve*"), Paul uses the situation in paradise to provide direction to Timothy and the church in their situation. There, he interprets an order of creation events as an order of rank. While the notion of a created order of rank, in which each person was assigned their own position, aligned well with existing social patterns of the day, in our situation such an idea is hard to make sense of. The use of this argument, too, is coloured by its context.

In addition, and in the third place, we need to consider how much weight Paul gives to the situation of Adam and Eve. He brings forward a whole palette of arguments, without giving any indication as to which one, for him, carries the most weight. The question arises whether others have not subsequently assigned a greater value to the creation order, a value in which the idea of 'the creation order' has become a virtually timeless theological concept. It is clear from I Corinthians 7:7-8 that for Paul this 'creation order' argument was not decisive. For he writes that it is good to be unmarried, even though the Creator himself had considered that '*it is not good for the man to be alone*' (Genesis 2:18).

In addition, the fact that in the Sabbath-command, rest on the seventh day is motivated with an appeal to the creation order has never prevented the Christian church from celebrating the day of rest on the first day of the week.

In summary, the 'creation order' concept is a useful but not directly Biblical term to indicate that God himself is pleased to give shape to human relationships (both in the church and in society at large). However, this term would do injustice to the broad diversity within Scripture if we were to try to use it to fix for all time all kinds of human relationships. It is itself an element of God's creation order that people, in a believing response to the word of God, endeavour to give shape to the ways of living that God has provided.

5 Our understanding of 'the office'

So far we have dealt with the way we read and understand Scripture. But how do we understand the role of women in the church and its offices?

Central to this report is the question whether or not women may serve in the church of Jesus Christ as elders, ministers and/or deacons. What brings these three indicators of function together is that all three of them are 'offices'.

Thus the question is not whether women may carry out pastoral, diaconal or even preaching tasks within the church. In practice, these tasks are already being performed without giving rise to any principle objections. The question is whether women may be admitted to the offices of the church. But what then are these 'offices', when clearly they cannot be completely defined in terms of a number of concrete tasks and responsibilities?

5.1 The church and its office-bearers

Together with Scripture and the confessions, the office is the manner by which the church is reliably kept close to Christ. The office is a divine, not a human institution. People are called (*vocatio*) by Jesus Christ to keep the church, as a fellowship, to its mission in this world. Hence, the apostle Paul asks: *'How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"'* (Romans 10:14-15). In the task of keeping the congregation with Christ through Word and sacrament, the office-bearer represents Christ.³³

This special calling of certain persons means that we cannot fully define the office in functional terms such as 'administration' or 'leadership'.³⁴ The office does not arise from the congregation, and therefore cannot be exhaustively described in functional terms. *"The fellowship of the church requires a structuring that preserves it in the faith in Jesus Christ, and in which it is exhorted to uncover, promote and exercise its Spirit-given gifts for the church and the world."*³⁵ The office derives its power and authority from its calling by God himself. This is not diminished by the fact that the congregation confirms this calling. Already at the beginning of the 3rd century, history relates that the bishop was chosen by all the people, and that the bishops of the neighbouring church laid their hands on him.³⁶ In addition, we must constantly stress that while the office may not be played off against the manifold gifts of the members of the church, it must be distinguished from them.³⁷

The question is whether the office that is so understood and described may also be filled by women. In the apostolic church, men only were called to be elders.³⁸ Does God call men only

³³ "The office-bearer is the person through whom Christ leads his church, and through whom he makes the members of his body participate in his body, becoming members of his body in baptism, and remaining such members through the celebration of the Eucharist". ... (A. van de Beek, *Lichaam en Geest van Christus. De theologie van de kerk en de Heilige Geest* (Zoetermeer. Meinema, 2012), 208).

³⁴ L.J. Koffeman, *Het goed recht van de kerk. Een theologische inleiding op het kerkrecht* (Kampen: Kok, 2009), 143-149.

³⁵ G. van den Brink & C. van der Kooi, *Christelijke dogmatiek* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012), 559.

³⁶ Van den Brink & Van der Kooi, *Christelijke dogmatiek*, 555.

³⁷ See M. te Velde, *Gemeenteopbouw 2. Bijbelse basisprincipes voorhet functioneren van de christelijke gemeente* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 1992) 100-101.

³⁸ The fact that the twelve apostles were exclusively men cannot be considered separately from the fact that they, just as the patriarchs, represented the twelve tribes of Israel.

to this service? In the practice of church life, this question is being variously answered. Within the Reformed tradition, the point of departure has been that Scripture itself has made the choice for men, and that this choice is still normative for the present. A second argument is that the office that represents Christ can only be filled by men, since the Son was incarnate as a man.³⁹

However, this connection between the office and the representation of Christ need not necessarily imply that only men can fulfil it. We read in Scripture that women (such as Phoebe) laboured in diaconal tasks, and that in exceptional circumstances women could even act as judges in Israel (Deborah).

It is therefore conceivable that a 'high' view of the office can go together with the possibility that, depending on the context, women also may represent Christ in an office.⁴⁰ In the 'office' as such, there is apparently nothing to indicate that this calling is to be reserved for men only.

5.2 Discussion

When we – on the basis of preceding parts of this report – state that the possibility of allowing women to serve as deacons, elders or ministers does not go against a Biblical view of the office, we do so partly under the influence of our present cultural context. At the same time, we emphasise that this in itself need not be a cause to doubt the validity of such a position. As we have said previously: against the background of different cultural contexts, the light of Scripture may shine in different ways.

On the other hand, the present cultural context of the church in western Europe is not normative, in the sense that it prescribes what the Christian church ought or ought not to do. The chain of thought is actually reversed. The Holy Scriptures open to us the possibility that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is brought to the foreground in new ways, to the end that there may be a beginning of restoration of the relationship between male and female, distorted in so many ways.

One of the trends that the Christian church must take account of is that of 'feminization'. By this we mean the growing influence of women, in terms of both number and substance, marginalizing the contribution of men. Both church and society – according to critical researchers – must respond to this development.

