

REPORT SUBCOMMITTEE RELATIONS WITH CHURCHES IN THE NETHERLANDS FOR SYNOD EDMONTON 2019

A. Mandate Synod Dunnville 2016

Synod Dunnville 2016 reappointed the brothers Rev. J. DeGelder, Rev. J. Moesker, G. J. Nordeman, and Dr. C. VanDam to the Subcommittee for Relations Churches in the Netherlands (SRN). We were given the following mandate with regard to the GKv (Article 104, 4.4 of the Acts of Synod Dunnville):

- 4.4.1 To maintain contact with the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad (BBK) of the GKv and represent the CanRC at the next GKv Synod;
- 4.4.2 To inform the next synod of the GKv in writing of GS 2016's decision;
- 4.4.3 To send a copy of this act of GS 2016 to each of the GKv churches, accompanied by a cover letter;
- 4.4.4 To monitor the work of the committee "Males / Females and Office", as well as the decisions of the next GKv Synod regarding this matter;
- 4.4.5 To monitor the ongoing discussions between the GKv and the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK);
- 4.4.6 To continue to observe developments at the Theological University of the GKv in Kampen (TUK), which includes paying attention to the article by Dr. Burger;
- 4.4.7 To monitor the results of the GKv's involvement with the National Synod;
- 4.4.8 To work in consultation with the deputies of our other sister-churches;
- 4.4.9 To report to the churches six months prior to GS 2019 giving special attention to the question whether or not to continue EF.

B. Concerning our mandate 4.4.1 to 4.4.4

We met regularly and maintained open communication with the Deputies Relations Foreign Churches of the GKv (BBK) as well as with deputies of sister churches. In November 2015 the BBK sent us the official decisions of Synod Ede 2014 as well as a questionnaire which they sent to all sister churches intended to ascertain the practices in the sister churches concerning the role of women within those churches. We responded to the questionnaire as best we could (see Appendix A, p.8). On May 16, 2016, two members of the SRN met with the 2 representatives of the BBK who had been delegated to Synod Dunnville. The report of the SRN to Synod Dunnville was discussed, in particular the recommendation to suspend points 4 and 5 of the rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship. Via the BBK we informed the GKv of the decisions of Synod Dunnville 2016. We also sent a copy of those decisions to all 269 GKv churches via email with a covering letter (see Appendix B, Letter to GKv consistories, p.10). We received little response from the churches to the material sent.

In October, 2016 the Deputies M/F of the GKv published their report for Synod Meppel 2017 entitled "Serving Together" ("Summary of the Report" in Appendix C with internet link to full report, p.17). We discussed this report and found that though it was better organized than the report to Synod Ede 2014, the 2016 report utilized the same basic approach to the interpretation of the Bible as the previous one and recommended that the offices be opened to women. We found the Biblical basis of the 2016 report as well as the view of the offices in the church seriously wanting. The SRN therefore sent the BBK of the GKv our reaction to only the Biblical

section of this report, this being the main issue (see Appendix D, “Response to the Biblical Grounds,” p.24). We also translated this report into Dutch.

In April 2017 the SRN travelled to the Netherlands to the “Foreign Delegates Week” organized for Synod Meppel at Mennorode over April 3-8, (see Appendix E, “Visit to Synod Meppel 2017 of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in the Netherlands” published in Clarion, V66, N22, p.31). We addressed synod on behalf of the CanRC (see Appendix F, “Address to Synod Meppel 2017, p.37). Though the SRN was not actually given the floor of synod with regard to concerns with the direction of the GKv and the report “Serving Together,” we were able to meet with most members of the Deputies M/F and delegates to Synod Meppel to express our Biblical concerns about that report. Though the discussions were open and frank, they were in camera and therefore not recorded in the proceedings of synod. As far as we understand, all the delegates of the sister churches expressed deep concern about the report “Serving Together.”

The GKv Synod advisory committee “Man, woman and office” sent the SRN a letter with some questions concerning those informal discussions to which they wished to receive reply by May 22. They felt that though much had been said in our meetings, there was also much that had not been said. And they stated, “We also had the impression that in the various rounds of discussion there was almost no attempt to seek common ground between our opinions and arguments.” The SRN did not see the need to seek common ground since we had presented the Biblical arguments as clearly as possible, and the GKv advisory committee had not interacted with those arguments in any meaningful way. We therefore simply sent the English and Dutch versions of our “Response to the Biblical Grounds” (Appendix D, p.24) as reply. The SRN was also invited to be present at the synod discussion of our “Response to the Biblical Grounds” on June 16. However, we declined for logistic and stewardship reasons and because we felt that we had done our best to present the Biblical arguments contra the report “Serving Together.”

In spite of serious concerns expressed on behalf of almost all the sister churches represented at Synod Meppel, that Synod decided in June 2017 that there are Scriptural grounds, besides men, to also call women to the offices of deacon, elder and minister (see decisions of Synod Meppel concerning this, Appendix G, p.40). The SRN has written an extensive response to this decision, “Response to Synod Meppel’s Decisions to Open all Ecclesiastical Offices to Women” (see Appendix H, p.50). The conclusion of this report is that the egalitarian culture of our times has had an enormous influence on Synod Meppel’s reasoning - reasoning which is not at all convincing in the actual light of Scripture. Scripture clearly assigns qualified men to the roles of minister, elder and deacon.

Synod Meppel also reacted to the decision of Synod Dunnville to scale down the relationship with the GKv and to suspend points 4 and 5 of the rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship (see Appendix I, p.63). They saw no need from their side to review the sister-church relationship and urged us not to close the door to discussion at synod level but to continue to serve one another especially when our insights differ. Among the grounds for that decision was Rule 1 for Ecclesiastical Fellowship, that as much as possible sister churches are to support each other in upholding and defending the Reformed Confessions, in accordance with Scripture, in doctrine, discipline and worship. However, this call for mutual support is hollow, as the concerns of CanRC Synods since 2006 as well as the letter of admonition of Synod Carman 2013 and the

serious concerns expressed by CanRC representatives to the GKv Synods since 2008 have not brought about any change in the direction of the GKv as far as Bible interpretation is concerned. In fact, Synod Meppel regards our concerns not a matter of Biblical import, but only a matter of differing in insight and in practice. Unlike Synod Meppel the CanRC does not view this to be a small issue, but a matter of faithfulness to the clear direction of Scripture and its authority and sufficiency for faith and life (Belgic Confession, Articles 5 and 7).

C. Concerning mandate 4.4.5

As reported in “Developments in the Relationship Between the GKv and the NGK” (see Appendix J, p.65), there is in the GKv a growing sense of ‘unity in Christ’ with various other churches. This is not a unity based on the Scripture as confessed in the Reformed Confessions, but more a unity based on a mutual recognition as Christians. This can be seen in the growing list of contacts being advised and maintained by the GKv Deputies for Church Unity (DKE). Unity based on the Word as confessed in the Reformed Confessions is desired and obligated. However, it appears that there is a seeking of unity without due regard to the basis of true ecumenicity. According to the report of the DKE there was consultation with the NGK deputies about a number of matters, including a comparison of church orders, the issue of women in church office, the sacraments, opening pulpits to each other’s ministers, and the place of practicing homosexuals in church life. The majority of the DKE proposed a new “general regulation’ for cooperation of the GKv and NGK which would include the rule that the pulpits of the GKv would be open to the ministers of the NGK and that NGK members would be admitted to the GKv churches and their Lord’s Tables. However, three members of the DKE presented a minority report in which they presented a very critical analysis of the discussions. They concluded that the discussions have not dealt with the most crucial matters for the relationship, namely, the binding to the confession and how to deal with office bearers who disagree with parts of the confessions. These are issues which caused the NGK to split from the GKv 50 years ago. The SRN sees this as confirmation of its assertion in reports to General Synods Carman 2013 and Dunnville 2016 that it is not the NGK who have become more Reformed, but the deformation in the GKv have made them more like the NGK. It is regrettable that in its decisions about the relations with the NGK Synod Meppel simply ignored the analysis of the minority report.

On November 11, 2017, Synod Meppel and the National Assembly of the NGK met in Kampen. Speeches and workshops were organized and the day was concluded with a worship service and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The two main decisions taken at that time were:

1. To express the longing to become a single church federation as soon as possible, on the basis of the Word of God and the Reformed Confessions and organized according to the principles of the Reformed church order.
2. With an eye to that union, establish a “Management Group” to work out the logistics of becoming a single federation.

When churches unite on the solid basis of Scripture and confessions and according to the principles of the Reformed church order there is reason for thanksgiving. However, in the case of the planned unity of the GKv and NGK we have serious questions, based on the past reports of the DKE and decisions of synods of the GKv. The assertion that the churches have found each other by listening to what the Lord says in his Word sounds rather hollow, as both the GKv and

NGK have admitted women to office in spite of the clear directives of Scripture that only males are to be assigned church offices. Though it was decided in 2016 that the offices are not open to same-sex couples, they are generally welcomed to the Lord's Supper table as members in good standing if they live in a relationship of love and fidelity in spite of the clear norms of Scripture regarding same-sex relationships. We therefore deny that a union GKv-NGK would truly be based on the Word of God.

Additionally, the claim that a GKv–NGK unity is based on the Reformed confessions is not justified, as there has been no clear and common understanding of what subscription to the Reformed confessions actually entails. This was one of the main reasons for the split in the past. Finally, the decision to seek unity on the basis of the Reformed church order without working out at least the main tenets of such a Reformed church order is very questionable, especially with a church which does not really have a church order. The NGK does not have an actual church order as basis of the federation but a much looser national agreement between churches which leaves much to the freedom of the local churches. Hence, we do not see this GKv decision to move toward unity as a positive development, but rather as a move away from its stated basis and principles.

The coming together of the GKv and NGK does not inspire confidence that the GKv are moving forward on a Biblical and Reformed path. On the contrary, we believe that these churches are continuing to turn away from the clear directives of God's Word and the Reformed Confessions.

D. Concerning mandate 4.4.6

In December 2016 we received a letter from the BBK of the GKv concerning the TUK (see Appendix K, p.70). This document offered the assurance that “the pointing out of God's lasting regulations for our lives requires, also in our culture, scripturally secured wisdom and sensitivity.” We were not reassured by this statement, considering how the prevailing culture has impacted the interpretation of the Bible at the GKv Synod.

For example, we were not reassured by some of the writings in the 2017 publication of TUK faculty entitled *Gereformeerde Hermeneutiek Vandaag*. In this volume Prof. Ad de Bruijne, one of the editors of this publication, emphasizes that we need to interact with the Word of God in ethical judgments but at the same time he opens the door to ethical judgments that could contradict the clear directives of Scripture. He also suggests that not all the ethical insight Christians need can be found in Scripture but can possibly be discovered in general revelation. The SRN's full critique of Prof. de Bruijne's article can be found in Appendix L, p.126. Following this professor's reasoning one might anticipate that the legitimization of homosexual relationships may very well be the next step in the GKv. Synod Meppel, in one of its final sessions in November 2017 appointed deputies to study whether there is reason to modify the traditional ecclesiastical way of dealing with homosexuality.

The SRN was also instructed by Synod Dunnville to pay attention to an article of Dr. J. M. Burger of the TUK in a 2014 publication: *Cruciaal: de verrassende betekenis van Jezus' kruisiging* in which he wrote an article about the atonement which many consider an undermining of the actual sacrifice of Christ. We addressed a letter to Dr. Burger on July 12, 2016 (see Appendix M, p.79). This letter contained two basic questions concerning his article:

Did we misrepresent him in our critique contained in our report to Synod Dunnville?” and “Have you since revised your views and publicly withdrawn your contested views as published in *Cruciaal?*” We received a reply from Dr. Burger in March 2017 in which he explained that what he wrote was from a cultic rather than judicial point of view of Jesus’ sacrifice. He also stated that he maintains what he wrote in the article because no one has shown him why his views should be withdrawn (see Appendix N, p.82). Prompted by his reply, we sent another letter critiquing Dr. Burger’s reasoning and pointing out that he needs to clarify and revise what he wrote to remove the confusion that has ensued about his views not only with the SRN but also others (see Appendix O, p.87). To date no response to this letter has been received.

As these discussions and communications show, our concern about what is being done at the TUK remains. In April 2017 Synod Meppel decided to work positively towards the establishment of a Reformed Theological University (GTU) which would include the TUK and the Theological University of Apeldoorn (TUA) of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken (CGK). However, in July 2017 the Synod of the CGK decided that the TUA would not be part of a GTU. This demonstrates that others share our concerns with the direction of the TUK. In conclusion, the SRN has seen a continued erosion of its confidence in the direction the TUK is taking. With its acceptance of new methods of Bible interpretation this institution is following a path away from the authority and sufficiency and normativity of the Word of God, the gospel of life in Christ.

E. Concerning mandate 4.4.7

As outlined in the report “Involvement of the GKv with the National Synod in the Netherlands (see Appendix P, p.91), GKv deputies have been attending the “National Synod” at the city of Dort. This body consists of delegates from a wide variety of Protestant churches in the Netherlands. Though it was primarily intended to be a discussion platform to meet and to discuss theological and ecclesiastical issues without commitments or obligations, at the 2016 meeting it was proposed that participating churches enter into some type of covenant. Voices raised at that time favoured the reception of one another’s ministers and each other’s members at the Lord’s Supper celebrations.

Synod Meppel has instructed the DKE to continue to participate in this body and if possible to even join the proposed covenant of Protestant churches in the Netherlands, taking into consideration obedience to God’s Word and the value of the Reformed confessions. The original National Synod of Dort 400 years ago was held to defend the unity of Reformed churches on the basis of Scripture and Confessions, including the Canons of Dort. But this assembly, composed of representatives of very different churches including the Remonstrant Brotherhood, is apparently seeking a different kind of unity, a superficial unity not based on Scripture and Reformed Confessions, in particular the Canons of Dort. We therefore believe that by participating in this gathering the GKv is compromising its stand for the truth of God’s Word as summarized in the Reformed Confessions.

F. Concerning mandate 4.4.8

The SRN maintained contact with the deputies of sister churches, especially when the reports for Synod Meppel were made available, in particular the report “Serving Together.” At Synod Meppel we had opportunity to meet with and to converse with deputies of the Free Reformed

Churches of Australia, the Reformed Churches in Brazil, the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa, the Free Church of Scotland, and the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing). We were thankful that our sister churches shared our concerns about the report of Deputies M/F and the decision of Synod Meppel. The GKv has unquestionably ignored the concerns of their sister churches throughout the world, as evident in the decision to open ecclesiastical offices to females.

This also became apparent at the July meeting of the International Conference of Reformed Churches in Jordan Station, ON (Appendix Q, “Press Release ICRC 2017,” p.93). Members of the SRN were present and interacted with representatives of sister churches and many Reformed churches throughout the world. This body decided almost unanimously to suspend the GKv from the ICRC due to the decision to admit females to all church offices. The suspension was based on the constitution of the ICRC. We noticed during the discussion that many of the representatives of Reformed churches were quite taken aback at the grounds for Synod Meppel’s decision. The chairman of Synod Meppel was present to defend the GKv decision.

Our sister churches (as well as many Reformed non-sister churches abroad) share our conviction that the GKv are deviating from Scripture as shown by the permission to ordain females to church offices. In spite of serious warnings via numerous representatives and urgent letters of admonition from the CanRC and other churches throughout the world, there has been no evidence of a reversal of direction in the GKv. Instead of standing firm with long-standing and trusted sister churches, the GKv has shown it is ready to pursue contacts and relationships with churches and organizations which do not submit fully to the Word of God. Some of our sister churches such as the Free Reformed Churches of Australia and the Reformed Churches of New Zealand have already therefore decided to terminate their relationship with the GKv.

G. Concerning mandate 4.4.9

The GKv acknowledge in various letters and reports that they as churches and as federation have changed over the past few years. We do not see all those changes as positive, in particular the changes in Bible interpretation and application. Though we are thankful for faithful voices in the GKv, we have to report with much sadness that the GKv as federation has continued to move away from a submission to the authoritative, sufficient and clear Word of God and has more and more accommodated itself to 21st century western culture. This movement has taken place over time, but it has come to a real watershed with the decision of Synod Meppel to permit the ordination of females to office. We therefore assert that we can no longer look to the GKv for help and support in the CanRC’s stand against the man-centred and post-truth western culture in which we exist and which we need to resist in order to hold fast to our covenant God and the salvation and life he has promised in Jesus Christ in his Word. Our recommendation is therefore that the CanRC discontinue the relationship with the GKv.

H. Recommendations

1. Synod decide: to discontinue the relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the GKv.

Grounds:

- a. The decision by Synod Meppel 2017 to admit females to ecclesiastical office is contrary to Scripture as shown in Appendix H of our report.

- b. It is highly unlikely that this decision will be reversed on appeal to the next general synod since Synod Meppel decided that the churches could ordain female office bearers immediately, and since the NGK with whom the GKv are in the process of uniting have been allowing female ordination for some time already.
 - c. By the decision to permit female ordination the GKv has ignored the numerous warnings about unbiblical hermeneutics directed to their synods by the SRN as well as delegates of other sister churches since Synod Zwolle 2008. The GKv has also brushed aside the serious admonitions directed to Synod Ede by Synod Carman 2013 concerning the place of those unbiblical hermeneutics at the TUK as well as in the report Deputies M/F.
 - d. The decision of Synod Meppel to work towards full unity with the NGK shows that the GKv have moved in the direction of those churches which have also opened the offices to females and which allow same-sex couples to remain members in good standing.
 - e. The decision of Synod Meppel 2017 to continue to take part in the wide ecumenical forum of Dutch Protestant churches at the National Synod in the Netherlands is concerning. This forum has moved to discussing some type of eventual union of all participating churches, so GKv involvement displays a weakening of commitment to true Reformed ecumenicity based on Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity.
 - f. A decision to discontinue the relationship with the GKv is consistent with maintaining relations with churches with which we presently have Ecclesiastical Fellowship as well as membership in the ICRC and NAPARC. The GKv membership in the International Conference of Reformed Churches has been suspended because of the decision to allow females to be ordained to office. Some of our sister churches have also terminated their relationship with the GKv and within NAPARC the OPC and the URCNA have ceased contact with the GKv due to female ordination.
 - g. A decision to discontinue the relationship with the GKv would be an encouragement to faithful members within the GKv to take action, and it would be a final call to the GKv as a whole to take stock of the direction of those churches which once stood with us on the same basis of Scripture and Reformed Confessions.
 - h. Severing ties with the GKv is the only responsible course of action in view of the spiritual wellbeing of the CanRC, which would otherwise be vulnerable to the unbiblical thinking which is becoming more and more evident in the GKv.
2. Upon accepting Recommendation 1., Synod also decide: to thank and discharge the SRN as subcommittee of the CRCA responsible for relations with churches in the Netherlands.
 3. Upon accepting Recommendation 1., Synod also decide: to appoint a CRCA delegation to attend the next Synod of the GKv to communicate its decision with appropriate words of sadness concerning this breaking with the churches with which we share such deep roots.

J. deGelder
 J. Moesker
 G. J. Nordeman
 C. Van Dam

APPENDIX A

**RESPONSE OF SUBCOMMITTEE RELATIONS CHURCHES IN THE
NETHERLANDS OF THE CANADIAN REFORMED CHURCHES TO THE
REFORMED CHURCHES IN THE NETHERLANDS (LIBERATED)
QUESTIONNAIRE CONCERNING MALE/FEMALE IN THE CHURCH**

Responses in italics

A. Activities of women in the church

1. Which tasks and/or activities are carried out by women in the churches of your denomination?
Every church has a ladies aid, a group of women which engage in such activities as raising money for church purposes (i.e. building renovations), supplying domestic type aid to members in need of help (i.e. meals for sick), organizing events and preparing meals and refreshments for socials or for church assemblies, etc.
2. To what extent are women present at church council meetings, do they have a say and influence?
Women can be invited to council meetings and they are consulted in matters which pertain to the church as a whole (i.e. calling of a minister, church building).
3. Are there any committees or tasks done only by men or only by women?
There is in general no committee or task restricted to men or women only.

B. Discussions

1. What discussions have there been or are still going on at a formal level (at the General Synod/Assembly, in the congregations or other meetings)?
Assuming that the question pertains to the role of women, there has been considerable discussion surrounding women's voting in the election of officebearers. Synod 2010 declared that the churches were free to permit women's voting but Synod 2013 overturned that decision. There has been some issue with female leadership in some school societies, though women are active in all these societies.
2. To what extent have the following issues played a role in these discussions:
 - a. faithful and obedient Bible reading?
This has been a major factor in the discussion, mainly texts surrounding male headship and the silence of women passages.
 - b. church history and traditions?
As the Bible has no explicit command concerning women's voting, this has also played a large role in the discussion.
 - c. the influence of society on the thinking and acting of Christians?
The role of women in society in general has changed, but this does not have a huge influence in the discussion.
 - d. the special and complementary differences between men and women?
There is a general understanding and acceptance that men and women are equal with respect to salvation in Christ (Gal. 3:28) but distinct and complementary as regards to roles in family and church (Eph. 5:22ff, 1 Tim. 2&3).

B. Decisions

1. Have any decisions been made regarding the calling and the right of women to use their gifts? If so, please send us the text of those decisions.
The only specific decisions concerning a calling or right of women to use their gifts are those about women's voting (Synod Burlington 2010 and Synod Carman 2013).
7. Which tasks / functions are exclusively carried out by men? *The church offices are exclusively carried out by men, though the aid of the women in the congregation is occasionally requested in carrying out those responsibilities (i.e. by deacons).* What ground do you have for this? *The Biblical texts which refer to the silence of women in the church (1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy) and the (male) requirements for the offices (Timothy and Titus). This was reflected in the report of the CanRC Subcommittee Relations Netherlands to Synod Carman of the CanRC 2013 (Appendix 1).*
8. Who has ultimate responsibility for the possible contribution of women in the church (Sunday school, catechism classes, preaching, etc.) or in other teaching / leadership roles?
The council (or consistory) has the ultimate responsibility for the contribution of women in the church.
9. How is that ultimate responsibility put into practice?
The council (or consistory) normally has supervision over the activities of the church and that provision is usually included in the mandates for the various groups or committees.
10. Are there congregations in your federation which have taken decisions on this subject that are not in line with the position of your General Synod / Assembly?
At present there are some churches which have implemented women's voting and are in the process of appealing the 2013 decision concerning this.

D. Informal affairs and beliefs

1. What opinions live in the community about the calling and the right of women to use their gifts?
Women have the calling and right to use their gifts as in the office of all believers (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 12), though not as ordained officebearers.
2. What opinions live specifically among women about their calling and gifts?
Generally the women believe that there is plenty of opportunity to make use of their calling and gifts in the churches. There are possibly some who wish they could take on more responsibilities, but generally there is acceptance of the traditional roles of men and women.
3. Do you notice a development in thinking and in practice with regard to the functioning of women?
Over the past decades there has been an increase in the acceptance of women in various roles in the church community.
4. How is this development interpreted?
This development has generally been regarded as positive, since the role of women in the past has not always been interpreted in a way that acknowledges their calling and gifts. However, there is also apprehension about the influence of the women's liberation movement in North American culture.

APPENDIX B

**Canadian Reformed Churches
CRCA Sub-Committee on Relations with Churches in the Netherlands**

October 18, 2016

To the consistories of the Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt)
in the Netherlands

Dear brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ

General Synod Dunnville 2016 of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) has completed its task and is no more.

One of the decisions of this synod dealt with the sister church relationship the CanRC have maintained for more than 60 years with the Reformed Churches, liberated (GKv/RCN). In view of ongoing developments within the GKv Synod Dunnville decide to temporarily suspend rules 4 and 5 of the Regulations for Ecclesiastical Fellowship ((EF) = Sister Church Relations).

This means in practical terms that (travel) attestations will no longer be accepted automatically and without reservation (rule 4), and pulpits in the CanRC will no longer be open as a matter of course for ministers in the GKv and possible calls to GKv ministers will need the concurring advice of a CanRC Classis (rule 5).

GS Dunnville instructed the Deputies for Relations with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands to inform General Synod Meppel 2017 and each local GKv church of this decision. We have attached the full text of this decision, Art. 104 *Acts of GS Dunnville 2016* as Appendix 1 to this letter.

It is our prayer that this correspondence may contribute to a further reflection on the seriousness of the matter we, the CanRC, herewith bring to your attention.

With brotherly greetings,
for the CRCA-SRN



Gerard J. Nordeman
Secretary CRCA-SRN

Article 104 – GKv (Reformed Churches in The Netherlands¹)

Advisory Committee 1 presented its report. The report was discussed. During discussion the following amendments were moved and seconded:

Amendment 1

To replace “To inform the GKv via the BBK of our decision”

With “To inform the next synod of the GKv in writing of GS 2016’s decision”

ADOPTED

Amendment 2

To insert between 4.4.2 and 4.4.3 “To send a copy of this act of GS 2016 to each of the GKv churches accompanied by a cover letter.”

ADOPTED

1. Material

- 1.1 CRCA Subcommittee for Contact with Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (CRCA-SRN) (8.2.3.1), including the appendices (8.2.3.2-7)
- 1.2 Letters from the following CanRC: Burlington-Rehoboth (8.3.1.1.1), Smithers (8.3.1.1.2), Chatham (8.3.1.1.3), Grand Valley (8.3.1.1.4), Langley (8.3.1.1.5), Ancaster (8.3.1.1.6), Fergus-North (8.3.1.1.7), Edmonton-Immanuel (8.3.1.1.8), Fergus Maranatha (8.3.1.1.9), Glanbrook-Trinity (8.3.1.1.10), Grand Rapids (8.3.1.1.11), Taber (8.3.1.1.12), Abbotsford (8.3.1.1.13), Grassie-Covenant (8.3.1.1.14), Cloverdale (8.3.1.1.15), Brampton (8.3.1.1.16), Elora (8.3.1.1.17), Burlington-Ebenezer (8.3.1.1.18), Toronto-Bethel (8.3.1.1.19), Hamilton-Blessings (8.3.1.5), and Lincoln-Vineyard (8.3.1.7)

2. Observations

- 2.1 GS 2013 (Art. 148) decided to reappoint the CRCA-SRN with the following mandate:
 - [4.1.1] To maintain contact with BBK² of the RCN and represent the CanRC at the next synod of the RCN. If possible, the CRCA subcommittee should be present when this Synod’s letter is dealt with by the next Synod of the RCN;
 - [4.1.2] To inform BBK of our decision concerning female delegates;
 - [4.1.3] To continue to observe developments at the TUK³;
 - [4.1.4] To monitor the work of the Deputies concerning the Role of Women in the Church and assess their report as well as the decisions of the next Synod of the RCN regarding that report;

¹ In reports and acts the acronyms RCN and RCN(I) can also be found.

