



Women and Office

February 2021
Ordained Servant

Ordained Servant Online

A Journal for Church Officers

E-ISSN 1931-7115

CURRENT ISSUE: WOMEN AND OFFICE

February 2021

From the Editor

How easy it is to forget important documents. When Jay Adams designed the Doctor of Ministry program at Westminster in California, he required students to have their theses published in order to receive the degree. He said he did not see much use in having our work relegated to the shelves of a library. This requirement also demanded us to become better writers. So it is with general assembly reports.

In this issue I realize that the subject is controverted throughout the Christian and secular worlds. However, my intent is to show that our church's limiting the ordination of officers to men is not inimical to, but goes hand-in-hand with, the robust enumeration and encouragement of women's gifts in fruitful ministry in the church. We should expect this since the Word of God is clear in limiting special office to men and in encouraging women to exercise all of their God-given gifts in the general office of believer.

One of the influences that radical feminism has infected the church with is the idea that special office is a privilege that women are being denied, whereas the Bible wants us to think of it as a heavy responsibility from which women are being lovingly exempted. "And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28). While this is not the only reason for the exclusion of women from special office, it is rarely considered. But it most certainly does not imply that women are in anyway ontologically inferior to men.

Women's ordination is like the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Only one tree surrounded by gorgeous fruit is chosen as the loyalty test, and yet that is the one that gets the attention. The devil is a master magician.

My editorial, "Phoebe Was a Deaconess, but She Was Not Ordained," is based on my response in *New Horizons*¹ to Dr. Robert Strimple's summary of his minority report in *New Horizons* titled "Phoebe Was a Deacon: Other Women Should Be, Too."² His minority report is part of the Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office submitted to the 55th General Assembly (1988). I should say that Dr. Strimple was one of my favorite professors and opposing his position was daunting, since I never found anything but sound orthodoxy based on careful exegesis in all that he taught.

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.'s. "Women Deacons? Focusing the Issue" is a part of the Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office. He distinguishes the fundamental difference

¹ This present article is based on an article with the same title originally published in *New Horizons*, 9:7 (Aug/Sept 1988): 17-18.

² Robert Strimple, "Phoebe Was A Deacon, Other Women Should Be, Too," *New Horizons*, 9:6 (June/July 1988): 17-18.

between the Committee report and the Minority has to do with the authoritative nature of the diaconate rooted in the biblical doctrine of ordination. He believes that

only when the issue of women's role in the church is no longer encumbered with the question of ordination and office will the church make headway, on the principle of 1 Peter 4:10–11, toward realizing an optimum exercise of gifts given to women—for showing mercy, yes, but for administering and teaching in the church as well.

Apart from formatting changes, this text and “Women and General Office” are exactly what is present in the general assembly minutes.

The section of the report dealing with “Women and General Office” focuses on the vast terrain of service in the church available to all who hold the general office of believer, fleshing out the positive conclusion of Gaffin. This was purposely left to the end so that the focus would be not on what women are excluded from, but rather on the wide range of ministry under the leadership of the gracious direction of ordained officers of the church.

I have also included Dr. Strimple's *New Horizons* article in a PDF. I also discovered that in that same issue I wrote a one page summary of the Committee's majority report and have also included it as a PDF.

Alan Strange continues his illuminating “Commentary on the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church” with chapter 13 on “The Local Church and Its Session.” This will prove to be a great resource for church officers when it is completed.

Darryl Hart reviews *The Irony of Modern Catholic History* by George Weigel. This is a fascinating critical review of a book that deals with the struggle the Roman Catholic Church has always had implementing its idea of Christendom as a reformation of culture. As Hart concludes, that idea “often loses sight of the singularity of Christ's redemptive work,” and in the process undermines the biblical pattern of redemptive history.

Ryan McGraw reviews *The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction*, by John Bower. Designed for serious students of the Westminster Confession, it “helps readers understand what the authors meant in their own context, how the text of the Confession was transmitted, and it gives us insight into its original form.”

Finally, William Wordsworth (1770–1850) is acknowledged to be the greatest of the Romantic poets, partly a reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, whose view of reason tended to evacuate the humanities of their soul. Although we do not know much about Wordsworth's specific religious convictions apart from his poetry, it is generally acknowledged that he, along with his friend and fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), became more orthodox in their later years. This Sonnet from his *Ecclesiastical Sonnets, Part 2*, “The Point at Issue,” (XXX) could only have been written in a culture strongly imbued with biblical theology and sensibilities.

The cover picture is looking toward Crawford Notch from the Mount Washington Hotel in January.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

CONTENTS

ServantThoughts

- “Phoebe Was a Deaconess, but She Was Not Ordained”

ServantWork

- Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Women Deacons? Focusing the Issue,” from the Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office [Extracted from the Minutes of the Fifty-fifth General Assembly (1988), 353–55]
- “Women and General Office,” from the Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office [Extracted from the Minutes of the Fifty-fifth General Assembly (1988), 344–52]
- Robert B. Strimple, “Phoebe Was a Deacon: Other Women Should Be, Too”
- Gregory E. Reynolds, “A Summary Report of the Committee on Women in Ordained Office”

ServantStandards

- Alan D. Strange, “Commentary on the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Chapter 13”

ServantReading

- Darryl G. Hart, review of *The Irony of Modern Catholic History: How the Church Rediscovered Itself & Challenged the Modern World to Reform*, by George Weigel
- Ryan M. McGraw, review of *The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction*, by John Bower

ServantPoetry

- William Wordsworth (1770 –1850), “The Point at Issue”

FROM THE ARCHIVES “ORDINATION, DEACONS”

http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject_Index_Vol_1-28.pdf

- “On the Laying on of Hands.” (R. D. Anderson) 13:2 (Apr. 2004): 44–48.
- “Are Deacons Members of the Session?” (R. Dean Anderson, Jr.) 2:4 (Oct. 1993): 75–78.
- “Deacons and/or Trustees?” (Roger Schmurr) 4:1 (Jan. 1995): 20–22.
- “Editorial [on Women Deacons].” (G. I. Williamson) 3:3 (Jul. 1994): 49–50.
- “The Deacons.” (John Calvin) 1:1 (Jan. 1992): 21.
- “The Pastoral Wisdom of John Calvin.” (John Calvin) 3:3 (Jul. 1994): 64–70.

Ordained Servant exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

Servant Thoughts

Phoebe Was a Deaconess, But She Was Not Ordained

by Gregory E. Reynolds

In 1986 I was elected an alternate to the study committee “Hermeneutics of Women in Church Office” by the 53rd General Assembly. Upon the resignation of George Cottenden I became a member and then the chairman. The committee's scope was broadened, renaming it the “Committee on Women in Church Office,” and it submitted its final report to the 55th General Assembly (1988). Shortly after this I responded to Dr. Strimple’s summary of his Minority report which appeared in the June/July 1988 issue of *New Horizons* titled “Phoebe Was A Deacon, Other Women Should Be, Too.”¹ I also gave a summary of the report in that same issue of *New Horizons*.² I should say that Dr. Strimple was one of my favorite professors and opposing his position was daunting, since I never found anything but sound orthodoxy based on careful exegesis in all that he taught.

Now, in 2021,³ I think the topic is still germane in light of contemporary discussions about the place of women in the church. While I do not think that anyone in our circles is advocating the ordination of women to special office, including the office of deacon, I believe that it is important to articulate why ordained office is restricted to men. And, more importantly, why this restriction does not inhibit the broad biblical arena of service open to all women and men in our churches.

The question before our church is not whether or not women should be performing diaconal work but rather, whether or not women should be ordained to the special office of New Testament deacon. The work of the deacons is not the issue. Who should lead in this work is the question before us. Therefore, the point at issue is the nature and authority of the office of deacon.

Using the Regulative Principle

As firm believers in the infallible Word, our church is committed to the principle that the doctrine and practice that bind the church must be “expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (WCF 1.6). The last phrase of this regulative principle is often misunderstood and misapplied.

¹ Robert Strimple, “Phoebe Was A Deacon, Other Women Should Be, Too,” *New Horizons*, 9:6 (June/July 1988): 17–18.

² Gregory E. Reynolds, “A Summary Report of the Committee on Women in Ordained Office,” *New Horizons*, 9:6 (June/July 1988): 16.

³ This present article is based on an article with the same title originally published in *New Horizons*, 9:7 (Aug/Sept 1988): 17–18. The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the committee.

Dr. Strimple indicates that the “positive scriptural warrant” demanded by this principle is a matter of degrees. He alleges that the demand for one hundred percent clarity “may well leave us paralyzed” (p. 17). This entirely misses the point of our Confession. The principle is a matter of logic (syllogistic reasoning), not probability. The binding conclusions deduced from Scripture must be based on express scriptural premises.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:2 Paul addresses all of the saints in the Corinthian church, male and female. In chapter 11 he delivers the Lord’s command for the church to partake of the Lord’s Supper. Based on these two clear premises we conclude that women are commanded to partake, too. The conclusion is as binding as the premises. This has nothing to do with probability. If either of the two premises in such a deduction is false or merely probable (unclear), the conclusion is invalid and not binding on the church. This is why our Confession instructs us to let the clear passages explain the unclear (WCF 1.9). Romans 16:1–2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 prove that some women were recognized for their diaconal service in the New Testament churches. But, these passages do not provide the premises to prove that women were ordained to the office of deacon.

The Minority’s assertion that we need biblical warrant to exclude women from the ordained office of deacon based on Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28 is unfounded. These two passages prove that men and women are ontologically equal as God’s image-bearers and as redeemed in Christ. They refer to the general office of believer and not special office or marriage roles. I hope to demonstrate that the biblical doctrines of office and ordination, as well as passages dealing with special offices in the New Testament, explicitly exclude women from the eldership and the diaconate.

Ordination and Office

Ordination is the biblical rite of transferring authority from one group of divinely-called leaders (office-bearers) to another, usually with the symbolic “laying on of hands” (1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22). Numbers 27:15–23 is a classic text on ordination. Notice the strong emphasis on authority. “Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation (v. 16). . . . You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey” (v. 20). This was not a magical rite but a public symbol of identification and transfer of power in recognition of God’s call to office.

It is no surprise to find ordination in the New Testament. In fact, the first ordination which we encounter after Pentecost is in connection with deacons in Acts 6:1–6. The absence of the noun deacon in this passage does not argue against seeing this as the first appearance of New Testament deacons. Here the apostolic foundation was laid for the ordinary office of deacon delineated in 1 Timothy 3. The verb *διακονεῖν* (*diakonein*), “to serve (to deacon),” is used in Acts 6:2, and the ministry of “serving (deaconing)” is used in vss. 1 and 4 (*διακονίᾳ*). Furthermore, there is a list of qualifications for (v.3) and ordination to (v.6) the office.

It is crucial to note that the purpose of the apostles was to appoint men over this responsibility. The verb used means “to put in charge of” (v.3 *καταστήσομεν* *katastēsomen*). This language is strikingly similar to that of Numbers 27:16 mentioned above. The apostles understood the importance of ordination in delegating a portion of

their ministry to the seven men. Ordination to office is public appointment to oversee the ministry of the church whether it is word or deed ministry.

When the offices of elder and deacon are set forth by Paul in 1 Timothy 2 and 3, the theme of authority and leadership is prominent. In 2:12–13 women are explicitly forbidden to teach or exercise authority over men in the church. Paul’s purpose in writing the entire section was that “you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God” (3:15). Authority in the church is analogous to authority in the family (household). Therefore, both elders and deacons should be proven family leaders before they can have leadership in the larger family of the church. Both are to rule (lead, manage, προϊστάμενοι, *proistamenoí* cf. 1 Thess. 5:12) their own households well (3:4, 12). The emphasis is on oversight and authoritative leadership.

