

City Reformed statement on Women in the Church

Because of the debate on the role of women in the evangelical church at large, and because of the confusion in today's culture about the meaning of women's roles in our denomination, it is appropriate that we issue a statement to clarify our views and their biblical foundation. The session of City Reformed affirms the following:

1) We affirm that all men and women are equal in value, and this has always been the teaching of the Word of God. The first chapter of the Bible, in the Old Testament, teaches that both men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). In the New Testament we are told that in regard to our relationship to God, "there is neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:28).

Saying that people are all equal in value, as we do here, does not mean that all people have the same economic worth or competitive potential, or that they have equal virtues, abilities or gifts. It means that all people are valued equally in their intrinsic worth by God because of his image which is in them. For example, Jesus said, "You are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:31; cf. Matthew 6:26, Luke 12:24) and "Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!" (Matthew 12:12). In so saying he affirmed that humans of all types and in all stages of life have much greater value to God than animals and that each person is very valuable to God. All who are in Christ are children of God and equal heirs to his promised glory for us in heaven (Romans 8:16-17), and all who are in Christ have the same Spirit: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6).

God transcends the physical categories of male and female; both male and female reflect something of his nature. To think of God in his essence as a human male is to create an image of God which is idolatry. Saying that God transcends the categories of male and female, however, does not mean that we are free to invent ways to address God. God has revealed himself in the Scriptures using masculine pronouns and terms such as "Father," "King," and "Husband." To alter that language is to distort the revelation of God. Also, the Second Person of the Godhead, when he took on human flesh, became the man Jesus, fully male. As a perfect man, he is a priest for all people, and understands the experience and temptations of all people (Hebrews 2:18), including women. His maleness in no way prevents him from being able to relate to women; although he did not have every possible human experience while on earth, his life was archetypal of human experience, including the full range of human emotions such as sorrow, anger, and grief due to broken relationships.

Any denigration of the value of women in comparison to men is ungodly and unscriptural, and all people should take care not to imply otherwise in objectifying images of women, stereotypes, or even in humor (Ephesians 5:4), as language can reinforce oppressive behavior.

2) We affirm that from the beginning, as part of God's good creation, God made men and women complementary, and not interchangeable, not only physically but in their very nature, for the benefit of both. Before there was sin in the world, God made the woman to be a "helper" for man (Genesis 2:18), a title also applied to the Holy Spirit, God himself (e.g. Psalm 54:4, John 14:26). Scripture teaches that the relationship between man and woman in marriage is a model of the relationship of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:24-32), in the loving and voluntary submission of the Church and the self-sacrificing love of Christ. This voluntary submission in no way implies inferiority of value or ability, and is modeled in the submission of Christ to the

Father, who although he was in very nature God, did not count equality a thing to be grasped for, and humbled himself, taking on the role of submission (Philippians 2:6-8). To say that submission implies inferiority of value or ability is to say that Christ is inferior in nature to the Father, which is contrary to orthodox theology.

3) These complementary natures are reflected in two human institutions, the family and the church. Christian husbands are to be the spiritual leaders in their homes, and spiritual authority in the church is to be held by men (Ephesians 5:22, 1 Timothy 2:12). This is because the church itself is a family (1 Timothy 5:1-2), not a business, and roles in the church ought not to be awarded on the basis of mere talent and skill. The church has father figures and mother figures who are complementary, but not interchangeable.

While affirming that men and women are equal in value but complementary in roles, we also acknowledge that many churches both in the past and present have treated this difference in ways that have not been healthy, and women have been oppressed in many cultures in the world, including ones which have called themselves Christian. Our goal is not to go back to any former time or culture, but to ever more and more act like the kingdom of God, which has standards that transcend any culture of this world.

4) In our denomination, spiritual authority is held by the offices of elder and deacon. While we acknowledge that there is substantial and legitimate debate among evangelical and Reformed Christians over whether the office of deacon is one of authority, it is the position of our denomination that both of these offices have spiritual authority, signified by the service of ordination and laying on of hands, and therefore women are not to hold these offices or perform their functions.

Not all men in the church have authority in the church; only those men who have been ordained may be said to have authority. However, on occasion, the church may use some non-ordained men in leadership roles normally associated with the work of elders, namely leading worship, discipling, and teaching. These men are effectively “elders in training,” and they are appointed by the elders and serve under their direction. In some cases the official designation of “intern” elder may be given to such men.

5) While we affirm ordination for men only, no one should take this to mean that women have no role of leadership in the church and no way to use their gifts. The normal mechanism for women’s leadership in our denomination is the organization called Women in the Church at the national level, often given other names in local churches. We encourage every local church to have a women’s organization which fully utilizes the spiritual gifts of women. Women ought to come alongside not only the deacons, but also the elders, in providing help in areas including, but not restricted to, all of the following:

Teaching: women’s Bible studies and discipleship groups; arranging theological and practical teaching for women’s meetings; recommending books; children’s education;

Discipleship and counseling: setting up mentoring networks for women (Titus 2:3-4); personal counseling; working as couples in marriage counseling;

Prayer: setting up and participating in prayer networks and prayer meetings;

Mercy: working alongside the deacons as appointed by session (BCO 9-7);

Hospitality: planning and organizing church events and fellowship;

Advocacy: being present at any meeting of the church in which a woman is asked to defend herself against accusations of sin (BCO 32-19);

Advice: offering advice to the elders on various matters when called upon;

Organization: administration of day-to-day operations of the church, accounting, and communication;

Worship: assisting in music, physical space, and other aspects of worship.

Women's ministry ought to be taken seriously as a spiritual ministry by all churches, and their leadership should be examined by session to ensure spiritual maturity, Bible knowledge, and agreement with our denomination's standards (the Westminster Confession and the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms). Spiritually mature women ought to be visible to the congregation. We have also been blessed as a denomination by a strong national Women in the Church organization and we encourage all women in our denomination to make use of their resources.

6) While women in the church may lead in numerous activities, we believe that three types of activity, namely leading public worship, leading seminars and adult classes with mixed groups of men and women, and leading Bible studies with mixed groups of men and women, should be reserved to men who are elders, deacons, or unordained "elders in training" appointed by the elders. By this we publically attest to our complementary view of men and women, which in turn attests to our deference to Christ. Although no person today has priestly role, and only Christ is the mediator between God and all people (1 Timothy 2:5), the men leading the church to some degree symbolize Christ who is the husband of his bride, the church (Revelation 19:7-8).

7) We earnestly pray that our denomination would be an example to all people of men and women working in joyful, complementary roles, not battling over authority but with both men and women modeling unity in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ, humility toward each other, and respect for each other's gifts and calling.