² The Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad of the RCN

³ The Theological University of the RCN at Kampen.

- [4.1.5] To monitor the ongoing unity discussions between the RCN and the NRC⁴ and to review the decisions of the next Synod of the RCN regarding unity with the NRC;
- [4.1.6] To review the results of the revision of the RCN Church Order;
- [4.1.7] To monitor the results of the RCN's involvement with the "National Synod";
- [4.1.8] To monitor the developments regarding the application of Article 67 of the RCN Church Order;
- [4.1.9] To work in consultation with the deputies FRCA and OPC;
- [4.1.10] To report to the churches six months prior to General Synod 2016 giving special attention to the question whether or not we continue in EF.

2.2 Concerns about the GKv have been expressed by our synods over the past few decades.

- 2.2.1 1998: Synod agreed with the concerns expressed regarding commitment to the authority of Scripture and confessions, deviations regarding the doctrine of Christ's suffering, and an article dealing with homosexuality (GS 1998 (CanRC), Art. 40, Cons. III.6; Rec. IV.G).
- 2.2.2 2001: Synod noted concerns about the marriage form recently adopted by GS 1999 (GKv) and mandated the CRCA to discuss the changes with the Dutch deputies (GS 2001 (CanRC), Art. 80, Rec. 5.3.2). Synod also mandated the CRCA to study the concerns expressed about the GKv to see whether the point has been reached that a warning is needed that the GKv are deviating from the Reformed basis in Scripture and the Reformed confessions (GS 2001 (CanRC), Art. 80, Rec. 5.3.3).
- 2.2.3 2004: Synod expressed concerns as well. In addition, it stated: "The letters from the churches show that there is concern within our churches about the situation in the GKv. It is important to keep in mind that we should not judge the GKv on the basis of what we know from personal observations, hearsay, or from articles in papers, but on the basis of its official documents." (GS 2004 (CanRC), Art. 44, Cons. 4.9).
- 2.2.4 2007: Synod maintained that there was enough reason to monitor the situation in the Netherlands. Further, it stated, "A church federation must be given time to work through the issues confronting it. If deviation is present, it will manifest itself eventually in the official decisions of churches. By carefully following the developments in the GKv in terms of the issues being dealt with by various deputies and in Reports, the committee should be able to keep a finger on the pulse of the GKv. While the committee can be encouraged to read more than just the official documents to get a sense of what is happening, judgments about situations must be based on the official documents." (GS 2007 (CanRC), Art. 133, Cons. 4.9)
- 2.2.5 2010: The concerns increased to the extent that a separate subcommittee was set up. It was charged to express grave concerns about the teaching at the TUK and about a change in how biblical hermeneutics are functioning the GKv (GS 2010 (CanRC), Art. 86, Rec. 4.4).
- 2.2.6 2013: Synod decided to send a letter of admonition directly to GS 2014 (GKv) because of

⁴ The Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK)

continued growing concerns (GS 2013 (CanRC), Art. 165).

- 2.3 GS 2014 (GKv) responded by letter to the CanRC letter of admonition. GS 2014 (GKv) expressed appreciation for the letter as an expression of love but defended the position of the GKv with regard to the matters mentioned in our letter of admonition.
- 2.4 Reactions from the churches:
- 2.4.1 Several churches indicate general support for the direction the committee proposes. Some of the items mentioned by the churches are:
- many warnings have been issued by our past synods;
 - it sends a strong signal to the GKv and adds a further clear warning;
 - the recommendation to restrict our EF will be an encouragement to faithful members of the GKv.
- 2.4.2 Several churches propose specific changes to amend recommendation 2 to the extent that the next general synod will make a decision about terminating our EF.
- 2.4.3 Langley proposes to suspend EF with the GKv rather than restrict it.
- 2.4.4 Cloverdale disagrees with the recommendation to restrict EF and instead proposes notice be given to the GKv that the EF will be terminated at GS 2019 (CanRC) unless there is meaningful change in the direction of the GKv. They note that the proposed restriction would create a new class of EF and “would punish visitors for the sins of the broader assemblies.”
- 2.4.5 Glanbrook-Trinity indicates that a synod should not be advising consistories as to their role in advising their members who are travelling to the Netherlands.
- 2.4.6 Hamilton-Blessings regrets that the Rev. Dr. Hans Burger was not contacted by the CRCA and indicates that his views are misrepresented in the report to synod. They propose that synod acknowledge this publicly.
- 2.4.7 Flamborough observes that the CRCA met its mandate to work closely with the deputies of the FRCA and the OPC.
- 2.4.8 Grand Rapids supports the EF restriction as a minimum, but sees the case for complete suspension at this time. They indicate that in any case the EF should be terminated by GS 2019 (CanRC) if the situation in The Netherlands has not improved.
- 2.4.9 Burlington-Ebenezer supports both recommendations of the CRCA and gives 2 Thess. 3:13-15 as guidance.
- 2.5 The CRCA-SRN recommends to restrict our sister relationship with the GKv. This more limited relationship should be understood as follows:
- 2.5.1 Rules 4 and 5 for EF which deal with the automatic acceptance of attestations from the GKv and the privilege of the pulpit for GKv ministers are to be considered null and void. Consistories are urged to exercise due diligence to ensure that those whose attestations

from the GKv are accepted are sound in doctrine and conduct. Should a church desire to call a minister from the GKv, the concurring advice of classis is required before such a call is issued. In the case of visiting ministers from the GKv, consistories are urged to exercise careful diligence and should be fully assured of the sound doctrine and the godly life of the minister involved. Furthermore, consistories should advise their members who are travelling to The Netherlands not to automatically join a GKv congregation but to be discerning where they worship.

- 2.5.2 If GS 2017 (GKv) makes a clear statement indicating that these churches are returning to acknowledging the full authority of Scripture and show that commitment by as yet acting on our concerns expressed in the letter of admonition from GS 2013 (CanRC) regarding the TUK, women in office, and other matters such as homosexuality mentioned in our reports, the normal sister relationship will resume. If, however, GS 2017 (GKv) maintains the present course of deformation then by that very fact this Synod will break the relationship of the GKv with the CanRC and the CanRC will consider the sister relationship to have ended.

3. Considerations

- 3.1. From the report of the committee it can be concluded that the committee fulfilled its mandate. The committee is to be commended for the amount of work it did and the clarity with which they presented their findings.
- 3.2. The report indicates that, in spite of the warnings by our deputies and the letter of admonition to GS 2014 (GKv), there is no evidence of returning to the full authority of Scripture regarding the items mentioned in the letter; for example, the teachings at the TUK, women in office, relations with the NGK. This is also supported by the official letter from the GS 2014 (GKv). In fact, the report from the CRCA-SRN shows that the GKv has gone further in challenging the full authority of Scripture. The report speaks of a “course of deformation.” We note this with sad and heavy hearts.
- 3.3 The GKv delegates to the GS 2016 (CanRC) indicated that the GKv understand the concerns of the CanRC but feel that the recommendations of the sub-committee are premature (see address, Appendix # 10). They urged this synod to wait till the next synod of the GKv. It is true that the matter of women in office for example, has not yet been concluded in the ecclesiastical assemblies of the GKv. It will be important for our deputies to monitor this development, also in light of the request of the GKv for input by the sister churches. In regard to the main concern of the CanRC, the apparent lack of authority of Scripture, there is no indication of change since GS 2013 (CanRC).
- 3.4 The above outlined history (see Obs. 2.2), as well as the first reason of the subcommittee report (p. 68), show that the CanRC have addressed these concerns over a prolonged period of time. The overview also shows that the CanRC have exercised patience in following due process.
- 3.5 The CanRC have a deep and rich, common history with the GKv. Over many years we have worked together and we recognize the bond we have with many faithful brothers and sisters in the GKv. We also share in several mission projects. The Bible, however, also calls us to speak the truth in love when we have concerns and we are required to address them in accordance with our rules of EF.
- 3.6 Synod recognizes that the GKv is facing many challenges in its Dutch context. To one degree or

another, however, we all live in a cultural context that is hostile to God's Word. Nevertheless, the authority of Scripture transcends culture and needs to be maintained in any cultural context.

3.7 Because the situation within the GKv at the local level is "fluid" and there are many differences in practice between local churches when it comes to, for example, living common law, practicing homosexuals, and women in office, the CanRC can no longer automatically accept statements made by local consistories of the GKv. For this reason, it would be prudent to temporarily suspend the operation of the EF rules 4 and 5. These rules are:

4. The churches shall accept one another's attestations or certificates of good standing, which also means admitting members of the respective churches to the sacraments upon presentation of that attestation or certificate.

5. The churches shall open their pulpits for each other's ministers in agreement with the rules adopted in their respective churches.

Synod agrees with the SRN recommendation that "consistories are urged to exercise due diligence to ensure that those whose attestations from the GKv are accepted are sound in doctrine and conduct."

3.8 It must be clear that this suspension of these two rules does not mean that EF with the GKv has ended but rather is under strain. This is a temporary situation in the hope that, under God's grace, this suspension can be undone when there is evidence of change within the GKv churches.

3.9 Synod is not in agreement with the committee's suggestion that if GS 2017 (GKv) maintains the present course of deformation, then, by that very fact, this GKv synod will break the EF. Synod agrees with the churches which have pointed this out. As to the suggestion of several churches that Synod mandate GS 2019 (CanRC) to make a decision about terminating our EF with the GKv, it is not within the jurisdiction of this synod to mandate a future synod to do this. It is our hope and prayer that breaking EF will not be necessary.

3.10 The report of the SRN identifies several serious concerns regarding an article by the Rev. Dr. Burger, lecturer of systematic theology at the TUK. Hamilton-Blessings questions the findings of the report. It would be important for the SRN to further investigate these concerns. The letter of Hamilton-Blessings should be forwarded to the SRN.

4. Recommendations

That Synod decide:

- 4.1 To express thankfulness for the Subcommittee for Reformed churches in The Netherlands of the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA-SRN) for their work;
- 4.2 To express thankfulness and joy to the Lord for much faithfulness in the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (GKv) as well as grief and disquiet over tolerance of deviations from Scripture and confession;
- 4.3 To continue EF with the GKv, with the temporary suspension of the operation of EF rules 4 and 5;
- 4.4 To mandate the CRCA-SRN:

- 4.4.1 To maintain contact with the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad (BBK) of the GKv and represent the CanRC at the next GKv Synod;
- 4.4.2 To inform the next synod of the GKv in writing of GS 2016's decision;
- 4.4.3 To send a copy of this act of GS 2016 to each of the GKv churches accompanied by a cover letter;
- 4.4.4 To monitor the work of the committee "Males / Females and Office" as well as the decisions of the next GKv Synod regarding this matter;
- 4.4.5 To monitor the ongoing discussions between the GKv and the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK);
- 4.4.6 To continue to observe developments at the Theological University of the GKv in Kampen (TUK), this includes paying attention to the article by the Rev. Dr. Burger;
- 4.4.7 To monitor the results of the GKv's involvement with the National Synod;
- 4.4.8 To work in consultation with the deputies of our other sister churches;
- 4.4.9 To report to the churches six months prior to GS 2019 giving special attention to the question whether or not we continue in EF.

APPENDIX C

Serving together

Summary of the report *Male/Female and the Offices*

The Deputies *M/F and the Offices* have submitted their Final Report to the General Synod of the Reformed Churches (liberated) in the Netherlands. What follows is a summary of this extensive report, which conveys its thrust and broad outlines.

This summary ought not to be regarded as a substitute for the report; instead, it is intended to provide information to the general public. For the benefit of those who wish to have more in-depth information, we refer frequently to the various chapters of our report itself.

An authorized English translation of the full report is to be found at www.gkv.nl/organisatie/generale-synode/gs-2017/english-materials-gs-2017

The Deputies *M/F and the Office*:

mr. dr. A. Haan-Kamminga, chairperson

dr. J.P. de Vries, secretary

prof. dr. E.A. de Boer

E.J. de Jong-Wilts MA

H.S. Nederveen-Van Veelen BTh

prof. dr. C.J. de Ruijter

dr. W.F. Wisselink

Introduction

Since we believe it is important for Synod to come to a decision, we aim to provide a number of building blocks. These building blocks will assist the Synod to determine its own position and make a choice.

First and most of all, we want to listen to what the Bible says about men and women, and about the offices. Next, we will examine the history of the offices. In addition, we will review past and current practice in the churches, and the thinking concerning the offices among sister churches in our own country and abroad. In the conclusion of the report, we present an overview of our proposal to the Synod.

Biblical building blocks

In Chapter 2 of our report we show what the Bible tells us about the way women may serve. It is clear that the Bible provides no direct answer to the question whether women may serve in the offices. The manner in which we as churches have organized the work of the offices also does not arise directly from the Bible.

On the other hand, we do find in the Bible clear guidelines for how women are to serve. We read of the gifts of women that are put to work as prophetess, apostle, deacon and judge. In the Bible, men and women have equal value, but they are not the same. God has created men and women differently, and has given them to each other. Together, they have been assigned the task of caring for and developing the world. Within this shared responsibility it is the man's task to lead. This is a matter of bearing Christ's authority, and a willingness to serve in complete submission to him. This does not mean that the man is to lord it over the woman. The texts that refer to the headship of the man point to a desire for reciprocal service, each in their distinctiveness as man and woman. Here, the Bible shows two lines: we see women who speak freely, while simultaneously we read texts indicating that women are to be silent. In our opinion, it is clear that these texts are intended to prevent that men or women would dominate, and in this way distort the shared responsibility that they have. Hence, the Bible does not help us with any direct instruction concerning the division of roles and tasks between men and women, then or now.

When we read what the Bible says about the leadership of the congregation, and who is to lead, the picture that emerges is no clearer. In the Bible we see a large

number of different tasks and roles, among which the role of 'elder' is consistently important for the leadership of the church. In this way, it becomes clear that there are special offices, given by God to the congregation. People holding special offices lead the congregation on its way to the kingdom of God.

History

In the history of the churches the Bible has always been the basis for the institution and organization of the offices. That is what Chapter 3 of our report deals with. In the case of the special offices, it has always been important that next to an inner calling, there is also to be an external one. Anyone who becomes an office bearer has to be chosen and ordained by the congregation. In this way it can be seen that whoever provides leadership to the congregation has special gifts and is given special responsibility.

In the confessions of the church there was never a choice to exclude women from the offices. The fact that the offices were open to men only, also came about because of the way that society and its government were organized. Hence, it was taken for granted that women did not receive an office, just as it was in society at large. In the Bible, however, we see that next to men, there are also women who serve in special offices.

We do not find in the Bible a compelling 'no', keeping all offices closed to women at all times and in all places. This means that readers of the Bible, the congregation, and the churches together have to make their own choices for an organization of the offices and the forms in which men and women serve together.

That gives Synod the room to think freely about which course to follow; it implies that other considerations may play a role in coming to such a course.

The worldwide church.

Chapter 5 of our report deals with the thinking and views that exist in sister churches within the Netherlands and abroad. We stand in relation to the church of all times and places. We recognize this in the contacts we have had with sister churches of the GKv. Most sister churches abroad, with very few exceptions, express deep reservations concerning the admission of women to the offices. A number of sister churches have even indicated that, should the GKv decide to follow this direction, this will have consequences for our sister church relations. These same reservations are also present among sister churches in the Netherlands, except for the NGK. We believe it is important that the relationship

we have with other churches is based on the Bible and our confessional documents. Hence, it is not inconceivable that local congregations will make different choices concerning the organization of the offices and the division of tasks and talents.

Practice

Chapter 4 of our report deals with current practice in the churches. As churches, we stand in a society in which men and women increasingly have equal opportunities for education and employment. In all kinds of places, and in all kinds of roles, we observe the gifts of the Spirit among both men and women. Women too develop their talents in education, leadership, administration and jurisprudence. Women feel themselves to be called, and are called, to tasks in the church, and our analysis of prevailing practice shows that they increasingly respond to this calling.

The argument is commonly expressed that men and women are different, and therefore ought to fulfil different roles and tasks in the church. While it is true that research in this field is still very much in progress, it is clear enough that the differences between men and women correlate very strongly with their social and cultural environment. We therefore believe that it is more important to look for the gifts that have been given to men and women as individuals. In doing so, we also want to take into consideration how we, in our time and culture, may give expression to our shared calling as man and woman.

Our investigation into current practice has also taught us that where a member of the congregation assumes a special responsibility, this often occurs without any thought being given to an inner calling or an outward ordination. In doing so, we do not give sufficient attention to the spiritual dimensions of the work of the offices.

Setting a course

The basis for our advice lies in the Bible, which makes it clear that it is God's will that both men and women are to be deployed in the service of the gospel. In this, the man is to serve in leadership.

Our report shows clearly that the structure of the offices, as we know them today, while derived from the Bible, is no longer in line with the manner in which gifts and talents are presently employed. Hence, we recommend to Synod to create more room for the deployment of the gifts and talents of women when they are called to special tasks in the office, and to choose a wise course for the future in

its weighing of options.

How this choice is actually to be put into practice is yet to be determined. Our advice is that we give each church the room to decide for itself the tempo and the route by which it will utilize all the gifts and talents at its disposal. Each church also ought to test for itself whether the calling of men and women is also a spiritual calling.

We realize that the course we recommend is a controversial one. A different manner of speaking about men, women and the offices incorporates a break with the past. For many members such a change of course will be a painful one, the more deeply felt because it clashes with the way many of us have read and understood Scripture itself.

We hope that the approach we took in describing and discussing relevant Bible texts has shown that we truly have searched for the will of God for his church and its members. This has given us the boldness to be at peace with these breaks with the past. It is for the members of the churches to seek each other in Christ, to want to understand each other, and to carry each other on the way to the completion of God's plan for this world.

Possible options

In order to make our advice more concrete, we outline a number of options below. In Chapter 6.5 of our report, each of these options is worked out in more detail, and accompanied by our evaluation.

a. No change, the offices remain closed to women.

This is the most conservative option possible; on paper, it would leave the present situation unchanged.

As Deputies we do not evaluate this option positively. This choice ignores current practice, which shows that women already participate in many tasks relating to teaching and church development, without however being ordained to these tasks.

b. Leave the offices unchanged, open the office of deacon to women.

This option would provide room for women to fulfil an office, without admitting them to the church council.

There are no Biblical arguments against opening the office of deacons to women. However, in this option the gifts of women in teaching and leading are

not engaged. It fails to do justice to the gifts of women and to current practice.

c. Leave the offices unchanged, open the office of minister to women.

The Bible leaves room for women to prophesy. However, in this option they would not be allowed to be overseers.

This option does justice to those women who have the gift of preaching, and leaves the present structure of the offices intact. Disadvantage: the expertise of a female minister would be excluded from the church council, and it implies that further reflection on our practice is required.

d. Leave the offices unchanged, but provide room for married couples to become office-bearers together.

This option provides a great deal of room for the deployment of the gifts of women, and reflects the 'together' of the Bible.

This option is quite appealing; however, in practice it would often lead to shared responsibility while at the same time only one of the two partners could act in a representative role. An unwarranted distinction is made between married and unmarried women, so that women would only be admitted to the office if their spouse also has gifts suitable for an office.

e. Leave the offices unchanged, but open offices with a special task to women.

The recognition of the gifts of women is here embodied in the creation of special tasks or functions.

In practice, this option would scarcely be different from opening all offices to women; in fact, it could serve as an intermediate step. Justice is done to the external confirmation of an inner calling. On the other hand, this would put us out of step with all of our sister churches.

f. Leave the offices unchanged, open them to women also, but with an emphasis on a small core church council that exercises spiritual leadership.

This option creates room for the use of the gifts of women, while delineating a decisive difference in responsibility between men and women. It appears to offer an avenue to bring diverging convictions together.

This option creates a structure of the office in which preaching and instruction is not longer linked to the concept of 'spiritual leadership'. It therefore fails to recognize the leadership that these spiritual gifts provide.

g. Review the structure of the offices, and give women an office of their own.

Gifted women are able to carry out their offices in a gender-specific manner.

This option leads to similar objections as does option e. and does not align well with our present culture.

h. Open all the offices to women (to be left in the freedom of local churches).

This option does the greatest justice to the deployment of the gifts the Spirit has given to women, to the shared calling and responsibility of men and women, and to current practice. However, much consideration must be given to sensitivities within local congregations and among sister churches at home and abroad. The honouring of the authority of Scripture is a very significant sore point for those who have objections to this position. Ample room must be left for local congregations to determine for themselves their own course and tempo.

For the sake of peace in the churches, we believe that Synod must now come to a decision. We lay before Synod a number of draft decisions. Our recommendation is that all of the offices be opened to women. Such a break with the past may also cause pain for our sister churches and in our own congregations, and might lead to a parting of ways. That, however, is not our intention; rather, we envisage the building up of the churches and a shared seeking for the will of God.

That is why we wish to leave it in the freedom of the churches, while reading, praying and reflecting, to come to their own choices in introducing this option, under the guidance of the Deputies *Male/Female in the Church*.

In conjunction with this proposal, we wish to lay before Synod that the options incorporating a special office for women are worthy of consideration, even though we think that such an approach will only be temporary. It will assist the churches in learning to see the distinctiveness of men and women, and as such may well serve as a transitional option.

APPENDIX D

Response to chapter 2, “Bijbelse bouwstenen” of the *Rapport deputaten M/V en ambt* by the Canadian Reformed Sub-Committee for Contact with the with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands January 2017

The mission of the MV report is to give a biblical answer to the question whether it is justified that women in the church (and in the special office) have a different position than in the society in which we live (4). In other words, does Scripture justify the ordination of women into the offices of the church? However, already in the manner in which the report articulates its mission one detects the pressures of society’s culture on this issue. This pressure is also evident in the report.

The Place of Culture

This report attaches great significance to culture, both in biblical times and now. Those who wrote the report are convinced that their recommendations to open the offices to women are based on Scripture and emphatically deny that they are due to the demands of our current culture (61–62). Without questioning the integrity of the deputies, this denial nevertheless has some credibility issues. It is, for example, remarkable that the report states that the authority of the husband over his wife is determined by the culture of that time (13, 15) and is thus in essence not normative for today. It is also striking that among the grounds given for urging the churches to create room for women to show their gifts in proclamation and education, the pastorate, and diaconate, is the matter of our current culture. Since both men and women are now educated and have equal access to positions in society, the same should be the case in the church (67–68). This is not the first time that such a rationale is mentioned in our Dutch sister churches. Myriam Klinker-de Klerck in her 2011 study, (*Als vrouwen het woord doen*, 134), voiced similar sentiments.

The impact that secular culture is having on the churches is openly acknowledged. The report mentions that churches are making their own decisions about women in office without thorough Bible Study. The report acknowledges that this is undesirable but also admits that the growing practice of women participating in all sorts of church functions means that decisions about the role of women are already being made by the churches. The line of division between what women do for the church and the work of the special offices is being blurred (6).

The Approach of the Report

The report works its way through what it calls biblical building blocks. The idea is first to see the broad lines in Scripture about the place of men and women; next, to focus on some passages where women are speaking and where they are told to be silent; and finally to consider some passages that speak of man as head (8).

This report discerns what it calls four layers of meaning. The first layer is creation (as it was in the beginning). The second layer is a reality broken by sin. The third layer is the liberating restoration and the fourth layer is fundamental renewal. According to the report, in

layer three the work of God's grace is evident. He has, for example, an eye for women who are marginalized in a male culture, but the restoration of the true place of women goes very slowly. The fruits of God's grace in this respect can also be seen in current Western culture (really?). The fourth layer shows the completely renewed relationship of God's children towards each other. The report states that this layer is not always evident in Scripture but it must lead to an ethic of equality and no more hierarchy. All are equal and all must be able to participate fully in the life of the church. These layers of meaning cannot always be reconciled with each other. For example, the report notes that the passages that tell wives to be subject to their husbands reflect the third layer, but the closer a husband and wife move to the fourth layer of fundamental renewal the less need there will be for the wife to be subject to her husband (11–13). More about that issue later in this evaluation of the Dutch report.

When the report distinguishes these different layers of meaning, it provides justification for its claim that when the Bible speaks of the place of women, then you notice the negative influence of the surrounding culture. According to the report, it is therefore understandable that in the New Testament we have a double line: the line of grace, of male and female being one in Christ and the line that is determined by the surrounding culture, namely that a woman has no authority over a man. These lines do not quite meet. In order to do justice to the matter of women and ecclesiastical office, one must distinguish these different layers (15).

Consequently, with this view of layers, the report can easily dismiss the plain reading of the biblical text as culturally determined and try to discern what the line of grace of being all one in Christ would actually mean for the issue at hand. That is exactly what happens and the consequences are devastating for a traditional understanding of what Scripture communicates. For example, when it comes to the critical texts for whether women should be ordained or not, the report uses the cultural context of a biblical text (e.g., 1 Tim 2:11-14) to interpret Scripture in such a way that the Bible ends up meaning the opposite of what the text plainly says.

The report's use of culture in understanding and applying Scripture is therefore a central feature as well as its Achilles' heel, its vulnerable weakness. By interpreting Scripture through the lens of the culture of biblical times, as the deputies understand it, the report essentially says that unless you are familiar with the culture of those days, you cannot correctly understand or apply the biblical text to today. When you place such a high premium on understanding the culture of the times, you are basically saying that only in our supposedly enlightened times with all the available resources of archaeology, cultural, and historical studies that we can finally find out what the Lord our God is actually teaching us in the apostle's writings.

