

# A RESPONSE OF THE ERKWB

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To the GKv Report published by the General Synod  
of the Reformed Churches Goes 2020 entitled:

*“Report of the Synod Committee weighing  
Revision requests about the men and women in  
Church office decisions”*

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ERKWB Committee response to the GKv report  
“The men and women in Church offices decisions”  
**Chapter 1 - Men and women: starting from and returning to the beginning**

## **Introduction**

Over the past several decades there has been much love and support exchanged between the ERKWB and the GKv, of which, the members of the ERKWB have been overwhelmingly the beneficiaries. We are and always will be extremely grateful for this generosity. There are so many glorious truths which our two denominations hold in common. The number of theological doctrines that unify us are far outweigh those that divide us. However, even the strongest chain can be severed when one of its links is broken. The topic of women in the offices of the church is one of those links that threatens the ecclesiastical fellowship of our two denominations.

In the following response to the document entitled, *“Report of the Synod Committee weighing Revision requests about the men and women in Church office decisions”*, we will attempt to lay out our most important concerns regarding the current direction of the GKv. To be clear, the heart of our concern has less to do with women in the offices of the church and much more to do with hermeneutical integrity.

If the Bible is the revealed word of God, preserved by Him throughout the ages, then it is our duty to exegete each text with the utmost possible care, and then to submit gladly to it with our lives. We trust that God, the creator of the cosmos and lover of our souls, not only gave us infallible instruction in His word, but that this truth is also intended for our good, regardless of how we or our society react to it.

## **The concerns of the ERKWB**

On page 7 of the report, the authors of the GKv say,

“However, argumentation (of the GKv) for the men and women in the church office decisions is not based on individual unconnected Bible texts.”

We find this sentence very troubling, as “argumentation from individual and unconnected Bible texts” is the very basis of systematic theology, and the duty of every lover of God’s word as we attempt to understand the meaning of the holy Scriptures. This is the work of any faithful exegete, and in this worthy endeavor of biblical interpretation we have two necessary principles that must guide us, namely the “Analogy of Scripture” and the “Hierarchy of Hermeneutics”, both of which will be used in this paper to demonstrate the weakness of the GKv report.

The “analogy of scripture” is the method by which we use scripture to interpret scripture. Not all doctrines in the Bible are of equal clarity and so, texts in the Bible which are more clear should be used to help us understand those that are less clear.

The “hierarchy of hermeneutics”, on the other hand, acknowledges that not all texts bare equal weight on certain doctrines. In some cases we must rely on contextual clues or historical examples in order to extract a biblical principle. At other times we are given a direct command from God or from one of his Prophets or Apostles. In the difficult work of hermeneutics and

exegesis, direct commands must take precedent over narrative anecdotes, and other forms of revelation found in Scripture.

In this case, there is a certain level of freedom for the exegete to formulate his own opinions when there is an absence of explicit commands in scripture. He must then do his best to relying on other evidence, clues, and contexts in order to derive a biblical principle. This is not the case, however, in the discussion of women eldership. In 1 Timothy 2:11-12 we are given a direct command, forbidding women from teaching and leading over men in the local congregation. Had this direct command not been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and preserved for us through the ages, other views regarding female leadership in the church may be justifiably entertained. However, as soon as those words in 1 Timothy 2 were penned, all theorizing and postulating come to an end, and we submit gladly to the will of God.

### **Genesis 1-3**

Much space has been given by the authors of the report to the creation story in Genesis 1-3. In some cases there is agreement between the ERKWB and the GKv report, and in other cases there is sharp disagreement. For the sake of this response, our concern will deal primarily with the inversion of the “hermeneutical hierarchy” principle which is exhibited by the authors of this report. Instead of using direct commands to interpret passages of the Bible which are unclear or tangential to the subject of women eldership, the authors have used less clear texts in order to produce a framework by which they attempt to undermine the command.

For example, the authors of this report argue that the first chapters of Genesis reveal God’s intention for unity between the sexes which cannot justify withholding women from ecclesiastical offices. Here is a sample of some of their arguments.

First, the authors of the report argue that the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 points to far more unity between the sexes than disunity. Not only is this claim demonstrably false, more importantly, this text says nothing about the ordination of women to the office of elder in the New Covenant dispensation of the church, whereas Paul speaks directly to this subject in 1 Timothy 2:11-14:

A woman must learn in quietness and full submissiveness. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; she is to remain quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, and then Eve. 14 And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman who was deceived and fell into transgression.

Second, the authors of this report say that the woman and the man were given equal dominion over the creation.

That could very well have been the case, but this is not clear from the text, and is an example of their sloppy exegesis. The text only tells us that they (together) were given the duty to reproduce and to take dominion. How the fulfillment of those creation commands looked in the economy of the family is never revealed to us. It is a pure conjecture to suggest that they carried out dominion with the same exact authority. However, whatever the case, this text also says nothing to the topic of ordination in the local church, whereas Paul gives us a direct command regarding this topic in 1 Timothy 2.

Third, the authors of this report argue that God did not create Adam, but rather that he created humanity in one person which then “blossomed” into two persons when Eve was made from Adam’s rib. This is an interesting philosophical tangent that has nothing to do with responsible exegesis, but rather reflects the ancient mythology of the Greeks picked up by Plato in his work “The Symposium” in which male and female once existed in one body but were separated by the gods. Here again, we need Scripture to interpret Scripture. In 1 Timothy 2:13 Paul tells us that Adam was created first, not humanity. However, regardless of their imaginative tangent, this text has no bearing on the question of women’s ordination which is explicitly dealt with in the Apostle’s letter to pastor Timothy.

Fourth, the authors of this report argue that Eve’s origins from the rib of Adam cannot be an indication of her submissive role in the family or the church, but rather, just the opposite. The fact that she was taken from Adam’s rib is evidence of gender equality in all spheres of life (a summary of page 13).

This, once again, is a conjecture. The text does not tell us if Eve’s genesis from Adam’s rib was a sign of diverse roles or equal authority, and thus, we may speculate as to its meaning, and to its bearing on the social fabric of the Christian community, but it does not speak directly to the question of women eldership, whereas 1 Timothy 2 does speak directly to this question.

Fifth, the authors of the report explain that certain language in the creation narrative was the result of cultural influences bearing upon Moses many centuries after the expulsion from the Garden. They explain that the expression in Genesis 2:25, for example, which talks about the “man and his wife”, seems to give priority to the man, but that this was simply a result of the fallen state of human culture in which Moses lived. At other times in the Genesis account, however, the authors go on to explain, Moses is lifted out of his “culture bound limitations” by the Holy Spirit and speaks about the unity of the genders. (pg.11)

This is a very troubling text because it leads the reader to an unavoidable spiritual agnosticism. How can we possibly discern when an author of Scripture is speaking from his fallen culture, and when he is being “lifted out of his culture-bound limitations” in order to give us the true perspective of God? We are simply left in ignorance as to what is truly God’s word and what is not.

This hermeneutical methodology leads us once again at the Jesus Seminar, casting marbles to decide which writings of Moses are genuine, and which are the product of his “cultural limitations”. This was a very troubling paragraph, and it sets a hermeneutical precedent that, if not repented of, will mark the end of the GKv. This very same hermeneutical principle will be used in the future by the more progressive wing of the church to normalize homosexual marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ+ ministers. When we invert the principle of hermeneutical hierarchy and interpret direct commands of Scripture by rationalistic conjecture, we have opened the door to any and every form of biblical interpretation that fits our personal and cultural preference, the fruit of which, in the Western church is in abundance.

## 1 Timothy 2:11-14

*A woman must learn in quietness and full submissiveness. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; she is to remain quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, and then Eve. 14 And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman who was deceived and fell into transgression.*

This is the most relevant text with regards to the current debate. It is one of the few instances in which God's word gives us a direct instruction regarding gender roles in the worship service of the local church. Paul clearly forbids women from teaching and exercising authority in the church, which are two of the most prominent responsibilities of overseers mentioned by the Apostle in chapter 3. The text is explicit, and the context reinforces Paul's meaning, the office of elder is closed to the women of the church.

