

The Role and Authority of Women in Ministry

In response to a 1988 General Synod recommendation to undertake a comprehensive study of “the role and authority of women in ministry” (*MGS 1988*, R-9, p. 387), the Reformed Church in America’s Commission on Theology presents the following paper in concert with the Commission for Women. This paper celebrates the service of women past and present, provides a framework for understanding the nature and authority of the church’s ministry, and urges new roles for both women and men as co-laborers with Jesus Christ for the sake of the whole creation.

This paper does not provide a systematic treatment of the biblical texts relating to the ministry of women. Persons who seek such a treatment can refer to the bibliography which accompanies this paper. Included in the bibliography are the “Reports of the Committee on the Ordination of Women” which were prepared for the denomination in 1957. These reports include a comprehensive survey and discussion of pertinent biblical texts and conclude that “Scripture nowhere excludes women from eligibility to the offices but always emphasizes their inclusion, prominence, and equal status with men in the Church of Jesus Christ” (p. 42). The commission commends the 1957 report, along with other items listed in the bibliography, to those individuals and church groups who seek additional resources concerning the role and authority of women in ministry.

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Introduction

The roles that may be filled by women in the ministry of Jesus Christ are as unlimited as the scope of God’s faithful activity in creating a new heaven and a new earth. But women’s participation in these roles is limited by the church’s understanding of the proper role of women in the context of God’s creative activity. On the one hand, from the moment God first created until this moment, God commissions women and men, created in God’s image, to be partners in service to one another, to all people, and to the whole creation. On the other hand, there are still questions for the church concerning the role and authority of women in ministry. These questions cannot be addressed apart from a broad discussion of the nature of the church’s ministry and the authority by which all Christians, male and female, engage in ministry.

The Roles of Women

In the Beginning

The church’s ministry is commissioned by Jesus Christ whose own work began in the creation of the world. In his earthly ministry Jesus enfolded and encouraged the full potential of humankind as first set forth in creation. By God’s design, Adam and Eve would know the fullness of God’s image and likeness in them when, together, they claimed their mutual role as partners with God in the keeping of creation. God created, invited, and commanded Adam and Eve to be God’s image on earth through their life in relationship, their tilling and planting, their fruitful and faithful caring for one another and their children, their delight in the birds of the air, their protection of the beasts of the fields, their careful use of the flowing waters, and their obedient consumption of the abundant fruits of God’s earth. Human beings, male and female, were created by God for a life of service in “unity, solidarity, mutuality, and equality.”¹

But they thought equality with God a thing to be grasped, and in grasping, lost sight of the equality and unity in which they were created to serve. In their isolation from God and one another, their differences as male and female were no longer perceived to be complementary, together reflecting the richness of the One who made them. Instead, they became opposites whose cooperative service for God in the world would be undermined by their opposition and separation.

As the author of creation, God authorized human beings, created in God’s image, to exercise a derived authority in the universe which is God’s domain. The authority which Adam and Eve received was an authority to serve in

God's domain—they were given dominion over and for the sake of creation. But the practice of dominion as service in partnership was replaced by dominion as domination—male over female, this race over that race, rich over poor, humans over all beasts and birds and soil.

In order to understand the role and authority of women in ministry, one must first recall that God's intent for females and males is clearly expressed through their creation in God's image for partnership in service to creation. The loss of this partnership to destructive patterns of domination obscures God's will for women and men.

In Israel

God called the people of Israel and labored to shape them into a community built on love, mercy, and justice, reflecting God's image. Through them God continued the work begun in creation, commanding them to love God and serve their neighbors—the orphan, the widow, the stranger, and the alien. Women and men served God in Israel.

The women filled their primary roles in Israel as wives, concubines, mothers, and grandmothers. The wombs of the women held the promise of the nation. In bearing and caring for their children, they were faithful to the work of creation, and they patterned their lives on the life of the One who in the beginning labored to bring forth the world, and who later brought forth the nation of Israel and patiently taught it to walk.

