

WOMEN VOTING IN CONGREGATIONAL MEETINGS

The Eureka Classis has appointed three special committees to study the role of women in the church and, particularly whether women have a biblical right to exercise the vote in the congregational meeting. These committees presented their reports to the Classis sessions in 1965, 1965 and 1968. The response of the Classis to each of these reports is noted after each report.

In response to an overture from one of the Consistories for advice on the subject of women voting, the 1976 Classis ordered the Publications Committee to reprint the previous Classis reports on this subject and send them out to all the Consistories before the 1977 session of Classis.

The Publications Committee herewith makes these reports available to the Consistories and to all persons who desire this material.

Norman Jones, Chairman
Publications Committee
Reformed Church in the United States

REPORT ONE
THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

In the study of the place of women in the church it is important, first of all, to note the equality of men and women in their relationship to God as individuals. This equality is apparent in the first mention of men in the Scripture for it is stated that man, male and female, was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). The relationship of man and woman to God is that each is the creature of God, created in God's image and in this they are equal. This being the case, we would expect that this equality would obtain in man's redeemed relationship to God, which is what we find (Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 11:11, 12).

However, that this equality in individual relationship to God does not imply identity or even equality in the created order of the universe is apparent from the placement of man and woman in their respective, and different, positions in that created order. This happens in Genesis immediately upon their creation and continues as long as the created world lasts. To conclude that Christ or his followers institute changes in the creation order is to ignore the fact that New Testament teaching on the position of men and women, in either the home or the church, rests directly upon the original economy itself (Mark 10:5ff.; 1 Cor. 11:7-9; 1 Tim. 2:13). Our problem then is to learn from Scriptural precept and example just what is the women's place in that part of the created order which is the church. That the church is rightly called a part of the created order is seen from the application of creation ordinances to it (1 Cor. 11; 1 Tim. 2:3). Some confusion of this point often occurs because of the church's intimate concern with man's relationship to God, but such teaching as that of Jesus concerning the absence of marrying in the resurrection point out to us the very reality of the church militant's place as a part of this present created order, wherein marriage is indeed an honorable estate in all.

I. Considering then the Scriptural examples and precepts, we notice first that women are found in many places of privilege and even leadership in the church. Below are given a number of examples of such position in the church, grouped in a somewhat arbitrary order. These could, of course, be easily multiplied.

There are quite a number of prophetesses mentioned in the Bible, most often in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament (Miriam — Exod. 15:20; Deborah — Judg. 4:4; Huldah — II Kgs. 22:14; Noadiah — Neh. 6:14; Anna — Luke 2:36; Phillip's daughters — Acts 21:9).

One instance of a woman judging Israel may be found, namely Deborah (Judg. 4:4).

Several women are found in places of privilege in the company of Jesus' followers. They are found often at Jesus' feet (Luke 7:38; 10:39), ministering to him (Matt. 27:55-56) and they are first at his tomb to discover his resurrection (John 20:1).

Many other places of prominence are given them in the history of redemption. We think of Ruth the Moabitess, Esther the queen, Mary the mother of Jesus and, not least of all, those women who are among those with the apostles in the upper room after Christ's ascension.

II. Next we consider women as they are found taking part in the general ministry or serving work of the church. "Ministry" here refers to the work of the church in general service, as exercised by the individual believer in his office as believer and does not refer to the official ministry of the special officers, namely, deacons and elders. Paul tells us that each member of the church has certain gifts and that each member is to use his or her gifts for the good of the whole body. We find this injunction followed by the people of God throughout the Scriptures. The serving work of the church is perhaps better examined if seen in a threefold division: 1). The administration of the Word of God; 2). The administration of rule; and 3). The administration of mercy.

We find women frequently administering the Word in more or less private situations. The Samaritan woman Jesus meets at Jacob's well goes into the city to tell its men about him saying, "Is not this the Christ?" (John 4:29). Anna the prophetess speaks out about the baby Jesus to all those who await the redemption of Israel (Luke 2:36). Priscilla is mentioned with her husband as expounding the way of God more clearly to Apollos (Acts. 19:26). Women are present at the meeting of prayer in the upper room (Acts 1:14), and are by Paul given the task of teaching the younger women proper Christian demeanor (Titus. 2:4).