The feminization of the church might mean that men are less willing to take up their responsibilities in and for the church. To the extent that women increasingly fulfil all kinds of roles and tasks not directly associated with the offices, it might be that men wrongly surrender their responsibilities in the church, and leave these tasks to women.⁴¹

For the present, the conclusion is sufficient that the church must show that it will not allow the cultural context to prescribe its practices. It also must remain alert to cultural trends (such as feminization) that are likely to have an influence on the Christian church. It has a calling to keep the catholic-reformed value of the office as defined above from evaporating; rather, it must act to preserve it. Just as well as men, women can represent Jesus Christ in their own official ministry.

We would like to suggest that as conversations are held within local congregations whether women might or might not be engaged in one or more of the offices, a broader discussion

³⁹ Van den Brink & Van der Kooi, *Christelijke dogmatiek*, 560.

⁴⁰ See Van den Brink and Van der Kooi, *Christelijke Dogmatiek*, 560 and van der Beek, *Lichaam en Geest van Christus*, 271.

⁴¹ Compare Michael Meyer-Blanck, *Gottesdienstlehre* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2011), 268-278. It would be a worthwhile exercise to further investigate the trends regarding the manner in which gender roles are filled within the church.

also takes place concerning the task-description of the offices, and their relationship to other roles and tasks within the church.

Three reasons may be given:

First, in many congregations this conversation (the content and responsibilities of the offices of elder, deacon and minister, and their relationship to the responsibilities of men and women who perform tasks that do not belong to the office) is already underway. As 'non-official' tasks we could think of: catechists, youth workers, church workers, group leaders, members of a pastoral team, and leaders of diaconal and missionary projects.

Second, in a number of congregations, management models and structures are used, in which a small church council – consisting of men – leads an extensive team of men and women who carry out responsible tasks within the congregation.

Third, the *Werkorde* (the recently revised church order of the GKv – tr.) makes a clear distinction between the church council (consisting of elders and minister(s)) and the college of deacons. This is consistent with Reformed church polity, as set out in Article 36 of the Church Order. There are different perspectives on this, as evidenced by the fact that the Belgic Confession states that '*elders and deacons, who together with the pastors, form the council of the church*' (Article 30).

These three observations show that – next to the question whether women may be admitted to one or more offices – other questions regarding the work of the offices and other tasks within the congregation must be carefully reflected on. To work this out in more detail would go beyond the mandate we as deputies were given.

6 Dealing with differences

As we, in line with the foregoing (starting with Scripture and informed by our view of the office), give thought to what the church might look like when men and women function in equality beside each other, including in the offices, a problem arises. For not everyone will be willing to share this perspective. We are therefore faced with the question: How do we, on this point, deal with mutual differences in the church?

6.1 Which differences?

Within virtually all the *churches abroad* with which the GKv maintains sister relationships, there are discussions concerning the role of women in the church.⁴² Still, 'women in office' is not a hot issue among them, with the exception of the *Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika* (GKSA, also known as the Dopperkerken). In Africa, Asia and Latin America, ecclesiastical culture differs little from what prevails within society as a whole. In Eastern Europe and some parts of Africa, the 'Deborah principle' is applied: In Hungary, the Reformed accept women in all offices because there are simply not enough male office bearers available. We are informed that in Kenya, for the same reason, women may present a sermon, but not from the pulpit. For many years, Presbyterians in Ireland (the IPC) have had female ministers and elders (beside *exclusively* female deaconesses), be it that on a local level this is sometimes still a point of discussion.⁴³ Among the traditional migrant churches there is a strong inclination to hold to the Dutch culture of the previous century, also when it comes to the way that the Bible is read and applied; hence, there are very strong misgivings among them on this point concerning developments within the Netherlands itself.

When we observe relations *within the Netherlands*, we note that the PKN has opened all offices to women. On this point, the 'Gereformeerde Bond' has explicitly taken a minority position⁴⁴, although within it a few churches depart from that. The CGK are living with a Synod decision in which a majority report was accepted at the cost of a minority position. In the NGK, in line with the VOP report, all offices have been opened to women. Especially this last development has created difficulties for local discussions with the GKv.

Within the GKv and NGK this discussion raises its head with a number of church planting projects, of which 'Stroom' in Amsterdam is the most prominent.⁴⁵ 'Stroom' includes women in its leadership team. The 'Veenhartkerk' in Mijdrecht has a leadership team that also includes women. Of late, a similar structure has also become the practice of the 'normal' congregation in Assen-Kloosterveen.

Within local congregations there is a growing diversity of views. Frequently, the question is raised whether there needs to be a sharper distinction between Reformed practice (present custom, the way things have grown) and the Reformed confession (our confessional foundations). If so, what belongs to which? It has become quite difficult to remain in discussion without judging each other.⁴⁶

⁴² This is what the deputies for BBK wrote in 2008 to the deputies *male/female*, p.8 of the supplementary report.

⁴³ We have no official sister-church relationship with these churches, but there has been an exchange of lecturers between the theological colleges in Kampen and Belfast.

⁴⁴ *Mannelijk en vrouwelijk schiep Hij hen. Over man, vrouw en ambt*. A publication of the Gereformeerde Bond in de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland [2012].

⁴⁵ *Nederlands Dagblad*, 11 oktober 2012: "Kerkplanters vragen ruimte om af te wijken van regels".

⁴⁶ Wubbo Scholte, "Omgaan met verschillen", in: Mieke Wilcke – van der Linden e.a., *Vrouw en kerk* (GSEv reeks 41; Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 1999), 158-166.

There are no Biblical objections to female deacons, provided the office of deacons is separated from the ruling tasks of the church. This is what we read in the report of the General Diaconal Deputies for the General Synod of Harderwijk. J. van Bruggen had already proposed this in 1980.⁴⁷ In the Gereformeerde Kerk of Harlingen a college of deaconesses has already functioned for a year. Its charter states that its goal is to support the deacons in situations where the deacons deem it desirable.

Still, a pragmatic measure that opens the office of deacons to women does not really resolve the questions surrounding the service of women in the offices. This is shown clearly by developments in the NGK, where room was first created for female deacons, and ten years later this was extended to female elders and ministers.

6.2 Carried along by the past

It is useful to bring in a lesson from the past, where it comes to dealing with differences. Prof. Dr. A van Deursen, who wrote a brief history of the Reformed Churches since the Separation of 1834, observed that where the 20th century was marked by church schisms, the 19th century records three successful church unions: those of 1854, 1869 and 1892. In each of those unions, the parties involved succeeded in finding each other on the one foundation of the Reformed confessions.