Women also served as the special agents of God's liberation (Exodus 1). The Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah trusted God and refused to obey Pharaoh's orders. When instructed by Pharaoh to kill the male children, but to let the daughters live, these daughters of Israel preserved the lives of all the newborn. They risked their own lives in order to serve God's purpose in setting the Israelites free from their slavery in Egypt.

In the midwives' story begins the whole story of Exodus, the paradigm of God's liberating activity in the world. Pharaoh let the daughters of Israel live because he believed they were powerless, a non-threat to his own power. What Pharaoh didn't realize is that in God's scheme, both women and men can be agents of liberation. So God called the midwives and empowered them to serve in new ways.

God empowered the widow of Zarephath to offer lodging and food to the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 17:7-16). Her ministry of hospitality came at a critical time for Elijah, and this poor widow placed herself and her child at risk by offering her only food to the prophet. Through her acts of service to Elijah, the widow of Zarephath advanced God's work in the world and was sustained by God because of her service.

Through their prophecies, Miriam (Exodus 15:20ff.) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:12ff.; 2 Chron. 34:20ff.) revealed the divine will. They were spokeswomen for God. Deborah was both a prophet and a judge in Israel, dispensing God's justice in the hill country of Ephraim. She also directed Barak in a battle against the Canaanites. All of these daughters of Israel were called by God to serve in surprising ways, in roles which were usually filled by men.

In their totality, all of these stories cannot and do not define the limit of ways in which women can serve. Although there are only a few stories that recall the special roles which women played in the history of Israel, there are enough such stories to remind God's people that God is always doing a new thing in the world. If these stories were the only stories in the Bible about women who served God in special roles, one might conclude that they present exceptions to the rules about the proper roles of men and women, and therefore should not be considered normative. But taking clues from the creation story, these stories reaffirm that women and men are equally able to be partners with God in the never-ending work of creation and re-creation. They do not show exceptions to God's order and purpose in creation, rather, they illustrate God's true intent for the roles of women and men in the world.

If one takes seriously the roles of women and men articulated in the creation story, then exceptions to God's purpose will be found not in the stories of the women who are empowered to serve, but in the stories of the women who are powerless, and who become victims of violence and abuse. It is in the stories of Hagar, Dinah, Tamar, and Lot's and Jephthah's daughters that one finds abhorrent exceptions to God's creation design. These stories of men

overpowering women through rape, broken covenants, and murder blaspheme both the Creator and the human creature.

If one seeks to discern God's intent for the lives of women and men today, the creation story must be heard anew. One must also hear the stories of women's leadership and service in Israel as testimony to God's intent that women and men should be co-laborers with God in the work of creation. In these stories God's good purposes erupt, pointing people toward, and drawing people to, the place where God is restlessly moving and doing a new thing now.

In the Ministry of Jesus Christ

Jesus of Nazareth was doing a new thing in Israel. Born of a woman, Jesus was the perfect image and likeness of the almighty Creator whose divinity he shared. In Jesus, God's intent for the human race was reasserted and finally sealed. Jesus came to serve and to call women and men to God's service.

At a time when the participation of Jewish women in the religious life of the community was largely restricted to their domestic roles as wife and mother; at a time when few women were instructed in the Torah, and few were allowed to teach it; at a time when women were frequently cut off from temple service because they were ritually unclean; Jesus offered new roles for women.

Jesus did not require women to give up their domestic roles in order to embrace new roles. Rather, he presented an expanded view of family relations which created additional possibilities for the service and participation of women. Women, children, and men gathered around Jesus to constitute a different kind of family, biologically unrelated, but joined together by their decision to embrace the good news of the reign of God. It was a family joined by faith, learning, and service in which both women and men could freely, fully, equally participate. It was a community whose kinship transcended and transformed all other types of kinship (Mark 3:31-35).