Women are also found widely administering mercy throughout the history of the church. The Shunammite woman provided a room and support for Elisha (II Kgs. 4:10); women were ever ministering to the Savior during his earthly work (Matt. 27:55–57; Dorcas is only one of several women who are mentioned in Acts as serving the church in this way (Acts 9:36) and the case of Phebe as related by Paul in Rom. 16:1–2 is another example of this work of mercy in the hands of a woman. Her case also raises the question of whether there was an official order of deaconesses set aside in a way similar to the other special offices in the church. In answering this question it must first of all be noted that this use of the feminine noun *diakonos* is the only such use in the Bible, so not a great deal can be concluded from it alone, particularly since this is not a very definitive use. Apart from telling us that she had helped Paul and many others nothing is said of her position. Secondly, if this is a reference to a special order of deaconesses it is the only such reference in the New Testament and were there indeed a special office of “deaconess” we would expect mention of it elsewhere. Although this is an argument from silence it is strengthened both by our first point here and by the universal use of men in the other offices of the church. The burden of proof would seem to lie upon those who see such an official designation here.

Thirdly, let it be observed that although the noun *diakonos* is not used elsewhere in the Scripture in reference to a woman, its parent verb *diakonein* is and that with reference to unofficial duties (Matt. 27:55). This would indicate that the noun also could be used to express the thought of service in an unofficial capacity (those who find a special office here must insist that the noun can be used of nothing else). We conclude, therefore, that it is most unlikely, though not completely impossible, that the special office of deaconess existed in the apostolic church. This will be discussed more later.

Finally, we do find women administering rule in the church but that only in a limited way. We have Miriam, the sister of Moses, leading the women of Israel in dancing before the LORD (Exod. 15:20) and we have Deborah judging the children of Israel in Mount Ephraim (Judg. 4:4). Upon close examination the rule which Miriam exercised is seen to be a rule only over other women and that not a commanding authority but a leadership through example. It was indeed an exercise of rule, as is any real leadership, but not with the binding power of dominion. The case of Deborah, on the other hand, was a case of actual exercise of authority over men as well as women, over “the children (Heb. ‘Sons’) of Israel,” all of them. Examination of this instance, however, leads to the conclusion that this is the exception that proves the rule (cf. Isa. 3:12). It is only in the direst need of leadership that Deborah is raised up, and in her dealings with Barak it is seen that this is not the natural order of things; in fact, it is a shame for her to lead the army of Israel against Sisera. It is a shame for Sisera to be delivered into the hand of a woman and it is only after Barak refuses to go without Deborah that she agrees to accompany him. The raising up of Deborah is then often viewed as the sign of a judgement upon Israel for sin rather than a situation which is to be imitated.

III. The third point in our study of the place of women in the church is that women are restricted in the realm of authority or rule. The restriction is simply that women are to exercise the office of believer in subordination to the authority of the male believers. This point is at the heart of our investigation and we must be most careful that what we have just said is an accurate statement of what the Scripture teaches. Let us point out that by “subordination” we do not mean the subjection of slavery or any inferiority of person but simply that a priority of order belongs to the man in the realm of authority. To see this we must consider in some detail the various Scriptural data involved.

We turn first then to the account of creation in which certain principles and laws are established concerning the order of this world. Man is created on the sixth day of creation for the purpose of having dominion over all the cosmos that God has made. He is the last and highest creature, whose duty is to rule over all things to the glory of God (Gen. 1:28, 1 Cor. 11:7). In this order woman is created as man’s “helpmeet,” she is made after man, out of man, because of man and for man. That, primarily, is her place in the economy of creation: man is by physical and psychological nature and by God’s ordinance placed in the position of authority and government over the world and woman is his helpmeet. She is equal in sharing the divine image but is subordinate in his rule of the world (Gen. 2:18; 1 Cor. 11:8, 9).

In the fall of man we have another index of the positions in the world’s economy that man and woman

occupy. The sin of Adam is that which defiles the human race because he is the representative head of the race. His sin is that of rebellion against God his creator. The sin of Adam's wife, however, is, at least in part, a rebellion against her husband as well as against the command of God. In eating first she is guilty of overturning the natural order of government in the family (Gen. 3:6, 12), and this fact is noted in the curse upon Adam (Gen. 3:17).

The way in which depravity is manifested in the woman is another indication of the proper order of authority, for her sinful nature is shown in an evil desire to rule over her husband. This is clear upon a careful exegesis of Gen. 3:16, where the KJV reads, "and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee." The nature of the desire stated in the first clause can be determined by nothing else than reference to the second clause and thus must be a desire to rule. Furthermore the second clause does not make sense coming where it does unless there is indeed that meaning in the first clause. Thus the waw-consecutive readily takes the meaning "but" and the meaning of the passage is, "and thy desire shall be [to rule] thy husband but he shall rule over thee." This exegesis is supported by a passage of very similar wording (Gen. 4:7), in which the same kind of relationship between the two clauses is necessary for the whole passage to make good sense. Here we would read, "and his [that is, sin's] desire shall be [to rule] thee but thou shouldest rule over him."

