

History of the CRCNA

[Previous](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next](#)

THE "WOMEN IN OFFICE" ISSUE

[\(Related Documents\)](#)

A HISTORY OF THE DISCUSSIONS AND DECISIONS CONCERNING WOMEN IN RULING OFFICES IN THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

(address presented to the Reformed Theological Society in Tokyo, March 1995)

INTRODUCTION: POSITIONS HELD WITHIN THE DENOMINATION

There are at least five positions held by members of the CRC with respect to the question as to whether or not women may serve in the offices of elder and minister (or ruling and teacher elder). They are as follows: 1. those who believe the Bible demands that women not serve in these offices; 2. those who think the Bible may not necessarily forbid women in these offices; 3. those who think the Bible allows women in office and feel it should be up to each congregation to decide the matter for itself (adiaphora); 4. those who believe the Bible demands that these offices be opened to women; 5. those who aren't sure and/or don't care. Roughly, the positions divide according to those who favor and those who oppose women in office. The CRC is a denomination almost evenly divided on this issue, as the subsequent discussion will show.

At the Synod meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in June of 1994, the delegates voted by a narrow margin to maintain the practice of not ordaining women as elders and ministers on a motion which contains very strong wording, e.g., according to position number 1. (see handout--copy of 1994 decision from Acts). However, this motion from Synod's advisory committee was in response to the 1993 Synod's decision, by a nearly equally narrow margin, to change the Church Order to allow for women to serve in these offices along the lines of position number 3. These two synods reflect the struggle concerning this issue going on in the CRC for nearly 25 years.

Over the years the often acrimonious debate over this issue has consumed much time and energy, been the topic of numerous study committees, books, and articles, and resulted in a departure from the denomination of about 20,000 members. Denominational cohesiveness as seen in the ministries supported at the synodical level has eroded significantly. Quota support for the agencies has fallen to between 70-80%. The women's issue is not the only issue being debated in the CRC, but it has certainly captured

the most attention and caused the most heartache for those who love this church. It is also a matter of great interest to other churches who are being forced in one way or another to face this issue.

CHRONOLOGICAL REVIEW OF STUDIES AND DECISIONS

1963. The REC appoints a committee to consider this issue, as there was lack of uniformity in practice among the members.

1968. REC delegates voted (25-22) that the practice of the Reformed family of churches of excluding women from the ruling offices is in accord with "the plain and obvious teaching of Scripture."

1969. The CRC Synod appoints a committee to study the nature of ecclesiastical office (the concern here was the place of so-called "lay workers" as opposed to the "ordained" workers). This committee was asked to report by 1972.

1970. CRC delegates to the 1968 REC meeting request that Synod appoint a committee to discuss the issue of women in ecclesiastical office. Synod complies, committee to report in 1972.

1972. Women in office committee report delayed. Ecclesiastical office committee report sent back for further work.

1973. Study committee on meaning of office and the first (of 6) study committee on women in office report to Synod.

The committee on the meaning of ecclesiastical office report defined office according to the Greek work used in the N.T. (diakonia). The offices are "ministries" which have been instituted by Christ for ordering the life of the church and are defined according to their function. The offices may be modified to meet local or special needs.

The first committee report on the women's issue expanded on the office committee report to outline two types of office: the "institutional" offices which are formal appointments and throughout Scripture are limited to men, and the "charismatic" offices, which are "anointed" and filled by both men and women. Examples of the former would be the Levitical priest and the Davidic king in the O.T., the apostles, elders and teachers in the N.T.; examples of the latter would be the prophets, judges, healers, etc. Concerning the office of deacon, there is a certain ambiguity as the word can be used in both a technical and nontechnical sense.

The report emphasizes the spiritual equality (equal worth, equally the image of God) of the sexes and highlights the biblical calls for observing rules of decorum and culturally conditioned restrictions in the functions assigned to men and women in the church. The matter of headship, which this committee said was limited to the home and could not be extended to the church or society as a whole, was revised by Synod's advisory committee. The committee ended with a most important statement which was to come up again and again in future reports and debates: "The practice of excluding women from ecclesiastical office cannot conclusively be defended on biblical grounds."