While calling together a new family, Jesus also called for changes in traditional family patterns. Under Deuteronomic law, a woman could not divorce her husband. However, there were laws in the first century which allowed a husband to divorce his wife if she was barren, or in the extreme, if she burned dinner. But, Jesus taught that a husband could divorce his wife only if she committed adultery (Matthew 19:3-9). His teaching was designed to protect a woman from the losses she might suffer because of her husband's whim or fleeting anger. Jesus preached against the very notion that wives could be tossed away by unsatisfied husbands.

Unconcerned about their status as ritually clean or unclean, Jesus taught, touched, and healed women. He welcomed them into lives of discipleship. Through his life and with his words, Jesus asserted that women could no longer be regarded as the objects of male sexual satisfaction—either in fact or fantasy. In forbidding men even to lust after a woman, Jesus bid women to come and stand with him as whole persons in the community of disciples. In offering new roles to women, Jesus positively transformed the traditional male role which he filled, thereby offering new roles to men as well. One can become so accustomed to the life and ministry of Jesus that one tends to lose sight of its revolutionary character. Jesus wasn't chastised for maintaining the status quo. He was killed for disturbing it.

For Jesus, the lives of men and women served equally well as examples of God's activity in the world. In order to communicate that both women and men are equally objects of God's salvific activity, Jesus told the good news using parables which both could understand. Jesus pictured God's love for humankind using the parables of the shepherd who searches the hillside for the lost sheep, and of the housewife who searches her house for a precious coin (Luke 15).

It was not always easy for women to embrace the new roles which Jesus held out to them. The story of Mary and Martha illustrates this fact beautifully (Luke 10:38-42). Martha complains that while she labors to prepare a meal for their guest, Mary sits at the feet of Jesus listening to his teachings. Martha plays the role of a proper Jewish woman while Mary plays the role of a male disciple. Jesus declares that Mary has chosen the better part. Martha's appeals

for support of the traditional role which she has chosen, do not prevail against the fact that women, like men, are called first to be hearers and doers of Jesus' words. The coming of God's reign demands it. But becoming Jesus' disciples did not require these women to abandon their traditional domestic roles. Instead, "it gave these roles new significance and importance, for now they could be used to serve the Master and the family of faith" of which they had become a part.²

When Jesus gratefully received the anointing of the woman whose gender and lifestyle made her action a scandal to many, Jesus transformed the meaning of priesthood and kingship forever. Jesus' anointing by this woman was an action-parable for professing that his own identity as priest would be most evident in the priestly sacrifice of his own self, and that his own identity as kingly ruler would be achieved not in the taking of power, but only in giving it up.

The women who followed Jesus day by day followed him all the way to the cross where the meaning of the parable played itself out. These women, who came in their traditional role to anoint his body in the tomb, were the very first to fill the role of those who bear witness to Christ's resurrection. In following Jesus these women discovered their calling to be his disciples. In bearing witness to Christ's resurrection, they discovered the purpose and fullness of their own freedom in discipleship, and they began to claim their responsibility as priests and rulers with Christ forever.

In the Early Church

By the teaching and example of Christ and by the preaching and power of Pentecost, the early church was firmly founded as a community of equals enjoying new freedom in Christ. On Pentecost, over the din of the rushing wind, the apostle Peter preached what Joel had prophesied long before him. Peter proclaimed that a new day—the last days—had dawned on the world. The Holy Spirit was poured out on God's people, without discrimination. Young and old, men and women, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, by the Spirit's power would prophesy, dream dreams, and see visions (Acts 2:16-18). God's Spirit came on Pentecost burning through barriers of age, sex, class, and race. Indeed, these last days would be radically new days for God's people on earth.

People were welcomed into the early church through this baptismal affirmation:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:27-28).³

Through its baptismal liturgy the church proclaimed that all who were joined to Christ enjoyed a new status altogether. They were freed from the curse of the law, sin, and death, and were joined together through Christ as a community of equals. This freedom and equality was not limited to spiritual status. It was not simply a matter of saying "now everyone can receive God's salvation"—this was true for women and slaves before Christ came. But after Christ's coming, all who are joined to the body of Christ are set free to live and serve and bear witness to the resurrection according to the gifts given them by the Holy Spirit.