Another scriptural datum on this point is that man is the head of the woman even as Christ is the head of the church (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22–25; 1 Pet. 3:1; Col. 3:18). Just what point of correspondence Paul and Peter have in mind when talking in this way is clear from the familiar, "wives submit yourselves to your own husbands," which they derive from this principle. They are always careful to limit this submission and headship to the matter of authority in the order of home and church however, and we too must do so. Paul is also careful to point out that Christ as head of the church so loved it that he gave his life for it, even as he speaks of its submission to Christ and that of woman to man. This makes it apparent that the subordination of woman to man is one of governmental order rather than of inherent worth.

It is sometimes argued that this subordination of woman to man applies only in the case of a wife to her husband and that outside of marriage the principle does not apply. That this is not the case can be demonstrated quite conclusively as follows: 1). The subordination of woman to man is not based in marriage but rather in the very nature of man and woman as created. The position of each in the creation economy reflects the purpose God had in making each of them as he did. This becomes even more apparent when we note that marriage itself is based upon the fact that man and woman complement each other in the natural economy. That is to say, marriage is based upon the complementary natures of man and women rather than that man and women must complement each other if marriage is to work (Gen. 2:24). 2). When Paul speaks of the respective positions of men and women in the church he refers to the creation order, thus showing us that it is inherent differences in the sexes that require this subordination in the church (1 Cor. 11). To state it negatively, it is not in a given man-woman relationship that Paul bases his argument but in the very nature of each as created. 3). First Corinthians 11 cannot be limited, even on the surface, to speaking of wives only. 4). First Timothy 2:9–13 clearly speaks of all Christian women and again Paul refers to the creation ordinance.

That this principle of subordination applies outside of marriage and indeed specifically in the exercise of the office of believer in the church is shown also by the close conjunction in which Paul places the office of rule in the home with the ruling office in the church (1 Tim. 3:4, 5, 12). This chapter of Paul's letter deals directly with the special offices of the church but it also shows the close conjunction between government in the home and government in the church. Particularly the permeation of this principle into the area of church government is established. Note too that chapters 2 and 3 are a unit applying certain principles to the services and government of the church and that one of these principles is that which we are here trying to establish, namely, the headship of man.

Another commandment concerning the restriction upon women in their exercise of the office of believer is that they are not to hold the special office of rule and teaching in the church. That this is true is clear from 1 Cor. 14:34 and 1 Tim. 2:12, and has been almost universally accepted among those who hold the Scriptures in high esteem. It is well to observe here that the reason women are denied the special offices of the church is that the principle of the headship of man would be violated by a woman pastor or elder. Women are

to be in obedience. The reason is not that women are less intelligent, or in every case less able than the men in teaching but that they are to be subordinate in the realm of authority.

Our principle is perhaps most clearly and definitely stated by Paul in 1 Tim. 2:12 — “I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” The Greek *authentēin* is translated a bit more accurately in modern English by “assume authority” or “govern.” The meaning of this statement is quite clear, the subordination of woman to man requires that under no circumstances is a situation to exist in which a woman assumes authority or governs a man in the church. Furthermore the act of teaching includes a governing function. Therefore no woman is to teach in a situation where men are students. Because there is no mention of marriage in this context and because Paul bases his statement upon man’s priority in time of creation, it is clear that this applies to all men and all women in the church. This finishes our study of the examples and principles of Scripture.

Conclusions

We must now list our conclusions concerning the exercise of the office of believer on the part of women. We have above pointed out the value of dividing the serving work of the church into three parts: 1. The administration of the Word, 2. The administration of mercy, and 3. The administration of rule. This work of the church is carried out, on the one hand, by every Christian in his calling as a Christian (that is, in the general office of believer) and, on the other hand, by the chosen officers of the church (that is, by the members of the church as they are called to the special offices of the church). The special officer in the administration of mercy is the deacon, the special officer in the administration of rule is the elder, and the special officer in the administration of the Word is the minister of the gospel. We will then use the term “special office” to refer to the offices of minister, elder and deacon in their respective administrations of the Word, rule and mercy, For example, the minister of the gospel exercises the special office in the administration of both the Word and rule, for he is an elder, set aside to the particular duty of administering the Word. The term “general office” refers to the ordinary members of the church as they are called to its serving work in any of these three administrations. Our conclusions then will be six, one concerning the general office and one concerning the special office in each of the three administrations of the church’s serving work.