It is of course true that the latest discoveries can help us to better understand Scripture. But, God's Word is clear with respect to the intended basic meaning, not just to our generation but to all those who have preceded us as well. No reader of God's Word should be held hostage to the latest cultural studies in order to finally find out what God really meant to tell us about female ordination to ecclesiastical office. Yet this is basically what this report says and it admits that their recommendations mean a break with the past (62). Is such a break with the traditional understanding of the biblical text which has served the church since Pentecost warranted?

We need to consider the evidence. For the purpose of our evaluation, it is not necessary to go through all the different layers and arguments that the report presents. One could write a book in response to this report. Our approach is more modest. We will consider how the report has handled two critical passages: 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14. After that we will briefly consider the report's use of the appearance of prophetesses in Scripture. Next

we will look at how it dealt with the authority of the husband and the role of Priscilla.

1 Corinthians 14:33b–35

The report begins by stating that we do not know for sure what this passage means because we do not have enough information about the situation to which the apostle is reacting. A number of exegetical points are covered. The report correctly mentions that the command to keep silent in the churches is meant for all the congregations and not just the one in Corinth. The report then notes that the demand for silence only applies to a specific situation since women were permitted to pray and prophesy in church (1 Cor 11:5; 14:26). The report goes no further on this passage and repeats that what the words mean for our time is unclear (19–20). However, this passage should not in this manner be shunted aside and made of little consequence in this discussion. More can be said that is relevant for the topic at hand.

In 1 Corinthians 14, the apostle Paul deals with prophecy and speaking in tongues with a view to ensuring that all things be done for building up. Thus to prophesy is better than speaking in tongues unless the prophecy is interpreted for the benefit of those who hear it. Prophecies however need to be carefully weighed (v. 29) for there was the danger of false prophets (cf. 1 John 4:1). In that general context the apostle says that women should be silent because they “should be in submission, as the law also says” (1 Cor 14:34). “The law” probably refers to the Old Testament, with the creation account being specifically in view since the apostle had appealed to creation earlier in regard to the relationship of men and women (1 Cor 11:8–9). The point is that when prophecies are being judged, women are not to speak for that could involve having authority over a male prophet. The demand for silence is repeated three times (1 Cor 14:34–35) underlining the importance of this prohibition.

With respect to 1 Corinthians 11, it should be noted that the practice of women praying and prophesying (1 Cor 11:5, 13) does not constitute a warrant for their having an official ecclesiastical office. The passage does not specifically state where this praying and prophesying was done. Some scholars have argued that the praying and prophesying of women in 1 Corinthians 11 took place outside the official worship services (cf. Acts 21:9–11). There is then no contradiction with the demand for silence in church in 1 Corinthians 14:33–35. However, this interpretation is not completely convincing since nothing in 1 Corinthians 11 gives the impression that this prophesying was a private activity and prophecies were to be evaluated in church (1 Cor 14:23–29). Regardless whether one interprets this activity as inside or outside the church, more to the point is the fact that the gifts of prophesying and tongues were temporary gifts of the Spirit in the apostolic era of the church. Prophets were part of the foundation of the church along with the apostles (Eph 2:20). Since a foundation is only established once, there are no more inspired prophets or prophetesses today. Such prophesying and speaking in tongues as well as the manner in which they took place are therefore not normative for the church today. The cessation of the gifts of prophecy and tongues means that 1 Corinthians 11 has no direct bearing on the issue of whether women should be admitted to ecclesiastical office.⁵

One of the most important and clear passages in dealing with the issue of whether female ordination is biblically warranted is 1 Timothy 2:11–14.

⁵For more detail on the gifts of prophecy and tongues and their cessation, see Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost: Studies in New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979) 55–116..

1 Timothy 2:11–14

The report correctly notes that in this chapter the apostle Paul appeals to both men and women to behave properly in church, each in their own way, with an appeal to creation. The report then states that the words: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man” do not constitute a general pronouncement (19). In other words, it is not normative for all times and places. This is so, according to the report, because Paul told Timothy that he had to see “older women as mothers” who had authority over their daughters and sons (1 Tim 5:2). This reasoning however does not hold. Within a domestic setting, mothers indeed have authority over their sons but in 1 Timothy 2:8–15 the context of the prohibition to teach and have authority over a man is public worship.

In trying to make its case for women in ecclesiastical office, the report asks whether women had to be silent because they lacked knowledge. As reason for raising this point, the report notes it was not usual in the culture of that time for women to be educated, yet in 1 Timothy 2:11 the apostle says: “let a woman learn quietly and in all submission.” So it appears that women were to be silent because they needed further instruction. That would also explain why the apostle did make use of gifted women such as Priscilla. The essence of the matter, according to the report, is that everyone is permitted to prophesy and to speak, but knowledge and insight is needed and without education it is not wise to speak. Furthermore, it is incumbent on men and women to behave appropriately when speaking. What is appropriate is culturally determined and what was culturally fitting in the apostle’s day does not have to be culturally fitting in our day. Thus the passages telling women to be silent (1 Cor 14:34 and 1 Tim 2:9–10) form no basis for keeping the ecclesiastical offices closed to women. Rather, according to this report, these passages “contain a call to let oneself be educated in all modesty—something that pertains to both men and women—although that means something different for each of them as also determined by the culture of the time” (20).

The report basically argues that these critical passages do not speak of barring women from ecclesiastical office, but rather these verses tell women to get educated so that they can teach and exercise authority over a man. A difficulty with this analysis is that nowhere does the apostle say this. There is no reference to the fact that they lack education as the reason for their not being able to teach or have authority over men. Rather the reason given is that God created Adam first and then Eve. In other words, the prohibition is not based on their lack of education but the text clearly justifies it by the order in which God created male and female. The text explicitly gives this as the reason. The passage reads: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. *For* Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Tim 2:12–14, our emphasis). In other words, the reason for a woman to keep silent is based on creation, just as in 1 Corinthians 14:34.

In sum, there is no biblical basis in the passages just discussed for the report’s conclusion that women may be ordained to ecclesiastical office. The report’s imagined cultural rationale for silence that women needed more education before being allowed to speak has no warrant in Scripture. Indeed, the report makes the text say the opposite from what it actually states.

Prophetesses

A big weakness of this report is that there is no systematic examination of what exactly characterized a prophetess in the Old and New Testament, but the report nevertheless uses the simple fact that women were prophetesses to argue for opening up the ecclesiastical offices to

women. But it does so in an indirect way without ever fully discussing the passages that supposedly support their conclusion.

The report acknowledges that Deborah, a prophetess who was judging Israel at a time of Canaanite oppression (Judges 4) was an exceptional case (15–16). Similarly, the report considers Mary's prophetic activity in her song (Luke 2:46–55) and Philip's unmarried daughters who prophesied, as not really connected with the prophetesses mentioned elsewhere as functioning in the congregation. These prophetesses are mentioned in Acts 2:18 and 1 Corinthians 11:5 but the report does not discuss them (14). It does assert that there was always room for women to be prophetesses and that no objections were brought against such activity (15). The report's initial conclusion on prophetesses acknowledges that there is no consensus among exegetes about the official character of the work that these prophetesses did (24).

But then the report then goes on to say that on the other hand the Bible shows that there was no problem for women to be prophetesses. Apparently they were called to the prophetic office. Their authority in prophesying is mostly accepted without any problem. In any case, they appear as those officially called ("ambtelijk geroepen"). In the New Testament, prophesying in a broader sense is linked with the way women function ("optreden") in the congregation. God has given women talents in order to bring the congregation further on the way to the New Jerusalem (24–25).

The report suggests or gives the impression with the foregoing that the prophetic ministry of women in the New Testament (which the report never defines) therefore argues for the use of their talents in official ecclesiastical ministry today (also cf. p. 59). Furthermore, the report states that what the New Testament refers to as prophecy and prophesying is basically Spirit-guided explaining Scripture which is analogous to preaching today. Thus if women were prophetesses in the past, they can be ministers preaching the gospel today (69).

A major problem with all of this is that the report does not address the nature and circumstances of the prophetesses in the Old Testament and also does not deal with the question whether in the New Testament the prophesying and the related speaking in tongues were a temporary manifestation of special gifts of the Spirit or whether they were permanent. This type of reasoning by suggestion without clear argumentation is not helpful and does not justify the conclusions which are drawn from these passages.

The report also confused the issue by linking the prophetess with the three-fold office of a Christian and then asking whether there is any difference between the office of all believers and the special ecclesiastical office (28). This blurring of the boundary between the special ecclesiastical offices and the general office of believers is unwarranted.

Authority of the Husband

On this issue, the report also shows the consequence of postulating several layers in the biblical text: especially the layer influenced by the grace of God and the layer of fundamental renewal. For someone who accepts Scripture at face value the report thus draws puzzling conclusions which seem more due to a desire to make the text say what the committee wants rather than listening to what the text actually communicates. In 1 Peter 3, Scripture says "wives, be subject to your own husbands" (v. 1) and describes as exemplary Sarah's obedience to Abraham whom she called Lord (v.6). The apostle concludes this discussion by telling husbands: "live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessels, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered" (v. 7). The report concludes from the above that the more husband and wife do

according to this instruction, the less reason there will be for the wife to acknowledge her husband's authority and to call him her lord (9, 13).

But according to Scripture the one does not follow from the other. Because the report interprets the command for the wife to be subject to her husband as belonging to the biblical layer where God's grace has not led to fundamental renewal, the report seems to consider the husband's authority over his wife as something negative. But the report's analysis and conclusion contradicts other biblical passages. "Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph 5:22; see also Titus 2:5). This submission does not deny the equality of man and woman as both being made in the image of God. But each has their complementary God-ordained role and place.

Surprisingly, the report draws inappropriately on 1 Corinthians 7:4b ("the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does") to suggest that the woman is not under the authority of her husband (13). However, this advice within the context of marital intimacy takes nothing away from the position of the husband as the head of the marriage relationship.

Also Ephesians 5:21 cannot justify the committee's agenda (13). In that chapter the apostle Paul urges his audience not to get drunk, to address one another in psalms and hymns, to give thanks to God and to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. The phrase "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" cannot be used, as the report seems to suggest, to abandon the leadership position of the husband. This phrase is explained by what follows, which includes the words: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph 5:22; also see Col 3:18).

The report concludes that the prevailing cultural view in New Testament times of the man as the authority figure in a marriage is so strong that this view also forms the point of departure in the public meetings of the congregation (13). In other words, the husband being the head of the marriage is not a divine ordinance but only a cultural practice of those times which spills over into meetings of the congregation.

Priscilla and Aquila

Priscilla and Aquila both taught Apollos "the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26). The report rightly concludes that the apostle Paul was grateful for the work that Priscilla did, but at the same time he instructed the congregations in which they worked that women were to be silent in church (17–18). One would think that the conclusion of the report would therefore ultimately be that Priscilla's work was private instruction and not official ecclesiastical work. However, as noted earlier, the report judges the instruction for women to be silent to apply only to women who were not educated. Since Priscilla was educated, the command for women to be silent would not have applied to her (20, 24, 25). Thus the example of Priscilla is used to buttress the argument that the apostolic command for women to be silent only applies to those who need further instruction. That was however not the argument that Paul used. He went back to creation (1 Tim 2:12–14). The reason Paul could make grateful use of Priscilla as well as Aquila is because they taught him privately, taking him aside (1 Cor 18:26). She did not teach in an official ecclesiastical capacity.

A Major Omission

Surprisingly the report has no discussion of the biblical qualifications for the office of elder which assume that males are in view (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6). Judging from the direction of

the report as a whole, if it had dealt with the criteria for becoming an elder, it would probably have said that those were the relevant qualifications for the culture of that time but they no longer apply to today since men and women have equal education and employment opportunities in our current society. Such an approach makes the biblical text mean something different from what the text states and denies the clarity and authority of Scripture. This method of interpretation leads to the church absorbing worldly thinking and cultural values and thus losing its distinctiveness as the holy body of Christ.

Conclusion of the Biblical Section of the Report

The report unfortunately does not let Scripture speak on its own terms but imposes on Scripture a system whereby some passages are said to reflect the culture of the day while other passages show more the grace of God for the renewal of life in Christ. In the process, the creation ordinance of God as appealed to by the apostle Paul is pushed aside and considered irrelevant. Such an approach takes away from Scripture and imposes a meaning on the text and in some cases makes Scripture say the opposite from what the text itself states.

Sub-Committee for Contact with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands

J. de Gelder

J. Moesker

G. J. Nordeman

C. Van Dam

January, 2017

APPENDIX E

Visit to Synod Meppel 2017 of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in The Netherlands

If you read the Acts of the last number of synods of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC), you'll notice that there has been a growing concern in the CanRC about the direction the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (RCN) have been taking since around the year 2000. This eventually led to Synod Burlington 2010 appointing a sub-committee for the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA), called the Sub-committee Relations Churches in the Netherlands (SRCN). This sub-committee has reported to the last two synods of the CanRC with growing concern about the developments in the RCN. The main concern has been how the Bible is being interpreted in the RCN. This concern has become focussed on the place of women in the RCN. The past three synods in RCN have received reports of their Deputies Male/Female in the church which have shown a Bible interpretation which has tried to show that the Bible is not as clear about excluding women from church offices as has historically been accepted in Reformed churches world-wide. The Deputies M/F released another such report at the end of October 2016 for their upcoming Synod Meppel in 2017. The SRCN met a number of times in 2016 and 2017 to review our mandate and to prepare for the report of the RCN M/F. The deputies were late with their report, so the SRCN was unable to go into the full report in detail. However, a response to the biblical section of the report was prepared, which we believe was the most important part. This response was sent to the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad of the RCN (BBK) and they forwarded it to Synod Meppel to be included in their considerations concerning the report at Synod.

Foreign Delegates Week at Synod Meppel 2017

All four members of the SRCN attended the "Foreign Delegates Week" at Synod Meppel 2017 from April 3 to 8, a week organized by the RCN synods to receive and regale delegates from their numerous foreign sister churches throughout the world. We were warmly welcomed on April 3rd at a beautiful meeting facility (Mennorode) in the forests of the Veluwe near Elspeet. As usual for the RCN synods, the eating and sleeping and meeting arrangements were superb. Over time there were approximately thirty-five foreign delegates from various continents. On Tuesday, April 4, the foreign delegates were taken to downtown Amsterdam and given a tour of evangelistic efforts among drug addicts and prostitutes there. The following day we were transported to Kampen to view some of the city and to listen to some presentations by lecturers at the Theological University Kampen about "Reformed Witness in a Multi-Religious Word." That evening we met with the delegates of the Reformed Church in the United States, the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa, and the Free Reformed Churches of Australia (FRCA) to discuss common concerns and our approach to the report of the Deputies M/F entitled "Serving Together." Members of the SRCN also engaged in private discussions with other foreign as well as Dutch delegates. Almost all foreign delegates expressed concern about the report. On Thursday April 6, after breakfast, the Dutch synod delegates and the foreign delegates gathered together in the main hall of the Mennorode facility, and after devotions and introductions, three foreign delegates were invited to make presentations – Rev. R. D.

Anderson of the FRCA, Prof. Dr. H. M. Yoo of the Kosin Presbyterian Church in Korea, Rev. D. K. Kithongo of the Africa Evangelical Presbyterian Church. They spoke about their churches and also of the views of their churches concerning women in office. All three, while acknowledging the significant role of women in the church, urged the RCN not to adopt the report and open the offices for women. These presentations were followed by a defense of the report “Serving Together” by one of the Deputies M/F, Dr. Erik de Boer.

Organizers at Synod had prearranged four groups each composed of some synod delegates, Deputies Men/Women, and foreign delegates. These four groups met for an exchange of thoughts following lunch. The meetings were respectful and along with the other delegates of sister churches we had opportunity to critique the report “Serving Together” and to listen to the defense of the report. A few of the concerns raised in the meetings we attended were:

1. The report has come with a new interpretation of passages such as 1 Timothy 2 which historically have always been plainly read as forbidding women to have authority of office and to preach. The reply was that these passages were interpreted from the point of view of a male-oriented culture, and in our more egalitarian age eyes have been opened to other ways of interpreting those passages.
2. Who determines what the culture was at the time the New Testament letters in particular were written? The response was that this is a matter of ongoing research.
3. The report was selective in the passages it interpreted, for instance not dealing with some Scripture passages which obviously deal with the matter of offices. For instance, 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 outline the qualifications for office and both speak of the need for elders and deacons to be the husband of one wife. There was no substantive reply to this.
4. The four layers of meaning which the deputies applied to the Bible in their report is a self-made system which they have imposed on Scripture and various passages in the Bible can arbitrarily be assigned to one or other layer, depending on how one wishes to see such passages. The response was that the Bible lends itself to such a system of four layers and the (cultural) context determines which layer is suitable for each passage.
5. Could the same contextual approach to Scripture when applied to other contemporary ethical matters (e.g. homosexual relations) not end up emptying the Bible of its normative quality? The reply was that each ethical issue needs to be examined in the light of Scripture on its own.

Many of the foreign delegates had questions, but it became apparent over time that the deputies and most of the synod delegates had made up their minds that Scripture does not forbid women in office, even if it does not recommend women to serve in the church offices. Unfortunately, these meetings were held behind closed doors and we were not given opportunity to address Synod in session as a whole about our concerns. This means that the concerns expressed in those meetings remained “off the record.”

That afternoon we were bussed to the Meppel RCN (“Kruiskerk”) and treated to supper by the congregation. Afterwards there was a worship service in which the Lord’s Supper was also celebrated. We had discussed the matter of attending the sacrament with some of the other foreign delegates, and decided that we would take part. We are still officially sister churches and the Lord’s Supper should not be used as a form of protest. After the service, there was opportunity for fellowship.

On Friday April 7, we were invited to the main Mennorode hall to observe a plenary session of Synod 2017. After the welcome and opening Synod discussed the “Report Deputies BBK: Relations Churches Abroad” to Synod. This report only mentioned that there had been contacts with the CanRC and that “discussions and correspondence have not been successful in preventing a critical report from being submitted to the General Synod of Dunnville in May 2016.” The recommendations of the main report were adopted, including the decision to continue the relationship with the CanRC.

After the synod sessions, there was once again opportunity for networking and for discussions with delegates and deputies of the RCN Synod. Another closed meeting with a number of synod delegates was held, but it became apparent that our concerns and the concerns of the other foreign delegates were not having any serious impact. The momentum propelled by the prevailing culture and the practices common in many churches appeared to be too great, and we sensed no real groundswell of disagreement with the report of deputies M/W “Serving Together” and how it handled and interpreted Scripture.

On the morning of Saturday, April 8, the RCN welcomed the Christian Reformed Churches of the Philippines to sister church relationship and the delegate of that church gave a presentation about those churches. A hearty farewell was organized after that, and the “Foreign Delegates Week” was closed with singing and prayer. We were impressed by the organization and care we received throughout the week. However, we found that what we heard in our discussions with the RCN deputies and delegates with regard to the report “Serving Together” quite unsettling. The questions and criticisms of many of the foreign delegates concerning how the Bible was being interpreted were politely received but basically brushed aside. We were heartened, though, by the fact that many of the other foreign delegates from various parts of the world shared most of our concerns and criticisms. And we were thankful that we could network with so many of the foreign delegates there.

After we had returned to Canada, we received an extensive questionnaire from the advisory committee of Synod Meppel regarding the report “Serving Together” and we were invited to observe the synod session June 16 concerning our response to the biblical section of the report “Serving Together.” We declined to attend the synod session as our report criticizing the biblical basis of the report speaks for itself. And we did not reply to the extensive questionnaire. The accompanying letter stated, “Although we discussed with you in two groups for almost two hours, we all felt that a great deal had not yet been said. We also had the impression that in the various rounds of discussion there was almost no attempt to seek common ground between our opinions and arguments.” We believe that we said what we wanted to say (also in our “Response to the Biblical Grounds”), and we were not interested in “seeking common ground” as far as the interpretation of Scripture was concerned since this would mean compromising the clear words of Scripture against female ordination.

Final decisions of Synod Meppel 2017 regarding females in office

The words of concern spoken by the CanRC deputies at Synod Zwolle 2008, the disquiet expressed in our meetings with the BBK before and at Synod Harderwijk 2011, the letter of admonition sent by Synod Carman 2013, the extensive critique of the report Deputies M/F submitted to Synod Ede 2014, our words at that assembly, our critique of the biblical evidence

sent to Synod Meppel 2017, and our discussions with members of the Deputies M/F and of the synodical advisory committee of Synod Meppel apparently all fell on deaf ears. With their handling of the Bible in this as well as other matters, the RCN are charting a course that is different from that of almost all its Reformed/Presbyterian sister churches.

We were amazed at the pressure the deputies and delegates at synods felt they were under in order to produce some kind of biblical basis to justify opening the church offices to females. One of the delegates stated on the floor of Synod Ede 2014 during the debate on the report to that body that women can, must, and shall serve in office and that all that was needed was to find the biblical basis for that. Synod Ede did not find that the Deputies M/F had accomplished that in their report, but instead of putting aside the matter, appointed Deputies M/F to investigate “how the offices can be structured so that women can be active for God’s kingdom within that structure” (Decision concerning M/F in the Church, 3.a.1). This shows how there has been increasing pressure from within the RCN, influenced by the prevailing feminist culture, to open the offices for females and that the deputies had the task to come up with a biblical justification for that. The decisions of Synod Meppel show evidence of that kind of pressure. In the July 4, 2017 letter which Synod Meppel sent to all the churches outlining the background of its decisions concerning females and the offices, this body describes (p. 2) why this is a currently relevant issue: *A practice has grown of increasing deployment of our sisters and their gifts in all kinds of tasks in the congregations. Sisters perform pastoral, leadership and instructional tasks that in the past had only been carried out by office-bearers. This sets up a tension between our doctrine of the office and congregational practice.*

Under pressure to come to a conclusion on the topic of females in office, Synod Meppel provided its own grounds for its decisions. Little of the actual reasoning of the report “Serving Together” comes to the fore in those grounds. The many clear and plain passages speaking about the gender-specific roles of men and women in the church were simply put aside as culturally determined and unclear and thus not normative for the church in this day and age. Instead scattered passages about women prophesying or using gifts in special circumstances in the church were sewn together as proof that the Bible does not forbid women to serve in church offices. Synod Meppel declared in its decision in June 2017 “that there are Scriptural grounds, next to men, also to call women to the ministry of mercy and therefore to the office of deacon” (Decision 4), and “that there are Scriptural grounds, that next to men, also to call women to the ministry of oversight, pastorate and instruction, and therefore to the office of elder” (Decision 5), and finally, “that there are Scriptural grounds, next to men, also to call women to the ministry of preaching and instruction, and therefore to the office of ministry” (Decision 6).

We do not see those grounds as solid basis for opening the church offices for females at all. Decision 5 concerning the office of elder, for instance, had as grounds the Old Testament references to Miriam (Micah 6:4) and Deborah (Judges 4-5), and New Testament references to older women being called to be examples and to spiritual care (Titus 2:3-5) and to Paul’s words about Junia and Andronicus as apostles and about other couples as his co-workers. Dr. C. Van Dam has demonstrated in his article in the July 28 issue of *Clarion* (Vol 66, No 15, pp.423-426) that these references constitute a very weak basis for Synod’s decision justifying the ordination of female elders in the church. He concludes in this article (*Clarion*, p. 426), Synod ended up grasping at straws as any neutral reader of Scripture can see from the evidence.

Furthermore, Synod's apparent refusal to let the full weight of the clear apostolic teaching on the requirements for male eldership in the church (1 Tim 3 and Titus 1) come to bear on their decision making process is unreasonable. Synod ended up recommending women for ordination to the office of elder contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.

There was a proposal to delay the implementation of the decision to allow females to be ordained to all the offices until the next synod, but this proposal was defeated and so the decision is effective immediately. The defeat of this proposal in fact cuts off the real possibility of appeal. As well, Synod Meppel also decided to again appoint Deputies M/F. Their task now is to "inform and advise" local churches and classes about the synod decision concerning women and office. If the decision was so clearly based on the non-clarity of the Bible passages about females and office, one wonders about the need for these deputies.

Later decisions Synod Meppel 2017 regarding church unity

The decision to allow females to be ordained to the offices in the church has removed a major obstacle in the movement toward unity of the RCN with the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NRC). They are a loose federation of eighty-seven churches with 33,000 members. These churches separated from the RCN in the late 1960s due to a number of issues including strict subscription to the Three Forms of Unity. The NRC are not as exactly bound to those confessions. They have also permitted the ordination of females to all church offices. They have acknowledged the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (CRCN) as well as the RCN as churches of Jesus Christ and there are quite a few local churches of all three federations which worship together in one form or another. The NRC have been engaged in (re)unity talks with the RCN over the last twenty years or so, and we as SCRNC have noted a movement of the RCN in the direction of the NRC, particularly with respect to the matters of being more broad-minded in the binding to the confessions and in interpretation of the Bible. Neither of those matters are apparently now hindrances to federative unity, as Synod Meppel has decided to move toward full unity with the NRC and to accept the invitation of the National Assembly of the NRC to meet in Kampen on November 11, 2017 to discuss the process to follow to achieve that unity. It is wonderful when churches find one another and are able to come to full unity. However, such a unity ought to be grounded on the Bible as confessed in the standards and we do not see how a unity based on new biblical hermeneutics and looser binding to the Three Forms of Unity (!) is the unity so praised in the Bible (Ps 133, Eph 4:5-6).

The July 2017 meeting of the International Conference of Reformed Churches

The ninth meeting of the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) was convened in Jordan, Ontario from July 12 – 19, 2017. This meeting would be a kind of test for the decision of Synod Meppel to allow females to church offices. This matter took up much time in the meetings as there was much discussion and various options were entertained. Some delegates spoke of the fact that the RCN was one of the founding members of the ICRC in 1985 and have been a great help and encouragement to member churches in the past. Yet it was quite clear that the view of the RCN is not the view of any of the other churches in the ICRC, and certainly was not the view of any of those, apart from the RCN, who spoke at our meeting. It was judged that they had transgressed Article IV: 4 of the Constitution in their recent synodical decision to permit the ordination of persons to the offices of minister and ruling elder contrary to the rule prescribed in Scripture. It was with much heaviness of heart, then, that the

Conference decided to suspend the membership of the RCN in the ICRC. If there is no change with regard to the decision of Synod Meppel, the RCN will be expelled from the ICRC at its next meeting in four years. It is hoped that the criticism of that decision at this body as well as the suspension will cause the RCN to reflect on the direction it has taken with regards to Bible interpretation.