How were internal differences dealt with? History teaches that it requires a certain degree of restraint, says Van Deursen. This applies to liturgy (metrical versions of the Psalms, the use of hymns) as well as to training for the ministry (1902: the Theological University in Kampen and the Free University in Amsterdam), and probably most of all for theological issues. *“Ever since 1834, discussions took place within the circles of the Seceders concerning covenant and baptism. As sharply as the parties differed, neither in the reconciliations of 1856 nor in 1869 were declarations made in favour of one side or the other. In 1892 also these questions were left to rest. Later attempts to as yet resolve the differences by means of binding doctrinal declarations led to fatal outcomes”*.⁴⁸

6.3 Outside In

Another lesson concerning dealing with differences can be learned from Article 47 of the Church Order, where it addresses relations with churches abroad. Here it reads, among other things: *“... on minor points of church order and ecclesiastical practice churches abroad shall not be condemned”*.^{*} What are these points? The relevant decision of Synod indicates that this refers to external structures, liturgical practices and agreements regarding church government, but also to the ways in which they confess the truth of God’s Word (General Synod of Groningen-Zuid, 1978). From the rules for sister relations with churches abroad we quote: *“Churches abroad shall not be condemned because of differences on subordinate points regarding the manner of confession, liturgy, church order and practice”*.

In dealing with churches abroad, we employ the motif ‘do not condemn one another on subordinate points’. And among such subordinate points we even include ‘the manner (to be read as: the content) of confession’! Why should we not, as someone once expressed it, turn this rule ‘outside in’? The things we are able to accept in churches abroad ought not to constitute a breaking point in our own country – neither in our relations with other churches nor within our own church community or in church planting projects.

⁴⁷ J. van Bruggen: *Ambten in de apostolische kerk* (Kampen: Kok, 1980), ch V. Similarly: E.A. de Boer, *Zij aan zij* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2006).

⁴⁸ A.Th. van Deursen, “Scheuring en hereniging in de geschiedenis van de gereformeerde kerken”, in: Van Deursen, et al., *Delen in eenheid. Omgaan met verschillen in de kerk* (GSEv reeks 43; Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2000), 41.

^{*} This translation uses the text Article 50 of the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches (*Book of Praise*, Premier, Winnipeg (2008), 670), which is substantially the same (tr.)

6.4 Sharing in unity

To put it more strongly, it raises the question whether the Christian church can retain or develop the capacity to acknowledge the value of diversity. The letter to the Ephesians is a source for this, *par excellence*. After all, what really counts for the church is that *'through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known...'* (Ch 3:10). When we are kept with Jesus Christ we will be able to discover, 'with all the saints', the love of God in him. This diversity is the other side of the unity of the church.

In this regard, Rene de Reuver has developed thoughts worthy of consideration.⁴⁹ He characterises diversity within the church as a 'manifestation of unity'. It is important to note that such diversity does not erase boundaries; rather, it sets such boundaries and indeed requires them. De Reuver lists three criteria for the preservation of one's identity: 1) unity in Christ; 2) an attitude of concrete love; 3) diversity within boundaries.

The *unity* of the church is determined by its *identity*: the confession of Christ as Lord. The New Testament does not know of a 'plural church' in the present sense of the word, but *one* church, manifesting itself in a diversity of forms and characterized by manifold gifts of the spirit. Hence, De Reuver concludes that it is legitimate to speak of diversity within the church (he calls it 'ecclesiological plurality'). Such diversity does not break up the church; rather, it brings a variety of believers together in praise and worship, and leads them to the one table of Christ. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that such diversity of views will require sacrifices – just as an attitude of love will always ask for personal sacrifices.⁵⁰

Notwithstanding, there will always be limits to such diversity.⁵¹ To begin with, to the room that such diversity must provide. Diversity within the church *"that disturbs or prevents the shared praise, prayer, and confession of the salvation of God in Jesus Christ, loses its theological legitimacy"* (p.305). Mutual differences are no end in themselves, but must be directed towards the building up of the body of Christ.

The attitude of believers must be marked by love for Christ and love for each other as members of the same body of Christ. Christians therefore must display the fundamental willingness to learn from each other: it is quite possible that the other might be right. This attitude is a necessary condition for the Christian congregation. It takes courage to persevere in a church in which there are great differences of view. The chief point here is the question whether, how and where the Holy Spirit sets boundaries for a diversity of view.

In this connection we take the position that differences concerning the service of women in office, provided they have been carefully thought through as has been done above, may be difficult to live with, but need not create divisions within the church.

In recently-published literature the matter of 'dealing with differences' returns. To illustrate, Marius Noorloos, in his handbook for church development through faith development, often has an eye for mutual differences that may exist. In his view, only when the church council itself is willing to follow a learning process in which *'heart for the Lord, heart for each other and heart for the world'* stands at the centre, a constructive manner of dealing with mutual differences will be found.⁵²

⁴⁹ René de Reuver, *Eén in meervoud. De ecclesiologische waarde van pluraliteit* (Boekencentrum: Zoetermeer, 2004).

⁵⁰ Here, De Reuver discusses Acts 15, Ephesians 3:14-21 en 1 Corinthians 12.

⁵¹ Here, De Reuver discusses Paul's four invocations of a curse (Romans 9:3; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 1 Corinthians 16:22; Galatians 1:8-9).

⁵² Marius Noorloos, *Groeien bij de Bron. Kansen voor het christelijk en kerkelijk leven* (Kampen: Kok, 2005) and: *Leven uit de Bron. Via geloofsopbouw naar gemeenteopbouw* (Kampen: Kok, 2009).

Recently Piet Schelling, a minister in the PKN, wrote a booklet about 'dealing with divergences within the congregation'. In particular, he emphasises that the differences that exist, simply exist, and that one may not remain caught up in the rightness of one's own view. What matters is that we keep seeking the other. For the leaders of the church it is important that they stimulate mutual conversations, in which participants do not at the outset judge each other, but are willing, genuinely and with integrity, to listen to the other.⁵³

Neither Noorloos nor Schelling address the question where the limits to plurality or divergence might lie. This question about boundaries is still fully in discussion within our churches, and a definitive answer has not yet been reached.⁵⁴

6.5 Discussion

The key question remains of course: where does that leave the question as to the truth? If one has the view that by having women as office-bearers we sin against the Lord, because we fail to honour the authority of his Word (which, after all, is as clear as daylight in this matter), and in doing so we have transgressed the limits of what can be permitted, then what? The question whether we, as a community of churches, are willing to allow such a fundamental difference of view to express itself, plays a role. Where does that leave the boundaries? Have we not placed ourselves on a slippery slope?