1). The woman is both by principle and example called to active participation in the administration of the Word of God in the general office of believer. She, as well as the man, is to be engaged in the teaching and nurture of children in the Word of God. She is to ask questions and take part in Christian discussion in the home and in other circumstances. There is nothing wrong in a man learning from a woman’s words, as did the apostles of the resurrection of Christ, in the proper situation. The woman is simply not to assume the authority of teacher over man as student. Women are also called to teach each other (Titus 2:4) and are at all times to be ready to give reason for the faith that is in them.

2). Perhaps the foremost service of women in the general office of believer is in the administration of mercy. This is because the woman is usually by nature far more gifted with compassion and tenderness than is her male counterpart. The opportunities for this work are seemingly endless and the examples of Lydia, Dorcas, Abigail and Mary Magdalene are multiplied many times in the Bible.

3). Women also find several places of activity in the general office of the administration of rule. It is in this administration, of course, that the principle of the subordination of woman to the headship of man finds its most direct application. Thus we conclude that women may exercise authority in the church only in such circumstances and positions in which they are subordinate to the men of the church. Women, of course, have authority over the children and are to guide in the home (1 Tim. 5:4; Exod. 20:12). How widely this activity can actually reach is seen in Proverbs 31.

4). The Scripture by specific injunction limits the special office of the administration of the Word of God to men. No woman shall under any circumstances be ordained to the gospel ministry (1 Tim. 2:11–12; 1 Cor. 14:34–35).

5). In the same way the special office of the administration of rule is restricted to men (1 Cor. 14:34–

35; 1 Tim. 2:11–12; 3).

6). The question of the special office of the administration of mercy is not as easily settled as are the above two because there is no specific statement of the matter either way. It must be admitted, however, that in accord with the evidence previously given the burden of demonstration certainly rests on those who would say that there is or was such a special office. Since Reformed practice rests upon positive scriptural evidence rather than in indulging in everything the Bible does not specifically forbid, it is concluded that such an office is very doubtful. We must conclude in addition that if there is such an office it is definitely not the same as that held by the male deacons who rightfully have a part in the official government and teaching of the church (cf. the activity of the deacons ordained in Acts 6, see chs. 7 and 8).

Our study would close at this point if it were not for the fact that the question of women voting in congregational meetings is current. We shall attempt to answer this question by the application of the third conclusion above.

The Nature of the Congregational Meeting

There is, however, the preliminary and foundational question as to the status of the congregation meeting itself: is the congregation meeting really just a Consistory meeting with the rest of the members of the church present? Does it have real authority over the Consistory? Does it have real authority at all or is it, as some declare, only an advisory body? A brief look at several passages from the Constitution of the Reformed Church in the United States will show us that the congregational meeting does have real authority, that this authority is exercised most often in relation to the Consistory, and that it is in some instances exercised over the Consistory (Arts. 12, 44, 46, 47, 49 and 70). Pertinent are such words as these from Article 12, “In matters of a general nature..., the trustees can determine nothing finally without the consent of a majority of those communicant members of the congregation assembled at a meeting called for the purpose.” Since it is the case that real authority is exercised in a congregation meeting, the vote must also then be considered as an exercise of authority.

The exercise of the vote in congregation meetings must be construed an exercise of authority in relation to the other voters for the following reasons: 1). The discussion by voters on the floor of any meeting is designed to lead and influence the exercise of whatever authority is involved. This in itself is an exercise of authority in relation to the other voters. 2). The casting of the ballot gives a voter a definite, easily calculated, percentage of the decision making authority in any given meeting.

We are therefore constrained to conclude that the voting of women in congregational meetings violates the principle that the woman is to be subordinate to the headship of man in the church. Giving women the vote first of all gives them a part in at times exercising authority over the Consistory, which is in direct conflict with Paul’s injunction in 1 Timothy 2:12. Secondly, even if this were not so, the exercise of the vote would in that instance put the woman on the very same level of authority as any man voting in the same meeting, thus violating the subordination principle.

Several Objections Considered

Several objections to this conclusion have been raised which should be considered here. Perhaps most important is the objection that this conclusion denies the oneness in Christ of all believers. We have emphasized at the outset the equality of men and women in the image of God and in the redemption in Christ but we must point out that the headship of man is a creation ordinance and the church is a part of creation. This objection is based upon Paul’s words in Galatians 3:28 — “There is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ.” Our first observation is that Paul is here speaking of justification, not of church government. Before this passage can be applied to the latter problem some connection with it must be found in the Galatians passage, in fact, nothing could be further from Paul’s mind than church government. Also it is of importance to note that it is this same Paul who so stoutly defends the principle of the subordination of women and that on

the basis of the creation ordinance. If the equality of all Christians as they rest in Christ for justification had erased this principle, Paul would have been first to admit and apply that equality to church government. Nor can we forget that Paul was in both instances under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit — there can be no contradiction in God’s Word. Finally, we must consider the parallel passage in Colossians 3:11 where, although “male and female” are not mentioned, the equality spoken of is the same as that in Galatians 3:28. Yet this does not stop Paul, who was a fine logician, from writing what he does seven verses later (Col. 3:18).