Some Christian scholars have pointed to specific cultural issues in and around Ephesus as the explanation for Paul's exclusivity in this text. Others have cited the outdated social structure of patriarchy which was in effect during the first century as the reason why Paul forbade women to teach and lead in the church. Paul, however, silences such objections by rooting his argument, not in the problems of Ephesus, nor in the culture of the 1st century, but rather by grounding his position in the very ontology of man and woman in the creation narrative in vs. 14,

“For Adam was formed first, and then Eve.” 1 Timothy 2:14

The authors of the report, however, object to this interpretation and comment,

“All things considered, there is good reason to wonder if Paul in 1 Timothy 2 is really referring to Adam and Eve in order to argue for a continuing subordination of the woman”. (pg.18)

A simple reading of the text makes it clear that this is very much Paul's intention, at least in regard to the community of the church. Not only does he say quite directly that women must learn in “full submission” (vs.11), but he also transitions to the creation story in vs. 14 with this conjunction “for”. This is significant, because we may ask, “why, Paul, do you command that women should not teach or lead over men in the congregation?” Paul then answers that question in the very next breath by saying, “**For** Adam was formed first, and then Eve.” This is, at least in part, his answer to the question.

We acknowledge that one's cultural sensibilities may feel affronted by Paul's words here, but what one may not do is to redefine what Paul clearly believed and taught about the roles of gender in the local congregation.

On page 19 of the report there is a paragraph that can only be described as a conscious and deliberate inversion of Paul's clear meaning in the text. The authors begin by conjecturing as to what Paul had in mind when he wrote these words in 1 Timothy 2. They argue that Paul was responding in this text to the fact that the women of Ephesus believed that they were “above” the men, because of the central role of Eve in the Creation story. Eve, they explain, was seen as a role model in Ephesus on account of her being the “mother of all the living”. In verse 14, Paul is therefore addressing this point by demonstrating that women do not have priority over men

because Adam was created first. With this supposed background in mind, the authors of the GKv report then conclude that Paul's point in 1 Timothy 2:11-14 was the following:

“Women in Ephesus can therefore not argue from a “birth order” to claim authority over men. And thus we, in our day, can similarly not argue from a chronological order at creation to support the claim that only men can be considered for exercising a “ruling office” in a church.” (pg. 19)

From which ancient source do we know that the Ephesians honored Eve as their role model? Once again, the authors turn to conjecture and assumption rather than accepting the simple and unmistakable meaning of the text. By a twist of logic, they actually force Paul to say the exact opposite of what he clearly states. Paul says,

“A woman must learn in quietness and full submissiveness. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; she is to remain quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, and then Eve.” 1 Timothy 2:11-13

And yet they interpret this text to actually mean that a woman can teach and lead in the church. This was perhaps the most troubling paragraph in the entire first chapter. The presbyters of the ERKWB plead with any of those in the GKv who still value God's Word and wish to submit to it, regardless of cultural or personal preferences. We urge you to rise up and reclaim the GKv before it is lost to the social syncretism which has robbed the West of so many faithful congregations for over the past 100+ years. We believe there are still many faithful ministers and members of the GKv who are equally shocked by the deliberate imprecision of this exegesis, and we encourage you to save your denomination. Do not be silent, but speak up in love and call on your brothers and sisters to repent.

The presbyters of the ERKWB recognize that women's ordination is not a doctrine on which salvation is dependent. However, the question of hermeneutical integrity surely does rise to that level. It is one thing to disagree on the non-essentials of the faith, but it is quite another to deliberately invert a direct command of scripture to say the very opposite of what it clearly teaches.

### **1 Corinthians 11:2-10**

*Now I commend you for remembering me in everything and for maintaining the traditions, just as I passed them on to you. 3 But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. 4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. 5 And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for it is just as if her head were shaved. 6 If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off. And if it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. 7 A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. 8 For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. 9 Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10 For this reason a woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head, because of the angels.*

After citing this text from the Apostle Paul, the authors conclude:

“This passage thus **supports** the broader Biblical teaching that women and men do not only share in the same way salvation in Christ, but also in the responsibility for church services and even in the prophetic proclamation of the Gospel.” (pg. 19) (emphasis ours)

They also conclude:

“Paul does not put the emphasis on subordination, but, just as Genesis does, on the unity of man and woman.” (pg. 20)

The ERKWB acknowledges that men and women are equal in value and dignity and that women and men have an equal share of the image of God. The nature of this paper does not, unfortunately, afford us the time nor the space for a proper outworking of that beautiful reality. The purpose of the following paragraphs, rather, are to respond to the conclusions of the Synod regarding Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11, which are another example of a conscious twisting of the obvious meaning of the text.

Paul says, “...the head of the woman is the man”. Paul says, “...the woman is the glory of the man”. Once again in this text, the Apostle uses the conjunction “for” in order to ground his argument in the ontology of creation when he says, “**For** man did not come from woman, but woman from man.”

It is difficult to understand how this passage “supports” the idea that women “share **in the same way**...in the responsibility for church services and even in the prophetic proclamation of the gospel.” (emphasis ours).

Once again, the ERKWB acknowledges how distasteful the language of the New Testament can be to our modern palates. We recognize how many people inside and outside of the church recoil at such sentiments of Paul. But for those who trust that God is good and wise, we submit our preferences to his word in faith, trusting that he must have good reason for all that he commands, even if it sounds offensive to us. The temptation of modern Christians to “deconstruct” the text of the Bible in order to make it more palatable to the world around us is both a lack of faith in the God who gave us this instruction, and a sandy foundation on which to build his Church.

### **Galatians 3:28-29**

*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise.*

This is a powerful text that points to the unity which Christians of all stations, genders, and nationalities possess in Christ. This text, however, has nothing to say about the role of women in the offices of the church. After citing this verse in Galatians, the authors of the report say,

“Here the normal words for man and woman are not used, but rather two words which indicate male and female. This means that in Christianity no woman is any longer made subordinate due to her sex.” (pg. 21)

There are several problems with this conclusion. The **first** and most obvious problem is that it contradicts other New Testament teaching on this subject.

1 Timothy 2:11 *A woman must learn in quietness and full **submissiveness**.*

Ephesians 5:22 *Wives, **submit** to your husbands as to the Lord.*

Colossians 3:18 *Wives, **submit** to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.*

1 Peter 3:1 *Wives, in the same way, **submit** yourselves to your husbands, so that even if they refuse to believe the word, they will be won over without words by the behavior of their wives*

Admittedly, these passages do not speak directly to the office of elder in the local church, but each one of them contradicts the conclusion of the GKv report regarding Paul’s meaning in Galatians 3.

The **second** problem with their conclusion is the authors’ disregard for the context of this verse. Paul is not dealing with ecclesiology in this text but with the unity enjoyed by all believers in Christ. Paul’s concern in the immediate context of Galatians 3:28-29 is the inclusion of Gentiles in the family of God by faith, reinforced by this rhetorical flourish highlighting the barrier breaking power of the gospel by which every person on this globe may become a child of God.

The **third** problem with the GKv’s conclusions regarding Galatians 3:28-29 is the logical consequences of their interpretation. If Paul means to suggest that women are no longer subordinate in marriage and in the church due to their sex, then he must, by logical extension mean that slaves are no longer subordinate to their masters. In the same breath that he proclaims that there are neither male nor female, he also says that, “...there is no longer slave nor free...”. However, by the analogy of Scripture we know that this cannot be Paul’s intention, given the fact that he instructed Christian slaves, who were unable to buy their freedom, to live faithfully in their humble position.

Ephesians 6:5-6 *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 6And do this not only to please them while they are watching, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.*

## **Conclusion**

There is more to say regarding the argumentation laid out in the first chapter of the Synod’s report, but in summary, the committee of the ERKWB finds that the authors of this report have relied heavily on texts that have no direct correlation to the discussion of women’s ordination. That women are of equal dignity and value is not contested by the Presbyters of ERKWB. However, when it comes to the question of women “teaching” or “exercising authority over a



man” in the local congregations, we must rely on the analogy of Scripture and the “hierarchy of hermeneutics”. In this case, we should be thankful that God, in His infinite wisdom and love for the Church made clear his will to us through the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 2.

Again, the heart of our concern is not, first and foremost, the exclusion of women from the church offices, but rather the attitude of Christ’s ministers towards the Word of God, and the care they must have for hermeneutical precision (as best fallen humans can achieve).