The report was not adopted as Synod's position, but was merely referred to the churches for study and response. A second committee was appointed to evaluate the hermeneutics employed by this first committee in their evaluation of relevant texts (especially I Cor. 7; 11:2-16; 14:33b-36; Gal. 3:28; & I Tim. 2:8-15) and to receive the churches' responses and report to the Synod of 1975.

1975. The second study committee on women in office issue reports. The committee noted that the overwhelming majority of the responses received from the churches does not favor opening ruling offices to women, though there is some ambiguity about the office of deacon. However, the committee also underscores what has been said previously, that the church must avail itself of the gifts of its female members throughout the life and work of the church.

Regarding the hermeneutical evaluation, the committee notes that the position of head of family/household, Levitical priest, and Davidic king are specifically limited to men. Concerning Galatians 3:28, they note that it is hermeneutically inappropriate to draw conclusions about women's position in the church from this passage, as Paul's concern there is limited to the point that human distinctions are worthless in making us acceptable to God. This committee felt it was unwarranted of the previous committee to presume that the praying and prophesying discussed in I Corinthians 11 were taking place as part of official worship services. They note that headship most certainly involves authority and is creational in origin. They challenge the previous report's argument that the "lalein" used in I Corinthians 14 refers to "babbling" but means instead "serious speaking," which is forbidden to women in this passage where silence is enjoined. In I Timothy 2 Paul denies to women the very type of teaching and authority which he commands of Timothy.

This committee concludes that the "practice of excluding women from the ecclesiastical offices would be maintained unless compelling biblical grounds

are advanced for changing that practice." This statement is adopted by Synod and will become another key statement in future discussions.

Synod responded to this and previous committees' concerns that women's gifts be fully utilized in the life of the church by appointing a standing committee to coordinate opportunities for service and to contact those wishing to serve. This committee's work, at first limited to encourage employing women's gifts, is later expanded to serve as an clearing house for all, regardless of sex, who desire to serve the church in various capacities.

Another study committee was also appointed at this time to do further work on the hermeneutics of the relevant scripture passages concerning women in office.

1978. The 1978 Synod establishes the office of evangelist, an office to which qualified men would be ordained with the laying on of hands. The office allows the evangelist to preach the Word and administer the sacraments only within the geographical vicinity and in the emerging congregation in which he is commissioned to do church-development work. The office ceases upon church organization. (This latter condition is modified in 1994 to allow the evangelist to continue to function within the congregation he has been developing even after organization for the sake of continuity, to work with a new pastor as staff or to provide for pastoral services in the case that a minister is not available to pastor the group.)

At this Synod the third study committee (the "hermeneutics committee") also reports. The report begins with a summary of traditional Reformed hermeneutics, e.g., the grammatical-historical exegetical process. The committee then does some analysis of specific biblical passages.

Regarding Genesis 1, it is noted that the word 'adam' is used here generically and includes both sexes. Sexuality implies some variation in roles for carrying out the creation mandate to "be fruitful and multiply." Genesis 2 contains no explicit statement about headship, but some may infer the man's headship from his naming of the woman. From Genesis 3 it can be seen that man's ruling over women is the result of the Fall and part of the sinful condition. Concerning other Old Testament passages, the committee finds no evidence that women ever served as priests or performed Levitical duties; they note also that the prophetic office is not primarily institutional.

Moving to Galatians 3, the committee notes that this passage does indeed have implications for relationships within the church. This committee does believe that Paul is speaking about praying and prophesying in official worship services in I Corinthians 11.

The committee takes exception to the previous Synod's conclusion that "compelling biblical grounds" are necessary in matters pertaining to the church order. Many church order matters are established based on good sense and cultural practices of decorum and good order, and not because of biblical mandate.

Finally, this committee recommends that the office of deacon be opened to women, provided that their work is clearly delineated and distinguished from the work of the elders. (This has to do with the way the church consistory functions in the practice of CRC congregations, especially the smaller churches.) This recommendation was adopted, which implied that ratification by the subsequent Synod was necessary. (All church order changes require subsequent ratification before they are implemented.)