Thus women in the early church enjoyed not only spiritual freedom, but also the freedom to claim new social and religious roles in keeping with their spiritual gifts. The writings of the New Testament bear witness to the activity of women in the early church. Paul commends the work of sister Phoebe, who was "a deacon of the church at Cenchreae" and "a benefactor of many and of myself as well" (Romans 16:1). The Apostle refers to Prisca and her husband Aquila as co-workers "who risked their necks for my life" (Romans 16:3). Also mentioned as diligent co-workers in Romans 16 are Mary (v. 6), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (v. 12), and "the beloved Persis" (v. 12). The women in Corinth prayed and prophesied in the assemblies of the congregation. The female deacons mentioned in 1 Timothy held an official status in the church.⁴

In time, the church's enthusiasm for the freedom of the Christian life, and the egalitarian impulse which it nurtured, became something of a mixed blessing. Both the writings of Paul and the pastoral epistles contain instructions aimed

at the restraint of Christian freedom in the lives of women. In all likelihood, these instructions were given out of concern for public opinion which was, in that time and place, “profoundly conservative with regard to female equality.”⁵ Roman household codes articulated the proper roles of slaves, women, and children in relation to the master or father of the house. The experience of the church at Corinth suggests that external pressures to conform were joined by internal pressures to bring some order out of the chaos created by the shifting roles of women in the church. It seems that, at least potentially, the freedom enjoyed by Christian women placed the continuing life of the whole community in jeopardy. It was better for women to practice a bit of restraint in freedom than to risk losing every opportunity to proclaim the gospel.

The record of the early church bears witness to the culturally conditioned reality of the church’s understanding and proclamation of the gospel. Each generation of believers must evaluate the ways in which its own understanding and proclamation of the gospel are conditioned by cultural realities past and present. Convinced of Christ’s freedom for men and women, John Calvin placed Paul’s instructions for the conduct of women in the church among those teachings which are historically and culturally conditioned—like questions concerning whether one should stand or kneel when praying in public. Calvin concluded that they were not important to the gospel and therefore could lay no claim to permanence in the practice of the church. Although it did not happen in his day, Calvin foresaw the day when it would be absolutely necessary for women to speak and lead in the church.⁶

One is not required to reach the same conclusions that the Pauline or Johannine or Genevan churches reached concerning the roles of women in the community of faith. One is required to hear at the very core of the gospel the proclamation that in Jesus Christ all people are made free and equal. Whenever the church concludes that it must restrict the practice of full Christian freedom for women, the church must ask who will benefit from such restrictions. If, for example, the restriction of some Christians is effected for the benefit of a few who are anxious about their own position in the church, then such restriction is a sin.

Jesus invites both women and men into full freedom as his disciples. For Jesus the question of who can teach or preach or heal is simply a question of who can be a faithful follower. Who can be a reliable witness to the resurrection? Who can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, embody the servant ministry of Jesus Christ?

In the Reformed Church in America

This paper has identified in the story of creation, the life of Israel, the ministry of Jesus, and the experience of the early church, clear patterns for the roles and service of women in God’s world. These patterns were repeated and even expanded throughout the history of the church. At times these patterns were restricted and at other times new roles for women in the church emerged. For example, during the Middle Ages celibate women served as spiritual guides to male priests. They engaged in works of charity and wrote some of the greatest spiritual treatises of the Christian tradition.⁷

Recognizing the richness of the lives of women throughout the church’s long history, the commission regrets that it is not possible to detail women’s religious history in this paper. However, in this section of the paper the focus is on the ministries of women in the Reformed Church in America (RCA), remembering the patterns of women’s service set forth in creation, Israel, the ministry of Jesus, and the early church. Remember too that the ministries of women in the RCA stand on the shoulders of many generations of faithful Christian women.

Throughout the years, women in the RCA have offered a variety of gifts and filled many roles as they engaged in the church’s ministry. Their many works can be called a ministry because they have been given for the edification of the whole body of Christ and for the glory of God.