To answer this question, we must as believers acknowledge that, in this context, there is no such thing as truth that exists separately from time. The revelation of God always speaks concretely within human situations, but we can never know it in all its fullness. As creatures, we are by definition bound to time and space; we need each other to find the right path. That is not only a limitation, but also a challenge. For us, the reality of God is partly hidden. The light shines behind the clouds. Because of sin, we live in brokenness. We must learn to live with the fact that we will not always understand everything, and we must learn to hope for the new heaven and the new earth, where our knowledge will be complete.

Therefore: we must learn to discern what really matters, in love and depth of insight (Philippians 1:9-10). Further, we point to the function of the conscience of one who is born again by the Spirit (Romans 12:1-2; 14:5b). The Christian church has been given no guarantees, and it can give none either; it must learn, time and again, to live by trust in God.

⁵³ Piet Schelling, *Mijn gelijk en ons geluk. Omgaan met verscheidenheid in de gemeente* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012).

⁵⁴ See, for example, the special edition of *De Reformatie* 88/1 (11 January 2013). Here the question is again raised: what is meant by 'Reformed', and where should the limits be drawn?

7 Where to from here?

In reviewing what has been written above as a whole, the following picture emerges: What we deduce from Scripture concerning the relationship between men and women ought not to form a hindrance to admitting women to service in the offices. Nor does the Reformed view of the office – in our view – raise any such obstacle. Christians in our time are called to forcefully proclaim the Gospel, and unnecessary hindrances to that must be avoided.

All of this does not mean that everyone within the GKv thinks the same about the role of women in the church. Even as deputies we are not of one mind on that. It is our opinion that these differences need not create division within the church, provided they are seen in their right proportions. After all, we are not talking about a doctrinal dispute. Nor is the authority of the Word of God at stake. It would seem apparent that in the light of Scripture it is legitimately possible to come to different conclusions concerning the role of women in the church.

Even if this report does not convince everyone, we do hope that readers taste in it a joint search for what Christ asks of us. To strengthen this unity among us, more time for reflection will be needed.

It is especially Scripture passages such as I Corinthians 14:34-36 and I Timothy 2:11-12 that have led to the prevailing view within the Reformed tradition that women are not permitted to fulfil ruling or teaching offices within the church. Also, many sister churches abroad have exclusively male office bearers. We wish to explicitly take this situation into account, mindful of what Paul wrote to the churches in both Rome and Corinth about accepting one another in the faith (Romans 14-15; I Corinthians 8-10). If we do not wish to judge each other as brothers and sisters in regard to their stance on the position of women in the service of the Gospel, then we will not judge our own past either. It is an element of our Christian style of living that we express no judgement as long as we recognize in each other a search to be led by the Gospel.

First of all, this implies that this point need not form a hindrance in our contacts with other church communities, whether they permit women in the offices, or not (such as the NGK and CGK respectively). In addition, we would do well to rethink our present ecclesiastical structures, in order that both men and women, each with their distinctive gifts, may come into their own.

Looking to the future, we plead for an open attitude, so that with all our existing differences we may work towards unity, not only within the GKv, but also with brothers and sisters in the NGK and CGK. Broad-mindedly Reformed!

To the end that a time of reflection as described above may be made possible, and may be well used in striving for unity, we limit ourselves in this report to the following conclusions:

1. In the light of Scripture, the position that women may be office bearers is a legitimate one.
2. Taking into account the present situation within the GKv, where divergent views exist concerning the role of men and women in the church, this does not mean that women ought to serve everywhere as office bearers.
3. Whether or not women serve as office bearers ought not to form an obstacle in ecclesiastical contacts with the NGK and the CGK.
4. There is a continuing need to reflect on ecclesiastical structures as they have developed over time, certainly in conjunction with other churches with Reformed confessions, to do full justice to the understanding that both men and women are called by God in the service of the Gospel.

Draft proposals:**Materials:**

1. Acts of the General Synod Harderwijk, 2011 (Article 29, Decision 2);
2. Report of the Deputies *Male/Female in the Church*, submitted to the General Synod of Ede, 2014.

Decision 1:

to discharge the Deputies *Male/Female in the Church*.

Decision 2:

to declare, on the basis of this report, that:

- a. the position that besides men, women also may serve in the offices of the church, as described in this report, fits within the breadth of what can be affirmed as Biblical and Reformed;
- b. whether or not, besides men, women also serve as office-bearers ought not to become an obstacle for the GKv in ecclesiastical contacts with the CGK and the NGK, or in church plant projects.

Decision 3:

not to appoint new *Deputies Male/Female in the Church*.

Decision 4:

to establish a committee that charts the consequences – specifically those for church government – of decision 2a for the GKv, and translates them into agreements and arrangements within the churches, in order that the peace and harmony within the local churches may be served.

Appendices

1 Appendix 1 – To Section 2.3

Being head, being silent, not teaching

(from: *Ongemakkelijke teksten van Paulus*)

“...the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God ... A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.” (I Corinthians 11:3,7)

Here, Paul uses the word ‘head’ no less than three times. Not only is the man the head of the woman, man himself has a head: Christ, who in his turn also has a head: God. There is some discussion about the exact meaning of the Greek word ‘head’ (*kephalè*). Does Paul mean ‘head’ in the sense of ‘boss’? Or are we to choose for the meaning ‘source’, ‘origin’? There are also good reasons to think of such a thing as ‘bridgehead’. In our time, these last two meanings are less sensitive.

Aside from this discussion, we note that the man as head forms part of a succession: woman – man – Christ – God. A succession such as this one fits well with the world-view of the average 1st-century person, who saw a certain layering in reality. A similar vertical ordering also marked society of this time, in which each person occupied his own place, and was responsible to the one placed above him.

Against this background, it seems likely that Paul is pointing to a form of authority within the succession that he sets out. Paul, then, does not just bluntly assert to the Corinthians that the man is the head of the woman. He begins by pointing to the broader context. This is about more than just the man and the woman. Both of them form links in a larger chain.

