

A Summary Report of the Committee on **WOMEN IN ORDAINED OFFICE**

Gregory Reynolds

Since 1984 the Committee on Women in Ordained Office has been laboring to report its findings to the church on the question of the relationship of women to the special offices of elder and deacon. Finally the Committee brought a completed report to the 55th General Assembly which convened at Covenant College in Tennessee on May 17th. The following is a brief summary of that 40-page report.

Foundational Consideration

The Committee report begins by reminding the church of her confessional commitment to the biblical mandate known as the regulative principle (WCF 1:6). This means that in all matters of faith and practice, especially in the areas of government and worship, the church must have a clear biblical warrant to establish a doctrine or practice (cf. Lev. 10:1-3; Deut. 12:32; 1 Sam. 13; Isa. 8:20; Matt. 15:6; 28:19,20; Col. 2:20-23 and 2 Tim. 3:16,17). This principle alone prevents the church from compromising with the spirit of the age in its consideration of the matter of women in ordained office.

Women, as created by God, are equal with men as God's image-bearers. Women are also different from men in being created as man's counterpart to complement him in the God-given task of dominion. Man is the head of the relationship, and woman is a suitable helper (Gen. 1 & 2). As one flesh the two are united covenantally to image God's covenant relationship with his people (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:32).

In Christ women are equal with men in their status as redeemed and adopted by God's sovereign grace (Gal. 3:28). This equality of status does not negate the created role-distinction; rather it restores man and woman to their God-given relationship as head and helper in covenant life. Paul does not contradict his statement in Galatians 3:28 by delineating the distinction or roles in relationship to authority in the church in 1 Timothy 2:9-15. He asserts that

these roles are rooted in both God's creational and redemptive orders.

God has created and redeemed man and woman to be subject to his authority structure. This is expressed in the marriage bond which requires men to cherish and love their wives as Christ loves the church (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:25f.) and women to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ (Eph. 5:22-24). Christ restores the bond and order of marriage which sin has corrupted and distorted.

Women and Special Office

Scripture teaches that calling and ordination to special office are not meant to recognize gifts and abilities but are God's appointment to give leadership and order to the life and ministry of his people. God gives gifts in order to fulfill the function and service of special office, but special office is not required for the use of gifts in the church. Special office is meant to give direction and order to the use of the gifts of the ascended Christ in his body (Eph. 4:7-16).

Church history and our subordinate standards confirm the idea that ordination to special office is induction into a role of authoritative leadership in the service of the church. The church is called to submit to this leadership in the Lord.

Given this understanding, it is no surprise that Paul excludes women from the special office of teaching and ruling eldership in 1 Timothy 2:12. The order of the church is based on the order of the family (1 Tim. 3:15). As the husband/father is the head of the wife/children, so the elder is to take a leading role in overseeing the life and ministry of the church family. The proper exercise of such leadership is a requirement for the office of elder (1 Tim. 3:4, 5).

What is perhaps less clear to some in the church is the fact that Paul also excludes women from the special office of deacon. The N.T. prototype deacons of Acts 6 were ordained to

"preside over" (v.3) the ministry to widows in the Jerusalem church. The family headship requirement is the same for deacons as it is for elders (1 Tim. 3:12). The list of qualifications for "women" ("wives" in KJV) in 1 Timothy 3:11 would therefore refer to women associated with the ministry of the deacons.

Philippians 1:1 addresses deacons with elders as the ordained leaders of the congregation. The reference to Phoebe as a "deacon" ("servant" KJV) in Romans 16:1 is at best ambiguous. In only three of thirty N.T. uses of this noun does the context yield an unambiguous reference to ordained office (1 Tim. 3:8, 12; Phil. 1:1). Without the clear warrant of Scripture the committee could not in good conscience include women in the special office of deacon.

Church history and our subordinate standards confirm this conclusion. It is interesting to note that beginning with Calvin, most Reformed churches recognized two types of "deacons" in Scripture: ordained leaders of diaconal ministry and unordained women who assisted them particularly in their ministry to women.

Women and General Office

Every member of the body of Christ is effectually called into the general office of believer. Women's diaconal (and all other) gifts are to be fully used without special ordination, though our churches are encouraged to consider appointment of women as an auxiliary of the ordained diaconate. The N.T. indicates that under the godly leadership of ordained men, the gifts of women flourish. The report concludes with a survey of the rich variety of ministries performed by women in the N.T. church. Our church needs to encourage its women to use these gifts to the glory of our sovereign Lord.

Mr. Reynolds is chairman of the Committee and pastor of Westchester OPC in Mount Vernon, N.Y.