Philippians 1:1 indicates that the apostle thought of both elders and deacons as leaders of the Philippian congregation, since he singles them out in his greeting. The fact that elders and deacons lead in distinct spheres in no way reduces the leadership involved in each. The titles stand as complements, not as a contrast. Paul’s intention is to address them as leaders not to contrast their ministries. Word and deed ministry represents a division of labor in the life of the church (1 Pet. 4:10–11) which is reflected in the two offices provided to give servant leadership in these ministries.

Acts 6 is clear in emphasizing the oversight involved in both offices. Our Form of Government reflects this emphasis in stating that the board of deacons “shall oversee the ministry of mercy” (FG 11.4, p. 14). Furthermore, when a deacon is ordained, the congregation is asked to “promise to yield him all that honor, encouragement, and obedience in the Lord to which his office, according to the Word of God and the Constitution of the church, entitles him” (FG 25.7.c, p. 73). The authority conferred to serve by leading is clear.

Deaconing Women

Who, then, was Phoebe? As I have suggested in the title, she was a deaconess; but she was not ordained. Only three of the thirty New Testament uses of the word δίακονος (*diakonos*), found in Romans 16:1, clearly refer to the office of deacon. For this reason the KJV, the NIV, and the ESV translate this word as “servant” in Romans 16:1. The most that can be ascertained from this reference is that Phoebe was recognized for her diaconal service in the Cenchranean church. Nothing is said of her leadership in ordained office.

As the Minority inadvertently concludes, we must look elsewhere to decide whether or not it is “proper for a woman to serve in the office of deacon.” What is disturbing is that the Minority is willing to ordain women to the diaconate based on a “natural understanding” of a passage which says nothing about ordained office. It is just at this point that we must be guided by 1 Timothy 2 and 3.

Who, then, were the “women” of 1 Timothy 3:11? While both the KJV, the NIV, and the ESV translate this word as “wives” (γυναῖκας, *gunaikos*), this probably limits the word more than the context requires. The absence of the possessive pronoun “their” is decisive at this point, though certainly deacons’ wives may have been included. The most that can be deduced from this verse is that some women, like Phoebe, were closely and

publicly associated with the work of the deacons (which as Acts 6 shows would be of special help in dealing with ministry to women).

The very presence of this verse in the middle of Paul's discussion of qualifications for the office of deacon proves that he could not have women office-bearers in mind. If women were included in the office of deacon, Paul would have no reason to single out "women" in verse 11. Furthermore, the requirement for deacons to be husbands of one wife and rule their own households well (v. 12) would make no sense. If Paul had female deacons in mind, surely he would have used that word to refer to them here.

What we have in Romans 16:1–2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 are what Calvin wisely referred to as a "second order" of deacons made up of an auxiliary of women who assisted the ordained deacons (*Institutes* 4.3.9).

Van Bruggen

It is somewhat surprising that the Minority should quote so extensively from Prof. J. Van Bruggen.⁴ In *Offices in the Apostolic Church*,⁵ Van Bruggen contends that there is one continuing office in the New Testament, that of overseer or elder. Therefore, deacons should not be ordained as part of the consistory (session and diaconate). They should be "assistants" to the elders and not "deacon-office-bearers." They are to be elected and appointed, not ordained.⁶

This would effectively remove the possibility "of unlocking the office of teaching and overseeing for women, which Scripture expressly forbids." If this one-office scheme is to work, "then either one has to change the profile of the diaconate or to declare that the deaconesses to be elected are not female-deacons." Out of great respect for the history of his church, with its high view of deacons as ordained office-bearers, he concludes, "It is possible to leave the situation concerning the deacons as it is and to create next to it a second diaconate (with deaconesses)."

While I disagree with Van Bruggen's conclusion that deacons are not ordained officers, I appreciate his respect for the authority connected with ordained office. He has dealt with this question quite differently than the Minority.

Some Practical Effects

Let us conclude by focusing on the practical effects of these three views before us: If the deacons are not ordained (Van Bruggen) or have no overseeing authority (requiring a revision of our Form of Government) though ordained (Minority), the oversight of the broad range of diaconal ministry will burden the elders in precisely the way that the New Testament diaconal office was designed to avoid (Acts 6:2b, 4).

If women are ordained to the diaconate, it is hard to understand how this will square with the biblical doctrines of the office of deacon and the authoritative nature of ordination. And because our churches associate authority with ordination and office, two dangerous results are likely: (a) women deacons will exercise authority and oversight in

⁴ New Testament professor emeritus in the "Article 31" seminary in Kampen, the Netherlands.

⁵ J. Van Bruggen, *Ambten in de apostolische kerk: een exegetisch mozaïek* (Kampen: Kok, 1984).

⁶ Quotes are from an "Unofficial and Preliminary Translation of Chapter Five" by Adam DeJong, and thus are not paginated.

policy-making and administration, and (b) it will only be a short step to “unlock” (Van Bruggen) the office of elder to women.

If we add a deacon’s auxiliary to our present structure, the ordained deacons will lead the auxiliary in its work, relieve the session of direct oversight, and will not compromise on the issue of male headship and authority in the church. And the Phoebes (as well as the Stephens) will be mobilized to use their gifts to God’s glory and the good of the whole body of Christ.

Our church’s limiting the ordination of officers to men is not inimical to, but goes hand-in-hand with, the robust enumeration and encouragement of women’s gifts in fruitful ministry in the church. We should expect this since the Word of God is clear in limiting special office to men and in encouraging women to exercise all of their God-given gifts in the general office of believer.

One of the influences that radical feminism has infected the church with is that special office is a privilege that women are being denied, whereas the Bible wants us to think of it as a heavy responsibility from which women are being lovingly exempted. “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). While this is not the only reason for the exclusion of women from special office, it is rarely considered. The other reasons are articulated in the 1988 general assembly report. But it most certainly does not imply that women are in anyway ontologically inferior to men, as the report also clearly asserts.

Women’s ordination is like the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Only one tree surrounded by gorgeous fruit is chosen as the loyalty test, and yet that is the one that gets the attention. The devil is a master magician.

Back in 1998 the OPC defeated the proposal of ordaining women to the diaconate, thus, sending a clear signal to our churches and to a watching world that we follow Scripture and do not allow the zeitgeist of the fallen world to alter the doctrine and life of Christ’s church. Let us gladly acknowledge the ministries and gifts of the Phoebes in our churches in the way our Lord has ordained in his infallible Word.

Gregory E. Reynolds *is pastor emeritus of Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of Ordained Servant.*

Servant Work

Women Deacons? Focusing the Issue¹

By Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.

This General Assembly has been served by the Committee on Women in Church Office with two reports concerning women and the diaconate. Both offer some fairly extensive exegetical argumentation but reach opposed conclusions: the one (the Committee) that women may not be deacons, the other (the Minority) that they may. However, in neither report, nor in the two taken together, does the basic difference between them—and so perhaps the basic issue before this General Assembly—come out as clearly as it might. (The full Committee did not have an opportunity to consider the report of the Minority; it was not produced until after the Committee report had been submitted for inclusion in the Agenda).

The basic difference between the two reports is not that the one favors while the other is opposed to women deacons. An even deeper difference is diverging conceptions of the diaconate as a (special) *office* or, correlatively and more specifically, of the *authority* of the (office of) deacon. For the Committee, women may not be deacons because 1 Timothy 2:12 prohibits women to exercise authority in the church, including the authority inherent in the diaconate; all authority in the church is a function, by covenant-based analogy, of the headship of father/husband in the home. The Minority rejects this position and holds that women may be deacons because the authority of the deacon is “delegated authority, authority exercised *under* the authority of the elders.” The Committee and Minority differ because they have different conceptions of the authority of the deacon and, in that respect, of the office-character of the diaconate.

The ultimate resolution of this difference lies in Scripture. But what about our Form of Government? It might be said that its position concerning authority/office in relation to the diaconate falls between the Committee and the Minority. But that position is surely closer to the former. On the one hand, the work of the deacons is “under the supervision and authority of the session” (11.5). On the other hand, the Form of Government subsumes the specific offices—ministers, elders, and deacons—under a generic notion of office: officers are those who “have been publicly recognized as called of Christ to minister with authority” (5.2). Nothing here even suggests that the authority of the deacon, unlike that of the minister and elder, is *delegated* authority; rather, deacons, equally with ministers and elders, have their authority to minister from Christ. In the same vein, the procedures for electing, ordaining, and installing ruling elders and deacons are stipulated together in the same chapter and are identical for both offices: (1) the ordination/installation questions are the same for both (25.6.b), and, correspondingly, (2) the congregation promises obedience, without qualification as to its character as

¹ From the Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office [Extracted from the Minutes of the Fifty-fifth General Assembly (1988), 353–55].

obedience, to deacons as well as ruling elders (25.6.c, 6.e, 7.c). Considered from the side of the congregation, and the obedience/submission asked (and required) of it, the authority of ruling elders and deacons is equal and parallel.

Conclusion: What recommendation 2 of the Minority² intends, in detail, is not made clear. What is clear is its effect, if adopted. To revise the Form of Government to provide for women deacons will necessitate as well revising its underlying conception of the nature and authority of office. The General Assembly should recognize that—measured by the existing understanding of diaconal authority in the Form of Government—to “open the office of deacon to qualified women” would bring the OPC into conflict with its subordinate standard of government. Scripture is our final standard and wherever it leads we are bound to follow, but we need to be aware of the full dimensions of the revision demanded to avoid conflict in our Form of Government and to be sure that Scripture really does demand such revision.

It has not been my purpose here to debate the report of the Minority. But several further observations do seem in order in light of the preceding comments.

1. (a) Can we be sure that the exercise of (official) authority prohibited to women in 1 Timothy 2:12 is neatly restricted to teaching and closely related ruling? After all, in terms of the verse itself and its syntax, the prohibited exercise of authority over men is made without qualification and, further, is parallel in addition to the prohibition against teaching. The semantics of that syntax are open to interpretation, but the Minority has not addressed that question.

(b) Also, if, as the Minority holds, the authority of headship is not at issue for the office of deacon, why then does Paul stipulate that a deacon must lead/rule/manage his household well (1 Tim. 3:12)—essentially identical to the parallel requirement for overseers (vss. 4–5)? If headship is not at stake in the diaconate, why single out proven headship in the home as a requirement for deacons (as well as elders)—especially since, on the assumption that headship is not at stake, their worthiness for office could be adequately established by other criteria?

2. The Minority makes extensive use of the views of J. Van Bruggen, but does not follow them consistently. The tendency of those views, based on his exegesis of the New Testament, is to break the close bond between overseers (ministers and elders) and deacons characteristic of Reformed church orders—so much so that the *office* of deacon (as an authoritative, ordained function) disappears; for instance, in setting out his own view, as far as I can discover, he never uses the word “office” (Dutch *ambt*) for deacons. Apparently, there is really only one office in the church today—that of overseer; all other organized, structured ministry, including the diaconate, exists—without need of ordination—by appointment of the overseers and under their direction.³ In other words, in relation to the diaconate, Van Bruggen has freed himself from the issue of authority that continues to burden the Minority in his effort to argue for women in the office of deacon.

² That a committee of three be appointed by the moderator to report to the 56th General Assembly concerning what amendments to the Form of Government would be required in order to open the office of deacon to qualified women, and how such amendments could most helpfully be put before the church for consideration.

³ See, e.g., the summary paragraph in J. Van Bruggen, *Ambten in de apostolische kerk: een exegetisch mozaïek* (Kampen, NL: Kok, 1984), 117.

Van Bruggen’s position on women deacons—in the context of his stimulating, carefully argued work on offices in the apostolic church—merits the thoughtful consideration of the larger Reformed community. But in his laudable attempt to remove deacons out from under the eclipsing shadow of the overseers, it seems to me, he has failed to do justice to the unique bond between the two, as a permanent church order, found in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3, and reflected elsewhere in the New Testament.