If the Old Testament texts were the sum of our Holy Scriptures, then it would be appropriate for each of us to develop our best theological opinions regarding the place of women in offices of the church. The presbyters of the ERKWB believe that the creation story is strongly in favor of male leadership in the family and the Church. The GKv believes it is rather in favor of equal leadership opportunities. Some may say that Deborah’s judgeship in Israel is evidence that God desired women to lead, while others may look at that same story and decide that her leadership over Israel was merely indication of Israel’s weakness during the time of the judges and of masculine passivity in the face of their duties before God and country.

If the Old Testament Scriptures were all that we possessed, then we could have these debates, and each would be entitled to his own opinions. However, God, in his love and providence for the church, has given us a direct command regarding gender roles in the local church, and grounded that command in the creation narrative. This being the case, we are forced to interpret all of the Old Testament Scriptures, as well as any peripheral remarks or anecdotal stories about women in the New Testament in light of that command in 1 Timothy 2.

ERKWB Committee response to the GKv report  
“The men and women in Church offices decisions”  
**Chapter 2 – Not ruling over, but serving**

## **Introduction**

The second chapter of the GKv report seeks to answer the question:

“Does the New Testament teach us that there are differences between men and women which of necessity lead to the conclusion that women may not have a teaching or ruling office in the Church?” (pg. 23)

The presbyters of the ERKWB are troubled by many of conclusions drawn by the GKv in chapter 2 and are deeply concerned about the theological implications logically following these conclusions. Most worrisome of all is the emerging pattern of questionable hermeneutical methodology employed by the authors of the GKv report. In this response, we will not speak to every specific point of contention within Chapter 2, but to those which, in our opinion, pose the most significant theological or greatest hermeneutical concern.

## **Misunderstanding Scriptural Qualifications for Leadership**

*First, we believe this report misunderstands and misrepresents Scriptural qualifications for leadership.* Throughout Chapter 2, it is taken for granted that the debate of whether women can and should hold Church office is based primarily on gender. To give a few representative examples, according to the authors, “[the Church has] ...intended, indeed, to see maleness as the first criterion to be used...” (pg. 24). The section “Offices and gifts” even begins questioning whether the ultimate determinate of officials in the Church should be gender (pg. 27). It is clear that the GKv report believes gender to be the central issue.

The ERKWB agrees that the basis for Church leadership and office-bearing is not gender alone. To disallow or allow people to hold a certain office on the basis of gender alone would be sexist and sinful. We do not, however, believe that the central issue in this debate is gender. Instead, the guiding principles should be the criteria and qualifications set forth in the Word of God. Throughout Scripture and Church history, men and women alike are saved by grace alone through faith alone in the works of Christ alone. There are innumerable roles in which women and men can interchangeably participate and serve, especially in the modern Church. However, while all believers equally share this great salvation, ontological unity and opportunity to serve within the Body, there undoubtedly remain differences between the sexes and their roles. The Bible unashamedly proclaims this intention of God throughout all of Scripture. In particular, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul instructs Timothy on how to properly organize the Church, saying “I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of truth.” (1 Tim 3:15). A person qualified to be an overseer, according to 1 Timothy 3:2-7, is one who is:

- aspiring to the office
- above reproach

- the husband of one wife
- temperate
- prudent
- respectable
- hospitable
- able to teach
- free from addiction
- not pugnacious but peaceable and gentle
- free from the love of money
- able to manage his own household well, particularly his children
- not a new convert
- maintaining a good reputation within the community.

Paul's inspired criteria are focused primarily on character and gifting. From this list, we conclude that the chief distinction between any candidates for office is between biblically qualified persons and biblically unqualified persons. While no one person can perfectly fulfill these necessary characteristics, overseers are among those who *most* exemplify them. Timothy was not perfect. Paul was not perfect. Nevertheless, they pursued this Christlikeness to the full.

To be sure, gender is specified in the list and set forth as a rule. However, it is plain that gender is by no means the only qualification and certainly not the most important. The GKv's disproportionate treatment of gender and equality neither match the emphasis nor the reality of the scriptural qualifications for office. *Any* person who cannot fulfill completely or, at least, demonstrate a strong commitment to *all* of these characteristics and qualifications should not be allowed to bear the office. Consequently, many gifted men and women remain disqualified for the office of overseer (elder).

To make "gender" and "equality" the chief concern of the call to church office or to see 1 Timothy, Titus and the similar passages exclusively or even primarily through the lens of gender is to vastly misrepresent the texts.

### **Misunderstanding Scriptural Exercise of Spiritual Gifts**

*Secondly, we believe that this report also misunderstands the biblical exercise of spiritual gifts.* While the second chapter of the GKv report mentions 1 Corinthians 12 at great length, it neglects the importance of chapters 13 and 14 in the discussion. We believe Paul's exposition in 14 provides important guidelines for the present discussion.

Throughout 1 Corinthians, the Holy Spirit gives both the Corinthian Church as well as the universal Church, clear doctrine, instruction, warning and encouragement regarding the use of spiritual gifts. In the first portion of chapter 14, Paul reminds the Church of using their gifts for

the sake of others, consistent with the love and concern for edification he mentioned in chapters 12 and 13. Being sure that his point and instructions are not missed, Paul concisely and clearly lays down rules and practice for the Church in 14:26-33:

What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

As the reader can see, his argument is very simple: even if someone has excellent gifts, they are only meant to be used at specific times for specific purposes. Someone may have the gift of tongues, but if no one understands the tongue or an interpreter is not present, the gift should not be exercised. He goes on to say that someone may have the gift of prophesy, but if another receives a word or enough people have already prophesied, this person should keep silent. Said another way, the gifts must be used in accordance with God's Word and God's ways. This principle for practice is important for the topic at hand. Quite logically, we can also conclude that the right use of a spiritual gift may be, in fact, to abstain from using it. The presence of a gift does not demand it be used. Instead, gifts must be exercised with wisdom for the edification of those present. The right use of a gift depends upon the situation.

Contradicting this command of Scripture, the GKv report instead claims that "...gifts demand certain tasks to be carried out." (pg. 27). The report imagines "...a 'gifted' congregation where all, both men and women, share without distinction in the gifts of the Spirit." (pg. 27) It even goes so far as to claim that "there is no firm connection between tasks and being a man...nowhere in the New Testament do we read that women may not fulfill certain offices." (pg. 27-28) "The [presence of] gifts themselves settles the matter." (pg. 27)

In His grace, the Lord does not leave us without clarity. He does not leave us to our assumptions. In complete contradiction to the imaginations of the GKv report, the Lord makes it abundantly clear that one of the qualifications for Church office is maleness. The Lord makes abundantly clear that things are to be done well and in the right order.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, any person exercising their gifts in the wrong manner, namely the holding of an office by anyone whom the Bible has disqualified, cannot claim it is biblical to do so. They are neither pursuing the edification of the Church (1 Cor 14:26) nor submitting to the very God whose Church they seek to serve (1 Cor 14:37).

While mentioning 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, the GKv report rightly acknowledges the importance of practicing our spiritual gifts, yet fails to acknowledge the primary point of the text. Paul is writing to a Church which gives priority and honor to some gifts and not others. Members are not using their gifts for each other and the Lord, but for themselves. The purpose of spiritual gifts is

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 2-3; Titus 1; 1 Corinthians 11, 14. As well, women too have gifts unique to them. For example, no man will every have to privilege to bring forth a new life into this world

to point others to the Lord, not to ourselves and not to other people.<sup>2</sup> All gifts come from God and are maintained by God's gracious Spirit. There are many gifts, but one Spirit. No matter the type of gift, it is a gift from God to be used for God and His people. "One and the same Spirit works all these things..." (1 Cor 12:11).

In conclusion, we believe this same Spirit, the giver and sustainer of gifts, also inspired the writing of all Scripture. As the Lord and designer of all spiritual gifts, He has determined how, when and by whom they are to be practiced. He has set forth clear criteria in the pastoral epistles for holding office and given us clear instructions for practicing our spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians.<sup>3</sup> Accepting the conclusions of the GKv report would force us to say that the Spirit contradicts Himself – setting different standards for different Churches at different times. Why would the Spirit sow confusion into the Church, telling the Corinthians one thing and the Cretans and Ephesians another? Why would He restrict women from holding authority in some Churches, but not others? God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in *all the Churches of the saints*. (emphasis ours, 1 Cor. 14:33). The same principles given to Corinth apply to Ephesus, to Crete, to the ERKWB and to the GKv (NGK). If God gives clear and consistent instruction to the Church, then there is no place for assumption and imagination. Our ecclesiology, our polity and our exercising of His gifts must submit to His clear and consistent Word, no matter the consequences for individuals and their gifting.