Some concluding comments

There is an apparent pattern of actions once churches proceed to interpret the Bible in ways that accommodate to the prevailing western culture. Those churches will in due time also want to be more inclusive and seek ways to accommodate homosexual relations. The Bible, however, clearly shows that a homosexual lifestyle is sinful (Lev 18:22 and 20:13, Rom 1:24-27). Previous RCN synods (e.g. Zwolle 2008) dealt with issues of homosexual practice, and had stated in the past that such relations were unacceptable in the light of Scripture. Synod Meppel was confronted with a question from one of the churches about homosexual practice and there is reason to believe that there will be increasing pressure to interpret the Bible in such a way that same-sex relations are acceptable in the church. The NRC have accepted this and the growing unity between those churches and the RCN makes this a very real possibility. Synod Carman 2013 sent a letter of admonition to Synod Ede 2014 of the RCN which stated, Should you stay on your present course in regard to the matters we have raised in this letter, we fear that the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship which we have with you will be jeopardized. We urge your Synod and your churches to stand firm in confessing the whole truth of the Word of God and to defend this truth boldly and vigorously, even when it is denounced and hated by the world.

Unfortunately, this admonition has been ignored and the RCN have continued on the course that has caused so much concern in the CanRC. Synod Dunnville decided to suspend parts of the ecclesiastical fellowship. At this point it appears that this also has not had any effect in the RCN. A decision to terminate church relations between the CanRC and RCN seems inevitable at this time. Many of us were or are descended from emigrants from those churches, and so we share a common heritage with the RCN. A termination of relations between churches at the next synod of the CanRC would be very painful, particularly when it concerns churches in which we find our roots and with which we enjoyed almost seventy years of close fellowship. Please keep these churches in your prayers. And may the rapid pace of accommodation to modern culture and theological change in the RCN cause the CanRC to heed the serious exhortation of Proverbs 23:23a, “Buy truth and do not sell it.”

Rev. J. DeGelder
 Rev. J. Moesker
 G. J. Nordeman
 Dr. C. Van Dam

APPENDIX F

Canadian Reformed Address to Synod Meppel (April 2017)

Dear members of Synod Meppel,

On behalf the Canadian Reformed Churches, we bring you greetings in the name of our risen Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. We rejoice that we together with you may confess our common faith in Christ who died but rose from the dead and who hastens to return to make all things new. We are thankful for our longstanding relationship as sister churches and for the Reformed confessional heritage which we by God's grace may share. May our common commitment to the faith entrusted to us (Jude 3) help us to face the many challenges that face Christ's church in the twenty-first century – challenges, both here and in Canada, such as, for example, the pressures of egalitarianism, individualism, evangelicalism, and secularism.

The Lord our God has blessed us as a federation in the last three years since we met at Synod Ede. We rejoice in the unity of the faith which we may have as churches and are very grateful for the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS) in Hamilton. Most appropriately this seminary organized this year's seventh annual conference held in January on the theme "Rich and Relevant: Why the Reformation Still Matters after 500 Years." An international team of speakers gave us insight into the ongoing relevance of the Reformation for issues such as the clarity and certainty of Scripture, worship, liturgics, and missions, just to mention these. The conference was a great encouragement to reaffirm and maintain the riches which by God's grace were rediscovered half a millennium ago. The seminary, in cooperation with the Covenant Canadian Reformed Teachers College (CCRTC), is also involved in commemorating the Reformation by means of a special program called "Faithful to His Word: Celebrate 1517 in 2017." The strategy of this special initiative is to create opportunities in the arts that lead to a renewed and deeper appreciation of the Reformation. With that purpose in mind, this program has commissioned music and drama and welcomes essays, poetry, songs, and visual arts of which a selection will be published in a commemorative coffee table book.

The Canadian Reformed Churches continue to support the seminary and reap the benefits. We are thankful to the Lord for the faculty and staff and for the students who come to study and that this training for the ministry can fruitfully labour in peace and harmony. Over the last three years, graduates have accepted calls to proclaim the good news in Canada, Australia, and South Africa. The Canadian Reformed Churches are also active in spreading the gospel in mission endeavours both in urban centres at home (Hamilton, Vancouver, and Prince George) as well as abroad in Asia, Brazil, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea. Mexico is also being considered as a mission field. Along with the work of mission is the need to provide for the real material needs that missionaries encounter. This assistance takes many different forms. Also functioning in diaconal work is the Canadian Reformed World Relief Fund.

To facilitate the work of mission and to make the use of resources as effective as possible, the Canadian Reformed Missions Association meets annually to discuss areas of mutual concern,

help each other with advice, and listen to stimulating presentations that can give direction for the future.

Christian education is very important to us and there are Christian schools, both elementary and secondary, across the country, some have limited government support, others do not and they are entirely funded by the church community. Our church members also support special homes for those with mental disabilities and homes for seniors as well as care facilities.

Increasingly, there is more and more engagement by those in our circles on the political and social issues in our nation. The Association for Reformed Political Action (ARPA) continues to expand and works diligently to provide resources, to educate church members on the current topics of the day, and to help them bring their concerns to their elected representatives. ARPA has also been active on the legal front, defending God's rights before the courts. In their short history they have even had the privilege of being able to bring their testimony to the Supreme Court of Canada three times.

A major highlight of the past three years was the General Synod which met in Dunnville, Ontario from May 10-19, 2016. A topic that generated considerable interest in Canada was the issue of whether women should be permitted to vote in the election of office bearers. This matter had been dealt with in the previous two synods. Synod Dunnville answered appeals on this issue by essentially deciding that it is up to the local church to determine whether women should be given the right to vote. Synod decided that giving women this opportunity is not in conflict with Scripture and it is a matter of local regulation.

A very special event at Synod was the official presentation of the third edition of the *Book of Praise* to the chairman of synod. This edition has all the 150 Psalms as well as 85 hymns. It is the culmination of many years of labour. The first deputies for a Genevan psalter were appointed by Synod Homewood-Carman in 1954. Through the years more and more Psalms set to Genevan tunes became available which resulted in the first complete *Book of Praise* with all 150 Psalms and 62 hymns in 1972. As churches we are very grateful to be able to have and use this treasure of biblical songs.

Synod's agenda included our ecclesiastical relations with other churches. Unfortunately, there was little progress to report on closer relations with the United Reformed Churches with whom we would like to be one. The synod decided to continue the relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship and to reappoint and expand the Committee for Church Unity. With respect to our relationship with you, our Dutch sister churches, Synod dealt with the concerns about the apparent direction you are heading fuelled by a new way of looking at Scripture. Most recently this new direction is evident in the proposal at this synod to admit women to all the offices in the church. This proposition is contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture. Also of great concern to us is the toleration of homosexual relationships and those in such relationships being admitted to the Lord's Table. We are dismayed and saddened by these developments which are contrary to the Word of God. We have detailed them in our report to Synod Dunnville.

This synod noted (in Article 104) these developments "with sad and heavy hearts" for we have had "a deep and rich common history" with you. We recognized that you are facing many

challenges in your Dutch context but “we all live in a cultural context that is hostile to God’s Word. Nevertheless, the authority of Scripture transcends culture and needs to be maintained in any cultural context.” Because the degree to which the authority of Scripture is recognized varies within your churches, synod considered it “prudent to temporarily suspend the operation of the Ecclesiastical Fellowship rules 4 and 5.” This means that our churches will no longer automatically accept attestations or certificates of good standing coming from your churches and your ministers will no longer automatically have access to our pulpits. Our consistories are urged to exercise due diligence in these areas to ensure soundness in doctrine and conduct. All this shows that our relationship as churches is strained at the moment. Synod Dunnville expressed the hope that this would be a temporary situation and we echo that hope.

You have meant so much for us in the past and been a great encouragement to us. It is therefore very painful for our churches, especially the older members, to witness a growing divergence and disconnect between you and the Canadian Reformed Churches. As representatives of these churches we implore you in love to return to your heritage of acknowledging the full authority of Scripture on the issues that are on your synodical agenda. We need each other in a Western cultural context that is in the process of rejecting whatever remains of its Christian origins. As we said at Synod Ede: “May we continue to be partners in contending “for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3) and may we continue to be a blessing to each other. May the Lord our God give this assembly everything it needs to stay true to his Word.”

Delegates from the Canadian Reformed Churches

J. de Gelder

J. Moesker

G. Nordeman

C. Van Dam

APPENDIX G



Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland

Meppel 2017

Postadres: Postbus 770
3800 AT Amersfoort
Bezoekadres: Conferentiecentrum
Mennorode
Apeldoornseweg 185
8075 RJ Elspeet
Telefoon: 06 31 684 729
E-mail: synode@gkv.nl
Internet: www.gkv.nl

To all the church councils and all the classes
of the Reformed Churches

Almelo, July 4, 2017
Concerns: Decisions Male/Female and office
Mark: 25-MVEA-170704

Dear brothers and sisters,

Synod has requested its moderamen to explain and provide information concerning its decisions in relation to *Male/Female and the Office* in the letter below.

In this letter we would like to tell you something about the background to the decisions that were taken. We also describe the decision-making process that we as General Synod have followed. Finally, we make it clear that it is for the churches to make the next move. We express the hope that we may, with the help of God, find our way together in this matter.

The Background

In 2005, at the General Synod of Amersfoort-Centrum, the matter 'Women in the Church' first found its way onto the table of Synod.

The immediate cause of this was a letter sent by the church council of the GKv of Voorthuizen-Barneveld. In it, the council raised the issue that in our contact with the Netherlands Reformed Churches the matter of 'women and office' brought with it questions that "*could not be addressed in a simple manner by Biblical answers*". Furthermore, the council pointed out that "*we are dealing with a gradually growing practice of sisters who are deploying their gifts within the congregation in the absence of a clear Biblical rationale. Upon closer study, complex exegetical and hermeneutical questions quickly come to the surface; this is a task that goes beyond our capacity to deal with. What is more, we believe that this matter transcends local significance.*"

The General Synod, upon a proposal by the Regional Synod of Gelderland, instituted Deputies for 'Women in the Church', with the following mandate:

- To investigate, by means of a problem analysis, chiefly on the basis of empirical research, and in collaboration with the Theological University, the questions and problems the churches have identified around the subject of 'women in the church';
- To develop an approach that sets out in which way we may come to sound, Scripturally founded answers to the questions and problems that this investigation brings to the fore.

That was the beginning of the process that led to the decisions we have now made, in the year 2017.



We briefly outline the intermediate steps that followed:

- In 2008 the first report of Deputies was released; it contained a great deal of basic information. On the basis of a review of literature and empirical research the deputies observed that several different lines of argument played out in this matter, and that a range of views existed within the church around it. At that time, the Deputies proposed to keep this matter on the churches' agenda, by undertaking a theoretical study, and also by engaging in a dialogue within the churches.
- The Deputies that followed (2011) published a set of guidelines, and reported on how they were used in the churches. In addition, the book *Als vrouwen het woord doen (When women speak)* by Myriam Klinkerde Klerk (2011) saw publication: this theoretical study was carried out at the request of the Deputies. New Deputies were appointed, who were to prepare a pathway providing directions for the decision-making process.
- In 2014 the majority of Deputies presented the conclusion that *"The position that besides men, women also may serve in the offices of the church, as described in this report, fits within the breadth of what can be affirmed as Biblical and Reformed"*. The discussion that ensued at Synod centred especially on culture, hermeneutics and the offices. Synod did not agree with the supporting arguments to the Deputies' conclusion, but at the same time did decide that *"the view that beside men women may also serve in the ecclesiastical offices must be open for free debate, provided that arguments are based on Scripture."* Synod appointed two new deputyships, one to conduct discussions within the churches, and the other to focus on a study of the matter.
- In 2016 the study Deputies (*Male/Female and the Office*) released a preliminary report, in which the sore points in the discussion were identified, and in which the two lines that can be seen in Scripture were explicitly explored: one line can be discerned that curtails the contribution of women, while the other line clearly acknowledges such a contribution. Do we do an injustice to Scripture if we do not give this room to women, or rather if we do? With this report, the Deputies aimed to encourage the churches to begin a spiritual process of finding a shared course in addressing this problem. This was done in collaboration with the Deputies *Male/Female in the Church*, who had made an inventory of the current role of women in the local churches, and who had guided the process in the churches through local and regional discussion evenings.
- In their final report, *"Serving Together"*, the Deputies *Male/Female and the Office* articulated their findings about: what the Bible says about women; what the Bible says about the offices; the historical development of the offices; the practice in our churches; and the insights of sister churches within our own country and abroad.

Why is this a currently relevant issue?

In its discussions, the General Synod of Meppel (2017) has been continually and especially mindful of the urgency of this matter, which had been on the table of Synods since 2005. This urgency was highlighted in 2016 by the Deputies *Male/Female in the Church*.

A practice has grown of increasing deployment of our sisters and their gifts in all kinds of tasks in the congregations. Sisters perform pastoral, leadership and instructional tasks that in the past had only been carried out by office-bearers. This sets up a tension between our doctrine of the office and congregational practice. What is the Biblical underpinning and justification of the deployment of women in the



congregation?

At the same time, the delegates to Synod were constantly confronted with the differences of view that exist concerning this matter. That is the situation in which we as churches find ourselves: we tasted it in the variety of letters that were sent to us from the churches; we encountered it in the meetings we had with sister churches throughout the world during Synod's "days for churches abroad". And in our meeting sessions at Synod we wrestled with the same differences in insight.

Inside and outside the meetings at Synod we spoke to each other about the doctrine of the office, hermeneutics, the texts requiring women to be silent, and the different roles of men and women. We considered alternative proposals: for example, we considered the possibility of opening the office of deacon to women, and at the same time to broaden our view of this office beyond our current practice; similarly, giving women permission to preach, while the office of elder (incorporating the final responsibility for the congregation) would then be reserved for men.

The decisions of Synod

First of all, Synod decided to encourage the churches to make careful arrangements with regard to the appointment of men and women in various kinds of service that do not belong to the offices. See decision 2. This decision gives expression to our appreciation for and recognition of the possibilities the Spirit has given to women, gifts that they deploy in the congregation.

Further, Synod declared that there are Scriptural grounds to call, next to men, also women to the office of deacon, elder and minister. The text of the decisions articulates that *next to* the view that (certain) offices are to be reserved for men, there is *also* room for the view that these offices may be filled by women. (See decision 3). We did not easily resign ourselves to the difference in interpretation of the relevant texts. A careful weighing of the *content* of what Scripture says preceded these decisions, and this is reflected in the grounds provided. See decisions 3, 4 and 5.

We were able, on a number of points, to come to agreement; at the same time differences of insight remained, especially in relation to the calling of women to the offices of elder or minister. These differences in insight mirror the situation that exists within the churches.

The next move: up to the churches

Next, Synod decided to leave room for the local churches to decide for themselves whether, if so in what manner, and when they want to act in line with these decisions. See decision 7.

It is now up to each of the churches to discuss the decisions of Synod, and to address what lives in their own congregations. What is the level of support in the congregation for opening the offices to sisters? Do female members of the congregation feel called to an office? How ought we to deal with this in practice from here? It is vital that reflection and discussion about this matter does not come to a halt. That is what Synod has tried to establish in decision 8.

In order to facilitate this process of reflection, discussion and decision-making, Synod decided to appoint new Deputies *Male/Female in the Church*, in order to provide support to congregations and classes, to investigate what lives in the churches following on from the decisions that have been made, and to report to the next Synod. See decision 10.



Our Prayer

Synod is well aware that the decisions it has taken concerning the fulfilling of the offices by women will be received in different ways. For years already, differences of view have existed within the churches. This could easily hinder a genuine conversation between brothers and sisters.

That is why Synod issues an urgent plea to the churches and its members to carefully consider, with an open Bible, and before the face of God, the decisions it has taken and the grounds presented in support of them. In the meantime, Synod is also cognizant of the fact that this approach to its decisions will not automatically lead to agreement concerning the opening of the offices to women. As a result, there will be growing differences in practice, from congregation to congregation, in relation to the filling of the offices.

Mindful of this, Synod makes an appeal to the churches and its members, even when there is difference of opinion on this point, to keep accepting one another (Romans 15:7). Let us heed the appeal of the apostle Paul to be eager to maintain the unity that the Spirit gives us in Christ in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). Let us realize that for now we see in a mirror dimly, and only know in part (I Corinthians 13:12). And may we have strength to comprehend, together with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:18,19). Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13).

"Peace be to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible". (Ephesians 6:23,24)

in unity through Christ,
on behalf of the Synod,

ds. Frans Wisselink,
scriba II

Supplement: decisions of Synod MF and office



Supplement: Decisions MFAO

Materials:

1. Preliminary Report of Deputies Male/ Female and Office – *The Sore Points* (08-07-2016);
2. Final Report of Deputies Male/Female and Office – *Serving Together* (01-11-2016);
3. Letter from GK Brunssum-Treebeek (23-12-2016), indicating it is pleased with the report *Serving Together*, and expressing heartfelt agreement with draft decision 4;
4. Letter from GK Sint Jansklooster-Kadoelen (13-01-2017), interacting with the report *Serving Together*: taking the starting point in the creation of man and women is good; however, only the man was created in the image of God, not the woman; the 'four layers' model is incorrect; it is desirable that women are optimally deployed in the church, but that the differences between man and woman are not glossed over;
5. Letter from GK Kantens (23-01-2017), interacting with the report *Samen Dienen*: the manner in which chapter 2 gives attention to the historical contours provides valuable insights; however, it seems that the concept of equality between man and woman figures too prominently; chapter 3 seems to aim at providing room for women within the current structures of the office; broadening the office of deacons and (later) opening the office of deacons to women would be a good option; this matter ought not to be left in the freedom of the churches;
6. Letter from GK Bussum-Huizen (24-01-2107), providing an analysis of the report *Samen Dienen*: the report arrives at a different stance concerning the position of women in the congregation than has hitherto been taught in the churches; its discussion concerning the texts requiring women to be silent is too sketchy;
7. Letter from GK Emmeloord (26-01-2017), requesting that Synod limits itself to a declaration that 'women in office' is not in conflict with the Word of God, and that it leaves till the next Synod a decision to actually open the offices to sisters.
8. Supplementary report of Deputies Male/Female in Office' (31-01-2017): supplement to chapter 5 of the report *Samen Dienen*
9. Letter from the Canadian Reformed Church (24-10-2017), interacting with chapter 2 of the report *Samen Dienen*: the manner in which the 'four layers' are described shows that 'culture' has determined the direction of the report; it is clear from I Corinthians 14:33b-35 and I Timothy 2:11-14 that the Bible leaves no grounds for the ordination of women; the report does not offer a clear description of what the Bible means with 'prophesying'; man and women have equal value, but according to Ephesians 5:22 women are to recognize the authority of their husband, and in this context the reference to I Corinthians 7:4b is inappropriate; the report falls short in failing to pay attention to I Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6;
10. Letter from GK Capelle a/d IJssel-Noord (10-02-2017): asserting that the report *Samen Dienen* fails to do justice to the Word of God: in Chapter 2 the deputies wrongly state that Paul's interpretation of Genesis 1-3 is not to be regarded as normative; hence, the deputies have not done proper justice to the 'line of authority'; in Chapter 3 the difference between the ruling office and all kinds of service within the church has been watered down;
11. Letter from GK Spakenburg-Noord (24-01-2017): requesting not to go beyond decisions-in-principle at this stage, and only implementing these decisions if the next Synod agrees to do so with a great majority;
12. Letter from GK Veenendaal-Oost (27-01-2017): asserting that the line the Bible gives concerning



leadership of the congregation points to the man's role; in its view, insufficient weight has been given to the fact that at the Fall it was Adam who bore ultimate responsibility, and that Jesus appointed 12 male disciples; expressing objections against the deputies' reformulation of their mandate; and making a plea for option e., possibly to be extended by opening the office of deacons to sisters;

13. Letter from Deputies BBK (Deputies for relations with churches abroad)(15-05-2017): Advice not to proceed further at this point than the conclusion that in the light of Scripture it can be justified to open the offices to sisters, and to leave the decision to actually open the offices to the General Synod of 2020 at the earliest;
14. From the VGKSA (22-05-2017): written response to questions sent by the Synod Committee *M/F and Office*: under the influence of the 'new hermeneutic', present-day culture has become dominant in the report *Samen Dienen*; Genesis 3:16 is in itself not a curse; rather, the curse lies in the manner in which it functions after the Fall; hence, it is an artifice for the report to place this text in the after-the-Fall layer.

Decision 1:

To discharge the Deputies *Male/Female and Office*

Ground:

The Deputies *Male/Female and Office* have properly carried out the mandate given to them by the General Synod of Ede.

Decision 2:

To encourage the churches:

- a. to make grateful use, in instruction, pastorate and diaconate, of all the gifts that the Lord gives to both men and women.
- b. to make careful arrangements with regard to the appointment of men and women in various kinds of service that do not belong to the offices.

Grounds:

1. Next to men, women are also active at all levels in the congregation, without having been ordained to the office of minister, elder or deacon. They participate in the liturgy, in catechesis, and in committees and other positions (sometimes those of leadership). In recent years, this participation has become increasingly intensive, and that is a good thing.
2. Those who, serving in a special office, bear broad responsibility for the congregation must believe that they are called to this office, possess the necessary gifts, and by means of election and ordination are authorized by Jesus Christ to dedicate themselves to this task. This affords protection, both to the office-bearer and to the congregation. This protection is also important in relation to positions of service that do not belong to the offices.

**Decision 3:**

To declare that there are Scriptural grounds to provide ample room for the deployment of the gifts of women in task areas such as preaching, instruction, pastorate and diaconate.

Grounds:

1. Under the Old Covenant, men fulfilled all the regular offices in the church, those of prophet, priest and king. They were anointed to these offices, as a sign of having been appointed to and equipped for them. It was also men who served in numerous extraordinary functions of leadership in the church, such as the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua and the Judges. Finally, men fulfilled the roles of elders in the community. The few exceptional cases where women occupied leadership (Deborah, Judges 4:4; Miriam, Micah 6:4) or prophetic roles (Deborah, Judges 4:4; Hannah, I Samuel 2:1-10; Huldah, II Kings 22:14; Mary, Luke 1:46-55; Anna, Luke 2:36), confirms this rule under the Old Covenant.
2. At the same time, in the story of the Old Covenant, the pivotal roles are portrayed that women have fulfilled among Gods people in the course of the history of salvation (Eve, Genesis 3:15; Sarah, Genesis 17:15,16; Tamar, Genesis 38:13ff; Jochebed, Exodus 1:22-2:10; Rahab, Joshua 2:2-7; Deborah, Judges 4 and 5; Ruth, Ruth 1:16,17; Esther, Esther 4:15,16; Mary, Luke 1:38). We also read the story of the woman in Revelation 12:1-6, who courageously endured the threats of the dragon. This story stands in stark contrast to the failures of men (Abraham, Genesis 12:12,13; Genesis 20:2; Judah, Genesis 38:24; Aaron, Exodus 32:2-6; Eli, I Samuel 1:14; David, II Samuel 11 and 12; Solomon, I Kings 11:1-8). In Matthew 1:17 the Lord reviews this history, holding it up as a mirror to the male leaders of the church of that time and of all ages, and as a warning to them.
3. Among those who lived under the Old Covenant, there was a yearning for the coming of the New. The New Testament reveals the fulfilment of that longing. In the coming of the God's unique Anointed One, our Lord Jesus Christ, thanks to his official ministry, and thanks to the anointing with his Spirit, God's people might truly be what they since the covenant of Mount Sinai had already been called, a 'royal priesthood' (Exodus 19:6; I Peter 2:9). For all of His people, His coming is at the same time the coming of and the anointing with the Spirit of prophecy (Acts 1:8,14 and 2:4), for which Moses had been hoping (Numbers 11:29), and of which the prophets spoke (Joel 3:1,2). It is the perspective of their freedom in Christ, in which there is no longer any difference between male and female (Galatians 3:28). All will be prophets, priests and kings. In the New Covenant, the law carved in stone, the law of commandments and regulations, has been set aside (Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ephesians 2:15-17; II Corinthians 3:6) because it, also and especially in relation to the ordering of the Old Testament offices, had proved to be ineffective (Hebrews 8:8) and declared to be obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). The New Covenant, characterized by equality, has replaced it. All will know the Lord, from the least of them to the greatest. (Jeremiah 31:34; Acts 2:17,18; I John 2:20,27).
4. For the Christian church, this revelation of the Old and New Testament gives cause for continuing reflection. Throughout the ages, until Christ's return, the church will have to critically examine itself: the ordering of its church life, the functions that according to Scripture are to be carried out in it, the roles that all its members, male and female, from the least to the greatest, are to fulfil in it. In this way it will be continually exhorted, with a view to the organization of the offices, to critically examine its own understanding of Scripture.



5. In response to this calling, Synod has come to the conclusion that the witness of Scripture gives the congregation every reason to allow men and women to serve equally in all prophetic, priestly and royal tasks in the church, tasks which their shared name as Christians addresses equally (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's day 12). Synod has further come to the conclusion that those places in which Scripture speaks of an apostolic command to keep silent, or a prohibition against women teaching or exercising authority, do not, in themselves, supply indisputable grounds to categorically exclude, in our time and circumstances, women from teaching and ruling offices in the church, since the exegesis of these texts is too greatly in dispute.
6. Within these offices, next to this equality there will also be distinctiveness, and men and women are called to mutual acceptance of each other in the place and manner in which they serve, in accordance with the various and distinctive talents they have been given.

Decision 4:

To declare that there are Scriptural grounds, next to men, also to call women to the ministry of mercy and therefore to the office of deacon.