3. An overriding fear for me is that those who favor ordaining women to the office of deacon will suppose that thereby a victory has been gained for women, and their full and rightful participation in the life of the church at last secured. I suspect that the effect of such “victory,” rather, will be to limit that participation and inhibit it from being as full as it ought to be. 1 Peter 4:10–11 gives clear profile to the dual principle of ministry (the gospel in word and deed) for all believers, men and women alike—a principle that the dual office structure (elders and deacons) exists, in part, to facilitate by the leadership it gives.⁴ In my judgment, only when the issue of women’s role in the church is no longer encumbered with the question of ordination and office will the church make headway, on the principle of 1 Peter 4:10–11, toward realizing an optimum exercise of gifts given to women—for showing mercy, yes, but for administering and teaching in the church as well.

Richard B. Gaffin Jr. *is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and emeritus professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. He lives in Springfield, Virginia and attends Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Vienna, Virginia.*

⁴ See the fuller treatment of this passage in the Report, IV. Women and General Office, A. Biblical Teaching on the Identity of Women, 2.

Servant Work

Women and General Office¹

A. Biblical Teaching on the Identity of Women

1. Our consideration of the proper ministry of women in the church must take into account what the Bible says about the identity of women in Creation, the effects of the Fall, and the identity of women in Christ. Only then will we have an adequate basis for considering the role of women in the church.

It has often been implied that Galatians 3:28, relating as it does to the position of men and women *coram Deo*, has nothing to say regarding their interpersonal roles and relationships in church and in society. This would seem impossible to maintain. As Stephen Clark says, “. . . the view that Galatians 3:28 only applied to people’s standing before God neglects the communal or social consequences of religious distinctions. In Paul’s time, religious differences were the basis of social structure.”²

And this is not merely something that we would expect theoretically. It is something that we see happening in the church in Paul’s day. “Paul saw social implications of the new oneness in Christ for male-female relationships. It is noteworthy that women in the early church were taking on some roles prominent enough to be mentioned in Paul’s letter.”³

The exclusion of women from special office in the church (the eldership and diaconate) is a negative conclusion and so leaves open the question of what sort of ministry is given to women in their office as believers. Concerning that large question we offer several general observations.

Women, too, are part of the body of Christ (Gal. 3:27, 28) and the unity and the fellowship of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3, Phil. 2:1); they, too, have been baptized with the Spirit (Acts 2:17, 18, 1 Cor. 12:13) and so share in the distribution of the Spirit’s gifts (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-11; 14ff.). The question, then, how women may give legitimate expression in the congregation to these gifts, including the biblical insights and discernment given to them by the Spirit, must receive a positive answer. The principle of 1 Corinthians 12:7, 14:12; 1 Peter 4:10 is that in the church spiritual gifts are given to edify others, and what is given to edify others obviously must come to expression if others are in fact to be edified.

2. Within the New Testament, 1 Peter 4:10–11, perhaps better than any other passage, provides an overall perspective on the answer to the question before us:

¹ From the Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office [Extracted from the Minutes of the Fifty-fifth General Assembly (1988), 344–52].

² Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1980), 151.

³ *Report 33 – Committee on Headship in the Bible, Agenda for the 1984 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church*, 320.

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very word of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength that God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

Citing these verses in this format serves to highlight some pertinent observations either about or prompted by them:

a. The immediate context makes plain that Peter is addressing the whole church, men and women alike.

b. In view are all the gifts given to the church in their full diversity and as shared in by every believer ("Each . . . whatever gift . . .").

c. Each gift, a particular ministration of God's grace, is to be used for serving (*diakonountes*) others.

d. Verse 11 provides a fundamental profile on the gifts given to the church. Each of the gifts, in their full totality, reduces to either one of two kinds: speaking or serving (*diakonei*; note that this is a different, less broad use than that of the same verb earlier in verse 10, reflecting the variable meaning of this verb, and its cognate noun *diakonos*, in the New Testament). The ministry of the general office, embracing the exercise of the gifts of all believers, has a basic, twofold structure: *word*-ministry and *deed*-ministry.

e. It is difficult to deny an inner correspondence between this twofold structure of the general office and the permanent, twofold structure of special office in the church; the one reflects the other. Specifically, the eldership answers to the word-ministry of the general office, the diaconate to its deed-ministry. These two special offices are not only established in the church so that those who occupy them may exercise the respective ministries of each office to and for the rest of the church. Rather, their special office identity involves that, as head and fathers, they are also to lead the whole of "God's household," men and women alike, in the diverse word- and deed-ministries committed to the general office (cf. Eph. 4:12).

3. In working at our assignment we have been impressed with the paucity of explicit biblical evidence against women's ordination, a paucity all the more remarkable in view of the fact that some are making that issue a mark of fidelity to biblical Christianity in our time. We have also been struck, for instance, how extensively Calvin's remarks on these passages are based on what is "unseemly" and "incompatible" with "natural propriety" and "common sense."⁴ Similarly, the comments of Charles Hodge on 1 Corinthians 11:13 are revealing (the text is "Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?" but what Hodge says here he would apply as well to women speaking publicly in church meetings):

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, trans. Fraser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 306f.; his comments on the 1 Timothy 2 passage for the most part refer the reader to what he has already said on 1 Corinthians 14.

This is an appeal to their own sense of propriety. The apostle often recognizes the intuitive judgments of the mind as authoritative. . . . The constitution of our nature being derived from God, the laws which he has impressed upon it, are as much a revelation from him as any other possible communication of his will. And to deny this, is to deny the possibility of all knowledge.

As we have reflected on such statements, we have come to recognize that the strength of much of the current opposition to women's ordination stems from a very large premise, a premise that is not taught in Scripture itself but is assumed to underlie and solidify biblical teaching on the subject.

What is that assumed premise? In the words of one fairly recent Reformed exponent of it, "the premise underlying the Biblical teaching on this subject is that the Creator has not equipped women for positions of authority and initiative in the Christian Church. Her constitution, both in its strength and in its weakness, renders it inappropriate that she had such positions. . . . To require a woman to exercise an authoritative, teaching ministry is like requesting her to sing bass. It is a violation of nature . . . the woman is not constitutionally fitted to be the asserter, maintainer, and defender of the Christian faith . . . If her Creator intended her for submissiveness, can the woman hope to cope adequately with a situation requiring authoritativeness and assertiveness?"⁵

It is the premise that often includes the ideas that men are relatively more important than women and that women are more susceptible to temptation,⁶ that woman "is easily misled and easily misleads. The world has always sized her up in this fashion: she is both seduced and seducer. Sharpness of discernment is not in general her principal quality,"⁷ that "the peculiar power and usefulness of women depend on their being the objects of admiration and affection" so that "the refinement and delicacy of their sex . . . should be carefully preserved" by permitting them in church to learn as much as they wish but not to speak.⁸

These statements have come to light randomly during the course of our reading. They could easily be multiplied.

Does any among us wish to defend this premise, particularly its "ontology" of women or the doubtful piece of natural theology expressed by Hodge? We doubt it. Yet we dare say that because of deeply rooted cultural and historical factors that have found their way into the thinking and life of the church, virtually every one of us is under its influence to one degree or another. And as long as that premise continues to control and the decidedly unbiblical elements in its assessment of women persist, we will not be able to put the issue of women's ordination in proper perspective, nor will we be able to make necessary and constructive advances in grasping why *Scripture* prohibits their ordination. We need to be especially sensitive here to the apostolic injunction found in another context, "Do not go beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6).

⁵ Donald MacLeod, "The Place of Women in the Church," *The Banner of Truth*, 81 (June 1970): 37, 40.

⁶ A. Schlatter, *Die Briefe an die Thessalonicher, Philipper, Timotheus und Titus* (Leipzig, DE: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1950), 143.

⁷ E. L. Smelik, *De brieven van Paulus aan Timotheus, Titus en Filemon* (Nijkerk, Netherlands: G F Callenbach, 1961), 42.

⁸ Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle of the Corinthians* (repr., 1857; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 305.

B. Women in the Life of the Early Church: Some New Testament Observations

1. Priscilla

a. Acts 18:24-26 In the missionary context set forth in these verses, Priscilla and Aquila instruct Apollos. Previously, the ministry of Apollos, while forceful and Scriptural, had not been conducted from the perspective of the fulfillment that had already arrived in Christ (“he knew only the baptism of John,” v. 25); his “adequate” teaching about Jesus needed to become “more adequate.” That lack is supplied by the teaching he receives from Priscilla and Aquila.

Noteworthy is the fact that in this teaching activity, as elsewhere with one exception, Priscilla is not only paired with her husband, but her name is mentioned first. Perhaps this implies some kind of initiative or superior expertise; perhaps it simply implies that she is better-known. No firm conclusion can be drawn. At any rate, her (apparently full) involvement in teaching Apollos is plain.

Priscilla, however, does not teach independently of her husband. What occurs is fairly described as a mutual or joint effort (“they,” in “their home,” v. 26). Further, their instruction is given privately, not in public but in the context of hospitality extended to Apollos.

It is not easy to assess the complete significance of the latter circumstance. Very likely a strategic element is present; Priscilla and Aquila are concerned not to do anything in public that might diminish the reputation and ministry of Apollos. But is there perhaps as well an intimation that the teaching takes place in a private, nonpublic setting, because Priscilla, as a woman, is involved? The text does not provide an answer. Nor, at the same time, is there any indication that the teaching was “official,” that is, that Priscilla (or Aquila) occupied special office in the church. In sum, the teaching that Apollos received from Priscilla (or Aquila) is best understood as private and personal, nonofficial and nonpublic.

b. Romans 16:3 In this context of “serving” (v. 1), “helping” (v. 2), and “working hard” (vv. 6, 12), Paul mentions Priscilla and Aquila as “my fellow workers in Christ Jesus.” Paul’s “fellow workers” comprise quite a band of men and women in this “greetings” chapter and elsewhere in the New Testament: for example Urbanus (v. 9), Timothy (v. 21), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), Euodia, Syntyche, Clement, and “the rest” (Phil. 4:2, 3), Aristarchus, Mark and Justus (Col. 4:10–11), Philemon (Philemon 1), Demas and Luke (Philemon 2).

The designation “fellow workers” personalizes and intimates an apparently extensive support system of service. Such men and women were extensions of Paul, widening his ability to direct the life of the church in various locations, especially to care for various needs that arose. It is difficult to specify their service in detail and to circumscribe its extent. In the light of the contexts where their work is mentioned as well as 1 Peter 4:10, 11 (cf. above, IV.A.2.), it may fairly be seen to cover the full range of ministering the gospel in word and deed. Also, without undercutting the special office structure in the church, their activity gave them an identity that in relation to himself Paul sees as genuinely collegial rather than subordinate.

Priscilla and Aquila are especially valued members in this partnership for the gospel. Their impressive self-sacrifice and love is evidenced in the fact that Paul says, “they risked their lives for me,” and their renown is such that both, Priscilla at least equally with Aquila, have the gratitude of “all the churches of the Gentiles” (v. 4).

c. 1 Corinthians 16:19 (cf. Rom. 16:5) Aquila and Priscilla find mention here in relation to “the church that meets at their house.” It is precarious to draw conclusions based on the fact that in this instance Aquila is mentioned first. Perhaps there is in this order an intimation that Aquila, as head of the household, takes the lead in extending the greetings of the church. However, it is, after all, “their house,” not “his.” Also, in Romans 16:5 there is an identical description (the church meeting “at their house”) where Priscilla has just been mentioned first (v. 3).

d. 2 Timothy 4:19 This text adds nothing to our discussion except to reinforce two things: the high profile of “Priscilla and Aquila” in the heart and labors of Paul, and Paul’s heavy reliance on Priscilla and Aquila.

e. Conclusions

(1) It cannot be said that women would never teach men. Priscilla, together with Aquila, taught Apollos.

(2) In the one passage where Priscilla’s teaching is mentioned, it is a joint effort. She is a coworker with her husband.

(3) Priscilla taught “at home.” The New Testament is silent as to whether or not she taught the congregation as a whole or in a public setting.