Women have faithfully provided nursery care for the little ones. Women have nurtured the faith of children through their work in church school and vacation Bible school, as well as in their homes. Women have sewn thousands of costumes for angels and shepherds and warm-blooded beasts. For generations women have joined together in the middle of the week to pray and offer praise to God. Women have planted and plucked up gardens whose colors

made the sanctuary sing on Easter morn. Women have sung and played instruments. Women have prepared a million feasts, from soup suppers to the Lord's Supper. Carrying food and comfort, women have entered their neighbors' sickrooms; women have come to those who mourn; women have visited the lonely. There are times when men share in these many ministries, but they have been, for the most part, women's work in the church.

Women played a key role in the RCA's early mission work. They organized the Women's Board of Domestic Missions to raise money for the support of missionaries at home and abroad. In 1895, the Women's Board accepted under its care a missionary to the American Indians. They gathered clothes and furniture for the missionaries and for those among whom they labored. In order to raise consciousness and support from the churches, women gathered stories of people in China, India, and Arabia, and published them on the pages of the *Missionary Gleaner*.

Women themselves went out to be missionaries. Sometimes they went alone, such as pioneer missionaries Ida Scudder and Mary Kidder, with special training as doctors, nurses, and teachers. Many women, such as Harriet Scudder and Amy Zwemer, were pioneers with their husbands, who were trained as doctors or ministers. Many of these women missionaries, whether they went alone or with their families, engaged in evangelistic work, taught and preached, and provided leadership in the church overseas.

In their ministry, one discovers a curious contradiction in the church's theology. These women were not allowed to teach and preach at home because they were to be submissive and were not allowed to have authority over men. Yet they were praised for their teaching and preaching to men (and women) overseas. Quite probably, a shortage of male missionary personnel made it necessary for women to assume leadership roles in the mission church which they were not permitted to assume at home. However, this practical reality does not change the fact that the church was, theologically speaking, sending a mixed message to its women missionaries whose ecclesiastical authority shifted depending on the male audience in question. Nevertheless, in their role as missionaries, and in spite of certain theological ambiguities attending the role, these women have always returned home to tell their stories, thereby providing important models for young girls in the RCA.

In their roles as ministers' wives, women have made tremendous contributions to the life and ministry of the denomination. When the Commission for Women put out a request for stories of RCA women which should be collected and published, a large number of the stories received were about minister's wives. Their contributions need to be recognized and celebrated. For generations women have ministered full-time with their spouses—visiting the sick, coordinating the religious education programs, directing the choir, leading the women's groups, and playing piano or organ for church functions, among other things. To this day, some still fill this role, although one recognizes that the church can no longer assume that the spouse of the minister will also commit herself or himself to full-time ministry in the church. By 1918 the Holy Spirit had led some in the RCA to conclude that women should be welcomed into new roles in the church, and two overtures came to General Synod requesting changes in the language of the *Book of Church Order* which would allow women to be ordained as elders and deacons. Fearing friction and factions in the church, the General Synod refused to entertain the request. The same request came to General Synod in 1921, 1932, 1941, 1945, and 1951—each time from a single classis. But, in 1952, the same request came from thirteen separate classes.

At this time it was argued that,

in recognition of the full share of the work of our Reformed Church in America which has been done by women, and in accord with the action of our country in civil matters, and with the teachings of democracy, justice, and equal opportunity by our Lord when on earth,

there should be no limit on the ways in which women could serve in the Body of Christ.⁸ The Synod agreed to submit a request for amendment of the *Book of Church Order* to all classes for a vote. The classes voted against the proposed amendment. It was then decided that the Commission on Theology should prepare a report concerning the ordination of women as elders, deacons, and ministers of the Word.