### **Misunderstanding Ephesians 5:21-33 and Biblical Headship**

*Third, we believe this report mishandles and misunderstands significant aspects of Paul's discourse on marriage and relationships in Ephesians 5:21-33.* The book of Ephesians can easily be divided into two halves: chapters 1-3 are an explanation of the Gospel and chapters 4-6 are concerned its implications for our lives. The second portion is filled with calls to live in light of God's gracious works and salvation,

"Therefore I, a prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called..." (4:1), "So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk..." (4:17), "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children..." (5:1).

We must view the marriage discourse of Ephesians 5 in light of this general theme.

In Ephesians 5:21, Paul writes the following, "...and subject yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ." But here is the full paragraph, beginning in 5:15,

So then, be careful how you walk, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, in which there is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your hearts to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to our God and Father; and subject yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> In his disclosure formula (1:10), Paul makes clear that the purpose of the whole letter is to bring unity to the Corinthian Church. Each issue he addresses is to this end. We are summarizing the content from 12-14 for the sake of time and space but are happy to defend this reading of the text, need be.

<sup>3</sup> This is certainly not an exhaustive list for instruction regarding spiritual gifts

We therefore do not agree with the GKv report. Instead, we believe that Ephesians 5:21 is not intended to be understood as a part of the marriage pericope, which begins in verse 22.<sup>4</sup> Rather, “being subject to” or “submitting to one another” is a present participle dependent upon and describing the command to “...be filled in the Spirit” in 5:18. Like the preceding four participles (speaking, singing, making melody and giving thanks) this fifth and final description helps the Ephesian church generally understand their interpersonal relationships and behavior within the Church. Using 5:21 as a conceptual bridge, Paul clarifies three particular relationships - husband/wife, parent/child, and slave/master relationships. Helpfully, they are the three relationships most likely to suffer confusion were 5:21 to be left alone. Our Lord does not allow confusion to prevail.

The GKv assertion that, “in marriage, too, the command is: submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ” and that “...the relationship between Christ and His congregation...is the model and source for mutuality within marriage...” simply cannot be true (pg. 29). For this understanding to be correct, one would have to ignore the entire following content of verses 5:22-6:9. If Paul were to end with 5:21 or exclusively address marriage following 5:21, the GKv report’s interpretation would be far more plausible. However, much like we discussed in our response to the handling of Galatians 3:25-29, the interpretation offered by the GKv report is once again impossible to accept because of Paul’s immediate discussion of children and parents as well as slaves and masters. To accept such an understanding, we must *either* accept that parents and masters are equally submissive to and have no authority over their children or slaves *or* we must argue that Paul, teaching something entirely different for marriage, arbitrarily and without any warning pivots in his thinking regarding the other relationships. In fact, the text offers no clear or obvious differentiation between the relationships.

To be clear, Paul takes two things for granted in this text: first, that the reader will know the difference between a husband/wife, parent/child, and slave/master relationships. That is to say, he does not argue that marriage and slavery, for example, are the same, but rather that in each relationship, one person submits to the God-ordained head of the relationship. Second, that the reader will remember that this is strictly speaking about roles within human relationships. Ephesians 1-3 demonstrate with incredible beauty and eloquence the ontological reality all people share in Christ, regardless of position or status in this world. Each person on the basis of this mutual salvation must learn how to live in a manner worthy of this call and privilege. Slaves, parents, husbands and wives, among all others, must each learn to uniquely honor the Lord in their given roles.

In light of this, the ERKWB does agree that within marriage and within the congregation, leaders “lording over” people is wrong. However, the GKv report goes too far by implying that anything other than mutual submission, as they define it, is “lording over” others. To be clear, one must then conclude that following the scriptural prescriptions for office holders is “lording over” others, as these inevitably designate certain people to be in authority over others. All throughout, the GKv report seems only to imagine instances in which male leaders lead wrongly. The ERKWB believes that Scripture corrects this false dichotomy. Neither preaching complete mutual submission nor of “lording over” one another, Scripture portrays and commands, qualified,

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<sup>4</sup> ESV, NASB, NKJV, Benjamin Merkle, William Hendriksen, John Stott, E.K. Simpson are among the examples of this reading

Holy-Spirit led men to lead within their marriages and within the Church, as Christ modeled in His love for the Church.

Furthermore, the authors of the GKv report write,

“Paul calls the man the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the Church. Hereby self-renunciation is meant...Everything indicates that Paul here is not describing the next relationship of authority, but a mutual close solidarity with each other. (pg. 29)

While headship certainly includes self-renunciation, it is far more relationally comprehensive. Reading 5:22-33, one cannot help but notice the disproportionate attention given to the husband and his particular role within the marriage covenant. There is a tremendous joy and burden to bear as the head of the marriage. Loving their wife as Christ loved the Church undoubtedly requires self-renunciation. The attention and care demanded of husbands will require a sacrifice of their own interests. However, the Holy Spirit articulates far more than this, not only by demanding that wives give reverence to their husbands and be subject to them, but primarily by revealing that marriage is symbolic of Christ’s relationship to the Church. Our Lord absolutely renounced Himself for us, but that was certainly not all that He did.

Moreover, Paul’s entire depiction of marriage is based on biblical and theological principles rather than the current culture of his time. The GKv report arbitrarily assumes that the historical context of the Ephesian church must explain this depiction of Marriage. Even if that was verifiable, the discussion of the “pater familias” is rendered moot by Paul’s citing of Genesis 2 (5:31). He explains the roles within the marriage relationship on biblical and Christological bases. In 5:32, we are told that the mystery of the husband and wife becoming one flesh in marriage is fully revealed and understood in Christ. Paul is not indiscriminately or conveniently selecting an Old Testament analogy. Far more intentionally, he is interpreting marriage through the creation. Marriage was always intended to be an analogy of our relationship to the Lord.

Accordingly, this passage expresses both a significant unity between husband and wife in addition to an important difference in role and responsibility. All aspects of marriage derive their instruction, meaning and purpose from our relationship to the Lord. Paul is not trying to fit marriage into a cultural or biblical category, but rather teaching what marriage was always designed to be. The ERKWB agrees with the GKv’s assessment that there is a tremendous solidarity and mutuality within marriage, just as we are in Christ. However, what is troubling is the great contrast between this report and Scripture, in that the GKv report stops here. It therefore not only diminishes “unity” into solidarity, but also entirely ignores the glory and diversity of roles and responsibilities. Ephesians could not be clearer: the union of the marriage couple is a reflection of Christ’s union with the Church. Within our own relationship to Christ, we are not equals. God made us in His image. “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power and eternity.” (WCF 2.3) As image-bearers, the man and woman are ontological equals – worthy of equal dignity as a part of God’s creation. Jesus went to the cross to save sinful man and woman, slaves and masters, children and parents. But this does not erase their God-ordained differences.

The three persons are distinguished by their personal properties and roles within the Godhead. For example, we see our Lord Jesus in Gethsemane, praying and submitting to the Father. (Matt. 26:39) We are told that “although [Jesus] existed in the form of God, He did not regard equality

with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, and being made in the likeness of men..." (Phil.2:6-7). Very God and very man, yet willingly submitting to the Father, because that was His relation within the Godhead. Volumes have been written on the nature of God. In no way do we hope to exhaustively deal with the matter here. Our main hope is to demonstrate that even within the Godhead, there is an ontological unity and yet a great diversity between the persons and their roles. Jesus' submission to the Father was due to His relationship to the Father. In the same way, Jesus is given all authority over heaven and earth by the Father. Reflecting Christ, husbands are to be the authority of the marriage because of their relationship to God and wives are called to submit to their husbands because of their relationship to God. It is His design and His plain teaching in Ephesians 5. In so doing, both bring glory to one another and most importantly, to God.