(4) There is no reason to suppose that Priscilla had authority over her husband, or that their relationship was ordered in a manner other than that prescribed elsewhere by the New Testament (e.g., Eph. 5:22f.).

(5) Finally, the case of Priscilla reminds us that having gifts in the church does not imply or bring with it the right to hold special office. The possession of requisite gifts is a necessary but not a sufficient qualification to hold office. Certainly, the nongifted should not occupy special office. In no way, however, does that establish that the gifted have the right to office, and that office is merely the way in which, operationally, we make fullest use of their talents.

2. Phoebe

Romans 16:1–2 contains the sole reference to Phoebe in the New Testament. While she is apparently a person of some importance in the early Christian community, her precise status is less clear.

Paul’s commendation of Phoebe is rather full. First, he introduces her as “a servant of the church in Cenchrea,” a rather official-sounding phrase, although, as we have already argued (cf. III.C.1.c. above), not requiring a reference to the office of deacon. Secondly, she has been “a great help” to many, including Paul himself.

Paul’s commendation serves a request he makes of the Corinthian church: “give her any help she may need from you.” This request of itself seems to hint of a woman with some kind of mission, authorization, or capacity to enlist, if not command, resources for a specified ministry as she continues (presumably) to be “a great help to many people.”

Although the phrase “*diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea” does not set forth the ministry of Phoebe in formal or official terms, deference is still very much due to Phoebe and her ministry. Also, the phrase perhaps points up that Phoebe does not operate on her own but is under authority, the authority of her “home” church in Cenchrea.

3. Other women

a. Romans 16

In addition to Priscilla and Phoebe, Paul mentions a good number of other women in his “greetings list” of Romans 16: for example Mary (v. 6), Tryphena and Tryphosa (v. 12a), Persis (v. 12b), the mother of Rufus (v. 13), etc. These women are characteristically “(very) hard workers” (vv. 6, 12) in their endeavors, laboring for the good of the Roman Christians and others. Some of them are especially dear to Paul: for example Persis (v.12b) and Rufus’s mother, who had befriended Paul in a motherly way (v.13).

b. Philippians 4:2, 3

Two women mentioned here by Paul are Euodia and Syntyche. Along with his expressed concern about the disagreement between them and his exhortation for them to be reconciled, he recalls (1) that they “contended *at my side*,” and (2) that in doing so they “contended . . . *in the cause of the gospel*.” The precise character of their ministry, however, is not spelled out.

c. “House churches” associated with women

Lydia (Acts 16:14–15, 40) was a woman of some prominence and station in the community. She makes her home available for missionaries (Paul and Silas) and for “the brothers” (v. 40) in a ministry of willing and generous hospitality. Mary, John Mark’s mother, is pictured (Acts 12:12) as a courageous woman, willing to allow her home to be used for an “underground” prayer meeting to secure Peter’s release from prison. Nympha (Col. 4:15) is yet another woman who makes her house available for the church to assemble.

d. Conclusions

- (1) Paul pays women in the Christian community high honor.
- (2) Such honor invariably devolves on their “hard work” and apparently diverse usefulness in the cause of the gospel.
- (3) Their “hard work” is a work of “partnership in the gospel” (cf. Phil. 1:5); these women are Paul’s partners in a variety of ministry contexts and situations. His choice term for describing that partnership is “fellow worker,” a term that suggests coordination, not subordination, a shared common involvement underlying whatever differences may be involved.

4. The specific ministry of women

Besides the above examples of women’s ministry to the church of Paul’s day there are several passages in the Pastoral Epistles which have a more distinctly normative or prescriptive character: 1 Tim. 2:15; 3:11; 5:9, 10; Titus 2:3–5. These will be treated as suggestive rather than exhaustive of the positive role of women in the New Testament. The committee is aware that the argument against *ordaining* women must not be

construed as negating or denigrating the ministry of women in the general office of believer. Hence, we conclude our report not with what women may *not* do but rather with what they may and must do to be faithful to their Lord and Savior.

a. 1 Timothy 2:15

At least four possible understandings of this verse can be found among commentators. The differences focus on the understanding of the idea of the woman being “saved in childbirth.” In his commentary on the pastoral epistles, Hendriksen summarizes these (111–112):

- (1) saved by means of The Childbirth, i.e., the promised seed Jesus Christ,
- (2) saved, i.e., kept safely during childbirth,
- (3) saved through the meritorious efforts of childbearing,
- (4) saved by way of or in the sphere of childbearing.

The reasons for rejecting 1–3 are:

(1) While the messianic interpretation is not contrary to the analogy of faith, it has no precedent. Its only other usage is the verbal form in 1 Tim. 5:14, which refers to ordinary childbirth. Furthermore, this interpretation doesn’t fit the context in which the subject is the woman’s place with respect to man’s authority in the church.

(2) “Protection” in childbirth does not fit the normal usage of the verb “saved.” While it often means “to make whole” in the gospels, the Pauline usage is exclusively soteric (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Tim. 4:18). “Childbearing” is not narrowly defined as “giving birth” but has broad reference to the entire task of raising children. More decisive is the fact that v. 15 is meant to be a consolation in light of the exhortation of the previous verses. The focus is on roles, a concern considerably larger than mere safety in childbirth.

(3) The concept of meritorious salvation is contrary to the entire Pauline soteriology (cf. Rom. 3; Galatians). Moreover, Paul emphasizes “faith” in the second half of the verse.

(4) This alternative commands our respect because it fits the context and does justice to the Pauline usage of “saved.” Covenant women are saved in their God-given, created roles as mothers in the tradition of Sarah, Elizabeth, and Mary (cf. 1 Pet. 3:5–6). The curse for which she was partly responsible, by failing to submit to her husband’s authority, is lifted in God’s gracious salvation. Now by recalling to her God-given role as a suitable helper in the Covenant task, the Lord promises to save her as she trusts and obeys.

Hence, the preposition *dia* in the context refers not to the means of salvation (“through”) but the sphere in which one is saved (K.J.V. “in,” “by way of,” i.e., the “accompanying circumstance”).⁹

Among commentators who have held this view are: Hendriksen, Gordon Clark, Calvin, Poole, Lenski, Trapp, Meyer, Vander Kam, and Fairbairn.

This sphere to which grace restores her is her highest dignity. As she raises children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, she “exerts tremendous influence.” Christ came by her childbearing,¹⁰ as do all men (1 Cor. 11:11–12). The promise of blessing to the godly woman who uses the whole range of her gifts and calling, both inside and outside of the home (Prov. 31:10–11), *within* God’s authority structure, is a promise which contemporary women need to take seriously.

⁹ Richard Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Timothy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960), 572.

¹⁰ Henry Vander Kam, *Bible Lessons on 1 Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, n.d.), 23–24.

b. 1 Timothy 3:11

Having denied the ordained status of the “women” (K.J.V. “wives”) of this verse, it is all too easy to say no more. That is a shame, because whether these women were wives of elders or deacons or both, it is clear that Paul had “deaconing women” in view. They were recognized as special assistants to the ordained officers of the church. Phoebe is a classic example. Because of this association their spirituality had to be commensurate with the diaconate which they assisted.

Furthermore, there are aspects of diaconal ministry which can only properly be executed by women. These focus on (though they are not limited to) personal, private needs unique to women and needs in the area of hospitality.

Modern-day diaconates need to employ the gifts of women and even consider publicly recognizing some as officially associated with the diaconate in unordained status.

c. 1 Timothy 5:9–10

Biblical concern for orphans and widows is an ancient one (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; Jer. 7:6). This concern is not blind sentimentality. Widows supported by the church must be “truly needy” in the sense of having no other means of support; they must have lived as faithful covenant women who have used their gifts and calling as women to minister practically to the saints. Anna is a classic example (Luke 2:36–37). It is interesting to note the accent on domestic service. Prior to 60 years of age the role of wife-mother is the norm (1 Tim. 5:1ff.).

The point is that true covenant widows have much to offer the church from their godly experience, not the least of which is prayer (v. 5). The early church designated certain women “intercessors of the church.”¹¹ Married women don’t have the same amount of time available for intercession.

Though marriage is the Biblical norm, younger single women, like widows, need to be encouraged to develop gifts of service to use their freedom wisely as well as make themselves more “marriageable” in the wholesome covenant sense of that word.

The contemporary possibilities are endless. We need to replace our concept of “career,” focusing on self-fulfillment, with the Covenantal idea of “calling.” It was out of this sense of service (v. 10) that the “hospice” and the “hospital” grew. Hence: the modern orphanage, crisis pregnancy center, and L’Abri Fellowship, which never would have given “shelter” to anyone without the tireless service of Edith Schaeffer.

d. Titus 2:3-5

Here is a broader category than widows. “Aged women” does not mean 60 or older, but rather “mature,” i.e., “older,” more experienced. They are to be examples of godly Christlike character and behavior. But they are also to be “teachers.” The Greek word in v. 3 has the same root as the word used for the office of “teacher” in 1 Tim. 2:7, 2 Tim. 1:11, and the verb form used in the prohibition of women teaching men in 1 Tim. 2:12. The point is that while women are forbidden to give official instruction to men in the doctrines of the faith, mature women are encouraged to verbally instruct younger women in the specific area of godliness as wife-mothers.

The verb “teach” in v. 4 is different from that of “teachers” in v. 3. It is translated in other passages as: “to be sober minded” (v. 6); “to be sober” (v. 4); “sound mind” (2 Tim.

¹¹ William Hendriksen, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 173.

1:7). The idea is discipleship in godly wisdom. The mature wife-mother is to instruct, by word and deed, other wife-mothers in maternal wisdom and domestic discipline which distinguishes the Christian woman from her worldly counterpart. She might use Proverbs 31 and a host of Biblical examples such as Abigail and Lois. While the world teaches its women, like its men, to assert their rights and pursue self-fulfilling careers, the women of the church are to teach the pursuit of godliness (1 Tim. 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 3:3–4), submitting to their husbands, loving their children, “keeping” their homes, (vv. 4–5). They will thereby witness to the world that God’s Word is true (v. 5).

The positive calling of women outlined in the Bible is as wide and varied as any calling on earth. The feminist climate offers Christian women a unique challenge and opens a fruitful field of labor as they exemplify the richness and humanity of serving their risen Lord.

In conclusion, the church, exemplified in its ordained officers, needs to encourage and instruct its women as to the dignity of the unique role as women. We have only suggested lines of Biblical teaching along which this encouragement may take shape.

V. CONCLUSION

To the degree to which we as a church have emphasized what women are forbidden to do, and failed to lovingly and wisely lead them to do what God’s Word encourages them to do, we need to change our attitudes and the practices which flow from them. The church is always threatened with the attitudes of the flesh which lead men and women to abdicate their God-given roles and either domineer others or retreat from service. To be always reforming is to be always repenting and following our resurrected Lord.

Women, therefore, need to repent, where necessary, of the unbiblical desire to usurp authority in the church or the home. Men also need to repent, where necessary, of a failure to encourage women in the use of their gifts, and of making their womanhood more of a yoke than a privilege.

The church under the leadership of its officers needs to be thankful for the faithful women who serve the church in a rich variety of ways at present. We need to protect our women from being overwhelmed or seduced by the lie of secular feminism which promises liberation for disobedience to God’s authority structure and demeans the high calling of Christian women as wives and mothers. We need to instruct them as to their dignity as women in Christ (Gal. 3:28) and treat them accordingly.

Finally, sessions should consider ways to make greater use of the gifts of women in the total life of the church, so long as good order is not subverted by replacing or undermining or otherwise eclipsing the teaching and rule of the elders. Specific implementation should be left to the discretion of individual sessions, and will, no doubt, vary from session to session (cf. IV.B. above). And may the church be wonderfully adorned in these days with gifts from her risen Lord.