The problem that Paul wants to tackle in the Corinthian church deals with whether or not head coverings are to be worn while praying or prophesying. To Paul, it is a disgrace for a man to cover his head during such activities. Conversely, he does expect women to cover their heads. In both cases, his prescription is intended to not ‘dishonour the head’ (vs. 4,5). How might a woman dishonour her head by not covering it? Paul is thinking of the wedding veil. This veil, also worn in public after the wedding, served as a symbol of the virtue and faithfulness that was expected from a married woman. Conversely, the cutting or shaving of a woman’s hair was regarded as a disgrace. Not only because that was a typically male manner of wearing hair; for women shorn hair was also associated with infidelity. How might a woman dishonour her head by not covering it? Paul’s play on words here alludes to the literal and figurative meanings of the word ‘head’.

The opposite of disgrace is honour. Here an obligation rests on the women of Corinth. After all, they are the ‘glory’ of their husbands. The Greek word that the NIV (1984 and 2011) translates as ‘glory’, *doxa*, could be better translated here as ‘honour’: the woman is the honour of the man. Look at their origin, says Paul. Man did not come from woman, but woman from man. Hence, the woman’s behaviour ought not to disgrace her husband, but to honour him. Her behaviour has a big influence on his image.

Modern westerners will find the distinction made here between woman and man hard to swallow. But we should not forget that Paul discusses this issue from within the context of a greater succession. The man himself has another head: Christ. He in turn must take care not to dishonour his head (v.4). In v.7, Paul restates the succession in a slightly different form, in three steps (woman-man-God) rather than in four (woman-man-Christ-God).

Concretely, the rule for men is that they are to pray or prophesy with *uncovered* heads. This is probably best explained against the background of Roman cultic practices, where male priests generally covered their heads. For worship in Corinth, Paul rejects this custom. The worship of the only God must distinguish itself from the worship of idols. This is how men honour their Head.

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

This command for silence and submission is found in a section that deals with guidelines for the use of gifts of the Spirit when the Corinthians meet for worship. Paul attaches great importance to orderly proceedings, so that these gifts may truly edify the church (v.26). He therefore regulates in detail who may speak during the gatherings, and who is to be silent (vs.27-35). Women, then, are to be silent, most likely during the instructional element of the prophecy, that is during its critical evaluation (to which v.29 refers). A prophecy reached its completion when it was evaluated, for only then could such a word from heaven truly serve to edify the church. It is clear from I Corinthians 11:2-16 that women were permitted to prophesy as such, but it was not the intention that they should participate publicly in the discussion of prophecy. If they had questions, they should ask their husbands at home. The fact the Paul expects this of women in particular not only has to do with the requirements of the law (v.34), but also with the public character of the assembly. There might always be ‘outsiders’, entering as visitors (vs.23-25). Disorderly behaviour by Christians might lead outsiders to turn away in contempt.

For this reason, Paul explicitly considers the social sensitivities of his time, with their strong emphasis on honour and disgrace. Apparently, at that time it was disgraceful for a woman to speak in public. To do so ran counter to the submission she owed her husband.

‘Submission’ (Greek: *hupotassein*) fitted completely into the social structure of that time. Social relationships within the Roman empire of the 1st century had a strong vertical ordering, by means of what is known as the ‘patron-client model’. The *pater familias* (the male head of the household) was usually the patron of a number of clients, within the framework of a reciprocal agreement. Every day, the clients were to honour their protector by means of public displays of respect and gratitude. They addressed him as *dominus* (lord), or perhaps even as *rex* (king). A client also had to provide services for his patron, and must support all his activities in political and other domains. In exchange, clients were given a small allowance, meals from time to time, other assistance and legal protection. The more clients a patron had, the more his public image was enhanced.

Often, the patron himself was the client of a superior, towards whom he had his own obligations. In this interlinked fashion, the patron-client relationship permeated all layers of society. Everyone must show respect to the one higher and more influential than himself, right up to Caesar, the uppermost patron of all.

This structure lent social and economic stability to society. An all-encompassing social order, in which everyone knew and occupied his own place, belonged to the world-view of popular Stoic philosophy. As they saw it, the fixed order of the cosmos was determined by a divine principle, the ‘Logos’. It was only through voluntary submission to this order that man could attain his destiny. Anyone who went against it caused chaos.

A similar view of world and society can be found in the Bible also. For example, Christians were to submit to worldly authorities, for they were instituted by God (Romans 13:2). From this perspective, Paul’s prescription is perfectly natural: during public events such as Christian assemblies for worship, a woman must submit to her spouse.

Within the home, too, this subordination – sometimes referred to as ‘obedience’ – prevailed. In the New Testament this is clearly noticeable in what is known as the ‘household codes’ (from the German ‘*Haustafeln*’ – tr), the guidelines for the various relationships within the *familia*, the extended household: husband-wife, parent-child, master-servant (see, for example Ephesians 5:21-6:9 and Colossians 3:18-4:1).

It is striking that these household codes operate in two directions. Paul requires women to acknowledge the authority of their husbands (Ephesians 5:22,24 – *hupotassein*), but conversely, he also expects husbands to love their wives (Ephesians 5: 25,28,33). Children must submit to their parents, but fathers may not embitter their children in the way they bring them up. Slaves must obey their masters from the heart, but masters must treat their

servants well, without threatening them.

This reciprocity and gentle attitude to which Paul directs the *pater familias*, he motivates from a Christian perspective. Thus, Paul reminds masters that they too have a Lord in heaven, who does not discriminate between masters and slaves (Ephesians 6:9). In Christ, all parties have equal worth. In Ephesians 5:21, Paul gives this equality an almost programmatic prominence: *“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”*. Concretely, for men this means that they, imitating Christ and out of reverence for him, must give themselves up to their wives in love (Ephesians 5:25).

Therefore, while Paul maintains the social subordination of women, when viewing the relationship from within he stands for complete equivalence. Look at I Corinthians 11, where he refers to the creation of Adam and Eve, showing that woman is the glory of man (vs.8-9), and hastens to add: *“In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God”* (vs.11-12).

In the intimate domain of sexual relations within marriage, Paul’s instructions are even identical for husbands and wives (I Corinthians 7:1-7): *“The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife”*.