In contrast, the GKv report goes to great lengths to demonstrate that within marriage, "submission" is intended to be reciprocal and authority is absent. The Bible, however, makes certain that submission and authority are present. The husband and the wife have specific and particular instructions, in order to rightly reflect Christ and the Church. In the same way that Christ does not submit to the Church, neither is the husband to do so within the marriage covenant. This theological understanding is true in every time and in every culture, because it is based on the eternal relationships within the Godhead. Any effort by the husband to exploit or "lord over" the wife is sinful, wrong and out-of-step with Jesus' loving and self-sacrificial leadership of the Church. At the same time, any effort of the wife to assume headship would be equivalent to Christ assuming the role of the Father. A relationship in which one person is in authority over another is certainly not of necessity incongruent with the principles in Mark 10:42-45. The same Lord, who gave us the principle of servant-leadership, designed male headship within the marriage. Therefore, we can rest assured that these truths are not at odds with one another, but are in fact, meant to enhance and inform the other.

Finally, the conclusions drawn by the GKv report and its handling of Ephesians 5:21-33 lead to deeply troubling Christological and ecclesiological conclusions. The overemphasis of solidarity, love and equality may serve their personal bias well, but they misrepresent the text to such an extent that the intention and significance of marriage and gender differences erodes to the point of meaninglessness. Even worse, if we remove gender distinctions in marriage and take the interpretation of this report to its logical end, then we are left with absurd possibilities, such as Christ reciprocating and submitting to us. The very Gospel picture itself becomes threatened by mutuality and interchangeability within the roles and meaning of marriage.

In conclusion, Ephesians 5:21-33 demonstrates a stunning consistency within Scripture. In the same way that certain people are qualified and gifted to fill offices of the Church in order to seek its edification, so too are men and women called to different roles and responsibilities within the marriage relationship. For the sake of the Lord *and* one another, husbands and wives are to fulfill their roles in accordance with God's word.



ERKWB Committee response to the GKv Report  
“The men and women in Church offices decisions”  
**Chapter 3** - Men and woman and church office, and contemporary culture

In this chapter the authors of the GKv report describe the interaction between the Church and culture as it relates to the ordination of women elders in the local congregation.

**Exegesis or application?**

The authors of the GKv report say,

“The question is: how do the norms and values of the society in which the church finds itself relate to Christian norms and values, and to what degree is there a mutual influence, back and forth?” (pg. 34)

We acknowledge that church must learn to coexist with a non-Christian culture. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus prays, *“I am not asking that You take them out of the world, but that You keep them from the evil one.”* (John 17:15). We must interact with the world around us, and yet, at the same time, the world may not have any influence over our interpretation of Scripture. Here we maintain a vital distinction between the exegesis of Scripture and the application of it. The non-Christian culture in which we live may influence the ways in which we apply the truths of Scripture, but it may not have any impact on the proper exegesis of it.

For example, Jesus taught us to “give to Caesar what is Caesars”. Tax laws have differed greatly between ages and nations, and thus the church must apply the command of Christ differently in each cultural context. At the same time, however, culture can have no influence over the meaning and authoritative force of the Lord’s command, namely, that we may not cheat on our taxes, regardless of what age or society we live in.

The same is true in regards to Paul’s command in 1 Timothy 2:11-14. Although the application of this text may look slightly varied in the different societies in which the church exists, the culture must not be allowed to influence the clear and simple meaning of the text. According to the Holy Scripture, a woman may not teach or lead over a man in the congregation. Culture may have some influence over application, but not exegesis. Women are excluded from teaching and leading over men in the church regardless of the age or society in which we live.

**Cultural syncretism**

One of the greatest threats to the Church in all ages has been cultural syncretism. This was true of Israel, of Judah, and we already find evidence of it in the New Testament letters of Paul and in the opening chapters of Revelation. Cultural syncretism is a very inconspicuous enemy and is therefore difficult to recognize. It happens slowly over time through a long string of small compromises. The question is, how can we possibly recognize cultural syncretism before it is too late?

Thankfully, the Lord has given us a diagnostic tool by which we can distinguish cultural syncretism, namely the holy Scriptures. The opinions of culture are ever shifting sands, but the Bible is the only rock on which the church may safely be built. King Josiah is exemplary for the

church in this regard. Cultural syncretism had quietly corrupted the nation for generations until Hilkiah found the law of God and read it aloud in the king's presence. Upon hearing God's Word, Josiah tore his clothes, wept openly, and called all of Israel to Jerusalem in order to turn back to God with all their hearts.

In 1 Timothy 2:11-14 the Apostle, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has revealed to us the will of God for leadership in the local church. As Christians we submit to that command willingly, not only because he is God, but also because he is our "abba Father", and he knows what is good for his children.

### **Theocentrism or humanism?**

Our final concern with this chapter is the emphasis on solidarity with society rather than loyalty to God our Father, and Christ our King.

The authors of the report say,

"The Bible makes it clear that the church has as its task and calling to be healingly present in the society". (pg. 34)

The question is, how do we know what a healed society looks like, if not from the Word of God? We believe that the culture will only be healed when it submits to Jesus whose good law brings healing to men, women, marriages, and churches. True solidarity to society must look like solidarity to Christ, because it is from him that we learn what a truly healed society looks like. We believe that the New Testament's instruction regarding the complementarian relationship between men and women in marriage and in the church is what a healed society looks like. To believe otherwise is to elevate some other worldview above that of our Father.

The authors of the report say,

"There are also subjects concerning which the church must shine in giving a good example to society. Examples are: concern for the environment, care for the displaced, and striving for just social and economic relations. As far as what culture offers us, we must "approve what is excellent". (pg. 34)

This may be the most troubling paragraph of this short chapter. Nowhere in this list or in this chapter is there a call for the church to be exemplary in honoring Christ, in bringing glory to God, in worship, in submission to the King of kings, in subjecting our spheres to the reign of Christ in joyful obedience to his Word.

Jesus summarized the law and the prophets in this way...

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-38).

We acknowledge the importance of the second great commandment, but our love for neighbor must be informed and directed by the first great command, a love for God. How are we to know

what “love for neighbor” looks like without the instruction of our Father as we find it in his holy Scriptures? Are we to believe that 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, and Ephesians 5, and other passages are not expressions of God’s love and providential care for the world?

## **Conclusion**

The church must coexist with non-christian cultures, there is no doubt. However, the church must never allow culture to impact the exegesis of Scripture. The Church exists in the world, but it is not of the world. Our highest aim must be to live willingly and joyfully on Earth according to the culture of Heaven, regardless of what society says about us. Our authoritative resource for understanding what that heavenly culture looks like is the Holy Scriptures, inspired, preserved, and handed down to us by the will of God.

The fact is that Jesus promised his disciples that they would elicit hatred from the culture rather than mutual respect. We acknowledge that Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 2:11-14 and elsewhere are a stench in the nostrils of our modern culture. We are not surprised by this fact, nor do we despise them for it, but rather weep for them who reject Christ their savior and king whose will for the world is healing.

ERKWB Committee response to the GKv Report  
“The men and women in Church offices decisions”  
**Chapter 4 - Diversity and unity**

In this chapter the authors of the GKv report appeal to the importance of Christian unity as it relates to the divergent views of women eldership.

The Presbyters of the ERKWB are very sympathetic to the tone of this chapter and respect the emphasis on Christian love and unity in the church. Jesus prayed for the unity of the church in his high priestly prayer, and divisiveness is treated with the highest disdain in the New Testament. It is in the spirit of unity and love that we humbly ask the brothers and sisters of the GKv to consider the following response.

**Unity at the expense of solidarity to God**

The authors of the GKv report write,

“For it is precisely the Holy Scripture which shows us how important the Lord of the church finds unity to be. Church unity is for the Lord no minor issue.” (pg. 36)

We agree with this statement with our whole hearts. It is for this very reason that we consider the separation of the GKv from its historic trajectory to be no small event. The GKv has been a shining example of submission to God’s Word in matters of faith and practice, and this divergence has been occasion for great sadness and concern. Our hope is to maintain the unity between our two denominations, however, unity must never be had at the expense of joyful obedience to God’s authoritative Word. The question before us is this, does God have anything to say about who may or may not lead and teach in his church? The fact of the matter is that he does have something to say about it.