Ivan Davis
Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.
Robert D. Knudsen
Gregory E. Reynolds, Chairman

PHOEBE WAS A DEACON

Other Women Should Be, Too

Robert B. Strimple

I appreciate this opportunity to indicate something of the thrust of my minority report to the 55th General Assembly. But I fear that a brief article which cannot begin to convey the force of the New Testament evidence for recognizing the propriety of qualified women serving as deacons in the church could prove counter-productive! I would therefore urge interested readers to study the full report of over 20 pages which appears in the Agenda for General Assembly (see p. 16).

While I am in full agreement with the bulk of the report of the GA Committee dealing with the role of women in church office and with its argument that the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12 clearly excludes women from the office of elder, I do not believe the Committee is correct in concluding that the Bible also excludes women from the office of deacon.

I. The Regulative Principle and the Burden of Proof

The Committee is certainly correct in asserting that "the answer to the question of whether or not women may be ordained to the office of deacon depends entirely upon the establishment of positive scriptural warrant." But what must we require as to the nature of that positive scriptural warrant? Must it be more clear and explicit than the warrant on the basis of which we have determined other matters relating to the worship and government of the church? Must it be more clear, for example, than the biblical command which grounds the participation of women in the Lord's Supper?

Do we really want to take the position that we cannot act on the basis of what we believe the Scripture teaches, unless we find that teaching so 100% transparent that no counter interpretation with even the slightest degree of plausibility can be suggested? The requiring of such an absolute demonstration may well leave us paralyzed, unable to obey what we have adequate

reason to believe the Bible to be saying.

We must be careful not to make the mistake of thinking that the Reformed regulative principle means that only the positive position, the position that qualified women may be elected as

"The answer to the question of whether or not women may be ordained to the office of deacon depends entirely upon the establishment of positive scriptural warrant." But what must we require as to the nature of that positive scriptural warrant?

deacons, needs to satisfy the burden of providing biblical proof, while the negative position needs to provide no explicit biblical teaching to the effect that women are to be excluded from this office.

Given the Bible's clear teaching regarding the full equality of the sexes before God (accented in texts like Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28), we would seem to require some biblical basis for excluding them from a par-

Given the Bible's clear teaching regarding the full equality of the sexes before God (accented in texts like Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28), we would seem to require some biblical basis for excluding them from a particular role and office in the church at least as much as we would require a biblical basis for opening it to them.

ticular role and office in the church at least as much as we would require a biblical basis for opening it to them.

II. The New Testament and Women Deacons

The New Testament seems to con-

tain two texts which speak quite directly to the subject before us, because they speak of *women* deacons. Since it is the Scripture which must decide the issue, the church must have the courage to take a fresh, unbiased look at what the Scripture says. As the Committee report rightly notes, we must not be blinded by the spirit of our times—whether of feminism or of male chauvinism. Neither must we be content to follow the easy course of maintaining the status quo in the church simply because it is the status quo.

A. Romans 16:1,2

Here the apostle Paul writes, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is also a deacon of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever manner she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well."

It has been noted that the term *deacon* (servant) was used for such a variety of ministries in the church that it is surprising, perhaps, that it ever came to be the designation for a particular ministry or office. It did become such an official title, however, and it is clearly used as such in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8,12,13. The question is whether it is used in such an official sense of Phoebe here. If Philippians 1:1 is the first reference in the N.T. to this particular office of deacon, is Phoebe the first (and only!) holder of this office to be *named* in the N.T.?¹

It is not enough to suggest, as the Committee report does, that there is nothing in the passage that absolutely rules out the general force of deacon here. We must consider what are the elements in the passage which make it,

¹My report includes an extensive study of Acts 6 and concludes that the appointment of the Seven was a special provision for that particular time and circumstance only, but one which did guide the church later, by way of example, when it came to appoint helpers to the elders.

as the Committee itself concedes, more natural, "perhaps even more likely," that it should be "read as a fixed or official designation" here.

Space does not permit a careful look at these elements, but there are at least four:

1. The formula Paul employs here suggests that the reference is to Phoebe's holding the office of deacon. He speaks of her, literally, as "being a deacon." Such a participial phrase is consistently the way in which one identifies the particular office someone holds at a particular time. Examples of this usage in the N.T. are found in John 11:49; Acts 18:12 and Acts 24:10.

2. The force of the "also" in the best-attested Greek text seems to be to emphasize that Phoebe is not only a Christian sister but *also* a deacon in the church at Cenchrea.

3. Most especially, the genitive phrase added ("of the church which is at Cenchrea") does not simply inform us of the place from which Phoebe came, but underscores again her official status, even as today we refer to Tom Bradley, mayor of Los Angeles, or to Jack Peterson, pastor of the church in San Antonio.

4. At the end of v. 2, Paul adds that "she herself has also been a helper of many." If the reference to Phoebe as a "deacon" in v. 1 indicated nothing more than that she had been helpful to many, the words in v. 2 would be a superfluous repetition. As it is, Paul is making clear that not only did she bear the office and title of servant, she really was a servant in her life and practice.

As already noted, it is often asserted that our Reformed regulative principle requires that the alleged example appealed to as providing the biblical warrant for an ecclesiastical practice be clear. But this matter of clarity cuts both ways. We might well be expected to adopt the natural understanding of Romans 16:1,2 unless the teaching of the N.T. elsewhere that it is not proper for a woman to serve in the office of deacon is so clear that we must conclude that this understanding of the Phoebe reference cannot be the correct one.

B. 1 Timothy 3:11

Six pages of my minority report are devoted to establishing the fact that the "women" addressed in this verse are

not the wives of the deacons but are rather women deacons. (The NIV, for example, "their wives," is not translation but interpretation. There is no possessive pronoun in the Greek text, though one would expect such if the deacons' wives were in view.)

In answering the question that naturally arises if one sees this text as giving qualifications for wives of the deacons—namely, Why are the qualifications for the wives of the overseers not given?—the Committee suggests that the wives of the deacons had a part in the work of their husbands in a way in which the wives of the overseers did not.

In explaining why this should have been so, however, the Committee virtually concedes the crucial point which I believe must be emphasized concerning the important difference between the office of overseer and the office of

The Committee suggests that the wives of the deacons had a part in the work of their husbands in a way in which the wives of the overseers did not....[This] concedes the crucial point which I believe must be emphasized concerning the important difference between the office of overseer and the office of deacon, and how this difference makes it appropriate that the office of deacon (but not the office of elder) be open to qualified women as well as to qualified men!

deacon, and how this difference makes it appropriate that the office of deacon (but not the office of elder) be open to qualified women as well as to qualified men! I quote the Committee, "by virtue of the differences between the two offices, deacons' wives could be more directly and extensively involved in the official activities of their husbands...."

III. Elders and Deacons, the Overseers and the Servants

Prof. J. Van Bruggen of the "Liberated" (Article 31) Reformed Churches in the Netherlands uses an interesting figure in arguing that the trail of the women deacons can definitely be traced back into the N.T. itself, but that the church has suffered a "derailment" at

this point.

The leading cause of this loss of the N.T. understanding has been "colored by the work of the overseer" in the thinking of the church; "and the Bible clearly says...that a woman in Christ's church is not permitted to teach or have authority over the man."

This derailment of the N.T. viewpoint is further fostered today by the attempt of many to seize upon the presence of women deacons in the N.T. as an argument for admitting women also to the tasks of oversight and teaching. It is often "as a reaction to this," as Van Bruggen notes, that "others close to women even the door of diaconal work."

The solution to all such derailed thinking is to seek a more accurate biblical understanding of the deacon. The important difference with regard to the nature of the authority exercised between the elders and the deacons would seem to be underscored in the greeting of Philippians 1:1 by the use of the, not merely different, but contrasting titles: "the overseers" and "the servants."

Recognizing the biblical distinctiveness of both the elders and the deacons has proven more difficult for churches from the Dutch Reformed background (with a tradition of seating both on the church consistory with little meaningful distinction) than it should be for Presbyterians. We should recognize that the elders are responsible for the oversight and rule of the total life of the congregation, including the work of the deacons. The deacon is not a ruling office. That priority is reserved for the elders. The deacons are helps to the elders, analogous to the Seven appointed to assist the Apostles (Acts 6).

Sad to say, contemporary advocacy of the admission of women to the diaconate has too often been embraced by those unwilling to be in submission to the Scripture at all points, with tragic confusion resulting. Fear of the advances of such theological liberalism, however, should not be allowed to prevent us from entering into a more biblical understanding of the office of deacon and the exciting possibilities for qualified women—and qualified men!—in that role.

A minister in the OPC, Dr. Strimple is professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in California and has been its president since 1982.

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.

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.

Servant Standards

Commentary on the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

by Alan D. Strange

Chapter XIII The Local Church and Its Session

1. The local church consists of a definite membership organized as a distinct congregation with its officers. Two or more local congregations may be associated together under the government of a single session. The membership of a local congregation consists of communicant and noncommunicant members, all of whom have the privilege of pastoral oversight, instruction, and government by the church.

Comment: The local church is a particularized, or organized, congregation that is ruled by its own governing assembly, the session. While each local church ordinarily has its own session, circumstances might necessitate two or more local congregations associating together under a single session, as noted in the second sentence of the section. One such circumstance might involve a mission work, a gathering of believers as a congregation not yet particularized: the mission work and the local congregation with which the mission work is associated would both be under the government of the same session.¹

The session of a local church consists of all the ministers called by that church (the pastor, certainly; some churches have called other ministers to serve as associate pastors, teachers, evangelists, etc.), together with the local ruling elders in current sessional service. The local church has a membership that consists of a definite number of baptized and baptized/professing lay persons, which includes all the ruling elders and deacons of the church and excludes any ministers. While all ministers called by the local church serve on the session, ministerial members retain membership in the regional church and its presbytery.

The membership in every congregation falls into one of two classes, either communicant membership (those who are professing members of a local church) or noncommunicant membership, baptized children and youths who have not (yet) professed faith in Jesus Christ. There has been some confusion historically about the latter, leading some in the church misguidedly to speak of noncommunicants as if they are not members of the church. They are members as baptized: baptism is the solemn admission into the visible church of all those who are born within the covenant and who

¹ Those who are part of a mission work may have membership either on the rolls of some other local OPC (customarily the mother church that planted the mission work) or on the rolls of the regional church (and under the direct authority of the presbytery). See FG 29.A.1.

thus have a right to the outward sign and seal of baptism as testimony of their membership in the visible church.²

Baptized children and youth, even though they have not yet professed faith in Christ, as members of the visible church, are subject to all the pastoral care that communicants enjoy, including instruction and oversight of the local office-bearers. They are also properly under the government and discipline of the church and may be censured by admonition or rebuke as much as any communicant may.³ It is thus incorrect to employ the parlance, all too sadly used, of “becoming a member of the church,” when a covenant youth professes faith. Upon profession, he becomes a *communicant* member and is removed by the clerk of session from the roll as a *noncommunicant* member, designated hereafter with all the other communicant members.

2. Communicant members are those who have been baptized, have made a credible profession of faith in Christ, and have been enrolled and admitted to all the rights of church membership by the session. Noncommunicant members are the baptized children of communicant members.

Comment: Keeping with the theme of communicant and noncommunicant members, let us drill down a bit into the meaning of such. The former, communicants, are those who have been baptized and have made a credible profession of faith in Christ. Some of those who are communicants in our churches were baptized upon a profession of faith, having never been baptized before. They were never validly baptized as infants, either because they were brought up in churches that did not teach and practice infant baptism or because they were not brought up in any Christian church at all.⁴ These are those, customarily, who, never having been baptized, have come to the faith at some later point in their lives and have testified to their faith before the church and received baptism.

Among Presbyterians, such later-in-life baptisms characterize those who were not brought up in the church but converted to the Christian faith as youths or adults. Many communicants, especially in our churches, were baptized in infancy, in the Presbyterian

² OPC *Directory for the Public Worship of God* 3.B.1.b.(2) on “The Meaning and Nature of the Sacrament [of Baptism]” makes this clear. This is, arguably, even clearer in the 1645 (Westminster) *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (in the section “Of the Administration of the Sacraments: And First, of Baptism”) that says that the “seed . . . of the faithful, born within the church . . . are Christians, and federally holy before baptism and therefore are to be baptized.” Baptism for such infants is a recognition of what is already true of them by virtue of their birth “within the church.”