1979. Synod defers ratification of the decision to allow women as deacons and instead appoints another study committee (number four) with a triple mandate: 1. to review the 1978 report and discussion; 2. to study and describe the office of deacon; and 3. to study the implications of the ordination of women as deacons with respect to the concept of male headship and the nature of that authority. This committee was to report in 1981.

1981. The fourth committee reports. In examining the use of "diakonos" in the New Testament, the committee points out that our "deacon" is not necessarily the equivalent (in job description) of the deacons we see appointed in Acts.

The committee sees two strands of thought throughout the Bible concerning men and women: on the one hand, there is the underlying teaching of equal worth--women and men share equally in being the image of God; on the other hand, there is subordination of the wife/woman to the husband/man.

The committee points out that in the history of the CRC there has been some ambiguity in the functions carried out by elders and deacons. They recommended an organizational change to delineate the offices more clearly, e.g., a separate deaconate and a restricted consistory. (This is quite similar to the traditional presbyterian structure.)

Synod, still unsatisfied with how the headship matter had (not) been addressed, responded by appointing still another committee (number five) to study "headship" and how it applied to these questions. This committee was asked to report in 1983, but was unable to report until 1984.

1984. The "headship committee" reports. Analyzing Genesis 2, the committee notes that Adam (the male) was created first and given a position of predominance and leadership. In Genesis 3, this position degenerates into the oppression of women; however, the Fall did not introduce the man's authority and leadership but merely distorted it. They note that elders in the O.T. are always men; it is the men who led worship and were the monarchs. The Hebrew term for head ("rosh") when applied to human beings most often and naturally is interpreted as "chief" or "leader." Similarly, in the N.T. "kephale" does imply authority, particularly in I Corinthians 11. This committee understands this passage to apply to all men/women and not merely to husbands/wives. I Corinthians 14 enjoins a qualified silence upon women. I Timothy forbids to women the kind of official teaching required of Timothy. Galatians 3:28 does not rule out distinctive roles.

The committee concludes that the biblical teaching concerning headship does preclude women's service in the ruling offices of the church, but not their service in the diaconate.

Synod concludes that "the headship principle...is a biblical teaching" which applies to the home and the church. Synod opens the office of deacon to qualified women at the option of the churches, provided that their work is distinguished from that of the elders.

1985. In response to a variety of overtures and appeals, Synod declares that the headship principle "implies that only male members of the church shall be admitted to the offices of minister and elder."

1987. Synod appoints another "headship committee" (the sixth committee) mandated to provide clear biblical and confessional grounds for extending the principle of headship from marriage to the church.

1989. Synod declares that the matter of the ordination of women is not a confessional but merely a church order matter.

1990. The final study committee reports. Instead of following the mandate precisely, this committee presents arguments both for and against extending the headship principle to the church. The committee builds cases both for and against women's ordination to the eldership and ministry. The argument focuses on the interpretation of "head" as it is used in the Bible, e.g., does it mean "direction-setting authority" or merely "source"? The case for ordination of women argues that all the gifts for leadership, teaching, and direction-setting are shared by men and women alike. There is a distinction drawn in the hermeneutical approach to the question between the "protological" (looking back to the pre-Fall condition) and the

"eschatological" (looking forward to the full establishment of Christ's kingdom and the direction the Scriptures point toward, eg. how things will be in the new age).

The committee concludes that the whole issue is debatable; both positions may be taken and either is equally Reformed and grounded in a common understanding of the authority of Scripture.

Synod votes (by a rather narrow margin) to delete the word "male" as a qualification for ordination and allow local option in the ordination of women to all the offices. Guidelines are also established for implementing this decision. Ratification of this major Church Order revision is scheduled for 1992. By synodical order, the document, "Women in Office: A Report to the Churches," is produced and distributed by CRC Publications.

1992. Synod votes (by a very narrow margin) not to ratify the 1990 decision, saying that the biblical grounds are not sufficiently persuasive (Note Synod 1975's requirement for "compelling biblical grounds"). Instead, Synod approves the full use of women's gifts outside the bounds of ordination to office, including "expounding the Word of God."