Grounds:

1. According to the testimony of Scripture, in apostolic times women shared in the office of the deacons (I Timothy 3:11, 5:9), and they too were called 'deacons' (Romans 16:1-2).
2. The office of deaconess was also known in the early Christian church. In a number of Reformed churches this office still continues.

Decision 5:

To declare that there are Scriptural grounds, next to men, also to call women to the ministry of oversight, pastorate and instruction, and therefore to the office of elder.

Grounds:

1. Women such as Miriam and Deborah portray women in the Old Testament who, in collaboration with men, acted as rulers and judges.
2. They could also be called to this service by God Himself, as is evident from Micah 6:4, where the Lord teaches Israel: "I sent before you ... Miriam".
3. While the New Testament refers to men as elders, older women are also called to exemplary and pastoral tasks (Titus 2:3-5).
4. Paul's reference to Junia and her husband Andronicus as highly regarded apostles (Romans 16:7), and to other married couples as his fellow workers (Romans 16:3), and his mention of married couples and of a brother and sister, at whose home a church meets (Romans 16:5,15), create the impression that men and women, from a position of equality, together gave leadership in Christ's congregations.

Decision 6:

- a. To declare that there are Scriptural grounds, that next to men, women also, who have received the necessary gifts, may be given permission to preach; and hence to delete the word 'male' from Article 1 of



the general regulations governing permission to preach.

- b. To declare that there are Scriptural grounds, next to men, also to call women to the ministry of preaching and instruction, and therefore to the office of minister.

Grounds:

1. The Old Testament already makes mention of prophetesses (Exodus 15:20,21; Judges 4:4-7; II Kings 22:14), or of prophetic activity by women (I Samuel 2:1-10). In the New Testament also, already before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we read about prophetic activity by women. We note Mary and her *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55). We also read of Anna, who prophesied together with Simeon on the occasion of the infant Jesus' presentation in the temple, and who served the Lord day night and day in the temple (Luke 2:36-38).
2. The fulfilment of the promise of Pentecost (Joel 3:1-2; Acts 2:17-18) is that sons and daughters, young and old, will share in the gift of prophecy. The New Testament displays that reality. On the day of Pentecost the apostles, together with other disciples, among whom possibly women (Acts 1:14), anointed by the Holy Spirit, acted as Jesus' witnesses (Acts 1:8; 2:4-8). Other places, too, make mention of women who prophesied (Acts 21:8; I Corinthians 11:4-5).
3. The meaning of Scripture is that "*the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation*" (I Corinthians 14:3). This manner of prophesying applies to both men and women.
4. New Testament prophecy, as to its content, has always been understood within the Reformed tradition as the explanation of Holy Scripture, and a Spirit-guided application to the present day, specifically in the preaching.
5. While there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the precise interpretation of the apostolic command to 'be silent', comparative examination of I Corinthians 14:34 and I Corinthians 11:5 and 14:26 shows that in any case this prescription cannot be understood as an absolute prohibition to speak (or preach) in the worship service.

Decision 7:

To leave room to the local churches to determine for themselves whether, if so in what manner, and when they want to act in line with these decisions.

Grounds:

1. It is for each church to consider how the gifts given to its members are to be deployed, in order to bring the congregation further on the road to the kingdom of God.
2. Each church ought to follow its own process of reflection, and come to its own decision if, if so in what manner, and when they will take action in line with these decisions.

Decision 8:

To encourage the churches to engage in further reflection as to how justice can be done to the differences between men and women in the execution of tasks and offices in the congregation.



Grounds:

1. The Bible speaks about both the equal value and position of man and woman, and the distinctive place God has given them within it, in marriage and in the congregation. In our present-day culture, which is strongly oriented towards equality, this aspect deserves special attention.
2. The Bible repeatedly sounds warnings that man and women ought not to intrude into each others place, nor lord it over each other (I Peter 3:7, 4:15, 5:3; I Timothy 2:8-15; I Corinthians 14:34-35; III John:9).

Decision 9:

To send the decisions concerning *Male/Female and Office* to sister churches abroad.

Ground:

A number of sister churches abroad have responded in writing to the reports of Deputies, and/or participated in discussion of these reports during the days allocated to relations with churches abroad at the Synod.

Decision 10:

To appoint *Deputies Male/Female in the church*, with the following instructions:

1. To explain and provide further information concerning the shared service of men and women in the local churches and the classes;
2. To gather and develop material that will serve the process of reflection in the local churches and the classes;
3. To provide advice and guidance at points of difficulty regarding the decisions that have been taken (in collaboration with the Deputies for Church Polity);
4. To provide advice in relation to the ordination of men and women to tasks that belong, and do not belong, to the offices (co-ordinated with the Deputies for worship services);
5. To make an inventory of the manner in which the local churches and the classes deal with the decisions that have been taken (in collaboration with the *Praktijkcentrum*).

Grounds:

1. The decisions that have been taken call for careful communication with the churches
2. There is already a great deal of material available in the form of reports to Synods of 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2017. However, it is good to develop a coherent package of materials for the benefit of the churches.
3. The decisions that have been taken regarding the joint service of men and women have a sizeable impact, and will be received in quite different ways. That is why it is beneficial for the churches to be able to turn to a single address to obtain advice in relation to these decisions.
4. Now that it is in the freedom of the churches whether and to how to take action in line with these decisions, it will be beneficial to gain an overview of the manner in which the churches respond to them.
5. An insight into what lives within the churches in relation to these decisions may assist determining whether, in the longer term, the offices need to be described or organized differently.

Decision 11:

To allocate a budget of € 20.500 in total to the Deputies *Male/Female in the church*.

APPENDIX H**Response to Synod Meppel's Decisions to Open all Ecclesiastical Offices to Women****Table of Contents**

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Introduction

On July 4, 2017, Synod Meppel officially informed all the church councils and classes of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN) of their decisions to open all ecclesiastical offices to women. A copy of this official correspondence that included the full text of synod's decisions was sent to us in English translation. This document can be found as Appendix G to our report.

The synod made eleven decisions surrounding this topic. Three decisions gave specific grounds from Scripture and history to justify their decision. Since the biblical grounding for synod's decisions is critical for evaluation in the light of God's Word, this report will focus on those decisions and present a critique which, due to the nature of a report to synod, will of necessity be fairly brief.

The Dutch synod first decided on female ordination to the office of deacon, then elder, and finally minister of the Word. This report follows that order as well and uses the numbering that synod gave to their decisions.

Office of Deacon

Synod Decision 4

“To declare that there are Scriptural grounds, next to men, also to call women to the ministry of mercy and therefore to the office of deacon.”

Synod gave two grounds. The first one stated that “according to the testimony of Scripture, in apostolic times women shared in the office of the deacons (I Timothy 3:11, 5:9), and they too were called ‘deacons’ (Romans 16:1-2).”

We will consider each biblical reference in turn and so evaluate the grounds given.⁶ After that we will consider the second ground of the synod for this particular decision.

1 Timothy 3:11

This passage occurs in the middle of apostolic instructions on the qualifications necessary to be a deacon. After Paul stated that deacons must be men worthy of respect and so forth and that they must first be tested, he wrote: “Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things” (NASB).

The question is: who are the “women” mentioned in this passage? Are they the wives of deacons or are they female deacons? The Greek term in question can mean either “women” or “wives.” The term cannot mean “deaconess” even though such a translation is sometimes suggested.

Those who wish to understand the women as deaconesses argue that the word “likewise” suggests that the apostle is moving from discussing deacons to deaconesses. However, it is just as likely that the apostle means that as deacons must be dignified, so should their wives. Furthermore, it seems odd to continue right after this passage to again mention the qualifications for male deacons in verses 12–13, as if this reference to women is a mere afterthought. Such a flip-flop from deacon to deaconess and back to deacon in such a short passage (verses 8–13) is unnatural and unlikely.

⁶. More supporting information for the discussion on the office of deacon that follows can be found in Cornelis Van Dam, *The Deacon: Biblical Foundations for Today's Ministry of Mercy* (Grand Rapids: MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), 77–92, 113–30.

Furthermore, if the apostle had wanted his readers to know that he was now discussing female deacons, he would probably have been more specific and not used the term that can only be translated as “women” or “wives.”

It seems best to understand the women as the wives of deacons. The passage concerns deacons and their qualifications. Those qualifications include that they have spouses who are supportive of the diaconal work. After all, these wives could be expected to be involved in one form or another in their husband’s task as deacon by assisting him, especially when ministering to women.

There is no convincing basis to consider the women in 1 Timothy 3:11 as holding an official ordained office in the church. Not surprisingly, virtually all major English Bible translations prefer the rendering “women” or “wives” rather than “deaconess” or something similar.

1 Timothy 5:9

1 Timothy 5:9–10 states: “Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work” (ESV).

If the criteria for these widows are any indication, these women were probably enrolled to continue their service of good works for which they justly had the reputation. As needed, their work could include taking care of orphans, giving godly advice to young mothers (cf. Titus 2:3–5), and showing hospitality. The question is whether this service of love involved their being ordained to diaconal office.

Those favoring the ordination of women as deaconesses argue that the Greek term for “enroll” can be understood as being selected for membership in a group with a special task. That task is then understood as an ordained office. Also, it is reasoned that since the apostle has mentioned qualifications for overseer (1 Tim 3:1–7) and for deacons (1 Tim 3:8–13) and discussed elders in 1 Timothy 5:17–19, he must also have been referring to ordained office when discussing enrolled widows in 1 Timothy 5.

These arguments do not convince that an ordained diaconal office is in view. The verb “to enroll” simply indicates making a selection for membership in a specific group. It has nothing to do with being ordained or appointed to office. The text also makes no mention of this. Furthermore, it was not necessary for widows to be ordained to an ecclesiastical office to do their diaconal work. Since we must not draw conclusions that go beyond the biblical evidence, one must judge that there is insufficient evidence for deciding that widows were ordained into diaconal office. These were unordained women who served the church with their labour of love. They can be an inspiration for female diaconal work in the church today.

Romans 16:1–2

This passage reads: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well” (ESV)

In this and other translations such as the 1984 NIV, Phoebe is described as a servant which translates the Greek term *diakonos*. This word can also be translated as “deacon,” as, for example, in the 2011 NIV. Which should it be?

It is not enough to simply reason that since the word can be translated as “deacon” therefore it should be in this instance. The word *diakonos* is used many times in the New Testament to indicate a person who is of assistance to someone and is therefore translated as “servant” or something similar (e.g., Matt 20:26; 22:13; Rom 15:8). It is the context that must be decisive in determining whether the person in view is a deacon or more generally a servant or assistant.

There has been considerable debate, which we cannot enter into here, whether Phoebe was an ordained deacon or simply a servant of the church. The fact that this debate continues shows that at the end of the day, there is simply not enough information in Romans 16:1–2 to be able to conclude in any decisive manner that Phoebe was an ordained deaconess. The fact that the New Testament elsewhere gives male qualifications for the office of deacon (1 Tim 3:8–13) and nowhere else identifies a woman as a deacon underlines the dubiousness of concluding here that Phoebe must have been an ordained deacon.

Deaconess in the Early Christian Church

Synod Meppel also invoked church history by stating as part of the second ground that “the office of deaconess was also known in the early Christian church.” No proof was given for this statement. In evaluating the weight that can be given to this ground, we need to consider the following facts.

First, there is no evidence that women were ordained as deaconesses in the first two centuries of the early Christian church. This fact indicates that the apostolic instructions regarding the offices in the church as recorded for us in the New Testament did not move the early Christians to ordain deaconesses. Indeed, the late first century *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (15:1) specifically instructed that men be selected as deacons.

Second, ordained female deacons only appeared later in the third century in the Eastern church. The third-century Syrian church order, *Didascalia Apostolorum* (chapter 16) explained the necessity for female deacons. They could visit and help women especially in corporal works of mercy in sickness. Also, female assistance was needed at the baptism of women for reasons of modesty. Finally, deaconesses were to educate newly baptized women in Christian purity and holiness. However, not all Eastern churches accepted the idea of female deacons. By the end of the eleventh century, deaconesses had basically disappeared from the Eastern church.

Third, there is no positive evidence of deaconesses in the Western church until about the sixth century. The ordination of women as deaconesses was not widely supported and frequently prohibited. In the Western church, a special order of unordained widows helped in the baptism of women. However, eventually the order of widows and the function of deaconesses were absorbed into the monastic movement. Female deacons disappeared by the twelfth or thirteenth century in the Western church.

In light of the above, the appearance of deaconesses in the early Christian church is not very convincing as a justification for ordained deaconesses today.

Deaconesses in Reformed Churches

Synod Meppel's full second ground as justification for ordaining female deacons stated: "The office of deaconess was also known in the early Christian church. In a number of Reformed churches this office still continues."

The synod is in error to suggest that the office of deaconess continued from the early church until today. Deaconesses disappeared from parish churches before the Reformation of the sixteenth century and after the Reformation there was also no continuous ordination of women as deacons in Reformed churches.

Calvin wanted widows to serve in a second rank office of deacon but these women were not to be ordained. During the time of the Reformation Calvin's idea found little support because the biblical data did not convince the churches of the necessity of deaconesses. An exception was a decision made at an unofficial gathering of Reformed ministers known as the Colloquy of Wesel (1568). It thought it suitable that women be ordained as deaconesses. But the first official synod of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands (Emden 1571) made no mention of female deacons in their church-orderly decisions. Nevertheless, in 1573 the congregation of Wesel had four ordained female deacons to take care of the poor, sick, and expectant mothers. However, the Synod of Middelburg (1581) decided not to ordain women deacons. Should female help be needed for the diaconal ministry to sick women, then the wives of deacons or other capable women could be called in to help. Female deacons did continue to function for some time in various places, but they were not ordained.

The movement to ordain women as deaconesses in Reformed churches in the Netherlands and America started in the twentieth century. This movement met opposition on biblical grounds but eventually many Reformed churches ordained women into the diaconal office. In Canada, the church of L'Église réformée du Québec allows for the ordination of female deacons, but whether the practice is biblically justified is currently under discussion in this church.

Conclusion

Synod Meppel's appeal to Scripture and early and Reformed church history is not convincing in terms of justifying the ordaining women to the office of deacon.

Office of Elder

Synod Decision 5

"To declare that there are Scriptural grounds, next to men, also to call women to the ministry of oversight, pastorate and instruction, and therefore to the office of elder."

We will give and evaluate the grounds for this decision in what follows.

Deborah

Synod's first ground is that "women such as Miriam and Deborah portray women in the Old Testament who, in collaboration with men, acted as rulers and judges."

We will first focus on Deborah and discuss Miriam with Synod's second ground.

Is the fact that Deborah functioned as a judge and prophetess a valid reason to open up the office of elder to women today? The answer must be no when you consider the following.

A primary rule for the correct interpretation and application of Scripture is to place the passage in question within its biblical context. Deborah lived in the days of the judges. In these critical times Israel cried to the LORD for help and God used Deborah to give deliverance.

It is important to note how the LORD introduced Deborah and how he involved her for the salvation of his people. We read that "Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment" (Judg 4:4-5 ESV). With the preceding two crises, the Hebrew expression "the LORD raised up a deliverer" (Judg 3:9, 15) is used. We also frequently read of the judges being empowered by the Spirit for their military task (Judg 3:10; 6:345; 11:29; 14:19; 15:14). Remarkably, these expressions are not used with Deborah. Rather she is introduced as a prophetess and not a military leader.

As a prophetess she was judging Israel, that is, in the context of Judges, Deborah was leading Israel as a prophetess. When people came to her for God's judgment she spoke God's Word and so led his people. As a result, she summoned Barak and gave him God's command to mobilize ten thousand men to defeat the foe (Judg 4:5-7). To calm his fears, she accompanied him and so as spokesperson for the LORD gave tangible expression to the fact that God himself would go with Barak and give him the victory.

Deborah is never pictured as a military leader of Israel, a judge in the sense of Othniel or Gideon. She was a prophetess. Although she gave leadership through her prophetic task, she is not described in Scripture as the judge who delivered Israel from Sisera. Rather it is God who is specified as the deliverer of Israel (Judg 4:23) and he used another woman, Jael, to kill Sisera (Judg 4:21). Deborah's subordinate role as prophetess and not as military leader is also evident from the fact that God did not send Deborah to head the troops into battle, but Barak. Furthermore, when Samuel would later mention deliverers of Israel (1 Sam 12:11), he did not mention Deborah, but he did name Barak, the commander. Similarly, Deborah is not mentioned with the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, although several judges, including Barak (v. 32) are, but not Deborah. All of this underlines her relatively modest role with respect to the deliverance of Israel.

Deborah's function as prophetess was an exception within an exceptional situation. The fact that she was also known as the wife of Lappidoth could indicate the ad hoc character of her office. People came to her in the current circumstances for God spoke through her, but there is no record of her going out and prophesying among the people. Without taking anything away from her being a prophetess, it should not be forgotten that she is also identified as a married woman, indeed as "a

mother in Israel” (5:7). Her prophetic office was not everything. She also fulfilled a woman’s normal place in Israelite life.

Can Deborah function as an example for us to follow for today by ordaining women into the office of elder? The answer is clearly no. The situation in Israel was desperate and by way of exception God raised her up as a prophet in Israel. In this way God enabled her to pass on God’s command that Barak (and not Deborah) summon and command a military force against the enemy (Judg 4:6-7). God’s use of a woman and her need to accompany Barak were an implicit condemnation of the lack of male leadership in Israel (cf. Judg 4:8-10) and was akin to a disaster (cf. Isa 3:12). It showed that things had gone terribly wrong. Deborah is therefore not an example to be followed and her situation provides no justification to open the leadership offices of the church to women. But, as Calvin noted on 1 Timothy 2:12, God is sovereign and he can do in extraordinary circumstances what we are not allowed to do. He therefore did use Deborah in a special way for his service.

Miriam

Synod Meppel also gave as second ground that Miriam and Deborah “could also be called to this service by God Himself, as is evident from Micah 6:4, where the Lord teaches Israel: “I sent before you ... Miriam.”

Miriam’s leading Israel refers to an event after the Israelites had left Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and the LORD had drowned the pursuing Egyptian forces. Then “Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea’” (Exod 15:20-21). Miriam led the women in song. She is identified as “the prophetess.” What does this mean?

With respect to her identity as a prophetess, it is possible that Miriam received revelation from God (cf. Num 12:2) as one would expect from a prophet (cf. Exod 7:1-2), but Scripture nowhere indicates that she publicly proclaimed new prophecy. The public prophetic act of this prophetess was singing with a musical instrument and exhorting praise to God.

There are also indications elsewhere in Scripture that praising God and declaring his great deeds constitute prophesying. Saul, for example, met a procession of prophets with musical instruments prophesying and the Spirit came on him and he prophesied as well (1 Sam 10:5-11). This prophesying can best be understood as praising God. Another example that can be mentioned is when David set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of music in the temple. This ministry is then described as “the ministry of prophesying” and the singers are described as prophesying when they thank and praise the LORD (1 Chron 25:1-3). Consistent with the nature of this musical ministry, the leaders of the temple song are called seers or prophets (1 Chron 25:5; 2 Chron 35:15) and the poet Asaph is also called a seer or prophet (2 Chron 29:30).

Miriam’s prophetic task can therefore be seen in her music and singing ministry—an activity also associated with Deborah, the prophetess, when she with Barak, sang a song extolling God’s deliverance (Judg 5:1). And like Deborah, Miriam as prophetess gave needed leadership to Israel, along with Moses and Aaron (Micah 6:4). Her leadership was for the women of Israel since they were

the ones who followed her (Exod 15:20). In his sermon on Micah 6, Calvin notes that even though Miriam was a woman, God gave her this leadership role “in order that she might strengthen women.” In his commentary on this passage, he notes that “it was an extraordinary thing, when God gave authority to a woman . . . no one may consider this singular precedent as a common rule.” Indeed, how true.

It is noteworthy that synod’s decision ignores the fact that God punished Miriam with leprosy when she challenged the leadership of Moses (Num 12). Furthermore, Micah 6:4 is the only time that Miriam is mentioned as a leader along with Moses and Aaron. She is not mentioned in other places where the LORD says that he sent Moses and Aaron as leaders (Josh 24:5; 1 Sam 12:8; Ps 105:26). Her leadership in leading the women in singing at that one exceptional event cannot function as an argument for ordaining women to the ruling and leadership offices of the church.

Titus 2:3–5

The third argument synod used to justify ordaining women to the office of elder is: “While the New Testament names older men as elders, older women are also called upon to be an example and to spiritual care (Titus 2:3–5).”

The point of this argument seems to be that while older men are called to be elders (their qualifications are given in Titus 1), older women are addressed in chapter 2 and charged to do certain things which to the Synod seems to intimate that they too had an office. But this sort of logic does not hold. After giving the qualifications for the office of elder in chapter 1, the apostle next addresses different groups in the congregation. He first mentions the duties of older men “to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness” (Titus 2:2). The apostle then continued that “older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train young women to love their husbands and children” and so forth (Titus 2:3–5). After that the apostle addressed the younger men and slaves (Titus 2:6–10). There is no talk of office in Titus 2. Here the apostle gives instructions to the entire congregation. To seek justification for female ordination to ecclesiastical offices from the admonition that older women should be an example of Christian conduct to others simply does not hold.

Romans 16

Synod’s fourth ground is: “Paul’s description of Junia and Andronicus as apostles who were greatly esteemed (Rom 16:7) or of other couples as his co-workers (Rom 16:3) and his mentioning couples and a brother and sister in whose home a congregation meets (Rom 16:5, 15) create the impression that man and wife gave leadership in Christ’s congregation in positions of equal standing.”

It is difficult to understand how this fourth ground can give any support to the notion of women elders. In the first place, to suggest that Andronicus and Junia are a man and wife couple is saying more than what the text states. It does say that they are fellow Jews who were in prison with Paul. Furthermore, it is far from certain that Junia (or Junias as it can also be written) was a female.

There are strong arguments to insist that it could be a man's name.⁷ In addition, it needs to be ascertained what exactly is meant by the term "apostle"? Before discussing that it should also be noted that the text can not only be translated as "they [Andronicus and Junia] are outstanding among the apostles" (NIV 2011) but also as "they are esteemed by the apostles" (footnote in NIV 2011). The translation that they were apostles is one interpretation of the Greek, but other translations which remove Junia's identity as an apostle are also possible and indeed may very well be preferable.⁸

So what does the term "apostle" mean here? It should be stressed that the term can mean different things. It does not need to refer to the apostolic office such as Paul had. The first meaning of the original Greek term is "messenger." Paul used it in this sense in 2 Corinthians 8:23 and Philippians 2:25. So why could he not have used it with the sense of "messenger" here as well? The indications are that this is the case if the translation "among the apostles" is chosen. These "apostles" would be messengers. After all, the reference to the English word "apostles" is always those personally chosen by Christ. And these apostles were all male.

In summary, Romans 16:7 cannot be used to prove that there was a female apostle in the days of Paul. There too many uncertainties to make this claim.

The Synod also refers to a couple mentioned in Romans 16:3, namely, Priscilla and Aquila. This Christian couple had taken Apollos aside in Ephesus "and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26). This was clearly private instruction and not official ecclesiastical work. Priscilla did not participate in this teaching as a female office bearer (cf. also 1 Cor 16:19). Synod's references to Romans 16:5 and 15 prove nothing with respect to women in ecclesiastical office in the apostolic church.

Conclusion

Synod's arguments for female ordination to the office of elder are unconvincing. Furthermore, Synod's apparent refusal to let the full weight of the clear apostolic teaching on the requirements for a male eldership in the church (1 Tim 3 and Titus 1) come to bear on their decision-making process is unreasonable. Synod's decision to open the office of elder to women is contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.

Minister of the Word

Synod Decision 6

Synod Meppel decided:

"a. To declare that there are Scriptural grounds, that next to men, women also, who have received the necessary gifts, may be given permission to preach; and hence to delete the word 'male' from Article 1 of the general regulations governing permission to preach.

⁷. See especially Al Wolters, "IOYNIAN (Romans 16:7) and the Hebrew Name *Yēhunnī*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 (2008): 397–408.

⁸. For a summary of the debate and defence for the translation "well-known to the apostles" or something similar, see Michael Burer, "Rom 16:7 as 'Well Known to the Apostles': Further Defense and New Evidence," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58 (2015): 731–56. ESV (2016), NET Bible (2005) render "well known to the apostles"; Christian Standard Bible (2017) translates "noteworthy in the eyes of the apostles."

b. To declare that there are Scriptural grounds, next to men, also to call women to the ministry of preaching and instruction, and therefore to the office of minister.”

Synod gave five grounds for this decision. We will consider each in turn.

Prophetesses

Synod’s first ground was that: “the Old Testament already makes mention of prophetesses (Exod 15:20–21; Judg 4:4–7; 2 Kings 22:14) or of prophetic activity by women (1 Sam 2:1–10). In the New Testament also, already before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we read of prophetic activity by women. We note Mary and her Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55). We also read of Anna, who prophesied together with Simeon on the occasion of the infant Jesus’ presentation in the temple, and who served the Lord day and night in the temple (Luke 2:36–38).”

We saw earlier in this report how Miriam (Exod 15:20–21) and Deborah (Judg 4:4–7) were both exceptional in their function as prophetesses. Their work cannot function as a paradigm and basis for female participation in the office of the elder, including that of the teaching elder, the minister of the gospel. The appearance of the prophetess Huldah (2 Kings 22:14) and the mention of Isaiah’s wife as a prophetess (Isa 8:3) are also rare exceptions in the midst of the many male prophets that are mentioned elsewhere. Indeed, apart from the examples just mentioned there are no other instances of true prophetesses in the Old Testament. Mary’s song of praise or Magnificat has similarities with the Old Testament song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1–10) but like Hannah she too is not called a prophetess. With respect to Anna, the prophetess, her prophetic activity consisted of “worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day” in the temple. When Jesus was presented, “she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:37–38).

All the instances of prophetesses underline the fact that God is able to raise up whomever he wishes for special service. But such instances do not form a pattern for us to follow, especially if God gives clear guidelines for the office of teaching elder elsewhere in Scripture (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–8). Synod’s first justification for admitting women to the ministerial office is therefore not convincing.