Again it is objected that the subordination of women makes them “second-class Christians.” This is no more true than that creating woman as man’s helpmeet to be in subjection to him in marriage makes her a second-class human being (cf. equality in God’s image). Also the equality of man and woman as image bearers of God does not infer identical position and function in the exercise of that office. In fact, the opposite is true: each has his own function which the other cannot fulfil. Let us notice that Christ became man in the form of a servant, subject to death. Was he a second-class human being? Rather, we rejoice in that he called us brethren, thus raising our position.

It is also objected that since church elections may be defined as the church’s recognition of those whom God has chosen for office, this conclusion implies that women do not have the spiritual discernment to recognize God’s gifts, when in fact women in Scripture do exercise such discernment, and it is clearly stated that woman as well as men are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (2 Kgs. 4:9; John 4:19, 29; Acts 2:17–18).

We must first notice that in spite of these facts there is not one instance in the whole Bible where women exercise this discernment in any official capacity or circumstance. Neither can we ignore the fact that, with the exception of Deborah, men are used exclusively in the government of God’s people. Even in the casting of the lot to determine a replacement for Judas it is implied in the way Peter addresses the assembly that this will be the action of the men (Acts 1:16 *andres adelphoi*). The same address is used in speaking to the council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:7). The key to this difficulty must be found in applying the scriptural principle. Women do have this discernment but are not to exercise it in the official decisions of the church because that would be an exercise of authority over man and would violate the principle of male headship. This does not mean that the woman’s gift of discernment is not to be used at all. The examples given above show how and that this gift should be used. God gives gifts that they might be used but used according to his order.

Finally, let us examine the objection that this conclusion robs widows of a rightful representation in church affairs. It is to be noted, of course, that this objection can have force only in cases of “widows indeed.”

For some reason or other it has become the feeling of our society that when a man dies his wife becomes the head of the family. In the Scripture it is not this way; the duty of headship falls upon the closest and eldest male relative of the deceased. It devolves upon the family of the widow to care for her support (1 Tim. 5:4) and it would seem also naturally the care for her interests in the government of the church. Even in the extreme case of Zelophehad who had only daughters it was through their marriages to their father’s brother’s sons that they were able to keep inheritance in the land of promise (Num. 36:12 cf. v. 8).

The Scripture, both Old and New Testament, is very solicitous that believers have regard for the interests of the widows and fatherless. This would seem superfluous had they not in the loss of the head of the family lost their advocate in governmental affairs.

It cannot be denied that, especially in this age and nation, problems will arise because of this conclusion. We must ever be mindful, however, that Scripture is our rule of faith and life, not the society around us. We must decide whether it is better to obey God or men, and having decided we must determine God’s will and follow it as far as He gives us grace so to do.

Classis Action: It was moved to recommend this report to another Classis committee which would report the following year.

REPORT TWO
WHO SHALL VOTE IN CONGREGATIONAL MEETINGS?
PART ONE

The question of who is to vote in the congregational meeting is one that has arisen only in the last one hundred years. The question has indeed existed as long as congregations have met to do business but until relatively recently there has been no active consideration of it because the answer has been assumed to be self-evident. It was only as the question of woman suffrage in civil affairs has arisen, that a similar question has been raised in ecclesiastical matters. We should notice this fact not because it will, or should, have a great bearing on how we answer the question but because we must realize that there is not a great and classically Reformed background of study and decision on this question.

I. As a part of this question, namely, should women be enfranchised in congregational meeting? has received attention from the church in the past century, we notice that the Scriptural principles bearing on the matter have usually been disregarded in the official decision of the church. Several scriptural studies have been made in connection with the problem but most often these studies have little bearing on the final conclusion of the matter (e.g. in recent years this has been the case in both the Christian Reformed Church and in the Southern Presbyterian Church). In cases when the answer to the woman's vote has been negative, the conclusion has been based on prior practice: "what was good enough for our fathers is good enough for us." This is usually said, as in many of our own churches, without any serious study as to WHY this was the practice of the fathers. On the other hand those who have answered in the affirmative have been doing so simply as a matter of going along with the practice of the times in which we live. Often there has gone with this a vague reference to "equality in Christ" but with no serious study into the principle involved and its true application. This latter reaction we are not surprised to find in the more liberal denominations of the day, but we are dismayed that it also happens in conservative circles. For instance, even though the committee of the Christian Reformed Church which was appointed to study the Scriptures on this question reported a negative answer, the Synod voted acceptance of a halfway positive procedure with respect to women voting. What this tells us is that thus far the question of who should vote in the congregational meeting has been answered by default to feeling (from either side) or by uncritical continuance of prior tradition. It is important that we understand this historical background lest we, too, answer this question by such default.