³ Peter Wallace, “Covenant and Conversion,” *Ordained Servant* 14.2 (Sept. 2005), 30–39, discusses the nineteenth century debate in the PCUSA Old School of whether discipline applied only to those professing faith or also to those who were baptized but had not (yet) professed faith. Wallace argues that it should apply to all since all are members of the church. He expands on this question as he deals with the revision of the *Book of Discipline* in the Old School Church in the late 1850s in chapter 9 of his dissertation, “‘The Bond of Union’: The Old School Presbyterian Church and the American Nation, 1837–1861.” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2004. The last sentence in this section of the FG makes quite clear the commitment of the OPC to minister fully to all members, communicants and noncommunicants.

⁴ The validity of baptism presupposes three things: It is in the Trinitarian name, performed by an ordained minister, and with water. Baptisms performed in cults (such as Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses) are invalid as are those performed “in the name of Jesus only,” as characterizes some Pentecostal churches. The Reformers and their successors did not question the validity of Roman Catholic baptism, though they regarded parts of it as irregular. In nineteenth century American Presbyterianism the validity of Roman Catholic baptism was successfully challenged, though the rejection of RCC baptism was sharply contested by Charles Hodge and others, whose arguments later came to prevail, see Hodge, *Church Polity*, 190–215.

or some other church, and came to profess their faith in Christ as young people and accordingly received as communicants. Communicants chiefly enjoy the right to table fellowship, i.e., to take the sacrament of holy communion, as well as all the privileges that appertain thereunto, especially the right to vote in congregational meetings on such things as election of ruling elders and deacons, calling of a pastor, etc.

The church, then, administers holy baptism to all who profess faith in Christ *and* to their children, who, as noted earlier, by virtue of their birth within the covenant, have a right to the sign and seal of baptism, the sacrament of initiation, as part of their “solemn admission” into the visible church.⁵ All the ministry of the church with respect to noncommunicants has as its goal their coming to a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ. If baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the life of God and his grace, then profession of faith involves the confession to the congregation that the grace of baptism has been made effectual in the life of the one professing. In other words, those professing faith wish to express that they love the Savior, who has all their lives expressed his love to them, beginning outwardly with their baptisms.⁶

It should be noted that profession of faith, whether as an adult convert or as noncommunicant youth, is qualified by the modifier “credible.” A credible profession of faith is a believable one. In the OPC, we regard a profession as credible if the one professing is able to take the five membership vows that affirm the basic doctrines of the faith and the commitment needed for godly living, all by God’s grace.⁷ In some Reformed communions, a successful profession of faith includes a more or less explicit commitment to the relevant Reformed standards (the doctrinal standards of the particular church).⁸ In the history of the Presbyterian Church in the mainstream in this country, we have reserved such commitment for the office-bearers.⁹

⁵ So much more might be said about baptism as a seal or its general place in our theology. For a start, see two articles in *New Horizons* by Alan D. Strange, “Baptism as a Seal,” at https://www.opc.org/nh.html?issue_id=23, and “Baptism in our Confessional Standards,” at https://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=544.

⁶ And such as profess their faith come to the Lord’s Table to partake of the sacrament of continuation. Baptism signifies and seals the beginning of God’s grace and the Lord’s Supper signifies and seals its ongoing progress in the life of the Christian. See J.V. Fesko, “The Sacraments as Visible Words,” *New Horizons*, at https://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=611, and Larry Wilson, “Signed, Sealed, and Delivered,” *New Horizons*, at https://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=18.

⁷ OPC *Directory for the Public Worship of God*, 4.B.2. (1–5).

⁸ The URCNA Church Order, Article 43, sets forth that “public profession of faith” shall occur “with the use of the appropriate liturgical form,” which is found in *Liturgical Forms and Prayers of the URCNA* (2018): Proper profession requires that one “wholeheartedly believe the doctrine contained in the Old and New Testament, and in the articles of the Christian faith, and taught in this church” (“Public Profession of Faith: Forms 1 and 2”). These words are variously interpreted among the churches, some assuming that they bind all the members in some sense to the doctrinal standards of the church. It is the case that Calvin in Geneva, for instance, “advocated the formal adoption of a Catechism...by all citizens” (in D. Hall, ed., *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, 2).

⁹ By the “Presbyterian Church in the mainstream,” I mean those churches that emerged from the Church of Scotland, whatever its original practices may have been, like the PCUSA and PCUS (and ultimately the OPC and PCA), not the churches like the RPCNA and ARP that emerged from the offshoot Covenanter and Seceder lines. Some of these churches required some sort of subscription to the Westminster Standards, unlike the mainline Presbyterian churches (including their confessional offspring, the OPC and PCA) which have only required a “credible profession of faith.” See for this latter, e.g., *The Constitution of the RPCNA*, D-1, which requires all members not only to give a “credible profession of faith” but also “acceptance of the Covenant of Church Membership,” with 1–7 making it clear that “Ministers, Elders,

It has been the conviction of our churches that admission to communion should not be stricter than what we would regard as necessary for admission to heaven. It is the case that all communicants must be teachable, particularly as set forth in the fourth and fifth membership vows, requiring submission to and support of the local church. We find it sectarian, however, to require all members to make a commitment to the doctrinal standards, even as we earlier made it clear that it was partisan to make Presbyterianism pertain to the essence, or being, of the church (rather than its well-being) and thereby unchurch every other church.¹⁰

3. The officers in local congregations are ministers, ruling elders, and deacons. The number of each is to be determined by taking into account the needs of the congregation and the number of those to whom Christ has given the gifts required for such offices.

Comment: The session, as noted above, consists of the ministers called by the local congregation together with the serving ruling elders. The board of deacons consists of the serving deacons in that congregation. Elders or deacons who are not in current service are not thereby removed from office.¹¹ All of these form the body of officers in any given congregation. The first part of the second sentence reflects that the number of such in a particular congregation depends on the needs of the congregation. This is especially so with respect to ministers. A congregation of hundreds presents a challenge to only one pastor, and, increasingly, churches recognize that an additional pastor or two proves helpful in ministering to many larger congregations.

Similarly, a larger congregation needs more elders and deacons to meet the needs. This is why some congregations offer ongoing leadership training and not only training for those in the process of becoming officers: congregations often require a pool of potential candidates for the offices of ruling elder and deacon, especially if they have three-year terms of service. The second part of the second sentence should not be neglected, however. Note that the number of officers, especially elders and deacons, is also dependent on those having the gifts for such. A smaller congregation could have many men gifted for service as officers. Those men should be in office, and it should not be alleged that “we don’t need them.”

The church needs all those whom she determines are gifted for office in service in those offices. A church of one hundred members, e.g., may have six elders and a church of two hundred the same number: one should not conclude that the smaller church has too many elders in service or that the larger church ought to have more, regardless of whether she has more qualified men. Men should be qualified for office, and all who are (by the church’s judgment, not their own) should be encouraged to be in such service.

4. The session, which is the governing body of the local church, consists of its pastor, its other ministers, and its ruling elders. It shall choose its own moderator annually from among its members.

Deacons, and Members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America,” all swear to the same set of doctrinal beliefs and practices.

¹⁰ Hodge, *Church Polity*, 218–224. Hodge is adamant, as are the Princetonians generally, that “the Lord’s Table is for the Lord’s people—and we commit a great sin, if we presume to debar any man, giving credible evidence of being a child of God, from our Christian fellowship” (218).

¹¹ FG 25.2.

Comment: The session, the governing body of the local church, as noted above, consists of its pastor and other ministers called by that local body (these may be teachers, evangelists, or second or third pastors designated as “associate pastor”) and the ruling elders currently in service. The session elects, from its members, one who shall chair its meetings and perform other appropriate executive functions. This chairman in Presbyterianism is called “moderator.” Many, if not most, churches elect the sole or senior pastor to be moderator, but in the OPC, unlike some other Presbyterian bodies (the PCA, e.g.), any member of the session may be elected to serve as its moderator. Some would argue that it particularly pertains to the pastoral office for a minister to moderate the local session. It is the case that a pastoral sensibility should govern in any such case, whether the person elected to moderate is one of the pastors or one of the ruling elders. The election of a moderator is to occur every year. There is no “term limit” and many sessions customarily elect the moderator (and clerk as well) to serve multiple terms, especially if the senior or sole pastor is the one chosen to serve as moderator.¹²

5. The session shall convene at the call of the moderator, the presbytery, any two members of the session, or upon its own adjournment. A quorum of a session is two ruling elders, if there are three or more, or one ruling elder if there are fewer than three, together with the pastor or one of the pastors of the local congregation. In no case may the session conduct its business with fewer than two present who are entitled to vote.

Comment: The session of any given local church may be convened (brought together in a specific time at a particular place) by one of several parties: the moderator of the session may call a meeting, as may any two members of the session; the presbytery (in cases extraordinary, with a disabled session) may also do so. The session most commonly meets upon its own adjournment, which is to say, in the course of a regular meeting it is decided when the session will meet next.

The quorum of a session is the minimal number needed to transact business, and it depends on the size of the session. If a session has three or more ruling elders, at least two must be present for it to be a legitimate session meeting. If a session has less than three ruling elders, at least one must be present for there to be a sessional quorum. The pastor, or one of the pastors, must also, in addition to the required number for elders, be present for there to be a legitimate session meeting. At no time may the session conduct its business with fewer than two voting members present. This means, practically, that the least any church could have for a legitimate session meeting would be its minister and one elder.

6. When the pastor is unable to be present, or when for other reasons it seems advisable, another minister, normally of the same presbytery, acceptable to the session and the pastor, may be invited to be present for counsel; he shall be without vote, but may be elected to moderate the meeting.

When a church is without a pastor, the session shall request the presbytery to appoint a minister, normally of the same presbytery, to meet with them, or shall itself invite such a minister; he shall have the right to vote, and to be elected to moderate the meeting.

¹² For greater detail on how a session meeting might work well, see Alan D. Strange, “How to Run the Session Meeting,” *Ordained Servant*, at https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=356.

When it is impractical without great inconvenience for a minister to attend, those present may conduct business, but the grounds for the call of such a meeting shall be reviewed at the next meeting at which a minister is present.

Comment: When the pastor is unable to be present for a meeting of the session (perhaps he is ill, out of town, on sabbatical, etc.), another minister, normally of the same presbytery as that of the congregation, may be invited to be present. This provision presumes that the church needing a minister for its session meeting does not have another minister serving locally as an associate, teacher, etc. If the sole or senior pastor cannot be present to make it a valid meeting, then, of course, another minister who serves locally may do so. Many churches, however, have only one minister in the church or on the session and must look outside to secure the needed sessional services of a minister, because a session meeting ordinarily requires the presence of both orders: the elders that teach and govern (ministers) and the elders that govern (ruling elders).

Such outside ministers may also be invited to be present for counsel, not because the pastor is unable to be present, but because it is inadvisable for him to be there or to be an active participant in the meeting. Perhaps there are particular concerns that the session has with the pastor and finds it wise to have another minister in for counsel. This invited minister shall be without vote but may be elected to moderate the meeting. In any case, any such minister invited in for counsel must enjoy the mutual approbation of the pastor and the session. It should be noted that no member of a session, including its ministerial members, may be excluded involuntarily from any meeting of the session. In other words, a session may ask a member to absent himself but does not have the power to require a member to absent himself from a session of which he is a member. It may be wise for a member to absent himself to permit a discussion that his presence would render difficult, but he cannot be required to do so.

A church without a pastor needs a ministerial advisor and may ask the presbytery to appoint a nearby minister, mutually acceptable to session and presbytery, and usually of the same presbytery, to act as such. Alternatively, the session itself may invite a minister to act in such a capacity. The ministerial advisor may not only be asked to moderate the meetings (as may a consulting minister, in the paragraphs above) but also enjoys the right to vote in the meetings of the session.