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man ... And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner”. (I Timothy 2:11-12, 14)

In I Timothy 2:8-3:1a Paul gives instructions concerning the attitude of Christians during their worship assemblies. In relation to men, he does not have much to say: their prayers must be full of devotion, and that includes that they set aside all disputes and resentments. Paul has more to say about the attitude desired of women. They may not excessively adorn themselves, for what truly adorns Christian women, are good deeds and an attitude of modesty, decency and propriety.

A modest, or as one might better translate, a calm attitude: this is where the emphasis lies in his instruction. The word that Paul uses carries the meaning of quietness and rest. In v.11 he amplifies it: *‘in quietness and full submission’*. In the Greek it says: *‘complete obedience (pasè hupotagè)*. This expression is derived from the verb *hupotassein*: ‘to submit’, a word that Paul uses more often in his prescriptions for women (I Corinthians 14:34; Ephesians 5:21-22,24; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5).

To what women must submit is not explicitly stated. Expositors propose a variety of possibilities: to God, to his Word, to the instruction that comes from it, to the person giving instruction, to men in general, to the existing relationship between men and women. It would be asking too much to analyse all of that here. Primarily, Paul’s purpose is to describe an attitude, a general attitude of quietness and obedience during instruction.

This also implies that women themselves are not to *give* such instruction. The NIV translates: *“I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man”* (v.12). A possible alternative might be: *“I do not permit a woman to teach, and in this way to have authority...”*. The latter rendering is more likely, since it makes a connection between both activities, and underscores the point Paul wants to make: he does not want a woman to publicly elevate herself above the man. This statement, expressed in the negative, forms the counterpart to this positively expressed desire that she should submit, and directs the focus specifically to the male/female relationship.

Instruction of the assembled congregation is a fitting concrete example of activity that Paul regarded as authoritative. In this situation, a woman may *receive* instruction, but it would be highly improper for her to instruct the congregation *herself*. For then she would abandon her modest position and oppose the correct authority relationships. Were a woman to sit in the instructor's chair, she would reverse the roles, and that would create unrest.

Paul lends support to his prohibition of female authority by referring to the first human couple, Adam and Eve. While Eve was created second (v.13), she was still the first one to sin (v.14). After all, she took the initiative in eating of the forbidden fruit. Apparently, for Paul both events provide sufficient Old Testament grounds to affirm the authority of the man over the woman, and not the other way around.

Introduction

The primary question General Synod 2011 of Harderwijk asked the deputies '*Male /Female in the Church*' was whether it is permissible, on the basis of Scripture, also to appoint sisters to the offices of minister, elder and deacon.

In their report "*Men and women in the service of the Gospel*", to be submitted to the General Synod, the Deputies conclude: the view that women may serve in the offices is, in the light of Scripture, legitimate.

As one of the Deputies, I am unable to share responsibility for this report or its recommendations, even though it contains sections that I do subscribe to. Naturally, I wish to give account for my decision to the General Synod of the Reformed Churches, who appointed me to this position.

I would have greatly valued for the Deputies to submit a unanimous report to Synod, and it was with this intention that I expressed my willingness to collaborate in this task that General Synod 2011-2012 assigned to us. Discussions within the Deputies were conducted in all openness, but at a number of essential points we were unable to reach unanimity.

I feel no need to challenge the intentions of my fellow deputies. With the approach they indicate in this report, they intend to provide the Reformed Churches in 2013 with a feasible path in dealing with an issue that preoccupies a portion of the churches. I am unable, however, to follow them on this path. The final report, and the discussions that led to its completion, have not convinced me that the principal question, formulated above, can be answered in the positive from Scripture itself. And that for me is decisive.

Connection

I do not feel the need, next to everything that has already been written on this subject, to expatiate further. I think that by now all arguments have already been exchanged, and I do not pretend to be able to add much to them.

In broad terms, I can find myself in the balanced approach of Rev JJ Schreuder to this matter in his recent publication "*Dienende mannen en vrouwen in het huwelijk en in de kerk*" (Woord & Wereld 85, 2010). Here, he gives account of his position with reference to literature published in the Netherlands and abroad. I would also like to mention with approval the article by dr. PF Bouter "*Waarom alleen mannen in het ambt?*" which appeared in a special issue of the periodical *Kontekstueel, Tijdschrift voor Gereformeerd belijden nú* (27 (1), Sept 2012), devoted to this topic.

It is my conviction that both publications do more justice to the whole of the instruction of Scripture. Paul's appeal to creation and the fall (1 Timothy 2:13,14; 1 Corinthians 11:8,9), and his characterization of Christ as the head of the man, and the man as the head of the woman (1 Corinthians 11; Ephesians 5:21-24), remain standing next to Galatians 3:28 (*There is neither ... male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*). This is the same Paul who writes in various letters concerning various aspects of the relationships between men and women, and who within this framework, more than once, explicitly emphasizes that he is not expressing his own opinion, but is writing in the capacity of apostle of Christ. His instruction forms part of the closed canon, which for the church fully contains the will of God (BC, Article 7).

My criticism of the report focuses on the significance that it gives to the notion of 'culture', and also that it – in my view – takes insufficient account of the argument which for the 'mainstream' in the Christian church (in the past as well as in the present) has been and still is regarded as decisive in not opening the special offices to the sisters in the congregation.

The cultural context

The report assumes that the cultural context was of great significance in the writings of Paul and others, in the sense that they, where possible, adapted themselves to existing cultural patterns. As I see it, this argument is not convincingly substantiated, and the Bible itself also gives us no occasion to make this choice.

In a general sense, I would point out that the concept of 'culture' is so complex that it is almost impossible to uncover all cultural categories and circumstances, and then to determine which of them might be relevant and/or normative for the authors of the Bible. To illustrate this, I will give an example: § 4.1 of the report argues that in relation to the position of *women* Paul joins in with what in his (cultural) context are prevailing social norms, while in relation to *men* he challenges these prevailing norms. The supposed difference, then, is that in the one case it would cause offence to outsiders, while in the other it would not. This doesn't convince me. A useful mental exercise might be to read 'outsiders' as '*women* outsiders'. I do not think that they would have taken offence at Paul's plea to give women a different position within the church of Christ from the subordinate one they had in society at large. I fear that in Paul's time mostly men especially would have found this argument more difficult to accept.