We also agree with the authors in the following statement,

The unity of the church is not threatened by diversity, but by division. (pg. 38)

The critical question, however, is, when has diversity crossed a certain threshold requiring division? We do not believe that it is acceptable to divide the church over matters that are considered “adiaphora” or non-essential. Neither should we split the church over opinions that do not directly contradict the clear teaching and commands of Scripture. We recognize that there are some theological issues which are more or less clearly communicated in the Bible, such as church polity or supra- vs. infralapsarianism. However, whenever the scripture gives us a direct command regarding a certain subject, whether in regards to sex, money, or eldership, we must submit gladly to the will of God. There cannot be unity in disobedience.

The author says,

If we follow Luther and Calvin, then a church split on the grounds of a difference of opinion about women office-bearers, would only be justified if it can be clearly shown that the **marks of the true church** are in dispute. (pg. 40) (Emphasis ours)

We concede that women eldership is not the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. However, as we have stated elsewhere in this paper, women eldership is not our main concern. Our main concern is an unwillingness to trust the Word of God when it speaks in the imperative. It is true that women bearing office in the church is not considered a mark of the true church, however, the faithful teaching and preaching of God's word is one of the three marks of the true church. In this case, it is indeed a mark of the true church to teach and preach what the Bible has to say about the leadership in the local church.

The author says,

“Divisions create a negative witness, both to the world and to the members of the church in particular the young, the new Christians and to those weak in faith.” (pg. 37)

The Presbyters of the ERKWB agree with this sentence and that is why we plead with the brothers and the sisters of the GKv not to divide from us on this point. We have not changed our views, but the GKv has changed its view. One who departs cannot accuse the one who remains with creating division. We invoke the very words of this warning back to the GKv. How confusing it must be for visitors and for the young people of the church to experience such a seismic hermeneutical shift. Seeing women in the pulpit of the churches of the GKv will not threaten anyone's salvation, but the hermeneutical gymnastics required to redefine the clear teaching of the New Testament regarding gender roles in the church will be devastating to all who once trusted in the leadership of the GKv. And so we plead with you not to create this division in the church, not only because of the effect it can have on the broader Christian community, nor because of the harm to our evangelistic witness, but because of the honor of a holy and glorious God who has, in his infinite wisdom handed down to us this command regarding the leadership of the local church.

### **When love serves unity**

There is great emphasis in this chapter on love and unity in the body of Christ. We acknowledge the centrality of these two Christian virtues in the life of the church, however, love does not only seek unity by concession, but also by rebuke, by warning, and by discipline when necessary.

The author says,

Yet love is the essential, binding factor which enables a Christian congregation to stay focused on its aim: to glorify God by working on the growth of His Kingdom. For this reason Paul prays, “...that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment...”. (pg. 38)

Again, we concur with the authors of the GKv report regarding the preeminence of love. And it is exactly that which motivates our response. It is first and foremost a love for God, and second and a love for our brothers and sisters in the GKv which moves us to plead with the Presbyters of the GKv to turn around from this decision.

Love and unity are related but must never be conflated. They are not the same thing. As a matter of biblical prescription, some unity can only be found on the other side of disunity. When, for example, love seeks to restore a brother with words of rebuke, then disunity is the messenger of

love and the servant of unity. Jesus himself taught us to confront a brother when he has sinned, and if he repents, we have won our brother. Loving conflict is often the means of genuine unity, as Solomon reminded us in Proverbs 27:5-6, it is the “blows of a friend which can be trusted.”

We hope that this response to the GKv report will not be received as antagonism but as love, a love that is willing to take the risk of a broken relationship for the sake of rescue.

The author says,

But now we see that this (decision of the GKv to allow women eldership) has led to a growth in diversity in practice in our church life, we will have to find ways to deal with this and relate to each other in a Biblical manner. (pg. 36).

The question we are forced to ask ourselves in this situation is, what is the Biblical manner of dealing with this situation? Is the question of church leadership a matter of “adiophora”? Is it a matter of preference which the writers of the New Testament have left untreated? Or is there a command in scripture directly dealing with the subject at hand? Many theological, practical, and ethical questions which we face today are not treated by direct command in the New Testament, and in those cases, there is some freedom of conscience before the Lord. In regards to who is permitted to preach and teach over men in the local congregation, however, there is a direct command which is grounded, not in the culture of Ephesus nor in the zeitgeist of Paul’s generation, but in creation itself. “For Adam was formed first, then Eve...” 1 Timothy 2:13.

In this case, we are forced by scripture and by the very logic of the GKv above to follow the biblical protocol of church discipline given to us by our Lord in Matthew 18 and by the Apostle in Galatians 6:1. May the Lord show us if we err in this response, so that in our rebuke we might first remove the log in our own eye.

### **Conclusion:**

The author says,

“Hereby we recognize that the issue as to whether women may bear church offices or not does not affect the heart of Christian faith, but rather the organization of church life. (pg. 37)

This sentence reveals the true concern of the Presbyters of the ERKWB, which is, once again, not women officers, but rather, happy submission to the Word of God. We believe that this sentence by the authors represents an important misunderstanding of the GKv regarding the central concern of the ERKWB and other Reformed churches. It is not about women, money, power, greed, holiness, or the offices of the local church which are our main concern, but rather, the trustworthiness of the Word by which we learn God’s will regarding money, power, greed, holiness, and the offices of the local church.

In the quote above, the author says that women bearing office in the local church does not affect the heart of the Christian faith, and once again, we agree. But, once again, that is not our main concern. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the heart of the Christian faith. The question, however, is how can we be sure of the trustworthiness of the gospel of Jesus Christ given to us on the pages of

Holy Scripture? If we cannot trust a direct command given by the Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, then how are we to be sure of anything other truth handed down to us by the Apostles, including the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the heart of our faith?

Once again, the GKv report leads us to a position of agnosticism regarding the scriptures as a whole. It is this precedent, we believe, which will eventually move the church beyond the question of women eldership to take up the cause of homosexual union and the approve of LGBTQ+ ministers. If Paul's clear command has no bearing on the universal Church of Jesus Christ, then who is to say that Paul's words regarding homosexuality in Romans 1 are not equally limited to the culture of his own day. This is, of course, already the argument which is winning the day in many denominations around the world, and in every case to our knowledge, it was the hermeneutical compromise regarding 1 Timothy 2 which opened the door and set the precedent for that progressive course. We plead with the GKv to reconsider your decision.

ERKWB Committee response to the GKv Report  
“The men and women in Church offices decisions”  
**Chapter 5 – Hermeneutics and the authority of Scripture**

## **Introduction**

The Presbyters of the ERKWB sincerely appreciate much of the hermeneutical principles set forth within Chapter 5 of the GKv Report. We *agree* entirely that all believers, especially those in leadership or authority, should approach the Bible in a responsible and careful way. We also *agree* that the Church, traditions, Confessions and practices must all be in conformity with Scripture. We *agree* with the GKv understanding of the 2 Peter 1:20-21. Sole divine authorship of Scripture does not open the door to individual interpretation of doctrine and practice, nor should passages be arbitrarily and artificially detached and used to say whatever the reader desires. We *agree* that secondary sources, such as descriptions of history, culture, literary context are important, but “...that such data can never have an importance above or next to the Scripture.” (pg. 45) We *agree* that Scripture should interpret Scripture. Lastly, we *agree* with Martin Luther: It is not the Church which determines what the Word says, but rather the Word which determines what the Church should say.

Unfortunately, we believe the GKv goes on to undermine this exact hermeneutical stance throughout the entirety of the Report. As we have conveyed in previous chapters, the entire GKv position depends upon reinterpreted proof-texts. At a minimum, support for their novel positions stands upon revisionist readings of Genesis 1-3, Galatians 3, Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2. What is more, they have “artificially detached” the concept of “not lording over others”, suggesting that it somehow provides a “fundamental imperative” by which we should view all other relational and leadership texts of the New Testament.

It is difficult to understand the inconsistency between their professed hermeneutical methods and their practice. And so, we will examine the primary points of Chapter 5 in an attempt to interpret the GKv’s hermeneutical methods.

## **Presumption in Hermeneutics**

The authors of the GKv report claim,

“The Bible contains the Gospel for all times and all places, but in its form has been shaped by the time and the culture in which it was presented.” (pg. 44)

Of course, in a general sense, this is true. As acknowledged by the GKv, the Bible was written in ancient languages. Many stories and concepts must be understood through the lens of ancient culture. For example, tearing one’s clothes in response to terrible news was a cultural tradition (never mandated in Scripture) limited to time and context.