1993. Synod decides on appeal (by a very narrow vote) to rescind the 1992 decision not to ratify the 1990 decision to open the offices and appoints an ad hoc committee to assemble biblical grounds favoring the ordination of women. The committee is mandated to report to the 1994 Synod at which time the 1990/1993 decision to revise the Church Order is to be ratified.

Many protests are made that this decision is out of order, considering that no new grounds have been introduced to compel Synod to reconsider a previous decision.

1994. Synod votes (by a very narrow vote margin) not to ratify the 1993 decision to revise the Church Order but to continue the practice of limiting the ruling offices to male confessing members. The grounds are, in the order of Synod's decision: a. the lack of persuasiveness of the biblical texts cited by Synod 1993; b. the "clear teaching of Scripture" (I Timothy 2:11-3:15; Genesis 2; I Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:33-35) which "prohibits women from holding the offices of minister, elder, and evangelist"; c. the "general analogy of Scripture" which "supports the exclusion of women from the offices"; d. the historical unanimity of the churches of nearly all persuasions on this issue; e. Synod 1993's violation of its Church Order in revising the 1992 decision without introducing new grounds; f. the unbiblical nature and impracticality of local option on this matter; and g. the point that this cannot be considered adiaphoron since the Scriptures speak clearly to it.

A great many negative votes and protests were registered, but as of 1994, this was the CRC's official synodical position on the issue of women in the ruling offices of the church.

CONCLUSION: A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF

As the issue has come to a head in recent years, very close votes on both sides of the issue are the rule. It is often difficult to separate arguments and positions from emotions, and there is much alienation, as I mentioned in the beginning. Ironically, the reason this is so does not so much relate to the gifts of women and their obvious place of importance in the life of the church. No one disagrees about this! However, the larger issues of the authority of Scripture, hermeneutics (how to understand and interpret the relevant texts and the flow of biblical history), the encroachment of secular world-views (feminism and individualism), and the pattern of decline seen in other Reformed churches which have led the way on women's ordination (particularly the GKN) are the more important matters. Certainly, no one denies the critical nature of these issues. They are determinative in the whole discussion. These are the underlying foundation which must be examined before the decision about whether or not women can serve in the so-called ruling offices can be made.

The CRC is in great pain and divided as a result of the above discussions. Please pray for and encourage her in this time of trouble. And take heed to yourselves as you also examine this issue.

Lawrence K. Spalink, 3/95

SOURCES:

"Women in Office: A Report to the Churches," CRC Publications

"A Cause for Division?" CRC Publications

Acts of Synod 1994, CRC Publications

Various articles in The Banner (CRC Publications), The Outlook (The Reformed Fellowship) and The Reformed Witness (CCM/CRC)

POST SCRIPT:

The Synod which convened in June 1995 voted once again, and by a very narrow margin, to overturn the decision of 1994 and declared that there exist within the churches two equally valid interpretations of the Scriptural

data which lead to opposite conclusions on this matter. Since over the 20 years of debate, unity has not been found on this question, Synod voted to allow classes to decide among themselves and within their own jurisdiction (local option) whether the word "male" in CO Art. 3 will be operative or not. The synod also called for a moratorium on discussion for five years. Synod further moved in 1996 to declare several young women as candidates for the ministry, some of whom have subsequently actually been ordained. A number of congregations have proceeded to call and ordain women members to the eldership as well.

Many observers criticize the 1995 Synod for reversing the earlier synod's very biblically-grounded decision without citing weighty biblical or church order grounds and therefore regard this decision as illegal and against Reformed principles, and as fallout from this Synod, extra- ecclesiastical assemblies have been formed and erosion of the denominational membership has accelerated, the decline reaching 10% in 1996. A number of congregations have proposed the formation of classes which maintain the 1994 decision ("theological affinity classes") and are presently petitioning synod to approve this as a compromise for those congregations with conscientious objections to 1995 to remain within the CRCNA fold.