II. To get at the scriptural principles by which we may positively answer the question, "Who should vote in the congregational meeting?" we must first consider the nature and method of exercise of authority in the church of Christ. We must, of course, give particular attention to this authority as it is found in the general office, that is, the office of believer as over against the special offices of the church, namely the elder and deacon. Following Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* (pp. 593-95) we classify the authority of the church as a) derivative, b) ministerial, and c) spiritual.

The authority of the church on earth is primarily a derivative authority. This means that this authority is derived or received from Christ the King and head of the church. It is not an authority that the Church has in itself; it is an authority that must be exercised in obedience to his Word and Spirit. Just as an ambassador does not have his powers in and of himself but receives them from the government he represents, so the church has only the powers it receives from Christ.

Secondly, the authority of the church is ministerial. To minister is to serve, and the authority of the church is an authority to serve in the name of Christ, an authority it has as the body and servant of Christ its head. When the church does not serve Christ according to his Word it cannot claim his authority for what it does.

The authority of the church is also a spiritual authority, but that has no direct bearing on the subject of this study and so will not be involved in our discussion.

This authority of the church is given to it on two levels. There is a general authority that is given to the church as a whole. Each member of the church, simply by virtue of the fact that he is a believer, partakes in this authority. We may call this authority the authority of the general office. This is the authority that Paul has the

Corinthian Christians exercise in treating as an outcast the adulterous person (1 Cor. 5) he has cast out of the church. Paul's authority as an apostle can excommunicate but the congregation's authority in agreeing to that excommunication must also be exercised. This is also the authority which the church exercises in choosing out the seven men who are to become deacons (Acts 6). It is, in fact, the authority which is exercised in the congregational meeting by the members.

The other level at which the authority of the church is given is that of the special office. Certain members of the church are given, by Christ — and not by the church, we must point out — the necessary gifts and abilities to be officers in the church. Ministers are elders who have given their whole life to the study and teaching of God's Word. Just as the special officers receive their gifts and calling directly from Christ through the operation of the Holy Spirit, so also the authority of the special office is an authority received from Christ himself. Therefore it is a thing in itself and is not an extension of the authority of the general office. Each office, then, both special and general, has its own authority which it must exercise in the order ordained by Christ.

The special office, for instance, has the power of the keys. Only the special office can forbid or extend the sacraments and ordain other special officers. The general office can never do these things. Further, each of these offices must exercise its authority with respect to the other. The special office cannot ordain without the approval of the general office and the general office cannot force the special office to ordain someone the special office finds unfit. If there is a disagreement between these two offices which cannot be reconciled, it must be determined whether or not one or both of them is disobeying the Word of God because there is no authority for either office apart from such obedience.

With this in view we may now consider the method by which the general office is to exercise its authority. There is little doubt from the New Testament examples that there are two particular methods used, that of approbation and that of choosing. Approbation (approval) of what the special office does is the most used and more universal of the two. Approbation is what Paul was asking for from the Corinthians in the casting out of the incestuous person. Approbation is the presence and approval which the multitude of Christians gave to the decisions of the council at Jerusalem (Acts 15). Choosing or election of officers and in certain matters of policy is done in accordance with the only example in Scripture which is by casting lots, or voting by members of the congregation. It is, of course, a question concerning this latter point that is before us: which members of the congregation shall vote? Shall all of them or only certain ones vote? This we must determine.

III. Before we attempt to answer this question there is one more principle of Scripture which must be explained. This is the principle of representative headship. We see the principle of representative headship at work immediately after creation in Adam and Eve. Even though Eve sinned first, it was Adam's sin which defiled the human race. This is clear from the difference in the curse upon each of them. Eve is cursed for her part in the Fall but the whole earth is cursed for Adam's part in this sin. This is not because Adam has committed a different sin than Eve but because Adam as head of the first family was also head and representative of the human race. The important thing to notice is that what Adam does he does for all his family, including the children yet to come. This is representative headship, and this is the principle about which we are talking.