Patriarchy is assumed to be in the same category. Let us assume then that the GKv report is correct and “patriarchy” an Old Testament cultural holdover. Let us assume that it is a sinful, fallen structure which perpetuates inequality between men and women, as well as the subordination of and hostility towards women (pg. 44). Of course, being a very important discussion in our own current time, it is hard to believe that we are not anachronistically



rewriting history. Nevertheless, suppose the GKv report is correct. Does this necessarily rule out the possibility of good and right and exclusive male leadership?

The report goes on to claim,

“God patiently chose to adapt to the culture of the first century for His work of restoration with the result that the society of His people was strongly colored by patriarchy...” (pg. 44)

This is a claim for which no evidence is given. Could it be that God’s people throughout Scripture were basing their so-called patriarchy on something else? Could it be, that this organization of God’s people was not necessarily a product of 1<sup>st</sup> century near east culture, but instead was derived from other sources, such as Old Testament command and practice, or the Creation order, or instruction from the Apostles? This paper does not intend to explore each of these possibilities, but rather to simply reveal the possibility of many good and right alternatives.

In this same manner, the GKv report frequently creates false dichotomies, claiming that we must either modernize our interpretations or continue accepting sinful or cultural errors of the past. There are undoubtedly many examples of sinful men abusing their power in any given position – in the Church and in the world. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that exclusive male leadership is the problem, especially given the wealth of imperative texts suggesting otherwise. Exclusive biblical male leadership does not necessarily lead to sinful sexism or patriarchy. As we have already shown in our Commission report, the Bible clearly demonstrates and even commands this to be so.

According to the GKv report, Abraham Kuyper claims,

“This total freedom [of exegesis] is furthermore indispensable, if theology is to fulfill its obligation to the confessional life of the Church... [so that the Church] does not live from the water in the pitcher, and cut itself off from the fountain out of which that water was taken.” (pg. 45)

Our fear is that the GKv has realized these fears. Professing a freedom of exegesis, they are actually driven by worldly ideals and philosophy. In so doing, they have cut themselves off from the fountain. A true freedom of exegesis would enable the GKv to hold fast to clear biblical instruction, even when it is unpopular or offensive to the world. As is clear throughout the entire GKv report, their presumptions and bias seem to have limited their ability to rightly consider the text. Failing to interpret life and Church through Scripture, they have undermined their very hermeneutical principles and interpreted Scripture through life, Church and experience.

### **Freedom with Limitations**

The authors of the GKv report also write,

“... When confronted with a new, relevant question, we must go back to the Scripture itself, and try, with utmost respect and in faith, once again to understand what we read there.” (pg. 45)

Once again, in a general sense, this standard is true. With new technologies and new ideas, Christians must also search the Scriptures seeking to “test the spirits” (1 John 4) and ensure they “take every thought captive” (2 Corinthians 10). The new life given to us in Christ affects every corner of our lives. For example, Christians need to consider how to use an iPhone and social media in a God-fearing manner. Within the last decade, this has become a new and relevant question. Very soon, Christians may need to consider the use of bionics or life in Space. These are possible, new and relevant questions.

However, the question of women in Church leadership is not new. It is made somewhat relevant by modern feminism but has been overwhelmingly answered throughout Scripture and Church history. There is no new necessity to address this question again. The very attempt to offer fresh or modern answers is suspicious and concerning.

The basis for this report and its contemporary conclusions is what the GKv report terms, “freedom of exegesis”, as quoted earlier from Abraham Kuypers. It is important to consider their understanding of this principle. We agree that a certain liberty exists for non-essential doctrines of the faith. Personal liberties such as alcohol consumption or worship styles differ greatly between well-meaning Christians. Furthermore, even within more important doctrines of the Church, such as Communion or Church polity, there exists a variety of views built on strong biblical cases held with integrity by many believers. Yet, these liberties exist because of legitimate and faithful interpretations of Scripture. Protestant Churches agree with great unity on the significance and meaning of Communion, only differing on styles and particularities. Church polity differences are no different. To be sure, many Churches are organized differently in terms of authority and roles, yet each can point to certain legitimate emphases or particulars in the Bible to ground their conviction and structure. All acknowledge the importance of the Church, the community of believers and leadership in the Body.

In each of these differences, Christians appeal to various texts in an effort to best reconcile confusion and uphold the “most biblical” approach to life and practice. The heart behind the matter is to seek earnestly what God intends for His people and to practice it. God and His rule are the starting point. Building upon this, the cornerstone of any hermeneutical methodology must therefore be Scripture – God’s Word. The plain and most simple understanding of Scripture should accordingly be our default. God is not a god of confusion. Recognizing all of Scripture as God-breathed and using it to interpret other Scripture should therefore be our first and greatest method.

Unfortunately, the GKv has demonstrated time and time again throughout this entire report that this is not their intention. Far from being free, their exegesis of crucial texts seems trapped in an agenda. Their revisionist hermeneutical approach seems bent on finding egalitarianism under every rock and stone of the Bible. Resorting to modern understandings of ancient culture, selective historical interpretation and plain conjecture, they have inadvertently (we hope) rendered the Bible impotent. The God-breathed text is reduced to subjectivity, only as powerful and as enduring as the reader allows. The novel interpretations of foundational texts open the hermeneutical gates far and wide to endless conjecture. The presbyters of the ERKWB are convinced that the hermeneutical approach of the GKv erodes the fundamentals of our faith.

## Conclusion

Through it all it becomes clear that the GKv has fallen prey to the exact hermeneutical errors they accuse the early Church of committing. As they say,

“...that God and His Bible writers adapted to the culture of that time does not make the recording of it in the Bible normative.” (pg. 44)

With great sorrow and reluctance, but with a heart for truth and purity, we believe the GKv has adapted to the culture of their time and are now attempting to make it the norm of the Bible. Just as they were correct in saying that cultural practices of the ancient near east were not necessarily Scriptural, cultural practices of the modern west are no more Scriptural.

ERKWB Committee response to the GKv Report  
“The men and women in Church offices decisions”  
**Chapter 6 - The remain silent texts**

## **Introduction**

The presbyters of the ERKWB appreciate many of the well-reasoned arguments articulated in this chapter. We also recognize the hermeneutical challenges presented by the “stay silent” texts in the New Testament. In the following chapter we will not attempt to unpack every point of disagreement, but rather select a few statements which touch on the heart of our concern.

### **The relevance of the “stay silent” texts to the question of women eldership**

In the introduction to chapter 6, the authors of the GKv report lament the fact that the “stay silent” texts have been used to reinforce the position of male-only leadership in the church. Instead, they believe “it is questionable” whether the “stay silent” texts are applicable to the question of women eldership at all. (pg. 47)

However, given that Paul lists teaching as a necessary qualification of the elder in 1 Timothy 3, it seems that these texts are indeed very applicable to the question of women eldership, as it would be difficult to both teach and be silent in the assembly at the same time. This becomes even more evident when one considers that the requirement of the overseer to teach is given only 5 verses after Paul says, “But I do not allow a woman to teach...(over men)”.

### **The Authority of all Scripture**

The Apostle Peter writes,

Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom **given him**, 16 as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do **the other Scriptures**. 2 Peter 3:15b-16 (emphasis ours)

For the purposes of our discussion there are two important points to consider in this short passage. The first is that the “wisdom” of Paul’s letters was “**given to him**” (vs.15) by God and therefore binding on all the churches. Second, Peter reinforces this point by identifying Paul’s epistles as “**scripture**” (vs. 16). In this case, it is our firm belief that every letter of Paul which is recorded for us in the New Testament is authoritative and binding on churches in every generation. The authors of the GKv report, however, begin chapter 6 by writing,

“Paul wrote a letter, as is evident at the opening of it. That is worth pondering: this is not prophecy nor a law text, but a letter.” (pg. 47 ¶4)

The Presbyters of the ERKWB would be very interested to know what the authors of the GKv report intend to say with this sentence. Are the epistles of Paul less authoritative and significant than other parts of scripture? Are we to assume that the words of Paul are not prophetic for the universal Church? If not, then how are we to discern which parts of Paul’s letters are simply historical anecdotes, and which are authoritative for Christians in all ages?