The next three grounds all deal with prophesying.

Prophesying in the New Testament Church

The second argument which Synod Meppel used to justify female ordination into the office of minister of the Word is as follows. “The fulfillment of the promise of Pentecost (Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:17–18) is that sons and daughters, old and young, will share in the gift of prophecy. The New Testament displays that reality. On the day of Pentecost the apostles, together with other disciples, among whom possibly women (Acts 1:14), anointed by the Holy Spirit, acted as Jesus’ witnesses (Acts 1:8; 2:4–8). Other places, too, make mention of women who prophesied (Acts 21:9; 1 Cor 11:4–5).”

When Peter proclaimed that Joel’s prophecy was being fulfilled (Acts 2:17–18), he was explaining the striking phenomenon that all the believers, young and old, male and female, were telling “the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). Thus prophesying as explained by Peter is telling the great acts of God. One can say that by receiving the Spirit-given ability to tell the saving deeds of God to others, all believers are thus equipped to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this sense, all believers have the

prophetic office and calling. As we confess in the Heidelberg Catechism, we share in Christ's anointing and as prophets we "confess his name" (Lord's Day 12). However, the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy on the day of Pentecost involved more than this general prophetic office of all believers.

The context of Peter's referencing Joel's prophecy is that the Holy Spirit came down upon the believers and they "began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4). The result was that when people came to see what was happening they heard the mighty works of God each in their own language (Acts 2:8, 11). In response to those who mocked this speaking in other tongues, the apostle Peter declared that Joel's prophecy was being fulfilled. Thus not only the gift of prophecy but also of tongues were involved in this fulfillment.

In light of the above, one cannot use Joel's prophecy to justify female ordination. The fulfillment of this prophecy does not address it. Furthermore, when it comes to spreading the gospel in an official capacity, Christ did specifically address the apostles to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8; Mark 16:13; Luke 24:48; cf. Acts 13:31, 47; Col 1:23). It can also be noted that although Peter proclaimed that Joel's prophecy was being fulfilled, neither he nor the other apostles used this to advocate the ordination of women. To the contrary.

Synod's second argument also mentions "women who prophesied (Acts 21:9; 1 Cor 11:4-5)." This brings us to Synod's third and fourth grounds.

The third ground for the ordination of female pastors is: "the meaning of Scripture is that '*the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation*' (1 Cor 14:3). This manner of prophesying applies to both men and women,"

The fourth ground for female ministers is that "New Testament prophecy, as to its content, has always been understood within the Reformed tradition as the explanation of Scripture, and a Spirit-guided application to the present day, specifically in the preaching."

When considering these grounds, the key question is what is meant by prophesying in the passages that the synodical decision references? To answer that question, we will especially concentrate on 1 Corinthians since this is where the biblical proof for the third ground comes from. Prophecy is a special gift of the Spirit (1 Cor 14:1, 14) which was given to both men and women (1 Cor 11:4-5; also cf. Acts 21:9). It involved passing on revelation from God. This is evident from the close association of prophecy and revelation in 1 Corinthians 14. The apostle instructs: "Let two or three prophets speak, and let others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets" (1 Cor 14:29-32). These verses form part of the apostle Paul's instruction for orderly worship. Significantly he earlier introduced this section by writing: "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up" (1 Cor 14:26). By including "revelation" he clearly alludes to prophesying as his subsequent instructions show (vv. 29-32).

The revelatory character of prophecy is also seen by the apostle's closely associating the gift of prophecy with understanding "all mysteries." He wrote: "If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge . . . but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor 13:2). A mystery is that which

God needs to reveal. It is hidden to human beings. The apostle Paul considered himself to be steward of God's mysteries (1 Cor 4:1) which means that God used him to reveal what would otherwise have been hidden. As he wrote to the Corinthians: "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet" (1 Cor 15:51–52). Similarly, he wrote to the Roman Christians: "I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Rom 11:25–27).

Dr. Richard Gaffin, emeritus professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, has shown in more detail than is possible here that the revelation given by the prophets in the New Testament church was "on a par and of one piece with the inspired revelation received and proclaimed by Paul and the other apostles." Furthermore, revelation given through prophecy did not address "individualistic, purely localized interests, but concerns, along with apostolic revelation, the salvation in Christ with its rich and manifold implications for the faith and life of the church."⁹ Thus, it is not difficult to see that "the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Cor 14:3).

It needs to be recognized however that such a special revelatory prophetic gift was part of the foundation of the church and thus a temporary gift. And so, seeing that "the foundation of the apostles and prophets" has been laid with "Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph 2:20), such special prophetic gifts have ceased to be given to the church. As a result, the New Testament passages dealing with prophecy that are mentioned in the decision are not applicable as grounds for female ordination in the church today.¹⁰

Is Scripture Clear?

Synod's fifth and final argument: "While there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the precise interpretation of the apostolic command to 'be silent', comparative examination of 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Corinthians 11:5 and 14:26 shows that in any case this prescription cannot be understood as an absolute prohibition to speak (or preach) in the worship service."

This last argument is premised on the fact that Scripture is not clear since "there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the precise interpretation of the apostolic command to 'be silent.'" Is this true? The apostle wrote: "when you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation" (1 Cor 14:26). These words reflect the situation in the apostolic era when God gave special gifts of revelation and tongues to both male and female (1 Cor 11:4–5). With the completion of the canon of Scripture, there is no reason to think that God will continue to give new authoritative revelation through the gift of prophecy. However, in the apostolic church revelations were received, but one had to be able to distinguish between true and false prophecy or revelation (1 Cor 14:29). In that context, the apostle charged that women were to be silent because judging prophecy could involve exercising authority over a male prophet which was not fitting for women since they

⁹. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost: Studies in New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 62.

¹⁰. On the foundation character and cessation of the gift of prophecy, see Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*, 93–102.

“should be in submission” (1 Cor 14:34). The fact that women were to be silent in that particular context was so important that this command was repeated three times (1 Cor 14:34–35).

A basic principle underlying the demand for the silence of women is that they should be in submission in accordance with the creation order as taught in the Law, that is, the Five Books of Moses, and specifically Genesis, chapter 2 (1 Cor 14:34; cf. 11:8–9). Similarly, God’s Word elsewhere says: “Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim 2:11–13). In other words, it is not fitting for women and their role over against men to speak publicly in church. This inappropriateness is not confined to the apostolic church since the reason for the submission of women is grounded in the order of the creation of male and female.¹¹

In light of the above, Synod Meppel’s final argument is unconvincing and does injustice to the clarity of Scripture, especially in light of the Bible’s requirements for the teaching and preaching office as spelled out elsewhere in Scripture (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–8) and the prohibition that a woman may not teach in church (1 Tim 2:12). If one part of Scripture is not completely clear to us, it should be interpreted in light of the more clear passages.

In Conclusion

It is very difficult not to sense that the egalitarian culture of our times has had an enormous influence on Synod Meppel’s reasoning which does not at all convince.¹² Scripture has clearly reserved the teaching and preaching office for qualified males (1 Tim 3:2–7; 5:17; 2 Tim 4:1–2; Titus 1:5–9) but the Synod makes no mention of these passages, apparently because they did not fit its vision for the office of minister.

¹¹. For more a more detailed biblical discussion than is possible here, see, e.g., George W. Knight III, *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 29–32, 36–40.

¹². See also our *Response to chapter 2, “Bijbelse bouwstenen”* (January 2017) of the report that served Synod Meppel. It is Appendix D to our full report.

APPENDIX I



Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland
Meppel 2017

Postadres: Postbus 770
3800 AT Amersfoort
Bezoekadres: Conferentiecentrum
Mennorode
Apeldoornseweg 185
8075 RJ Elspeet
Telefoon: 06 31 684 729
E-mail: synode@gkv.nl
Internet: www.gkv.nl

To the Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches
CRCA Sub-Committee on Relations with Churches in the Netherlands
C/- Gerard J. Nordeman
per email: gnordeman@cogeco.ca

Almelo, the Netherlands, 13 September 2017
Regarding: Response of the General Synod of Meppel to your letter
Our reference: 53-D-3-170913 - CanRC

Esteemed brothers,

In your letter dated October 18, 2016, our agenda item 53-D-3, you wrote to the General Synod of Meppel, 2017, of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, in relation to the suspension of sister church relations.

Synod has made a decision concerning this matter, a copy of which is attached herewith. On behalf of Synod, I request that you receive our delegates, in order to enable them to provide you with an oral explanation of our decision.

I trust that this information will be of service to you.

Yours in Christ,
On behalf of the General Synod,

Rev. Frans Wisselink,
Scriba II.



BBK / letters
16 June 2017

Materials:

1. Letter from GS Ede 2014 to the CanRC + 5 attachments, (01-12-2014);
2. Letter from GS Ede 2014 to the FRCA + 5 attachments, (01-12-2014);
3. Letter from GS Ede 2014 to the RCUS + 5 attachments, (01-12-2014);
4. Letter from Synod Baldivis of the FRCA 2015 (01-07-2015);
5. Letter from Synod of the RCUS (04-10-2016);
6. Letter from Synod of the CanRC 2016 (18-10-2016).

Decision 1:

in the light of the instruction of Scripture regarding the need for self-examination (I Corinthians 11), to appeal to the CanRC, the FRCA and the RCUS not to close the door to substantive discussion at synodical level, and to urge them not to prematurely break off the bond with the GKv, but to continue serving us and each other as churches of Jesus Christ in the world, especially when our insights differ.

Grounds:

1. The discussion with these sister churches has not been concluded, since none of them has responded to the letter sent to them by the General Synod of Ede.
2. As much as possible, sister churches are to support each other in upholding, promoting and defending the Reformed Confessions, in accordance with Scripture, in doctrine, discipline and worship (rule 1, to which the GKv have obligated themselves in their relations with sister churches).
3. Since the GKv wish to remain bound to the confession of God's Word, there is no cause to review the sister church relationship.
4. Mutual support to and from our sister churches is a Biblical calling (I Corinthians 12:14-26)

Decision 2:

to declare that, notwithstanding the intended curtailment of sister church relations by the CanRC, the FRCA and the RCUS, we from our side see no cause to review our sister church relationship.

Grounds:

1. As regards confession, church government, discipline and worship practice, there is no cause for such limitation.
2. The decisions of these sister churches need not induce us to reciprocate.

Decision 3:

to appoint the praeses and assessor of General Synod, together with the Deputies for Relations with Churches Abroad, to personally deliver letters to the CanRC, the FRCA and the RCUS, in order to facilitate a face-to-face explanation of our decision.

Grounds:

1. Sending a delegation on behalf of the General Synod to accompany the customary delegate from the Deputies BBK will serve to demonstrate our genuine desire for engagement and goodwill.
2. A face-to-face meeting will enhance opportunities for sound reciprocal communication.

APPENDIX J

Developments in the relationship between the Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt) and the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken, between 2014 and 2017.

General Synod Dunnville 2016 (Acts Art 104, rec.4.4.5) gave the Subcommittee for contact with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (lib.) the mandate *to monitor the ongoing discussions between the GKv and the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK)*.

However – when we read the report written by the GKv “Deputaten Kerkelijke Eenheid (DKE) to the GKv Synod Meppel 2017 it is good to notice that these deputies are involved in more discussions with a number of different churches in The Netherlands.

This has been triggered by changing circumstances in the GKv

- Doors have opened for more and more local contacts and conversations with other churches and church groups.
- This leads to more ‘faith recognition’ with other believers, beyond the walls of the churches.
- Especially for young people church boundaries no longer mean anything. They experience unity-of-faith separate from institutional structures.

In the first chapter of their report, under the title “...in eenheid van het ware geloof...”, DKE reflect extensively and in depth on the whole matter of ecclesiastical unity, and what the goals are that the churches should strive for¹³.

It is important to give this some more detailed attention to understand where the GKv is going with its ecumenical contacts, and why this is.

The Deputies state that they want to take as starting point the teaching of God’s Word with regard to the church, as summarized in LD 21 of the H.C., which emphasizes that Christ gathers his church ‘in the unity of the true faith’.

They then describe how this ‘unity of true faith’ led to striving for ecclesiastical unity with other churches, on the basis of the Reformed confessions. But this has changed. Today they also exercise what they call ‘ecclesiastical contacts’ with other Christian

¹³ The philosophy behind this and the paradigms that should govern this development have been outlined by one of the deputies in a 10-page document: *Als het tij verloopt verzet men de bakens* (literal: “when the tide changes, one must shift the beacons), meaning: “when the times/circumstances change, we have to adopt new methods/policies”. This document is added to the DKE report as an appendix. Important reading to learn what drives the changes in the GKv.

churches, with which they also experience this 'unity of faith', despite theological differences.

This came about in particular with the participation of the GKv in the so-called "National Synod". The DKE claim that in the 21st century we have the responsibility to acknowledge this and to find ways to do justice to this 'unity of faith'. Therefore they propose to maintain and expand those conversations as official "ecclesiastical contacts", even if "ecclesiastical unity" is not possible, because of significant theological/confessional differences.

Deputies do acknowledge that what we have and share in Christ cannot be separated from what we know and confess about Christ. They recognize how often the Bible warns against the danger of false teachings, and how often we are urged to maintain and protect the true doctrine. But those warnings and this need for doctrinal discernment do not seem to function when they stress the ongoing calling to strive for unity, as part of the ongoing sanctification of God's people. There is indeed a call to seek unity. But there is also the call to obedience. And the question can be asked: is the joyful recognition of this growing unity of faith evidence of a growing and deepening obedience to God's Word?

As the DKE envisage this process to develop, they distinguish between unity in faith / unity in Christ as the foundation, and ecclesiastical unity as a unity in what is being built on this foundation. The terminology comes from 1 Cor.3, where the apostle Paul distinguishes between Jesus Christ as the foundation of the church and the different ways in which people build on this foundation.

But the exegesis of this passage and how it is used by the deputies in the above-mentioned context is very questionable – to say the least! For Paul the variety of building material when people claim to build on the one foundation is reason for a serious warning, whereas for DKE such variety is acceptable pluriformity. Even if ecclesiastical unity is not yet, or perhaps never possible, unity of faith between churches can be experienced and practiced.

Deputies do not suggest that such ecclesiastical contacts in unity of faith should be entirely without any limitations. While ecclesiastical unity can only be established, based on Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity, unity of faith can be found with the Nicene Creed as basis.

But this also leads to many questions. How do the Confessions of the Reformation relate to the Ecumenical Creeds? Is there a contrast? The things in the Three Forms of Unity that are not mentioned in the Nicene Creed – are they less relevant or less biblical? Or do the churches in the 16th century simply expand what was already present in the early Creeds? Unfortunately DKE do not confront themselves with these matters.

The result of this is now that DKE do not only report on the ongoing discussions with the CGK and the NGK in view of possible ecclesiastical unity, as they have done for years, but also on a number of initial contacts with other churches in The Netherlands:

The Hersteld Hervormde Kerk (HHK), the Voortgezette Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (VGKN) and the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN).

Besides those contacts, via the DKE, the GKv are also involved in other bodies that promote ecclesiastical cooperation: The Contact Orgaan Gereformeerde Gezindte (COGG), The Nationale Synode/Protestants Forum and the Raad van Kerken in Nederland (RvK: National Council of Churches).

We have not studied and monitored all those contacts in the past, and we don't need to do this now. The alarming developments in the GKv have already gone beyond that.

But it is good to be aware that in the big picture openness toward a wide range of ecumenical contacts cannot be isolated from the dramatic changes we observe within the GKv.

When we focus on the mandate given in art.104 of the Acts of GS Dunnville 2016, we have to look in particular at

- A. Developments in the relationship between the GKv and the NGK,
- B. Developments regarding the GKv participation in the National Synod.

A. Contacts with the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken

Observations gleaned from the DKE report for GS Meppel 2017

1. The discussions between GKv and NGK, in view of working towards ecclesiastical unity, continued between GS Ede 2014 and GS Meppel 2017. In mutual consultation the following topics were identified to focus on:
 - a. Comparing the Church Order (CO) of the GKv with the Akkoord voor Kerkelijk Samenleven (AKS) of the NGK, including the matter of binding to the confession, and how this functions within the NGK.
 - b. Women and Office¹⁴
 - c. The sacraments
 - d. The request of the NGK to open the pulpits for each other's ministers.

2. The deputies have noticed that, while there is growing mutual trust between the GKv and the NGK, there are still fears, hesitations, concerns and questions among the members of both church federations. They conclude that, despite the fact that in several places local GKv and NGK congregations have some form of cooperation, these misgivings require that moving towards ecclesiastical unity needs patience.

¹⁴ The NGK decided in 2005 to open all offices for women.

3. In 2016 the NGK decided that the offices in the church will not be open for practicing homosexuals who live together in a relationship of love and fidelity.
4. The majority of DKE concluded that in the practice of the NGK the binding to the reformed confession has become more and more similar to the practice in the GKv. However – in connection with this the deputies also acknowledge that this is not so much the result of a more firm binding in the NGK. They observe that in the GKv much has changed with regard to how the binding to the confession is experienced.
5. Concerning the issue of female elders and ministers in the NGK – the DKE did not give this much attention in their discussions with the NGK in the time between GS Ede (2014) and GS Meppel (2017). In 2014 Synod Ede had again appointed committees to study this matter, and the DKE realized that future discussions with the NGK about this topic would depend on the outcome of these studies and on a possible decision of the 2017 Synod.
6. The majority of the DKE proposed a new ‘general regulation’ for cooperation with the NGK, which would include the rule that ministers in the NGK are declared authorized to preach in the GKv, and that members of the NGK can be admitted to the Lord’s Supper and received as members in the GKv as well.

Minority Report

A minority of three members of the DKE presented an additional report to Synod Meppel. They analyse in particular the developments in the contacts and discussions with the NGK, as well as the approach of the DKE in light of previous synodical decisions concerning this ecclesiastical process.

The three brothers offer a very critical analysis of what has been and what is still going on.

Among other valuable observations, they come to two significant conclusions:

- a. In the discussions with the NGK the DKE has consistently failed to address the most crucial matters for the relationship: the binding to the confession, and the question how to deal with office bearers who disagree with parts of the reformed confessions.
- b. The issues which 50 years ago caused the split between the NGK and the GKv are now by DKE themselves presented as, not only valid, but even necessary topics to be considered within the GKv.
This confirms what we, as subcommittee for contact with the GKv, did already report to GS Carman 2013 and GS Dunnville 2016: the fact that the GKv and the NGK have grown so much closer together in the last eight years, is not because the NGK has changed and become more reformed, but because the GKv has become more and more like the NGK (see also under ‘observation’ #4).

It is remarkable and regrettable, but at the same time very telling, that in the decision of GS Meppel about the relationship with the NGK the important analysis and conclusions of this additional minority report are simply completely ignored.

General Synod Meppel 2017

In the meantime Synod Meppel made the decision that women can be called to serve as ministers, elders and deacons in the GKv. This step will have a number of repercussions, but when it comes to the relationship with the NGK, we have no doubt that it will work as a catalyst to accelerate the process of ecclesiastical unification.

Synod Meppel concluded that with this decision an important obstacle for unity between the GKv and the NGK has been removed. Synod also observes with deep joy that God gives them the gift of renewed spiritual unity with the brothers and sisters in the NGK.

Based on the observation that there are no longer essential differences between both church federations, Synod Meppel decided:

- to instruct DKE to do all that is required to prepare a reunification of both church federations, and
- to accept the invitation of the NGK for a joint meeting of this Synod with National Assembly [of the NGK] aimed at reunification.

This meeting has been scheduled for November 11, 2017, to be held in Kampen.

APPENDIX K



deputaten **B**etrekkingen **B**uitenlandse **K**erken
Committee on relations with churches abroad of the Reformed churches in The Netherlands

To the sisterchurches of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands

Zwolle, 23 December 2016

Esteemed brothers,

At this moment the Theological University in Kampen is involved in a process of exploring the possibilities of constituting a Reformed Theological University together with different reformed denominations in The Netherlands.

In the past several sisterchurches have expressed their concerns regarding the biblical standards of the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands. Therefore we would like to be transparent and provide insight to our sisterchurches in the Biblical confessional and basic principles of theological education and research which are endorsed by the Theological University in Kampen. Please, find enclosed an English translation of chapter 2 of the report 'Moving forward together, in His service, to a Reformed Theological University'. The reformed identity described in this document can be seen as the hermeneutical principals of the Theological University in Kampen.

By sending this document we hope to serve you and your churches.
Wishing you a merry Christmas and the blessing of our Lord in the new year to come!

Yours in Christ,
With warm greetings,

ds. M.H. Oosterhuis, general secretary BBK

deputaten **B**etrekkingen **B**uitenlandse **K**erken
committee on relations with churches abroad of the Reformed churches in The Netherlands

P.O. BOX 499
T: (+31) (0) 38 427 0 470

8000 AL ZWOLLE
E: info@bbk.nl

THE NETHERLANDS
W: www.bbk.gkv.nl

Chapter 2 of “Moving forward together, in his service, to a Reformed Theological University” Steering group report GTU – November 7th 2016

Identity

A new start on the same foundation

In the Reformed Theological University reformed denominations, each with its own colour and origin and each with its own distinct church-life, come together. Despite differences in style and perception they all belong to “the reformed tradition” and within this tradition, share a common bond in their heartfelt confession of faith based on the Bible and the Three Forms of Unity. Members of the churches concerned have long since met and recognised one another, in various contexts: in education and in welfare, in political and in social organisations. During the last decennia there has also been a strong growth in the exchange between churches such as through pulpit exchange, as well as various forms of cooperation in theological areas. There has been an intensive and fruitful cooperation between the TUA, TUK and the NGP by way of research groups that were integrated 15 years ago. Theologians from the Gereformeerde Bond and the Hersteld Hervormd Seminarie have been involved in joint publications, congresses and cooperative projects. A clear sign of the increased trust and mutual recognition is the cooperation there is with regards to the publication of The Netherlands’ largest theological magazine, *Theologia Reformata*. For some time now an awareness has existed of a connection in faith and a mutual responsibility for reformed theology in our country.

In the initiative of the Reformed Theological University the lines mentioned cross each other. The Reformed Theological University is introducing a new, and further reaching phase in the process of interuniversity and inter-ecclesiastical cooperation on reformed grounds, and will give this cooperation more body. The goal hereof is to create a stimulus for the practice of theology in the full spectrum of the reformed tradition. Under God’s blessing the Reformed Theological University wishes to give a new élan to the training and equipping of theological students for their task in the church, the academic world and society. A first condition that needs to be met is a mutual and shared conviction concerning the identity and foundation of the Reformed Theological University. All of the parties that support the Reformed Theological University, accept completely and without reservation the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God and commit themselves to the reformed confessions, as being an apt putting to words of truth given in the Bible. In this, the Holy Scriptures have the ultimate authority. Basing ourselves on this foundation has consequences for the way we deal with the Bible, and for our vision concerning theology and the meaning theology has for the church and for society. This is elaborated further in the preamble of the Reformed Theological University. The framework texts in this preamble explicate distinguishing coordinates of reformed scriptural examination and hermeneutics, coordinates that define the way theology is practiced at the Reformed Theological University.

Preamble

Positioning

The parties involved in the Reformed Theological University are aware of their unity through their faith in Jesus Christ, as God given Saviour and Redeemer of this world. We share the calling and desire to live in the service of the proclamation of the Gospel, to God’s glory and for the salvation of our fellow men. By the power of the Holy Spirit this Gospel remains a trustworthy and living Word of God, even in our day and age and in our society, also with our culture’s degree of secularisation. It is our joy, and we see it as our calling, to work on the progression of this Gospel by working together in a reformed university. We hope and pray that

this university will, under God's blessing, through its courses of study, its research and its knowledge dissemination, serve the churches and society, both in the Netherlands and abroad. The Reformed Theological University's academic practice goes hand in hand with a living profession of belief in the Church of ages. Historically and theologically the Reformed Theological University follows in the footsteps of the Reformation, the Further Reformation, the Secession and of Neo-Calvinism. Within the broad bedding of this reformed theology the Reformed Theological University seeks to research, further articulate and teach the importance and meaning of this reformed theology for our churches and for our society in this day and age.

Reformed tradition and the Holy Gospel

The Reformed Theological University aims to be a place where the different reformed traditions, coming forth out of the Reformation, meet. Piety is experienced here and academics practiced out of a heartfelt consent for the reformed confessions concerning the Holy Gospel as expressed in articles 2 – 7 of the Nederlands Geloofsbelijdenis (Belgic Confession).

The Bible is the Word of God, written down by people as inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Bible testifies unto itself of its own authority. We accept the Scriptures before examining them and we let our questions not only be answered by the Bible, but also let them be corrected through it, in order to let it determine our thinking and our insights.

In communion with the Church of all times and places we confess the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures as the life-giving Word in which God makes himself known. In all of their diversity, the books of the Old and the New Testament together, form a spiritual union in the Bible. The Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that the Scriptures were given by God to direct our faith to, to found our faith on and to confirm our faith by. We believe that God's Word is the truth and that we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are led by this truth.

For an understanding of the Scriptures a theologian needs a head and a heart. In order to discern the meaning of the Scriptures a theologian is reliant and dependant on the work of the Holy Spirit, the "first Author". Word and Spirit are inseparable.

The practicing of Reformed Theology

Theology is, in faith, contemplating God as he has revealed himself. We practice this theology as an instrument in our praise of God. The Reformed Theological University and the associated church office studies, educate their students by teaching them to listen to the Scriptures. Herein also lies the prime task being the forming and equipping of future ministers of the Word. In researching and interpreting the Scriptures, reverence for the text, as the Word of the God who speaks, comes before traditional, cultural or personal preferences. This implies the wish to do right to the unique nature and style of the Bible text, in order to so completely respect the way of the Holy Spirit in putting the Word to writing.

Every Bible text is part of a larger whole: the Biblical message that is connected to and supported by salvation history, God's path with mankind and the world through creation, the fall, redemption and restoration. The salvation historical and eschatological perspective is essential for the reformed exegesis, as it provides insight into the unity of the Old and New Testament. Time and again, when interpreting the meaning of a text, both the direct and the broader context of the text are taken into consideration. The canon as a whole serves as a sounding board for the individual texts.