This principle can be seen at work throughout history. Noah is righteous, so his whole family is saved. David sins, thereby causing the death of his infant son. The fact that whole households are baptized when the head of the family becomes a Christian shows the continuance of this principle in the New Testament. In the application of this principle we find the head of the family representing the family in many kinds of official situations. Aside from the official aspect of the representation in the above instances and others of similar nature, we have the gathering of the congregation of Israel at the foot of Mt. Sinai as an example of the kind of meeting at question in this study. This meeting at Sinai was not primarily one of worship but of an official ratification by the congregation of God's covenant with Israel. In this official meeting with God it is strongly indicated that the "people" gathered before God were not all of the people (men, women and children) but rather the heads of families. This is indicated in verse 15 of Exodus 19 where those who are to appear before

the LORD are admonished not to “come at your wives” in preparation for the meeting. Thus “the people” refers in this case particularly to the members of the congregation who are the heads of families. This, of course, would be in keeping with known practice with respect to women in those days. This conclusion is further enforced by the fact that, when women and children did accompany the men in a meeting, express mention is made that woman and children also were present (e.g., Josh. 8:35; Ezra 10:1; Neh. 8:2–3). In fact, Joshua 8:35 gives the impression that a meeting of the congregation often did not include women and children.

The principle of the head of the family being that family’s representative before God and man goes hand in hand with the fact that the family is the basic unit both in society and in the church. The church is the company of believers but it is clear that some of the most important functions of Christianity take place in the home. The church still grows mainly through the bringing up of covenant children in Christ-centered homes. The daily worship and service of God is primarily a function of the home. Even the public gatherings of the church for worship are gatherings in which we are to take part as family units. Indeed, nothing seems more fitting on these occasions than that families join together in attendance at God’s house.

IV. With these principles then in mind let us attempt to answer the question at hand: Who is to vote in the congregational meeting? Obviously the requirement of Scripture that the church do things in order in exercising its Christ-given authority protects it from gross inequities. Who, for instance, would hold that a fourteen year old boy rightly exercises the same authority in church meetings as does his father? Yet there are those who claim that communicant membership should be the only basis upon which the vote is decided. These would say that, since each believer partakes in the authority of the general office, each believer should exercise that authority by vote in the congregational meeting. The problem with this is that each and every believer does not partake equally in the authority of the general office. In fact, the extent to which a particular believer does partake in this authority is conditioned by several factors other than the factor of true faith alone. The fact that there are special officers in the church clearly shows that some believers are called to exercise far more and even a different kind of authority than other believers. We are then forced to look elsewhere than to the question of faith as the condition which tells us to what extent a believer partakes in the authority of the general office,

It is at this point that the principle of the representative headship in the family applies to the problem. As the head of the family the husband and father holds governmental authority over the family. It is as head that he represents the family in larger society. As leader of the basic Christian unit it then follows that the head of the family partakes more fully in the governmental authority of the general office than do the other members of the family. If this is the case, it follows naturally that the head of the family would represent it in the broader exercise of the authority of the general office. The answer to our question is then apparent: he should vote in the congregational meeting who is the believing head of a family. His voting alone does not deprive the other believers of the exercise of their proper part of the authority of the general office, since he represents them. Rather this guarantees that the authority will be exercised in good and proper order. To have everybody voting in the larger society of the church is to tear down the representative and governmental authority of the head of the family. If this representative and governmental authority is not upheld in every situation, the difference is leveled out and made subjective even in the home. To deny governmental and representative authority in the church, then, is to deny it in the home.

APPENDICES:

A. In the studies that have been made before on this subject emphasis has been placed on trying to determine the circumstances of the New Testament examples of congregational meetings. This approach has yielded several conflicting answers because it is easy to read in circumstances which are not clearly stated in the context. Some say, for instance, that the presence of women in the upper room with the other disciples shows that they had an active part in later casting lots to determine a successor to Judas’ apostleship. However, it is clear that presence at one point is a long jump from casting lots in an official meeting of the congregation. We know, in fact, from extra-biblical information that it is highly unlikely that women took an active part in

meetings of this nature in that day and age. Certainly if they had, we would expect a pointed reference to the fact because it would be so far out of the ordinary.

B. We might notice that uniformly in Acts, at official gatherings, both Jewish and Christian, and at such gatherings only, that the group is always addressed as “men and brethren” (*andres adelphoi*). This would seem to militate in favor of the conclusion reached above.

C. The head of a family to anyone is the closest male relative who can exercise the proper responsibility. The following would fit the biblical description of a “head of family”: 1. married men. 2. bachelors who are no longer under the authority and support of their fathers. And 3. the oldest son of a widow, provided he is a communicant and personally capable of exercising the proper responsibility.

Classis Action: It was moved to submit this report to the congregations, for their consideration.