Since, according to the report, the cultural context of the time strongly determined what Paul *wrote*, it is necessary, for a clear *understanding* today, to know the differences between Paul's cultural context and ours.

With reference to my earlier observation concerning the complexity of the concept of 'culture', I believe that it is hardly possible for us to determine which (categories of) differences are relevant. In spite of that, in §3.1 five supposedly relevant differences between Paul's culture and ours are listed. I will comment on three of them.

The first one deals with the behaviour of men and women in relation to each other: In I Timothy 2 Paul is seen to warn against dominant behaviour by women towards men, while in our culture we are much more concerned with male dominance towards women. I do not believe that the kind of contrast presented here explains why Paul's warning no longer has meaning for today.

It appears to me that in Paul's time, male dominance was at least as powerful as it is in our context. That is why Paul explicitly addresses men in relation to their treatment of women (especially in Ephesians 5), and Peter does the same (I Peter 3:7). Service is an important aspect of authority! In the same way, the Lord Jesus instructed his male disciples concerning the creation and marriage to correct their (culturally conditioned?) attitudes regarding the position of husbands and wives (compare Matthew 19). And the response of the male disciples speaks volumes: "*If this is the situation between husband and wife, it is better not to marry!*" (Matthew 19:10). I read that Paul speaks to both men and women about their behaviour "*in all the congregations of the saints*" (I Corinthians 14:33). It appears to me, therefore, that Paul's instruction concerning the position of men *and* the place of women retains its significance in our context also.

According to the report, the second difference lies in the fact that Paul's instructions for the *church* were in accordance with the *social* situation of his time, while they run counter to the *social* situation of today. This may have been the case for speaking or remaining silent in (public) assemblies, but where it comes to the appointment of women to offices in the church, he might just as well have made connection with the fact that in his day priestesses were quite common. The admission of women to offices in the church, would, in this context, have caused little controversy. What is more, the fact that in his culture women had a different position from men does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that this is Paul's only reason for his argument.

A third difference would be that in Paul's culture, people tended to think more collectively, while our culture is much more individualistic. In that time, people were part of a single community (with common traditional morals) while today, people make their own (moral) choices more easily and are less likely to be led by such a common morality. I question why this should be relevant. There is at least as much justification for the plea that in our time, and in this respect, the church ought to present a clearly visible counter-culture. After all, in

the church every member has the primary calling to use his or her gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of others (HC, LD21)

Are Paul's arguments culturally determined?

In my view, therefore, the report on the one hand gives too much importance to the differences in cultural context in which Synod's questions are to be answered. On the other hand it fails to provide convincing answers to the question: why does Paul, in his instruction to men and women, appeal to arguments that are difficult to describe as culturally determined? I point to Paul's appeals to creation and the Fall, and to the notion that the man is the head of the woman, like Christ is the head of the man.

§4.2 of the report, in two short steps, quite strongly puts Paul's appeal to creation (I Timothy 2), in the perspective of cultural determination. Here, the argument goes, Paul does not make a normative appeal to what God has *prescribed*: all we have is a *descriptive* reminder of the story of Adam and Eve. Since Paul's interpretation of the sequence of creation as an order of rank fitted well with the social order of his day, he could use it to give direction to the church. In our situation, however, the notion of a created rank order only causes alienation.

I have a great deal of difficulty with this approach. At the very least, it seems odd to declare an historic *event*, described in the Old Testament and presented by Paul as normative, to be non-normative because it is not regarded as a *Scripturally given command*. In I Timothy 2:7, Paul explicitly presents himself as a 'teacher to the Gentiles' to instruct them in the true faith. Immediately afterwards, and in no uncertain terms, he gives prescriptions for the behaviour of men and women in the assembly of the church. Is it for us to assume then – where the text itself provides no reason for doing so – that where Paul points to creation and the fall as the motivation for his instruction, he uses an argument that has no normative significance for our time?

It was Paul's intention – so goes the argument – to make it clear to women in the church that they, while in principle equal to men, were called to take a different position, and in some situations were even called to be silent. According to the report, they would otherwise become an offensive hindrance for the proclamation and the spread of the (core of the) Gospel in the cultural context of the church, a context which was also missionary. If this was truly Paul's chief motivation, then his reference to the different positions of Adam and Eve at creation and the fall would only have created unnecessary misunderstanding.

In my opinion, then, these words of Paul have been too easily characterized as 'culturally determined'. As I said previously, it is striking that Paul also instructs men concerning their position and their responsibility towards women. Clearly, here too there was need for correction. To rule is to serve, just as Christ, who had authority over his disciples, at the same time washed their feet.

It is clear that Paul, in his instruction regarding the position of men and women in the church, is concerned with more than just the removal of obstacles to the proclamation of the Gospel. In Paul's words, I sense a struggle against the distortion of the relationship between man and woman as a result of the fall, and a plea for the restoration of sound relationships, in which man and woman together are the image of God. This struggle, in and of itself, is an essential element of Paul's preaching of the Gospel.

In this context, I Corinthians 11:7-10 and 11-12 can be described as illustrative. Immediately following what he says about the difference between man and woman (vs 7-10), Paul emphasizes that in relation to the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor man independent of woman

The past

My second point concerns the manner in which the report fails to justify its position over against the one taken by (the majority of) Christian churches, in the present as well as in the past.

For centuries, the Christian church has answered the question the General Synod placed before the Deputies in the negative, at least in relation to ministers, elders and comparable offices. Also today, the great majority of Christian churches in the world, whether Protestant

or Catholic, can see no room for female ministers. The report explicitly acknowledges this. It seems to me that this view cannot be primarily characterized as culturally determined. They have so understood the Scriptures, and have deduced from them that, for all times and places, the final responsibility in the church has been entrusted to male office-bearers, in particular the elders. Speaking with authority in the assembly of the church, also, is reserved for men.

The instruction of the apostle Paul forms an essential part of what the Bible says about the position of men and women. While there has always been some debate about the precise interpretation of this instruction, there has always been broad agreement concerning its overall meaning.

In itself, of course, a history of centuries of agreement is no guarantee that it is right. It is permissible, and perhaps even required, when times and culture change, to ask ourselves whether we as churches have spoken truly – in this case – about the place and task of men and women in the church of Christ and whether we have acted correctly.