The last paragraph of this section is quite important. It recognizes that at times a session needs to meet when it is quite impractical for any minister to be present. Note the language of “great inconvenience” suggests that session meetings should proceed to meet without a minister only under extraordinary circumstances. The session of a church without a pastor (or pastors) may have to meet under such circumstances. In any case, such a meeting needs to have the grounds of its call to such a minister-less meeting reviewed the next time a minister is present. It is presumed that the minister will confirm that a real exigency compelled the session to proceed without a minister. The FG does not say what happens if the minister refuses to recognize it as a legitimate meeting; at the very least such a refusal should be noted in the minutes, which presbytery may see upon review or visit.

This reflects the commitment of our FG for both orders (ministers and ruling elders) to be present at session meetings. They do not hold the same office, and a session cannot have a session meeting with no ruling elders (there must be a least one in the smallest

congregations). Similarly, session meetings ought not to be held absent ministerial presence, except in emergencies, requiring subsequent ministerial oversight. Both offices are to be properly reflected in all of our judicatories: session, presbytery, and general assembly.

7. The session is charged with maintaining the government of the congregation. It shall oversee all matters concerning the conduct of public worship; it shall concert the best measures for promoting the spiritual growth and evangelistic witness of the congregation. It shall receive, dismiss, and exercise discipline over the members of the church, supervise the activities of the diaconate, the board of trustees and all other organizations of the congregation, and have final authority over the use of the church property. The session also shall appoint ruling elder commissioners to higher assemblies.

Comment: The session has oversight of everything that pertains to the life of the congregation, given a proper understanding of the nature and limits of church power (see comments for FG 4). This section proceeds to enumerate the ways in which the session maintains the government of the congregation. First of all, it oversees all matters concerning the conduct of public worship. This means that the session concerns itself with who, in addition to its minister(s), may come into the pulpit and preach God's Word to the flock there. It also concerns itself with the content of public worship—the preaching, praying, and all the other elements of worship: Is the preaching faithful and clear, the prayers heartfelt, the songs appropriate, etc.? It orders the liturgy and determines baptisms, public professions of faith, and the observance of the Lord's Supper.

Secondly, the session is to plan the best ways to evangelize internally and externally, as well as determine the measures most necessary for the maximal discipleship of the congregation. This usually involves specific outreach beyond the preaching of the Word alone: canvassing the neighborhood, holding conferences or other special meetings, sending out flyers, invite-a-friend days, etc. The spiritual growth, or discipleship, component of this may also involve men's or women's Bible study or fellowship groups, youth groups, conferences, or the like. The session is in charge of public worship, the center of all evangelism and discipleship, and all the other ways in which the local church might act in gathering and perfecting the saints, both at home and abroad.

The session receives and transfers members, examines those desiring to make profession of faith (both the unbaptized and noncommunicant members), and otherwise exercises discipline over both communicants and noncommunicants. It exercises informal discipline, in keeping watch over and bring exhortation as needed to the flock. When necessary, it may bring charges and hear a charge, engage in a preliminary examination, conduct a trial, and issue judicial censures (admonition, rebuke, suspension from office and/or membership, removal from office and/or excommunication). It also restores those that are penitent and receives them into the fellowship and communion of the saints.¹³

The session, as the church's governing body, exercises authority over the diaconate, the trustees (if the church is incorporated, FG 31), and any other bodies that may function in the local church. It has final use over church property. Given especially the civil chaos of recent years, many churches have adopted procedures concerning property use

¹³ All of this is set forth in greater detail in the appropriate chapters in the BD (especially chapters 2–6) and will be duly commented on at those places.

(especially for marriages), childcare workers (some include background checks), emergency and security procedures (including evacuation plans and active shooter protocols), and the like. Some have working procedural manuals addressing such, in addition to local congregational by-laws or standing rules, which may address matters like term eldership, percentage required for the election of office-bearers, and any number of local concerns not addressed in the Form of Government, insofar as they do not contradict or violate the FG.

The last sentence in the section highlights again the nature of the office of ruling elder. It notes that the session shall appoint ruling elder commissioners to higher assemblies, which would include presbytery and general assembly. The session does not appoint ministers, because, while all ministers are permanent members of the presbytery, ruling elders are only members when commissioned. Similarly, presbyteries commission ministers to the general assembly, but the local session must commission them so that they may be selected by the presbytery in whatever fashion the presbytery employs to commission men to the general assembly. Note here that the language is that of “commission” not “delegate” as is the case in some Reformed churches. Commissioners serve in higher judicatories as those free to deliberate and follow their consciences in voting, whereas delegates may be instructed how to vote by the delegating bodies in the broader assemblies of the church.¹⁴

8. The session shall keep the following records: (1) minutes of its meetings, including a record of the administration of the sacraments and changes in the membership of the congregation; (2) minutes of the meetings of the congregation; and (3) rolls of the members of the congregation, both of communicant members and of their baptized children, with the dates of their reception. Such rolls shall designate those members worshipping with a mission work. Births, baptisms, censures, restorations, deaths, and removals shall be noted on these rolls. The session shall submit its minutes and the minutes of the congregation to the presbytery for review at least once every year.

Comment: The session is required to keep various records. Firstly, the session is to keep minutes of its meetings. Such minutes do not record all that takes place in a meeting as a transcript, or even summaries, of the discussions that took place would. Rather, minutes record actions of the session. Part of the actions that must appear in minutes are the session’s determination to administer baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Minutes should also reflect all changes in membership of the congregation, namely, transfers in and out, professions and reaffirmation of faith, censure, etc.¹⁵

Minutes should also be kept of meetings of the congregational meeting and read back for approval at the end of the meeting, since meetings of the congregation are generally too infrequent to allow easy recall at meetings distant from the time of the business transacted at earlier meetings. Further, a roll shall be kept of all communicant members, together with their baptized children, indicating the reception dates (by profession or

¹⁴ See the “The Report of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation” (at this point: <https://www.opc.org/GA/creation.html#Credentialing>) for a further discussion and elaboration of what it means, in the Presbyterian system, to be a “commissioner” (and not a “delegate”).

¹⁵ *Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised*, 12th edition (New York: Public Affairs, 2020) details the taking of minutes generally (446–53), though most presbyteries adopt their own conventions for keeping sessional minutes and the general assembly has its own “Rules for Keeping Presbyterial Minutes,” in the *Standing Rules and Instruments of the General Assembly of the OPC*, 18.

reaffirmations of faith as well as transfers) for communicants. Historically the rules for keeping such rolls include the full names of all such persons, along with the maiden names of wives. Also on these rolls should be the dates of birth, baptism, censures, restoration, death, and removal from the rolls (with or without full process).

Sessional and congregational meeting minutes are to be submitted to and reviewed by the presbytery to which the session belongs. The presbyteries, as noted, generally have detailed rules for minute keeping, addressing matters of both style and substance, the latter generally drawn from this FG. Sessions also commonly have by-laws and/or standing rules that apply to their congregations. Such by-laws may never contradict the *Form of Government*, of course, but may specify things about which the FG is silent (e.g., simple or super majority for the election of local deacons and ruling elders) or gives a choice (e.g., term or lifetime service for officers).

The submission of sessional records to the presbytery is part of the process of review and control and is one way, other than by appeals (of complaints or judicial cases),¹⁶ whereby the actions of the lower judicatories come before the higher. It is not the remit of the higher judicatory to correct what it regards as wrong judgments on the part of the lower judicatories (except in doctrinal cases) but to concern itself with procedural errors and lack of due process.¹⁷ The presbytery may make notations about lesser matters and take exceptions to alleged violations of the constitution. The session is able to respond to exceptions, and the presbytery may take further actions if improprieties are not corrected.

9. The names of members shall be placed upon or removed from the rolls of the church only by order of the session, and according to the provisions of the Book of Discipline. When upon the request of a member the session dismisses him to another congregation the clerk shall send a letter commending him to its care, and the clerk of the receiving church shall notify the dismissing church of the date of his reception. When notification is received the clerk shall remove his name from the roll and record the fact in the minutes. Whenever a member desires dismissal to a church of which the session cannot approve, and he cannot be dissuaded, it shall grant him a certificate of standing, unless the session institutes disciplinary action against him; upon being informed that he has joined such a church the clerk shall erase his name from the roll.

Comment: This section describes matters pertaining to membership that are more fully addressed in the Book of Discipline.¹⁸ Thus the brief treatment here. The first paragraph in this section asserts that it is the session alone that places or removes names upon the rolls of the church. Members do not do so on their own authority but only the session does, acting upon request and as it deems best, subject to appeal. A member seeking transfer to another congregation requests such from the session and remains on the rolls of the sending church until such church is notified by the receiving church of the date of his reception. Upon such notification the clerk removes his name from the roll and records it in the minutes.

¹⁶ See BD 7 and 9.

¹⁷ In cases of life (morals), as opposed to doctrine, appellate judicatories are not to retry the case (they are at a remove from the evidence, witnesses, etc.) but are to attend to whether the charges were properly formed and brought, the case was fairly handled, and like matters of due process. Much more on this in later commentary on the BD.

¹⁸ See BD 2 and 5.

If a member wishes to be dismissed to a church of which the session cannot approve—one not of like faith and practice and that is not considered beneficial to the would-be transferee—and the session cannot dissuade him of such, it shall furnish a certificate of standing, unless it determines to institute disciplinary action against him. Upon intelligence that he has joined such a church (not approved by the session), the clerk shall accordingly erase his name from the rolls and record the circumstances in the minutes.

10. If a session shall cease to exist or become so small as to prevent it from working effectively, the presbytery shall provide for an election and ordination of elders from within the congregation; or the presbytery, with the consent of the congregation, may appoint ruling elders or ministers, or both, normally from within the same presbytery, to be an acting session or to augment the existing session temporarily.

Comment: The session, as noted above, must have at least two members for it to be viable. When a session falls below this number, or when it may have such a number but clearly needs more members due to the circumstances of the local church, the presbytery may step in to help it. The presbytery may provide the help by facilitating an election and ordination of elders from within the congregation. This would occur in a circumstance in which the local congregation needs such help to get more elders, perhaps not being able on its own to provide training and needing the presbytery's assistance in the process of actually getting more men into office locally.

If such men are simply not available in the local congregation, the presbytery can then render aid by appointing men from within the presbytery (ruling elders, ministers, or both) to serve on the session in need. Those appointed to such service are normally from within the same presbytery as the session to which they are appointed. This means that in some cases they may be appointed from a church in neighboring presbytery. In any case, such appointment must receive congregational approbation: it is never the case that governors may be imposed on local congregants without their consent. The appointment of such men to aid a local session, called augmentation, is not permanent but temporary: their service is continued only as long as they are needed and/or until the congregation is able to put more local men in sessional service.

Alan D. Strange *is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as professor of church history and theological librarian at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana, and is associate pastor of New Covenant Community Church (OPC) in Joliet, Illinois.*

ServantReading

The Irony of Modern Catholic History

by *George Weigel*

by Darryl G. Hart

The Irony of Modern Catholic History: How the Church Rediscovered Itself & Challenged the Modern World to Reform, by George Weigel. New York: Basic, 2019, ix + 322 pages, \$30.00.

Anyone familiar with the world of American conservatism beyond the rants and slogans of talk radio, knows that Roman Catholicism plays an outsized role. In the history of Western civilization, the only Christian rival to come close to Rome's central place is the Protestantism that emerged in the sixteenth century. Christians outside the church of Rome often receive attention from American conservatives mainly for unleashing social and political forces that undermined the Christian society of medieval Europe. The result is an outlook where the only serious version of Christianity for righting the wrongs of the modern West (at least) is Roman Catholicism. George Weigel's new book, *The Irony of Modern Catholic History*, pretty much starts with this assumption. It is a chronicle of the relationship between Roman Catholicism and the modern world (i.e., Europe and North America).