REPORT THREE
WHO SHALL VOTE IN CONGREGATIONAL MEETINGS?
PART TWO

Your committee wishes to make grateful acknowledgment at the outset of the past studies conducted by the Eureka Classis on this question. These studies are more than adequate to settle the question put before this committee. At great length and in much detail, these studies were considered and were found to be scriptural. This committee feels that this is the only consideration which should be the measure of truth. (It should be noted that one particular congregation of the Eureka Classis was presented with one of these studies and on the basis of the conclusions was driven to lay aside all and any emotional feelings and to change the constitution of the local congregation in an effort to come closer to Scripture.)

The Authority of the Congregational Meeting

Central to the question of whether or not women should have the vote in the congregational meeting is the question of the authority of the congregational meeting. Perhaps this could have been made clearer in the past, but as it was not the question of the particular studies completed, and because it now is seen to be the prime question, your committee offers the following considerations:

If the congregational meeting is no more than a meeting which is called to advise the Consistory of the church, and if the Consistory is given the right to change, alter, or exclude any or all business transacted at the congregational meeting then there is no real authority for that meeting. And, if there is no authority, then it would follow that the biblical injunctions concerning the exercise of authority would not apply. If the congregational meeting is merely advisory, then this study would have to come to a close, for then it would make no difference who exercises the vote.

Reformed church government does not recognize the congregational meeting simply as advisory because that would mean that the special offices of the church should be responsible to God but that the general office — the office of the believer — would be responsible to men, namely the special officers. This would tie the conscience of the believer in a most unbiblical manner.

It should be immediately recalled that the same binding of the conscience applies if the congregational meeting exercises independent authority. In that case it is the conscience of the special officers that is bound since they would be obligated to fulfill the desires of the congregation whether or not they are in accord with Scripture.

What we come to is the question of the sovereignty of God, and the application of that sovereignty over the consciences of his people. If God is sovereign, and he most certainly is, then it must follow that all are responsible to him, and not either directly to the general office of the believer as is the case when the congregation acts independently, nor are all directly responsible to the special office of the Consistory as is the case when the congregation acts only to advise.

Your committee seems then to come to an impasse. If the congregational meeting for business does not act independently nor in an advisory capacity, what does it do? The answer is that the general office of the believer, in business meeting also, is exercised in accord with the law of God and in relation to the special office of the Consistory. And, on the other hand, the special office is exercised in accord with the law of God and in relation to the general office of the believer. What the congregation does, then, in the business meeting is to act in accord with the rule of Scripture and with the interests of the office of the special officers in mind. There is here a cooperative effort to honor God and to build the church of Jesus Christ. The congregation does exercise authority, but that authority is exercised in conjunction with the Consistory. And the Consistory, recognizing its responsibility to God and the welfare of God's people, must recognize that authority exercised, providing, of course, that it is exercised according to God's law.

Your committee feels that this position, sketchily presented as it might be, is the position of Scripture. The alternatives are hard and definite rule from the top on the one hand, and the rule of the wishes of the

majority over and above considerations for the law of God on the other hand. Neither of these positions is acceptable.

The above considerations are presented in order that we might see that each and every vote in the congregational meeting is an exercise of authority, easily calculated as a percentage of rule, real and designed to shape the activities and position of God's people. With that conclusion in mind we then ask the question of whether or not the woman may exercise the vote. Our answer must be based on whether or not the Bible will allow women to exercise the vote over the man. Your committee directs your attention for answer to the attached studies. From them it is clear that the woman is not to exercise authority over the man in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let your committee say it one more time. If the congregational meeting is authoritative and if then the participants of said meeting do exercise authority then it must follow that scripturally women are not to vote.

Your committee has no desire to lord it over the consciences of the members of the individual congregations of the Eureka Classis. This report is not designed to do that. Our concern is that the Constitution of the Reformed Church in the United States be brought into accord with the teaching of Scripture on the position of the congregational meeting and the position of the woman in God's order. There is no question that such a change in the Constitution will affect the constitutions of the local congregations in some way, but it is not the task of this committee to comment upon such change nor the causes for such change. Our task is simply to study the one question of the woman's vote in the congregational meeting.

Classis Action: This report was not received by the Eureka Classis when it was first made in 1968. Rather, it was moved to "postpone action on it indefinitely." However, the Classis considered this subject again in 1978, at which time it adopted the three preceding reports (without the recommendations, which were omitted in this edition) as the "position of Classis." The 1978 Abstract says that this position is "that the exercise of the vote in the congregational meeting is an exercise of authority in the church of Jesus Christ and is therefore properly the province [sic] of the male head of household" (p. 28). The Classis also instructed each congregation to examine its constitution and practice in light of the biblical principles set forth in the reports.