In 1958 the General Synod approved the report of the Commission on Theology which declared that, "Scripture nowhere excludes women from eligibility to the offices but always emphasizes their inclusion, prominence, and equal status with men in the Church of Jesus Christ."⁹ In the same report, the commission recognized that,

even in the Church of Jesus Christ, sociological and practical difficulties make themselves felt and may for a time restrain Christians from translating what is considered right on the basis of Scripture into new forms of communal action, fearful of accepting the clearly-indicated responsibility of moving forward in response to the Spirit's leading."¹⁰

The report also cautioned, "Tradition . . . which is important in the life of the Church, must not be the determining factor in deciding the issue."¹¹

Since 1972 women in the RCA have been entering new roles as ordained deacons and elders, and since 1978, as ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Nevertheless sociological and practical difficulties, as well as tradition, still restrain the church on questions regarding the leadership of women in the church. The women who now serve in these roles recall their struggle to serve. Some tell of their confusion and sense of betrayal in a church which welcomed them into full membership through their baptism, nurtured them in the faith, blessed them when they made a public confession of their love for Jesus Christ, invited them to sit at the Lord's Table, encouraged in them the gifts of the Spirit, but then said "no" when these young women wished to dedicate themselves to certain forms of service and ministry in the church.

Through their ministry as deacons, elders, and ministers, women are able to offer more of their gifts and experiences to the church. Very often women bring to their ministries, by their nature and nurture, a unique set of experiences and expectations.¹² Most little girls grow up playing games which are more cooperative than competitive. They learn that their own success depends on the success of the whole group, so it is in their best interest to care for the group as much as, if not more than, they care for themselves. As the primary caretakers of children and aging parents, women have attended to the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual growth of others. In many cases, women's socialization has allowed them to express their emotions, and to encourage such expression in others. Even women who have not chosen for themselves roles as nurturers and caretakers have inherited models from their mothers and grandmothers.

Furthermore, although they have not chosen it, many women carry with them an experience as victims of violence and abuse. Even Christian women raised in the church and/or married to Christian men share this experience.¹³ The abuse of women takes many forms.¹⁴ North Americans are quite aware that women are physically and sexually abused, both as children and adults. A less obvious form of abuse—emotional abuse—occurs when a woman or child is verbally degraded, threatened, denied basic feelings and abilities, or blamed for the suffering which is inflicted upon her by someone else. Environmental abuse isolates a woman from family and friends, and from the possibility of work, thereby forcing her into relational and economic dependencies on the very person who actively deprives her. Finally, social abuse is the form of abuse which reinforces all others. Social abuse occurs where "rigid life roles are imposed on men and women, limiting the expression of feelings to anger and depression, teaching that women are not as capable as men."¹⁵

The church must own its part in perpetuating social abuse through its teaching that women must submit and be subject to the authority of their fathers and husbands, and, by extension, to the authority of all men. Both implicitly and explicitly, the image of God the Father often serves in the church to explain and sanction male authority over females. In exchange for their submission to men, women are promised care and protection in their roles as wives and mothers. This cycle of submission to men in exchange for protection by men makes women prime targets of male violence and abuse, and it is the same cycle which makes it difficult for women to assume positions of leadership in the church.

Having articulated the roles of women as nurturers, caretakers, and as victims of violence and abuse, it must be said that none of these experiences or ways of being are true for every woman, nor are they absolutely unique to

women—men also share in them. Still, they are at present more typical for women than for men, and so they shape the ways in which women carry out the ministry which has been given them.

Finally, whether these experiences are claimed by women or men, in and of themselves none of them can be considered the Spirit's gifts for the church. They become gifts of the Spirit when through them the people of God are able to know, hear, see, feel, and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ more fully. The experience of caring for children or aged parents becomes a gift for the church when it shapes a holistic ministry of caring and teaching and discipling. The experience of abuse becomes a gift for the church when its telling breaks the cycle of submission, shame, and silence, and when it demands God's justice and mercy for men, women, and children.

Today there are nearly 1,800 women serving the RCA as deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacraments.¹⁶ Their ministry with the whole people of God is changing the shape of the church. The church is gathering in the middle of the week, with the minister, to hear the text for Sunday's sermon and to give voice to their own hearing of it. The church is gathering on Sunday mornings around tables in the fellowship hall to share in the Word and Sacrament. Through their traditional roles and their new roles in ministry, women are offering fresh insights, urgent concerns, and new understandings of what it means to be Christ's servants in the church and in the world.