God, who has revealed himself in Christ, is also the creator of heaven and earth. Because of this we also incorporate the vision of the created reality, in which God's multicoloured wisdom is reflected, into our practice of theology and, where necessary and possible, try to find ways to discuss this with other academic fields. Theology as a contemplation of God, His creation and the meaning of the redemption in Jesus, chooses not for isolation but rather for its place amongst other academic fields. The Reformed Theological University wishes to serve the church and society together with Christian academics working in other academic fields. In this, God's revelation, through his path with Israel and in the coming and work of Christ, is for us the exploratory and innovative perspective in which we see reality and the standard for the truth.

We bring ourselves along when we read the Scriptures, with our own way of thinking and our own presumptions, within the reality in which God has placed us. We cannot simply take ourselves out of the equation. The message of the Scriptures seeks to land specifically in the reality of our lives, including our culture, but can, more than once, also have a critical effect on it. In every time and place disciples of Christ may retrieve old and new things from the treasury of the Scriptures. (Matt. 13:52) The Scripture itself always has the last word in this, and not our traditional and cultural preferences or moral intuitions. The pointing out of God's lasting regulations for our lives requires, also in our culture, scripturally secured wisdom and sensitivity.

Meaning for our time and society

Because we receive the Gospel in the context in which we live, we practice a Reformed theology that enters into conversation with, and is fruitful for, our time, culture and society. A Reformed theologian turns to the Scriptures with questions from various domains: faith, ethics, society and science. In his quest for answers he will endeavour to understand the Scriptures as well as possible in order to interpret them as purely as possible. In this, decisions made will not always be the same for all parts of every reformed tradition. Even in a framework that is based on a heartfelt adherence to the Scriptures and our confessions, our explanations and understanding of the Scriptures when dealing with modern day questions will weigh text evidence differently, inevitably causing tension. In the realisation that our understanding will always be incomplete and that our academic knowledge is limited and temporary in character, theologians should always be transparent in their research questions and methods, and must always be willing to give accountability. In this way the mutual understanding is served and furthered.

The understanding and interpretation of the Scripture can present us with many questions to which there are not always uniform answers. It is therefore all the more important to engage in a mutual and precise manner of listening to the Scripture itself, in the realisation that we are dependent on the Holy Spirit. This prime task given by the Scripture to the practice of theology ensures that the Bible does not become a "paper pope". Sola scriptura is directly connected to solus Christus. Christ is the heart of the Scripture, it revolves around him. Reformed theology listens to the scriptures through Christ and to Christ. Thus, again and again, it presents, and answers, questions in every age and in varying contexts.

Mission and profile

The Reformed Theological University is aware of its calling with regards to the preservation, thinking through and further expansion of the heritage of reformed theological practice in the today's world. We wish to effectuate this mission by giving the input of both orthodox and neo-Calvinistic spirituality their full share and where possible bring them together in the practice of theology. The core value is "learning by meeting one another". In this, pietas et scientas, are ever closely connected. Continuing in this line the mission and profile of the Reformed Theological University can be worded as follows, whereby the Preamble is presumed to be its base.

Mission

The Reformed Theological University endeavours to be a home base for reformed theology in the Netherlands, a recognisable address for church and society. The spiritual forming and the academic and practical enablement of theologians, both future ministers of the Word and those who will serve God's church and Kingdom in other ways, are given a high priority.

Starting from various church backgrounds, the Reformed Theological University endeavours to be a meeting place for those who wish to reflect on theology, academics, church and the Christian presence in today's society, in line with the reformed tradition. To enable this, cooperation is sought with like-minded institutions, both foreign and domestic. The Reformed Theological University wishes to be an inspiring university for students and employees, a university that motivates the practice of theology at an academic level, in a context of spiritual forming and enablement. To make this possible the university offers various (part-time) studies: Bachelor of Theology, a Master of Theology (general), among others a Master of intercultural reformed theology, and a research Master. Besides this the Reformed Theological University is also home to a Master of Divinity for the education of pastors for the CGK, the GKv and the NGK. As comprehensive reformed theological university the Reformed Theological University guarantees good education and innovative research of the highest quality. The university develops activities in the field of knowledge valorisation for a wide audience in both church and society. Besides this the Reformed Theological University desires to be of meaning to Christians employed in other academic fields.

Profile

The basis of the Reformed Theological University lies in the desire to strengthen the practice of Reformed theology with the intent of building the churches with which we are connected, both in the Netherlands and abroad. While praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and drawing from the source of the living Word of God, confessional academics dedicate themselves to the spreading of the Gospel, in a desire to make a contribution to all the work required in the Kingdom of God. Piety and academics, doctrine and life, study and church are all entwined. The practice of theology at the Reformed Theological University is rooted in the confessions of the Church of Ages and in Reformed Theology, as developed since the Reformation. With respect for every person's uniqueness and input the Reformed Theological University seeks the to make the practice of reformed theology, in its full breadth and colour, fruitful for today's church and society.

APPENDIX L

The Theological University in Kampen (TUK) and Reformed Hermeneutics Today

An official publication of the TUK explains how Reformed hermeneutics should function in our time and culture. Thirteen essays by faculty members of TUK comprise the volume: *Gereformeerde ethiek vandaag* (2017).¹⁵ The TUK will host a conference on this publication on September 29, 2017.

A brief consideration of an important essay in this latest publication is important for trying to understand recent synod decisions concerning admitting women to office and probably also the decision that is still forthcoming on admitting practicing homosexuals to the Lord's Table. It is beyond the scope of this brief report to go into all the essays of this collection of essays. That would require another book. For our purpose, we focus on the contribution of Prof. De Bruijne who teaches ethics.

Ethics and Hermeneutics

In Ad de Bruijne's contribution, "Ethiek en hermenutiek" he asserts that we need a better vision than simply basing our ethics on the Ten Commandments (182).¹⁶ The central ethical hermeneutical question is: "what is the good life that fits with God's work in Christ on the way to the coming kingdom and *what is within the margins of the given situation the best way forward in that direction?*" (184-85, italics in original text). The primary answer centres on the threesome: faith, hope and love in which love forms the centre" (185).

De Bruijne goes on to claim that the ethics of the apostles was contextualized for their situation. We also need to attune to the culture of our day as the apostles did. They gave different advices depending on the situation (188-89). When it comes to today: "Factors such as experience, reason, fellowship and context remain standing within the framework of the encompassing narrative of Scripture. Therewith they are hallowed ("geheiligd") and they can fully participate within the ethical hermeneutic" (190).

De Bruijne details five consequences in light of the above.

Firstly, "Ethical hermeneutic needs to interpret explicitly the reality in which we seek the good life. After all, the reality was included in the grand narrative of Scripture. Reality is not just a passive field into which we can apply biblical norms. Also according to Article 2 of the Belgic Confession reality forms part of God's revelation. Reality can teach us much, as is evident in the biblical wisdom literature" (190-91). De Bruijne then paints with a very large brush as to what is all included in the reality that helps us to make ethical decisions. This reality includes films and other cultural phenomena evident in our western, Christian influenced culture (191).

Secondly, also self-understanding and self-critique belong to ethical hermeneutics. If you judge someone else, you judge yourself (Rom 2:1). Rational arguments are not enough. Love should be served, for example, also over against homosexuals.

¹⁵ Ad de Bruijne and Hans Burger, eds., *Gereformeerde hermeneutiek vandaag: theologische perspectieven*. TU-bezinningsreeks nr. 18 (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2017).

¹⁶ Some of the same themes are found in Ad L. Th. De Bruijne, "Christian Ethics and God's use of the Bible" in *Correctly Handling the Word of Truth*. Edited by M. te Velde and Gerhard H. Visscher (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014) 171-186.

Thirdly, De Bruijne notes that his approach to ethics through the hermeneutic of the apostles has consequences and gives correctives and supplements to common Reformed use of the Bible in ethics. We must reckon with [verrekenen] the contingent character of many ethical directives in the Bible. They do not stand apart from their own time and situation to which they are in the first place directed.

For instance, the Bible only says of homosexuality what was important in those days. The question that weighs the most heavily on us does not occur in the Bible, namely, that an upright Christian discovers that he has an involuntary homosexual orientation. Therefore, what the apostles say about that topic is not automatically a sufficient answer to the questions. The apostolic guidelines were first directed to fellow Christians in the days of the apostles and do not automatically give direct guidelines to us. Rather they stimulate us to answer such ethical questions in our circumstances (192).

Fourthly, more than is customary in Reformed ethics, we need to ask attention for spiritual ability for mature (independent) and creative ethical judgments (Rom 12:1-2). The Bible indicates this with terms such as the ability to discern, wisdom, and sensitivity. The congregation has that ability. As those redeemed by Christ and recreated by the Spirit we have the ability to discern good and evil. Such an ability is presupposed in the Sermon on the Mount.

Fifthly, in light of the above, ethical hermeneutics has an emphatic spiritual dimension. A methodical approach will not get you results. Every positive outcome is a gift. Insights take you by surprise, also when you work hard at it. You get insights given to you both directly and indirectly by others. You listen and read, become educated, observe and move in a tradition. This typifies insight into God's Word and will (194).

The biblical phenomenon of prophecy teaches us that such knowledge ultimately comes from either God or a wandering spirit. Knowledge of good and evil is a gift of grace. Wisdom is given in answer to prayer (James 1:5). De Bruijne then references Acts 21:10-14 to show that prophecy was used to indicate God's will in a concrete situation. He claims that prophecy belongs with ethical hermeneutics. Christian ethical insight is impossible if we do not with the deed give ourselves over to the guidance of the Spirit. Without this attitude, Christian ethics becomes secularized, even if it justifies with an appeal to Scripture and reasons from biblical data (194).

This gift character of ethical insight teaches us to respect God's freedom if his Word does not give a clear answer. And if ethical insights appear from unexpected places we should value and use them.

The gift character of ethical insight makes us both bold [vrijmoedig] and humble. You do not use a gift with all kinds of qualifications and disclaimers, but you use them enthusiastically and with conviction. At the same time you fully realize that you only have what you have received (1 Cor 4:7) and that also "ethical bread" only comes on a "daily" basis. You cannot rely with confidence today on the gift of yesterday and you do not yet have the gift for tomorrow. Besides, mistakes are possible and fellow Christians may have better insights. Even the church as a whole has regularly erred in discerning God's will (slavery, place of women) (195).

De Bruijne continues by saying that our ethical surety is the surety of faith. In faith you dare to take the step. Precisely this attitude makes you stand open for God's eventual correction and further guidance. You must be open to revising earlier conclusions.

The gift character of ethical insight therefore motivates being receptive before God. Only the spiritual person can understand (1 Cor 2:14-15). We are only open to God if we are formed by the Spirit and participate in Christ's traits. It is not only so that ethical insights can change how we live our life, but the

reverse is also true. We receive deeper insight when we really conform to the image of Christ. First comes love. From this is born discernment (Phil 1:9-10). Therefore the most important function of the Bible is not even that it shows us precisely the way to go. Scripture binds us to Christ and makes us participate in his all-round spiritual ability to recognize the good life. Ethical hermeneutics is only possible when Scripture constantly instils in us a collective and personal liturgy. Only in such a spiritual environment do fruitful ethical insights originate. Sometimes we receive an ethical insight while we are dealing with a biblical passage that has nothing to do with the subject of the insight. But that biblical passage does bind us to Christ and forms a window on the encompassing framework of God's works. Therefore, no ethicist can do without an intensive interaction with the Bible (195).

De Bruijne then pleads for a more expansive Reformed view of hermeneutics in ethics. He asks: Are the Reformed confessions correct in stating that "Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein" (BC Art 7)? When that is meant to say that all the necessary ethical insight are found somewhere in the Bible or can be derived from the Bible, then that is not true. However, if we see the Bible as a witness of God's work in Christ and as the means whereby the Holy Spirit makes us partake in Christ, then the picture changes. All factors of Christian ethical hermeneutics are indeed in Scripture. Seen this way, Christian ethical hermeneutics remains indeed hermeneutics of the Bible (195).

Brief Critique

In general, one can conclude that this essay does not promote confidence in the ability of the Word of God to address the ethical issues of the day.

Ad de Bruijne suggests that the Bible is not enough for determining ethical decisions. He denies that all the necessary ethical insight can be found somewhere in the Bible or can be derived from the Bible. According to him, since the ethics of the apostles was contextualized for their situation, we also need to attune to the culture of our day and give different advices depending on the situation. De Bruijne overlooks the fact that the apostles were inspired when writing Scripture. We are not.

In response to De Bruijne's essay, the following can briefly be noted using the above numbering.

First, De Bruijne suggests that general revelation in which he includes culture can be a help for us in making ethical decisions. This notion is not biblical and our critique of it can be found in our report to the 2013 Synod held in Carman (pp. 66-68). It can also be noted that the good in our present culture is often due to Christian influences on the Western world. These influences in turn came from Scripture. So we need to go back to Scripture for our ethical bearings.

Second, it is true that rational arguments are not enough in making ethical decisions. Love should also be included. However, we must be careful not to create false dilemmas as if rationally using the Ten Commandments and its principles cannot and should not use love in administering the divine norms.

Third, when De Bruijne states that we must reckon with the contingent character of many ethical directives in the Bible and that they do not stand apart from their own time and situation to which they are in the first place directed, he is in danger of undermining the clear norms of Scripture. This is clearly evident in the toleration of practising homosexuals because they live together in love and faithfulness. God revealed his abhorrence of homosexual behaviour throughout Scripture and through all kinds of cultures (e.g., Lev 18:22; Rom 1:26-28; 1 Cor 6:9-10). Love is served if God's enduring norms are made clear to those trapped in homosexual sin.

Fourth, when De Bruijne says that we need more attention for spiritual ability and creative ethical judgments than is customary in Reformed ethics, is he suggesting that we go beyond what Scripture teaches? He says that Christ assumed such an ability in the Sermon on the Mount. But Did Christ really expect those who heard his sermon to go beyond Scripture? Christ even said that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. He reaffirmed the ongoing normativity of the commandments (Matt 5:17-20). We need to act according to the law, not go beyond it.

Fifth, when De Bruijne emphasizes the spiritual dimension in ethical judgments, he correctly emphasizes that we need to interact with the Word of God. However, by suggesting that prophecy belongs with ethical hermeneutics, he opens the door to ethical judgments that could contradict the clear text of Scripture. We have no promise from God that he will give us prophecies from time to time in order to give us ethical direction. He guides us by his Word and Spirit (Heid Cat, LD 12).

In conclusion, De Bruijne is incorrect to conclude that all the necessary ethical insight cannot be found in the Bible or derived from it (195). Scripture contains everything we need to know. The Ten Commandments give us the basic divine norms from which we can derive the necessary ethical principles. Also, “we must agree, based on the apostolic appeal to the law in Romans 13:8-14, James 1:22-2:13, and 1 John 3, that the apostles most certainly assumed and taught the authority of the Ten Commandments and expected Christians to put them into practice.”¹⁷ Furthermore, contrary to De Bruijne’s view on an example he uses that we have no guidance from Scripture on environmental issues, the principle of stewardship and care for creation so clearly articulated in Scripture is a basic and sufficient guide to navigate the ethical waters of caring for God’s creation (e.g., Gen 2:15; Ps 24:1; 95:5; 145:9; Prov 12:10; 1 Pet 4:10). All other ethical areas can likewise be guided by God’s Word if we recognize the principles that the Word teaches us.¹⁸

¹⁷ Theodore G. Van Raalte, “Christian Ethics and God’s Use of the Bible” in in *Correctly Handling the Word of Truth*. Edited by M. te Velde and Gerhard H. Visscher (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 191.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. “Must We Go ‘Beyond’ the Bible?: The Theological Use of the Bible.” in *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*. Edited by Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Moisés Silva. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 82-93.

APPENDIX M

Dr. J.M. Burger
 c/o Theologische Universiteit
 Broederweg 15
 8261 GS Kampen
 The Netherlands

19 July 2016

Dear brother Burger,

This letter comes to you from a synodical committee of the Canadian Reformed Churches which has submitted a report to Synod Dunnville 2016. In this report, we evaluated developments within our Dutch sister churches (GKv). Among other things we critiqued your essay, "Voorbij de offerkritiek" which was published in *Cruciaal: de verrassende betekenis van Jezus' kruisiging* (2014). Please find this part of our report attached to this letter.

In response to this critique, a church submitted a letter to General Synod Dunnville claiming that this committee misrepresented your views. Synod therefore considered that "it would be important for the SRN [our committee] to further investigate these concerns." We were mandated "to continue to observe developments at the Theological University of the GKN in Kampen (TUK), this includes paying attention to the article by the Rev. Dr. Burger."

In the light of the above, we would like to ask you the following:

1. Did we misrepresent you in our critique of your article in *Cruciaal*? If so, could you point out where?
2. Have you since revised your views and publicly withdrawn your contested views as published in *Cruciaal*?

We very much want to fair to you as a brother in the Lord. Up to this point we are not convinced that we have wronged you. What you publicly wrote, we took the liberty to critique. It also struck us that the letter sent to Synod criticising our analysis of your writing did not indicate or show how we had misrepresented your position as given in your *Cruciaal* article.

We look forward to hearing from you.

With brotherly greetings

For the Subcommittee for Relations with the churches in the Netherlands



Gerard J. Nordeman, secretary

Cc: SRN Members Rev. J. De Gelder, Rev. J. Moesker, Dr. C. Van Dam

Excerpt from the CRCA-SRN report to synod Dunnville 2016

3. Hans Burger and Christ's Sacrifice

Dr. Hans Burger, appointed by Synod Ede as university docent in Systematic Theology, recently published an essay “Voorbij de offerkritiek” [Beyond Critiquing the Offering] with subtitle, “Het beeld van het offer” [“The Image of Sacrifice”].¹⁹ He notes that today words like sacrifice, scapegoat, and sin offering tend to have a negative connotation. How then can we speak of Christ's sacrifice as something positive when the word sacrifice has such a negative connotation in our culture for someone who has not grown up in the Christian faith (52)? What follows in Burger's writing is quite confusing. It appears that Burger wants to express the gospel in such a way that it is more understandable and acceptable to our current postmodern culture by downplaying the element of sacrifice. He unjustly suggests that the Bible is also critical of sacrifice (53) and questions dogmatic formulations of Christ's sacrifice. He writes that it is important to distinguish Scripture's speaking of Jesus's death as a sacrifice “from dogmatic articulations such as ‘Jesus brings a sacrifice by bearing our punishment in our place as payment for our guilt. In this way he gives the required satisfaction to God and acquires our salvation.’ This train of thought you do not find in this way in the New Testament” (53-54). This is an incredible statement since the Scriptures clearly teach all these truths.²⁰ With this statement he appears to deny the substitutionary atonement of Christ. Indeed, he states that Jesus's death was not a sacrifice strictly speaking. But, on the other hand he acknowledged that he is the lamb that takes away the sins of the world and that his blood brings peace (54-55). Nevertheless, Burger considers the biblical concept of the substitutionary atonement as a medieval understanding of Christ's death which suited their cultural context.

Our current culture is not so receptive to this notion and so Burger looks for a more culturally acceptable understanding of what Scripture says concerning Christ's sacrifice. He opines that the sacrifice of Christ consisted in Christ's complete dedication in obeying his Father in order to fulfill his mission. In this way Christ makes us people who like him are dedicated to God. The cultic image of sacrifice emphasizes the positive of Jesus who in his dedication covers our sins and changes us to people dedicated to God. In this way our whole life becomes a sacrifice. With this type of reasoning Burger downplays, ignores, or even denies the importance of Christ's paying for our sins with his bloody sacrifice in order to satisfy God's justice as confessed, for example, in the Heidelberg Catechism (LD 3 to 6). Indeed, he comes close to making a caricature of God as unfair to demand sacrifice. After mentioning how God stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son, Burger writes: “The Bible does not therefore picture a strict God who wants to see blood. As if God wants to see people die, no matter what the cost. As if he is a Father who is so bloodthirsty that he just goes ahead and sacrifices his own Son: a miserable, immoral God.”²¹ But Burger glosses over the fact that God is holy and that his justice must be satisfied. Burger continues by speaking of God's love, but says very little of God's justice. Apparently in Burger's opinion, such would not be appealing or understandable to our current culture. For Burger, God's sacrifice in Christ is “primarily an appeal to our heart. It is a loving invitation not to continue to reject God's love but to answer it. . . . Connected immediately with the death of Jesus as sacrifice is the appeal that we give our life as thank and praise offering with full admiration for God” (65). “So Christ's sacrifice is the secret of our life dedication.”

While it is biblical to speak of God's love in connection with Christ's sacrifice (e.g. John 3:16), one also needs to underline the importance of God's justice and the principle of the necessity of blood atonement

¹⁹ Hans Burger, “Voorbij Het Offerkritiek (Het Beeld Van Het Offer),” in *Cruciaal: De Verrassende Betekenis Van Jezus' Kruisiging*, Henk Bakker and et al. (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2014), 51–65.

²⁰ With respect to Christ's sacrifice in our place: Rom 5:8; 6:4-5; 2 Cor 5:21; as bearing our punishment: Isa 53; 1 Pet 2:24; Heb 9:28; as payment for our guilt: Matt 20:28; 1 Tim 2:6; 1 Pet 1:18-19.

²¹ Burger, “Voorbij Het Offerkritiek,” 64. The original reads: “De Bijbel tekent dus geen strenge God die bloed wil zien. Alsof God wil dat er koste wat kost doden vallen. Alsof hij een Vader is die zo bloeddorstig is dat hij dan maar zijn eigen Zoon slachtoffer: een nare, immorele God.”

(cf. Lev. 17:11). By neglecting penal substitution, Burger seems to be articulating a neo-orthodox view of the atonement. Similar to Burger, neo-orthodoxy teaches that salvation should not be seen in the forensic context of the courtroom, “whereby Christ, by his substitutionary action obtains a benefit that is then passed on to others. Rather, salvation is to be found in the very being of Christ, and therefore union with Christ becomes the key doctrine.” United to Christ, we share in his reconciled humanity and so receive God’s blessings.²²

In sum, in trying to be more culturally relevant or understandable, Burger’s essay raises the question whether he still upholds the full biblical teaching of substitutionary atonement. Unfortunately, his views do little to encourage trust in the TUK among the supporting and sister churches.²³

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²². A. T. B. McGowan, “The Atonement as Penal Substitution,” in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A. T. B. McGowan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 197; see also pp. 194, 197-200..

²³. The above is sufficient for our purpose, but much more could be said about Burger’s essay. See, e.g., the discussions in Rev. D. de Jong’s blog: <http://www.bijbelknopendoos.nl/kn24.htm>; <http://www.eeninwaarheid.info/>; and the review of *Cruciaal* by J. Douma: <http://www.jochemdouma.nl/boekbespreking/>.

APPENDIX N

Dr. J.M. Burger
Hondsdrif 4
8265 DZ Kampen
The Netherlands

CRCA Subcommittee for Relations with the churches in the Netherlands
Gerard J. Nordeman, secretary

2 March 2017

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

Thank you for the letter of your CanRC Subcommittee for Relations with the churches in the Netherlands. This offers me the opportunity to clarify my convictions and my position concerning the doctrine of atonement. Having read the excerpt of your report to synod Dunnville 2016, I think that some things would benefit from further clarification. Unfortunately, it would seem to me that some passages in my article have been misunderstood. I really hope that this exchange leads to more understanding, as a gift of God's Spirit.

Let me make three preliminary remarks.

First, I do not deny the doctrine of penal substitution. I do affirm and believe that our Lord Jesus Christ in our stead bore the punishment that we deserved for our sin (cf. Is 53:5); he was cursed in our stead and to redeem us from the curse of the law (cf. Gal 3:13). Nowhere in my writings have I denied this and I cannot imagine that I would deny this, for Scripture teaches it clearly. In the appendix to this letter you find my other relevant publications.

Second, in my attempts to understand the atonement, I want to do justice to the manifold way in which the Scriptures teach us about the significance of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Images from different areas of life are used to show this significance, like the temple, the court, the battle field, and the slave market. This is a reason to examine the doctrinal tradition in light of Scripture, and ask whether this tradition really speaks in accordance with Scripture. In the dogmatic tradition, we often find that images from different contexts are used to interpret each other, like this:

Sacrifice (cultic) = substitutionary bearing of punishment (juridical) = gift of satisfaction (juridical)
= payment of guilt (juridical; originally slave market) = acquisition of (benefits of) salvation

What I am investigating is whether these equations are helpful to understand the different passages of Scripture. My aim is only to test the tradition of dogmatic discourse against the touchstone of Scripture.

Third, in my article in *Cruciaal* I have focussed on the cultic image of sacrifice, without interpreting it too quickly in juridical terms. Thus, it would not be correct to equate my article with a complete doctrine of atonement. The article concerns only the image of sacrifice. It states that we cannot understand the image of sacrifice completely without the use of other images. I affirm the

importance of the juridical images. As I wrote, the cultic images need other images and especially the juridical to explain their meaning (see p. 56, p. 59). But the aim of the article, however, is to focus as much as possible on the image of sacrifice. At the same time as the publication of *Cruciaal*, I wrote an article concerning forensic images (see Hans Burger, “‘Door zijn striemen bent u genezen’: een uitweg uit de verstaanscrisis”, in *Theologia Reformata* 57 (2014) 4, 388-395). To understand my position, both articles have to be read together. Without God’s justice (which is not the topic of my article), the Gospel would be no gospel. We need the gospel of God’s righteousness. It is not because I myself could not have done so that we asked Maarten Wisse to write the article about punishment and judgement. Of course, I could have written both articles in *Cruciaal*, concerning the cultic world and concerning the juridical world of the court. In that case, it is most likely that I would not have needed to have written this letter.

After these preliminary remarks, I would like to deal with several themes.

1. The role of culture and context

In theology, it is important to be aware of one’s context and of the questions that theological themes evoke. However, cultural relevance and contextual plausibility are no criterion for truth. It would be wrong to ‘express the gospel in such a way that it is more understandable and acceptable to our current postmodern culture by downplaying the element of sacrifice’.