As we have already argued on several occasions, the hermeneutical methodology at work in the GKv report leaves us in a position of uncertainty as to which parts of the Pauline epistles are prescriptive for the universal church and which are not. The Church is subject to the individual opinions of each exegete. Each interpreter must decide which parts of the Pauline corpus are relevant for us and which are not. In so doing, the GKv report undermines the church's confidence in the Scriptures and makes impotent the minister's assurance when he says to the congregation, "thus sayeth the Lord...".

### **Rational argumentation**

In the introduction of GKv report the authors remark,

"It is not helpful here if we try to make the truth of the Bible certain by a strongly rationalistic approach." (pg. 4, ¶5)

The Presbyters of the ERKWB, however, find that the GKv report is 68 pages full of rational arguments, assumptions, and inferences, rather than taking the text at face value. This is especially evident in chapter 6. The author regularly says things like, "...**it sounds like**..." (pg. 49) and, "This expression **could be**..." (pg. 49), and, "**It seems** quite plausible..." (pg. 52). One significant example of this rationalistic approach can be found on page 53, in which the authors attempt to contradict the plain meaning of Paul's words regarding women eldership in 1 Timothy chapter 2. They do so by building an entire argument based on the assumption that the women of Ephesus were looking to Eve as an example of female dominance. The author writes...

"The women **seem to be** linking their situation in Ephesus with Genesis..." (pg. 53, ¶1, emphasis ours)

We addressed this point already in chapter 1, but it is worth mentioning it here again. The Presbyters of the ERKWB would be very interested to know which historical documents the authors of the GKv report rely on in order to demonstrate the appeal of the Ephesian women to Eve's superiority in the garden of Eden. To our knowledge, there is neither biblical nor extra-biblical evidence to support this assumption. However, the author confidently states,

"When you bring verse 15 into the picture, it becomes clear that Paul is showing that the appeal which women are making to Eve's example is nonsense." (pg. 53, ¶1)

Which appeal to Eve? Which hard historical evidence can they point to that the women of Ephesus appealed to Eve as their example of dominance? This is a step beyond rational argumentation. This is rationalism based on imagination in order to force Paul to say something opposite the plain reading of the text.

### **The case of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35**

Again, it is not our intention to respond to every point of conflict in chapter 6, but we would like to address one final matter because it touches on the heart of our concern, namely the hermeneutical responsibility of the Lord's shepherds.

The authors of the GKv report reference 1 Corinthians 11:5 in order to demonstrate that the “stay silent” command by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 cannot possibly mean what it plainly states.

Here are the two texts as a point of reference for the reader:

And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for it is just as if her head were shaved. 1 Corinthians 11:5

Women are to be silent in the churches. They are not permitted to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. 35 If they wish to inquire about something, they are to ask their own husbands at home; for it is dishonorable for a woman to speak in the church. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

According to the hermeneutical methodology of the GKv report, we must read the “stay silent” command of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 in light of, and conditioned by 1 Corinthians 11:5, which tells us that women were praying and prophesying in Corinth. The question is, is this proper hermeneutical procedure?

The fact that these two texts are found in the very same letter certainly creates a hermeneutical challenge. However, as we mentioned in chapter 1, there are several rules of exegesis that can help us in such cases. One of those rules is the “analogy of Scripture”, which states that the Bible is the best interpreter of the Bible. It does seem that the authors of the GKv report are indeed attempting to use this principle in chapter 6 by holding these 2 texts in tension.

The problem arises, however, when we are faced with the question of hierarchy. When there is a clear conflict between two or more verses in Scripture we must make a decision as to which one has precedence over the other? In this case a second rule of exegesis is necessary, namely “hermeneutical hierarchy”. According to the principle of “hermeneutical hierarchy” put forward by the committee of the ERKWB, Bible verses which communicate direct commands have precedence over narrative, examples, or anecdotal information in the text.

For example, the book of Samuel reports to us that David had many wives. Some Christians in the global south have justified their own cultural acceptance of polygamy on account of David’s example. The reasoning follows that, if the “man after God’s own heart” was allowed to lead the people of God with a plurality of wives, then so can I. And this may well have been a justifiable conclusion had it not been for one very important passage in Paul’s first letter to Timothy. In 1 Timothy 3:2 Paul makes monogamy a necessary qualification for church leaders. In this case a hermeneutical hierarchy solves the dilemma. The direct command of Paul takes precedence over the Old Testament example of King David.

These same two principles are necessary in properly exegeting the “stay silent” passage in the 1st epistle to the Corinthians. A proper hermeneutical hierarchy will solve this apparent conflict between the two passages, because the direct command of Paul 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 must take precedence over the anecdotal reference in 1 Corinthians 11:5.

We concede that 1 Corinthians 11:5 does make reference to women prophesying and praying in Corinth. However, we must also recognize that this passage is neither a command nor a moral assessment of the Apostle but merely an anecdotal reference in order to make a completely

different point regarding head coverings. This verse lacks the context necessary to give it prescriptive force for the church. The only thing we know for sure from 1 Corinthians 11:5 is that women were praying and prophesying in Corinth with their heads uncovered. What we do not know is **when**, **where**, and **how** they were praying and prophesying. Were the women of Corinth praying and prophesying during the assembly of the church? Were they doing it in private, or at home, or in women's meetings? We don't know, because the text doesn't tell us. The only prescript from 1 Corinthians 11:5 which we can point to for certain is that when women pray and prophecy, they should do so with their heads covered.

The committee of the ERKWB recognizes that, if 1 Corinthians 11:5 represented the only information in Paul's letters regarding the women in church, there would be some freedom to formulate diverse opinions about the practices of the local church. Some may read this text and approve of women praying and prophesying in the assembly, while others may point to various other texts in the New Testament and reject it. If 1 Corinthians 11:5 was all that we had, then there would be freedom to opine on the matter.

However, 1 Corinthians 11:5 is not the only text in this epistle which addresses the women of Corinth. Three chapters later the topic comes up again, but this time it is not an anecdotal aside, but rather a direct command from the Apostle in which he plainly states,

Women are to be silent in the churches. They are not permitted to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. 35 If they wish to inquire about something, they are to ask their own husbands at home; for it is dishonorable for a woman to speak in the church. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

The principle of "hermeneutical hierarchy" forces us to give 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 precedence over the less direct and peripheral reference in 1 Corinthians 11:5. In direct opposition to the view of the GKv report, the Presbyters of the ERKWB are compelled by the "analogy of Scripture" and the "hierarchy of hermeneutics" to interpret 1 Corinthians 11:5 in light of, and conditioned by 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, rather than the other way around.

## **Conclusion**

The Presbyters of the ERKWB are deeply concerned with the hermeneutical methodologies at work in the GKv report. Instead of careful exegesis of the texts at hand, there is a reliance on rationalism, conjecture, and a clear prejudice towards a particular egalitarian agenda at work in our current culture. The "stay silent" texts are given in the imperative form and, as such, provide a rule for the universal church in faith and practice.

## Concluding Remarks

We hope that you receive this report in the spirit of Proverbs 27:5-6:

“<sup>5</sup> Better is open rebuke than hidden love. <sup>6</sup> Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.”

As stated at the beginning of our response, we see the decision to permit women to church office as concerning, specifically because we believe Scripture speaks clearly on the issue. The more serious issue, however, is what we judge to be seriously faulty hermeneutics employed to justify the positions that the GKv now embraces.

The history of the church, in particular over the past century, is littered with cautionary tales of denominations who have lost their mooring. What begins with seemingly small hermeneutical compromises can quickly escalate into a wholesale rejection of such cardinal doctrines as the exclusivity of Christ, the eternity of hell, or the substitutionary atonement.

Historical reformed orthodoxy recognizes the Bible as the authoritative, inerrant Word of God, the Word to which we are called to humbly submit whether or not it offends our cultural sensibilities. Sadly, we see the decisions and justifications articulated in the Synod Report at Goes as capitulating to the prevailing winds of culture, not bowing to the God of Scripture.

While we wish to reiterate our deep appreciation for the many years of ecclesiastical relations between our two denominations, we lament that the present direction of the GKv, and now the union with the NGK, threatens to sever those relations. Therefore, we call on the GKv, and any individual congregations of the GKv to repent to the Lord and return to historic Reformed faith.