On the other hand, change is not, in and of itself, decisive or normative. During the past half-century, there have been countless developments within our society, leading to a situation where the distinction between men and women has slowly but surely been fundamentally denied. The reverse can also be stated: the view that there is no distinction between men and women has led to all kinds of developments. Many church members appear to have noiselessly gone along with this changed view, and no longer share the conviction that the offices ought not to be open to women.

In the recent past, as I have pondered this matter, I have increasingly asked myself whether we – consciously or unconsciously – have left aside the question whether the Bible, also for today, has a message concerning the relation between men and women: a message which, to a lesser or greater degree, excites tensions in relation to the gradual developments that have taken place in the Netherlands. Those cultural developments are not value-free.

We may not bind the churches to choices that have been made in the past, if we should arrive at the conviction that God no longer requires them of us in the present time. Nevertheless, this common conviction should carry great significance. The Word of God did not originate with us (I Corinthians 14:36).

It is my belief that the approach taken by the report does insufficient justice to the significance that the Word of God, including that spoken by the mouth of Paul, has for today. I see with Paul a clear line to God's original purpose when he created man and woman, both in terms of their shared tasks and opportunities, and of their distinct responsibilities.

When we take all of Scripture into account, there is a great deal of room for the service of women in the church. At the same time, we will also do justice to the authoritative teaching of Paul concerning the limits of such service. When it comes to authoritative teaching and spiritual leadership, it is the men who shall speak the Word.

I would like to add one critical remark. In the report, in the interpretation and discussion of texts that deal with the relationship between men and women, limitations are imposed, implicitly or explicitly, to the effect that these texts deal exclusively with the relationships between men and women *in marriage*. As is well known, this limitation is disputable. However, in my view it is important to consider that this approach could lend support to the notion that it might be better for a woman not to marry, if she values her freedom. Especially in our culture, where the commitment of a man and a woman in a lifelong bond of marriage is regarded as an undesirable restriction upon individual freedom, this appears to me to be an undoubtedly unintended, but still undesirable side effect.

Conclusion

I believe that the report does not convincingly provide a positive answer to the primary question that the deputies were asked to consider. The report hardly confronts itself with an interpretation that until quite recently was broadly accepted concerning the instruction of Scripture in this matter. The difference in cultural context between the church in a Greco-Roman culture and the culture of the church in the Netherlands in 2013 has become the

foundation that leads to a different conclusion. This foundation is, in my view, open to dispute and nowhere near solid enough to bear such a conclusion.

The report also does not provide convincing arguments that the question whether women may serve in a ruling office in the church, can be left free. Notwithstanding the freedom we have in Christ, and the many tasks that we see women carry out in the New Testament (as a matter of fact also in the Old), Jesus chose only men as apostles, only men were appointed as elders in the churches, and women did not dominate the conversation in the assemblies of the church.

It appears to me that it would be far better to establish that a convincing and unifying argument to read the Bible differently than it has been done for centuries has not been provided, and that we do not have sufficiently well-founded reasons to recommend following a different course.

Some thoughts for a different approach to the matter

I do not wish to limit myself to explaining why the approach taken in the report of Deputies cannot be mine. Hence, I'd like to provide a brief outline of what I envisage.

The General Synod asked us, with the assistance of material that had already been placed on the table, to primarily answer the question whether it is permissible also to appoint sisters to the offices as we know them in the Reformed Churches.

In my opinion, the report ought to have followed a different approach and arrived at a different conclusion. It might have looked something like this:

1. Why is it that various Deputies M/W and various Synods so far have not yet been able to come to a clear conclusion whether or not it is permissible for women to be admitted to the offices?

Three problems:

- a. The problem concerning the understanding of Scripture;
 - b. Lack of clarity as to what specifically belongs to the responsibility of each office;
 - c. A tension between the practice that has developed in the church and the world, and the 'classical view'.
2. A confirmation of the classically Reformed view of the understanding of Scripture. Scripture is its own interpreter. The texts of Paul in his various letters may not be played off against each other. They work together to create a full picture of the position of men and women in the church. A critical approach to modern hermeneutics. The differences between the cultural context of the Bible (assuming some degree of consensus on that matter) and of the context of present-day culture in the Netherlands cannot settle the matter of giving shape to the offices. After all, this giving shape should not be inconsistent with the directive and apostolically authoritative statements of Paul concerning the limited authority of women in the (assemblies of) the congregation.
 3. A description of the core tasks of elders and deacons. They have final responsibility for the congregation, they must ensure that the congregation is equipped to be a hand and a foot for each other, and they speak and decide authoritatively in the congregation on the basis of the mandate they were given (preaching, oversight and discipline: according to the command of Christ, to show the way, and to open and close the door to the Kingdom of heaven). Together they constitute the church council. This leading task is reserved to men.
 4. Describe the manner in which the distinction between men and women is to function, also in our time. This description ought to pay explicit attention to the fact that Paul speaks also to men in ways that do not connect seamlessly with the culture of his day. Give explicit attention to the responsibility of women to stimulate men to take primary responsibility for the congregation. Paul's reference to the fall is at the same time an accusation against Adam that he failed to honour his responsibility. Emphasize the shared responsibility of men and women together, *and* in their mutual relationships, in the light of God's purpose since creation. Men and women have a joint

responsibility to highlight and maintain their distinctive positions within the congregation. In this connection, it is important that the church of today can also emphatically be a counter-culture in which (the development of) the individual isn't regarded as central. The church is a community where the Biblical concepts of 'calling', 'obedience' and 'responsibility' set the tone.

5. Explain that many tasks in the congregation can be done by both men and women under the (final) responsibility of the consistory. For these tasks, structures can be developed which do not give them a (pseudo)official status. By no means all the work presently done by elders and deacons is specifically 'official'. Grateful use can be made of the report "*Dienst van de vrouw in de gemeente*" published by the General Synod of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands in 2001.
6. Acknowledge that the foregoing also urges us as church to consider what the Bible says about the calling of men and women in this world. Here too, we are called to provide a counterweight to erosion of the distinction between men and women (male and female) caused by an approach that starts from the happiness of the individual, regardless of male or female. This has importance beyond the matter of men and women in the church. It calls for a normative approach, starting from the creation of man *and* woman who together, having distinctive responsibilities and positions, may display the image of God.

I wish the General Synod much wisdom in arriving at a decision that will serve the peace in the churches.