This is not what I was seeking to do. In the article, I stated that for many today the idea of sacrifice is hard to understand. But what I was seeking to do, is answer the question ‘what did the authors of the New Testament want to say, when they wrote that Jesus’ death was a sacrifice (p. 55)?’

I am not looking for ‘a more culturally acceptable understanding of what Scripture says concerning Christ’s sacrifice.’ What I do wish to achieve is to make clear to 21st century people what the Bible teaches about sacrifice. And trying to be understandable is a virtue worth strive for for all who are guided by the Spirit of Pentecost.

2. Criticism of sacrifices

In my article, I dealt with several criticisms of sacrifice. I did not differentiate between them, and it may seem now that I regarded them all as one. Of course, we need to distinguish feminist or nihilist criticism of sacrifices from Biblical or prophetic criticism. I do maintain that passages like Hebrews 9:9.12.25-26 and 10:1-4 are critical of sacrifices. Only the sacrifice of Christ is effective. Hebrews is quite critical of Old Testament sacrifices. This criticism can be easily combined with the conviction that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of Old Testament sacrifices.

3. Difference between Biblical theology and systematic theology

In my article, I signalled the difference between the New Testament and Systematic Theology, and I answered the question: what should a Biblical understanding of sacrifice look like? Does Scripture itself give us an interpretation of the meaning of sacrifice?

In my article, I wrote that in Scripture we do not find statements like ‘Jesus brings a sacrifice by substitutionary bearing our punishment as payment of our debt. In this way, he give the required satisfaction to God and acquires our salvation’ (p. 54). We do find in Scripture that Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice; that our punishment was on him; that he payed the price to buy us. But the combination of

these elements in one systematic theological statement, is post-biblical in the sense that it moves beyond the words of Scripture into the field of systematic theological reflection. That does not mean that systematic theological reflection is prone to error, but it is still important to signal the fact that it is the Bible that is always authoritative, not systematic reflection.

And as I already wrote, I do not deny the substitutionary atonement of Christ. I do not know how I could do so. What only matters is that Scripture teaches this.

Third, I had good reasons to signal the difference between a sacrifice according to the Mosaic Law and the sacrifice of Jesus. It takes some steps to understand Jesus' death as a sacrifice. No clean Levite priest played a role in Jesus' death, but unclean Roman soldiers executed him. Jesus did not die in the temple and near the altar, but outside the city. The context of his death was not clean and holy; on the contrary, he died the unclean, unholy death of a cursed one (p. 54). Moreover, the Mosaic law forbids sacrifice of human beings. Nevertheless, the New Testament teaches that Jesus' death was a sacrifice. In my article I wanted to answer the question: why does the New Testament teach that Jesus' death was a sacrifice?

4. Our theological heritage

The report states 'Burger considers the biblical concept of the substitutionary atonement as a medieval understanding of Christ's death which suited their cultural context.'

My response to this statement would begin with the observation that a Biblical concept never can be medieval. Secondly, I wish to signal the difference between the language of the New Testament and later dogmatic formulations. For example, one will not find the word 'satisfaction' within Scripture. One does see the combination of Biblical elements in, for example, Anselm's doctrine of satisfaction and its reception by the Reformers as a reaction to problems created by the sacrament of penance.

Consideration like this lead to the following equations:

Sacrifice (cultic) = substitutionary bearing of punishment (juridical) = gift of satisfaction (juridical)
= payment of guilt (juridical; originally slave market) = acquisition of (benefits of) salvation

This doctrine of satisfaction makes it possible to say: "when coming to the priest in the sacrament of penance, a believer does not depend on his good works for his satisfaction. He depends on Christ's death." That is good theology: for the people who had to do penance and were insecure about their salvation, it was good news.

5. Sacrifice

Concerning my view of sacrifice, the report states: 'With this type of reasoning Burger downplays, ignores, or even denies the importance of Christ's paying for our sins with his bloody sacrifice in order to satisfy God's justice as confessed, for example, in the Heidelberg Catechism (LD 3 to 6).'

I would like to offer some remarks in reaction to this passage.

First, the article did not deny importance of Christ dying for our sins, paying the ransom to make us free, bearing our punishment, being cursed to save us from the curse, giving his blood for our atonement. Scripture teaches it. What I did in the article is to explain how we have to understand the sacrifice of Christ. The article was too short to explain completely how all these elements are combined into a systematic doctrine of atonement. Still, I did refer to many of them.

Second, the following understanding of sacrifice was suggested in the article:

Sacrifice = complete dedication to God = our dedication to God.

In line with the article this can be explained as the following:

Sacrifice = complete dedication to God (including the bearing of our guilt in accordance with God's will, the undergoing of our judgment) = our dedication to God = our sins are done away = we are bought free

6. Image of God

It is important that a doctrine of atonement does not suggest a wrong image of God. Our theology should not stimulate caricatures of God. Consequently, I regret that to the authors of the report interpreted the argument in my article as in any way misrepresenting our holy God.

God is good and fair – so how we speak about the atonement should fit with a Biblical image of God. This is the reason why I warned on p. 64 against defending the doctrine of atonement by using unbiblical caricatures of God. The aim of the article is similar to that of Herman Bavinck when he writes in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 3 p. 395 (in the original Dutch p. 384):

'The satisfactory nature of Christ's obedience, accordingly, does not consist in that Christ by his blood satisfied a vengeful deity and stilled his hatred and spite by a quantity of suffering'.

To see God as a vengeful deity, filled with hatred is wrong. Accordingly, it is in Bavinck's view, wrong to suggest in one's doctrine of atonement that God is like this. But for Bavinck as well as for me, it remains true that God's will includes Christ's death on the cross.

7. Gods wrath and holiness and penal substitution

I also want to make some remarks on God's wrath and holiness, and on penal substitution. God is holy and his justice must be satisfied. Therefore, I affirm the doctrine of penal substitution.

First, my article does not deal with the satisfaction of God's justice. It is about sacrifice, but not about the courtroom; not about punishment; not about judgment. I have written about the courtroom, about punishment, about judgment elsewhere, and we need these concepts in theology. Salvation should also be seen in the forensic context of the courtroom. If Scripture teaches that salvation should be seen in the forensic context of the courtroom (and Scripture does so), then we have to teach accordingly. We do not just need the context of the temple, we also need all these different contexts that the New Testament refers to: the courtroom, the temple the slavery market, , and the battle field.

Second, why did I stress that Jesus gives us perfect holiness? Because God is holy and as sinners we are not worthy to stand in God's presence. Moreover, because God is righteous, the article stated on p. 64: 'Daarin doet hij het schier onmogelijke: eerlijk zijn, trouw zijn aan slachtoffers van onrecht, het kwade straffen, misdadigers opruimen (de oude mens sterft), vrede en recht brengen, zonder dat er een lege aarde overblijft. Want als God vrede op aarde brengt en het kwaad opruimt, wie zou er dan overblijven?' This sentence includes the satisfaction of God's righteousness! Without the satisfaction of God's righteousness, the coming of God would result in an empty earth. No human being would survive God's presence, apart from Jesus Christ.

In your letter, you asked me whether I have revised my views or publicly withdrawn what I have as published in *Cruciaal*?

I have tried to clarify my position and answer critical questions several times, but this is all in Dutch. Below you find an overview of all my publications on the doctrine of atonement after *Cruciaal*. Until today, I have received the impression that my clarifications were convincing for members of the GKv, or at least satisfactory. No one has told me that I should withdraw or revise something, and more specifically, what it is that should be withdrawn and why. Consequently, the views expressed in the article were not revised, nor was anything withdrawn from the article in *Cruciaal*. Of course, it is possible that one may have my blind spots. You may be assured that I, too, would withdraw any views which may be shown to be erroneous.

I hope that this letter gives a satisfactory answer to your letter. If further clarification is needed, I am willing to give this.

Again, I am thankful for the opportunity that you gave me by writing me your letter. I hope and pray that God will give us a renewed, shared understanding of the meaning of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ at the cross. Here beats the heart of our Christian faith, here for all of us lies the source of our new life with God.

With brotherly greetings, in Christ our Lord,



Hans Burger

Appendix – some literature

Hans Burger, *Being in Christ. A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective*, Wipf and Stock Eugene Oregon 2008.

Hans Burger, “Door zijn striemen bent u genezen”: een uitweg uit de verstaanscrisis’, in *Theologia Reformata* 57 (2014) 4, 388-395.

Reaction on the website ‘een in waarheid’, ‘Cruciale kritiek 1’
<http://eeninwaarheid.info/index.php?rub=10&item=1102&zoekterm=hans%20burger> .

Second reaction on the website ‘een in waarheid’, ‘Cruciale kritiek 3’
<http://eeninwaarheid.info/index.php?rub=10&item=1129&zoekterm=cruciale%20kritiek> .

Hans Burger, ‘Waarom moest Jezus sterven? (2) Discussie over het offer van Christus – antwoord aan Bas Luiten’, in *Onderweg* 2 (2016) 6, 16-19.

Hans Burger, ‘Wil God bloed zien om iets te vergeven?’, in *Ambtelijk contact* 55 (2016) 3, 10-13.

Hans Burger, ‘Tussen atomisering en samenklontering: Op zoek naar Bijbels-theologische samenhang van beelden voor verzoening’, in Arnold Huijgen, Eric Peels en Cees-Jan Smits (red), *Schuld en vrijheid: Opstellen aangeboden aan prof. dr. G.C. den Hertog*, Boekencentrum Zoetermeer 2017, 61-79.

APPENDIX O

13 March, 2017

Dear Br. Burger

Thank you very much for your response to our questions regarding subject article.

We as committee have read it carefully and have a better understanding of your reasoning behind the article.

However we are not fully convinced that we were wrong in our critique as expressed to you.

We have detailed our observations in attached letter.

Again, we wish to express our appreciation for your having taken the time to try to take away any misunderstanding.

We look forward to perhaps meeting with you on April 5 in Kampen, D.V.

On behalf of the CRCA-SRN

Gerard J. Nordeman

Secretary

Dear brother Burger,

Thank you for your response of March 2, 2017 to our letter of July 12, 2016. We are happy to note that you do not deny the doctrine of penal substitution. We gladly accept your assurances in this regard. We will come back to this point later in our response.

We had posed two questions to you. We will consider your response of March 2, 2017 in light of these two questions.

Our first question to you in our letter of July 12, 2016 was “Did we misrepresent you in our critique of your article in *Cruciaal*? If so, could you point out where.” (We do not react to your other writings which you have sent us since we had not read them and they were not part of our report.)

In our critique, we had mentioned: “It appears that Burger wants to express the gospel in such a way that it is more understandable and acceptable to our current postmodern culture by downplaying the element of sacrifice.”

In your response you stated that “it would be wrong” to do this. Rather, you said: “What I do wish to achieve is to make clear to 21st century people what the Bible teaches about sacrifice.” However, in attempting to do this, we are of the opinion that you do not do justice to the biblical teaching on sacrifice. In your response to our concerns,

you first say that “I have focussed on the cultic image of sacrifice, without interpreting it too quickly in juridical terms.”

Secondly, you suggest that the Bible is critical of sacrifice and

thirdly, you signal “the difference between a sacrifice according to the Mosaic Law and the sacrifice of Jesus.” Let us briefly consider each of these in turn.

On the **first point**, can you really separate the “cultic image of sacrifice” from the juridical meaning underlying sacrifice? Sacrifice would not be part of the “cult” if it was not for God’s just demands for blood. The whole biblical rationale for the Mosaic sacrificial system was juridically anchored. Blood had to be shed because God demanded the life blood of man according to his divine justice. As Hebrews 9:22 summarized: “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (cf. Lev 17:11). Instead of demanding man’s own life and blood, God, knowing that man would not be able to bear his eternal wrath, graciously provided a provisional substitute life and blood by way of animal sacrifice in anticipation of the coming Savior (cf. Rom 3:25). Man had sinned, but animal blood was sacrificed. In speaking of sacrifice in a biblical manner, one cannot speak of it in isolation from its juridical significance.

You also mention: “We do find in Scripture that Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice; that our punishment was on him; that he paid the price to buy us. But the combination of these elements in one systematic theological statement, is post-biblical in the sense that it moves beyond the words of Scripture into the field of systematic theological reflection.” In our view, our original report on this issue stands and you are creating a false dilemma. If Scripture is crystal clear on the truths we confess, how can you justify the expectation that the Author of Scripture should summarize all the different elements regarding Christ’s work in one theological statement? Furthermore, your words could be interpreted as intimating that Scripture does not have theological statements or theological reflection. We should avoid muddying the waters with false dilemmas.

On the **second point**, it is not correct to say that the Bible is critical of sacrifices. The sacrifices were a means whereby the LORD graciously showed the gospel of the coming Christ. More about that in the third point. You refer to Hebrews 9:9, 12, 25-26 and Hebrews 10:1-4 as being critical of sacrifice. But the term “critical” is not correct here. These passages show the limitations of the Old Testament sacrificial service because they were shadows of better things to come, as God intended. They were divinely ordained. To criticize them is to criticize God’s good provision for his Old Testament people. It was God’s will to use them as types and symbols of the coming Sacrifice, the Lamb of God (John 1:29). Rather than thinking negatively about sacrifice, as you apparently assume modern man does, Scripture teaches us to rejoice and exalt in this provision of the Lord even if the notion of a bloody sacrifice may be distasteful to a modern mind. Modern man needs to hear how the apostle Paul rejoiced in the sacrifice of Christ. He knew that speaking of the crucified, sacrificed, Savior was foolishness to the Greek, yet he exalted in the message of the cross (1 Cor 1:18-2:16).

In the **third place**, you write in your response about “the difference between a sacrifice according to the Mosaic Law and the sacrifice of Jesus.” In *Cruciaal* you even say that “in strikte zin was Jezus’ dood geen offer” (54). What is the point of making such a statement? You back it up by saying that he was not a Levitical priest, that a priest did not kill Jesus, that he did not die in the temple on an altar and that he died on unholy ground (54). All of this betrays a lack of understanding on the nature of Old Testament types and symbols. That to which a type or symbol points is not the same as the type or symbol itself. Scripture makes clear what each type or symbol points to. And so the sacrificial service functioned as a type and symbol which had reference beyond itself, namely to the bloody atoning sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Scripture makes clear that due to the nature of the case, an exact parallel in the fulfillment with all the different aspects of the Old Testament sacrificial service is not called for and we should not try to find such parallels or question Scripture about it. The central point is that blood needed to be shed for the atoning of sin. This was the heart of the matter in the Old Testament and it was graciously fulfilled in Christ’s death on the cross. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We do not need to point out to you as a professor teaching at a confessional seminary the truth of the above as is evident in Scripture and as you yourself confess in Articles 20 and 21 of the Belgic Confession. In light of the above, we do not agree with your writing to us that “I had good reasons to signal the difference between a sacrifice according to the Mosaic Law and the sacrifice of Jesus.” We do not believe that there are good reasons to do so.

In this connection we also reject your contention that the confessions’ way of speaking of atonement originated in the Middle Ages. We believe it finds its origin in Scripture, as the relevant Scripture proofs found in the confessions also indicate. Furthermore, we should not create false dilemmas between what Scripture says and the church’s dogmatic formulations. For example, you state that one will not find the word “satisfaction” within Scripture. However, though the word itself may not be found in Scripture, the essence of it certainly is (Rom 3:25, Heb 2:17 “propitiation”). What we confess about Christ’s sacrifice comes from and is grounded in Scripture. Your reasoning (*Cruciaal*, 54) does not convince.

With respect to our criticism concerning your discussion on sacrifice that “with this type of reasoning Burger downplays, ignores, or even denies the importance of Christ’s paying for our sins with his bloody sacrifice,” we do not say that you intentionally deny the importance of Christ’s paying for our sins, but the type of reasoning that you employed can lead to such downplaying and even denial of the importance of Christ’s paying for our sins. For example, you write that “God beantwoordt menselijk kwaad liefdevol, door Jezus’ dood te gebruiken als oplossing voor onze zonden” (*Cruciaal*, 61). God used Christ’s death as a solution for our sins. Stating it this way gives the impression that Christ’s death was not preordained but that in Christ’s giving himself wholeheartedly to God in sacrificial obedience, he happened to end up on the cross and God then used the crucifixion as a solution for our sins. But Christ himself emphasized the necessity of his death and the coming cross (e.g., Matt 16:21; Luke 24:26). This

was all preordained to fulfill the Scriptures (e.g., Luke 22:37; 24:44). You have now clarified the issue by writing in your letter to us that you believe that “God’s will includes Christ’s death on the cross.” We are happy to read that clear statement for such clarity was not evident in your article in *Cruciaal*. This lack of clarity in your article is what apparently led us to misread (in your view) your comments on God’s love without paying the necessary attention to his justice. However, as we mentioned earlier in this letter, you cannot do justice to Christ’s sacrifice and say, as you do in your letter to us, “my article does not deal with the satisfaction of God’s justice. It is about sacrifice, not about the courtroom” et cetera. You cannot discuss sacrifice in isolation from why God ordained sacrifices to begin with.

In conclusion with respect to our first question, we remain convinced that considering the article we were critiquing that we were justified in our careful statement that “It *appears* that Burger wants to express the gospel in such a way that it is more understandable and acceptable to our current postmodern culture by downplaying the element of sacrifice” (emphasis added).

Our second question to you in our letter of July 12, 2016, was “Have you since revised your views and publicly withdrawn your contested views as published in *Cruciaal*?” We are happy that you wrote: “I do not deny the doctrine of penal substitution. I do affirm and believe that our Lord Jesus Christ in our stead bore the punishment that we deserved for our sin (cf. Is 53:5); he was cursed in our stead and to redeem us from the curse of the law (cf. Gal 3:13).” However, it appears that this affirmation was not clear in your essay in *Cruciaal*, since you state near the end of your letter of March 2, 2017, that “I have tried to clarify my position and answer critical questions several times Until today, I have received the impression that my clarifications were convincing for members of the GKv, or at least satisfactory.” We obviously were not the only ones who had difficulty with your *Cruciaal* essay. We understand the above as an admission that you needed to do further explanation of your views in order to satisfy others of your orthodoxy on this point. Although not technically a revision of your views, it did constitute a needed revisiting of your article which was indeed apparently confusing not only to us but to others also.

As committee we are thankful for the clarification which you have given us, but we do not think that we have misrepresented your views as articulated in your article in *Cruciaal* in our report to Synod Dunnville 2016.

May the Lord our God give you everything you need to train ministers of the Word of God for the faithful preaching of Christ crucified and resurrected.

Yours in Him

For the Subcommittee of Relations with the churches in the Netherland

J. de Gelder, J. Moesker, C. Van Dam, Gerard J. Nordeman, secretary

APPENDIX P

Involvement of the Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt) with The National Synod in The Netherlands, between 2014 and 2017

General Synod Dunnville 2016 (Acts Art 104, rec.4.4.7) gave the Subcommittee for contact with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (lib.) also the mandate *to monitor the results of the GKv's involvement with the National Synod.*

1. Background

- a. In 2010 the “National Synod/Protestant Forum” project was launched in The Netherlands as a personal initiative of some leading members of the Protestant Church in The Netherlands (PKN), in cooperation with members of other protestant churches. The GKv was not involved in the start-up, but was soon invited to participate. Initially it was presented as a discussion platform, an occasion to meet each other and discuss theological and ecclesiastical issues, without any mutual commitments and obligations.
- b. Synod Harderwijk 2011 approved the decision of Deputaten Kerkelijke Eenheid (DKE – Deputies Ecclesiastical Unity) to accept the invitation to participate in 2010, and instructed DKE to continue to be involved.
- c. In the meantime this so-called Synod has evolved into an organization with official representatives, appointed by the participating churches. Also the number of participating churches has expanded.
- d. Follow-up meetings were held in 2013 and 2016. These meetings were all held in the city of Dordrecht. This was intentional. The plan was triggered by the fact that in 2018/2019 it will be 400 years since the well-known Synod of Dort 1618/1619 was held. The plan is that the last meeting of this National synod/Protestant Forum will be held in 2018/2019, and again in Dort.

2. Observations from the DKE report and supplementary report for GS Meppel 2017

- a. It can no longer be said that in this so-called “National Synod” people just meet for a free and non-committal exchange of theological thoughts and ideas, like it's done at a conference. The 2016 edition of the National Synod has proposed that the participating churches enter into a covenant. At this point in time the commitments and practical implications of such a covenant are not clear yet. Some suggest allowing each other's ministers on the pulpit and receiving each other's members at the Lord's Supper.
- b. As confessional basis for such a covenant the Nice Creed has been proposed. The goal is to have these matters finalized at the meeting of this National Synod in 2018/2019, at the joined commemoration of the Synod of Dort 1618/19.

- c. DKE recommended that Synod Meppel decide to participate in this covenant, taking into consideration the identity and responsibility of the Reformed Churches in obedience to God's Word.
- d. The deputies emphasize that ecclesiastical unity of the participating churches is not the purpose of this covenant.

3. General Synod Meppel's decision

GS Meppel 2017 adopted the recommendations of DKE, and instructed the DKE to continue to participate in the activities of the National synod, and – if possible – to join the proposed covenant of protestant churches in The Netherlands on behalf of the GKv. As they do so, the deputies have to take into consideration the identity and responsibility of the Reformed Churches in obedience to God's Word and ask attention for the value of "het gereformeerd belijden"²⁴

4. Evaluation

That this National Synod scheduled for 2018/19 is seen as a fitting way to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dort 1618/19, without any critical comments, is telling.

In 1618/19 the Synod of Dort was convened to protect the unity of the church based on the truth of the gospel. That's why the false teachings of the Remonstrants were rejected, the Remonstrants themselves were removed, and the Canons of Dort were adopted as a Reformed Confession and added to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic confession as the 3rd Form of Unity.

The National Synod of 2018/19 has the opposite purpose. It is the plan to bring together in some sort of superficial unity, a variety of churches with essential doctrinal differences. This is not meant to protect the truth of the gospel, but is only possible by ignoring this truth. The result is that in 2018/19 Arminius, who in 1618/19 was shown the door as a false teacher, is warmly welcomed again.

With the decision of Synod Meppel 2017 that the GKv will continue to be actively involved in this National Synod project, with DKE officially being represented at the Steering Committee, we believe that the GKv is compromising its stand for the truth of God's Word, as summarized in the Reformed Confessions.

²⁴ In the report Dutch expressions should be in English, but how do we translate the expression "het gereformeerd belijden"? It's not the same as "de gereformeerde belijdenis". That would, of course, be 'the reformed confession'. But it's more vague. Perhaps something like: "confessing the reformed faith". Any other and better ideas?

APPENDIX Q

Press Release ICRC 2017

The ninth meeting of the International Conference of Reformed Churches was held in Jordan, Ontario, Canada, from July 12 – 19, 2017, in the facilities of the Immanuel United Reformed Church and the Heritage Christian School. It was a blessed time of fellowship with one another as delegates and with our hosts, which not only included the calling Immanuel United Reformed Church of Jordan, and her local sister churches, but also regional church members of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC), Free Reformed Churches (FRCNA), Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), and Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC). The welcome was warm and generous, and a great opportunity to see and experience the Lord's work in this part of his vineyard.

Following the beginning of the meeting with a Prayer Service held under the auspices of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) on Wednesday evening, July 12, we were able to work our way steadily through the schedule, capably led by the Chairman, the Rev. Dick Moes.

It was our brother Moes, who, throughout the meeting, in light of the 500th year since the nailing of Martin Luther's 95 Theses, focused on four of the Reformational Solas – Solus Christus, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, and Sola Scriptura in the morning devotions.

It was a joy to receive into the membership of the ICRC the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia (CRCA) and the Presbyterian Church of Uganda (PCU) after reports from sponsoring denominations and consideration by the Membership Committee. We look forward to a fruitful work together with them. Already the CRCA is involved with the Presbyterian Church in Eastern Australia (PCEA) in hosting the 2019 Asia-Pacific Regional Conference due to be held in Australia.

It was with much sadness, however, that the Conference suspended the membership of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (RCN), as it was deemed that they have broken with Article IV:4 of the Constitution in their recent synodical decision to permit the ordination of persons to the offices of minister and ruling elder contrary to the rule prescribed in Scripture. This took up much time in the meeting as there was much discussion and various options considered. A number spoke of the blessed help the RCN have been in the past to their federations and so this involved an extra heaviness of heart. Yet it was quite clear that the view of the RCN is not the view of any of the other churches in the ICRC, and certainly was not the view of any of those, apart from the RCN, who spoke at our meeting. Please pray for our brethren there, that the Lord in his grace would turn them in repentance to his Word and so be able to join fully with us once more.

The various Committee Reports brought out the Lord's blessing upon the member churches and service to him in various spheres – Theological Education, Diaconal, and Missions. A new Committee set up is the Publications Committee which takes in the new ICRC magazine – *Lux Mundi* – and the current website. In connection with these different aspects of ICRC work there were four very well received and helpful panel discussions on theological education and growing future leaders for the Reformed faith, the ministry of mercy and the Reformed faith, bringing the Reformed faith to Asia, and on the future direction of the ICRC.

There was also much time given for bilateral and multilateral meetings among the member delegations. It was also a blessing to have a number of observer churches present.

Financially the ICRC is very healthy with an excess from the past four-year period. It was felt prudent to retain such a balance and continue to receive membership assessment payments to meet the actual costs for the next four-year period.

A highlight of the meetings were the evening addresses, given respectively by the Rev. Hiralal Solanki on 'A Brief Overview of Christian Mission in India', the Rev. Dr. Derek Thomas on John Calvin's preaching on the Book of Job, Dr. Matthew Ebenezer on 'Bringing the Reformed Faith to India', and Dr. Joel Beeke on 'Reformed Piety: Covenantal and Experiential.' There was also a valuable time of discussion on these occasions where we were joined by many from the local Reformed churches.

We were well provided for – physically and spiritually. We leave refreshed in the precious faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and looking confidently for future worship and service of him, praying the Head of the church to keep us faithful to his Word.