Weigel's purpose is to question and offer an alternative to the dominant way of telling this story—that modernity was on the side of progress and Rome on the other side, a reactive and regressive check on social, political, and intellectual improvement. The result is a history in which Roman Catholicism, through its encounter with modern society, “became more coherent, less defensive, and more influential in shaping the course of world affairs” (7). Weigel also believes (or at least hopes) that Rome's example may help “secular modernity save itself from its own increasing incoherence” (7). Of course, as a popular Roman Catholic author and public intellectual, with over a dozen titles under his belt, including a successful biography of John Paul II, Weigel's identity and audience is thoroughly Roman Catholic. At the same time, as a political conservative who has worked in the trenches with evangelical Protestants, Weigel could well have considered what the story of Christianity and modernity looked like with Rome and Protestantism in the picture. Publishing with a trade press (Basic Books) might also have produced a book with advice for Christians outside the Roman church.

The irony at the heart of Weigel's history of Roman Catholicism since the French Revolution is the ongoing antagonism between Rome's traditions and the West's modern innovations. It is a narrative dominated by popes, though Weigel mixes in Roman Catholic theologians and writers (not necessarily clergy) who also supplemented the

church's awareness of and response to modern intellectual trends. That addition adds a wrinkle that Weigel never sufficiently addresses, namely, the degree to which bishops sift, approve, and authorize church's teaching as opposed to scholars whose vocation it is to assess and produce ideas.

Either way, the short story to Weigel's relatively long book begins with Popes Gregory XVI (1831–1846) and Pius IX (1846–1878) who resolutely, though sometimes for very good reasons, opposed European political developments that replaced aristocratic privilege with democratic access. Next comes Leo XIII (1878–1903), the so-called father of the church's social teaching, who was guarded about modern economic and political forces, defended the church's prerogatives, but also signaled forms of accommodation. Weigel calls this a "Leonine Revolution," which twentieth-century popes implemented with various degrees of success. One successor in Rome was John XXIII (1958–1963) who called and convened the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In Weigel's view, that council advanced Leo XIII's approach to modernity. Following in the wake of Vatican II were the papacies of John Paul II (1978–2005) and Benedict XVI (2005–2013), conservatives who strongly critiqued "political and cultural modernity" but did so "from inside modern intellectual premises" (11). The story concludes with Pope Francis (2013–) about whom Weigel is ambivalent. Still, Francis emerges as a figure within the post-Vatican II succession of the church critiquing modernity, who also promotes evangelization and reforming the church (particularly with reference to the sex scandals).

Weigel's book is not exactly warts-and-all history. His reputation as a certain kind of apologist likely prevents him from compiling the sort of blemishes that could turn a reader away from his Roman Catholicism. For that reason, the irony that his book does not explore as much as it could is the development of the dogma of papal infallibility during a period when popes looked particularly fallible when reading the signs of the times. Of course, papal infallibility means technically that when popes teach from the position of their Petrine authority (as successors to Peter) their declarations are free from error. Popes have invoked this power sparingly (only in connection with Mary, in fact). But the place of the Bishop of Rome in the hierarchy, not to mention the papacy's universal jurisdiction, means that when popes pontificate, bishops, priests, and laity listen (or are supposed to). The global scope of papal responsibilities accounts in part for the long list of encyclicals and apostolic exhortations over the last 125 years on every manner of world crisis beyond the Roman Catholic Church's own health.

Here the record of popes' responses to the modern world hardly justifies looking to Rome as a font of wisdom. After all, the papacy completely reversed course from the early days (which lasted for at least seven decades) of opposition to the political liberties modern people associate with the American Founding (though the French Revolution's version of political liberties were decidedly anti-clerical and threatened the papacy directly). After all, the last of the eighty defects of modern society condemned in the famous Syllabus of Errors (1864) sweepingly denied that the pope could or should "reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization."¹

¹ Vatican website, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm>.

One hundred years later, Vatican II changed that estimate of the modern world and elaborated ways that the church could and should accommodate the trends of modernity (from freedom of conscience and vernacular liturgy to a recognition of the laity's vocation in serving God). Weigel himself admits that Vatican II's sense of modern life, a time not of crisis but of calm, was naive and revealed "historical myopia" (165). The council's pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, he adds, described the modern world of 1945–1965 in ways that left the church unprepared for what was coming in 1968 and beyond.

[The] Western world at least, was not an "obsolescent" modern man of the sort imagined by . . . the bishops of Vatican II, but postmodern man—metaphysically indifferent, spiritually bored, demographically barren, skeptical about the human capacity to know the truth. (164)

To be sure, not even the best of Presbyterian or Reformed assemblies or synods is up to the task of understanding the present moment and charting a Christian course for civilization and politics. The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture at its best prevents Protestant communions from teaching on matters where the Bible is silent. But the legacy of the papacy's place in European history, combined with its universal authority, encourages popes and those subject to them to think the papacy has the answers and insights to modern society's woes. It is hard to imagine setting a Christian leader up for a bigger fall.

Despite the popes and bishops' failure to discern the challenges of modernity—aside from the recent sex scandals to which Weigel devotes several pages—the author judges Rome's stature in the modern West still to be vigorous and well situated to supply needed help. The modern world has run up against a crisis of human dignity, Weigel asserts. It is saturated in skepticism, doubt, relativism, nihilism, and emptiness. Prior to Vatican II, the church had largely adopted a defensive strategy. But the modern church has "recommitted itself to missionary discipleship . . . to proposing to the world what it believes to be liberating truths about salvation and the ultimate destiny of human beings," which includes how to live together in society (284). What the church offers chiefly is "friendship with Jesus Christ," the answer "to the question that is every human life" (285). In a word, modern Roman Catholicism is Christian humanism at its best, and it offers a better and more stable foundation for "happiness, beatitude, and genuine human flourishing" (287) than the one attempted by science, the Enlightenment, and modern political ideologies.

That may sound tempting to any believer who has thought about the relationship of Christ and culture. But as so often happens in those discussions, the effort to fashion a Christian culture often loses sight of the singularity of Christ's redemptive work. In that way, Weigel's book reveals more than he likely intends since it shows the degree to which even conservative American Catholics equivocate on the Augustinian basics of the fall, sin, its penalty, grace, Christ, and eternity.

Darryl G. Hart is distinguished associate professor of history at Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan and serves as an elder in Hillsdale Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Hillsdale, Michigan.

The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction *by John Bower*

by Ryan M. McGraw

The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction, by John Bower, Principal Documents of the Westminster Assembly. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2020, xviii + 415 pages, \$40.00.

The Westminster Confession of Faith is the most robust and widely used Reformed confession of the seventeenth century. Representing the fruit of high orthodox Reformed thinking in the period of confessionalization, the Westminster Confession became the standard of ministerial unity in Presbyterian churches for centuries to come, and it served as the basis for Baptist and Congregational confessions of faith as well. The Westminster Confession continues in use in Presbyterian denominations across the world. This means that this Confession is an important part of the Christian heritage in general, and the Reformed tradition in particular. Yet in many cases, denominations that use the Confession include their own slight modifications to the original text, and the original text received minor alterations even in early printings. John Bower seeks to restore the original text by producing this critical edition of the Confession, with a substantial one hundred and ninety-two-page introduction to the production of the Confession and its contents. All readers interested in understanding the Confession in its own context will profit greatly from his painstaking work.

The author provides valuable historical background to the content and meaning of the Assembly's work, largely building on the earlier research of Chad Van Dixhoorn. As he notes, "this study is more concerned with understanding how the confession was created than in explaining its meaning" (51). Nevertheless, his focus on the creation of the Confession is highly insightful in relation to the intent of the Assembly at key points. Bower illustrates the importance of his textual work by providing an example in which the original revision to the Thirty-Nine Articles included the word "all" in relation to Christ being the Savior of all men. Researchers have consistently based their analyses of atonement theories at the Assembly on the omission of the word "all," which only applies to later copies of the Assembly's work in revising the Articles (14). While the Assembly affirmed that Christ died for the elect only, they were comfortable retaining the biblical language of "all" in their documents.

In addition, Bower draws attention to the fact that "articles of knowledge" containing a brief summary of doctrine were drafted and only discovered recently (28). This issue was that Parliament had omitted a prescription in the proposed text of the Directory for Worship for the level of knowledge required to admit people to the Lord's Supper, fearing that this would relegate the standard of admission to the Supper to the discretion of local church officers without any kind of uniformity (30). The resultant summary provided included Scripture, the Trinity, Christ's two natures, creation and the fall, redemption in Christ and the means of applying his benefits, the nature and necessity of faith and repentance, the nature and use of the sacraments, and the future state (31). While bearing remarkable

similarities to the membership vows used in many Presbyterian denominations today, Parliament intended the list to restrict the activities of local elders in examining communicants.

Bower goes on to show the vital role of the editorial committee at the Assembly in harmonizing the wording adopted in earlier chapters with that of chapters developed and adopted later (72). This committee later even began to change the order of some paragraphs in the final draft (91). It is interesting as well that the chapters on faith, repentance, and good works were added later to the initial chapter outline of the WCF (86). This was partly in response to concerns over antinomianism. Chapters eight and nine of the introduction address various official printings of the WCF and bibliographic issues. The final chapter outlines the method that the author used in his herculean task of producing an authentic critical text.

Bower offers useful insights at times into the content of the WCF as well. For example, he suggests that the reason for including a distinct chapter on adoption was that earlier Reformed creeds had presented adoption as the purpose of election and predestination. Moving election prior to creation resulted in the need for a distinct chapter on adoption (78). This is merely one example of such fruitful insights into the content and intent of the Confession.

Following the introduction, the text of the WCF itself appears in full, with the proof texts in the margins (195–234), followed by a table of corrections made to the proof texts (235–239). The remainder of the material compares the four authoritative printings of the WCF in parallel columns (242–342), a comparison of the WCF with the Irish Articles (343–350), and the Assembly’s partial revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (351–366). Bibliographic material, a glossary, and Scripture and subject indices make this book even more useful as a guide to the critical text, serving as an approximate guide to the original intent of the authors (190).

I have one minor quibble with Bower’s assertions. On page 114 he writes that oaths make an assertion and vows were promises “directly to God.” Bower mistakenly asserts that the WCF is at odds with its definition of vows by stating that vows can be between men. In actuality, this neglected the fact that vows were a species of oath in which people called on God to witness the truth or falsehood of promises made. While people must not make oaths and vows in the name of anything other than God, making vows to others, such as in marriage, fits the general definition of vows current at the time. Digging into more primary sources on this point would likely have resolved the issue.

One of the great blessings of using a confession of faith that is over three hundred and fifty years old is that it connects the church of the present day to the Spirit’s work in the church in the past. One of the great challenges of using the WCF today is that it appeared in a context very different from our own. This work helps readers understand what the authors meant in their own context, how the text of the Confession was transmitted, and it gives us insight into its original form. This volume is indispensable to serious students of the WCF, whether historians, pastors, or interested church members. It is a useful complement to Bower’s earlier work on the Larger Catechism, and it leads readers to anticipate future books in this series.

Ryan M. McGraw *is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church serving as a professor of systematic theology at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina.*

Servant Poetry

Ecclesiastical Sonnets - Part 2, "The Point At Issue" (XXX)

William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

For what contend the wise? for nothing less
Than that the Soul, freed from the bonds of Sense,
And to her God restored by evidence
Of things not seen, drawn forth from their recess,
Root there, and not in forms, her holiness;
For Faith, which to the Patriarchs did dispense
Sure guidance, ere a ceremonial fence
Was needful round men thirsting to transgress;
For Faith, more perfect still, with which the Lord
Of all, himself a Spirit, in the youth
Of Christian aspiration, deigned to fill
The temples of their hearts who, with his word
Informed, were resolute to do his will,
And worship him in spirit and in truth.