God's people know God's call and the Spirit's power in the lives of the women who minister to them through the womens' caring, discipling, teaching, preaching, healing, and sacramental service. So the church has never been able to conclude in the abstract whether this one or that one has been called to a certain form of ministry and service in the church. Rather, the church faithfully, honestly watches and listens in order to affirm God's call to particular persons, regardless of their gender, race, or class. To watch and listen in any other way is to quench the Spirit.

The Authority of Women in Ministry

As the sole author of creation, God is the One who authorizes all human beings to become partners together with God. Created in the image of God, men and women are authorized to reflect in their living the character of the One who authored them. God's character shines forth in God's authorship of the universe. God builds up and makes new. God seeks goodness and delight, wholeness and harmony, equality and productivity. God welcomes and persuades partnership. God exercises dominion not through domination, but through faithful, loving care and service. God, the author of creation, opposes those who misunderstand and abuse the authority given to them as persons created in God's image. In the beginning God authorized women and men to exercise a creating, partnering, servant authority on earth.

The proper exercise of this servant authority is demonstrated most clearly in the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18). Jesus came to serve the least, the last, the littlest, the lost. When Jesus' disciples engaged in a debate about who among them would be the greatest, Jesus contrasted Gentile authorities and standards of greatness with those expected among God's people:

whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-43).

The authority by which men and women today claim and fulfill their roles in ministry is given by the triune God who in the beginning authored creation, and who through the work of Jesus Christ has established a new creation. Men and women, created in the image of God, were first called to represent God as servants, and given the authority to be caretakers of creation and to develop the whole creation to its fullest potential. In Jesus Christ, beginning and end find their center and fullness. Through Jesus Christ the first creation is completed in the new creation which lives and pulses beyond every power which seeks to destroy it.

Now women and men and children are joined by baptism to Jesus Christ, who in serving them re-creates them and restores to them the authority to be God's servants in the world. The authority of all believers is recognized as the authority of Jesus Christ insofar as its exercise reflects and makes visible in the church and the world the servant authority of the One who by his death and resurrection has become the sovereign servant.

This authority belongs always and only to Jesus Christ, the only head of the church, who by the Holy Spirit channels that authority to the church, not as the possession of a few, but as a trust which empowers all who are members of the body of Christ. In early Christianity, *diakonia*, or service, was the term used to describe "all significant activity for the edification of the community" (Ephesians 4:11ff.)¹⁷ The servant authority of Christ is reflected in and represented by the whole congregation. As Reformed Christians the RCA confesses that all believers, by virtue of their baptism, share in Christ's anointing and have become prophets, priests, and kings with Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 32). All believers are called to confess Christ's name; to present themselves as living sacrifices of praise; to begin their reign with Christ, here and now, as they struggle against the powers which seek to destroy creation.

Within this ministry which belongs to the whole people of God, certain ministries are given by Christ to the church "so that the universal ministry of all believers may be enhanced and developed."¹⁸ These unique ministries are located in the offices of elder, deacon, teacher, and minister. These offices do not contain the fullness of the church's ministry; rather, they distill and focus the church's whole ministry. The commission believes that these offices are instituted by Jesus Christ and are sustained in the church by the Spirit's power. At the same time, the commission acknowledges that the Spirit freely organizes and reorganizes the church's ministry in new ways according to the demands of time and place. Today the church in some parts of Latin America is organized into households similar to those of the very early church. These Christians are rediscovering what it means to hold their possessions in common and to be equal partners, men and women, in Christ's ministry.

The same Spirit who organizes the church's ministry, and who freely calls people together as the body of Christ, also calls and authorizes men and women to engage in every form of ministry in the church. Those who are called and ordained to office in the church are not called to a more elevated position, or a higher status, or a greater authority, or a fuller representation of Jesus Christ than the believer who teaches the children about Sarah and Abraham. Those in office are called to be servants to all servants in the church. They are called to teach, preach, challenge, nurture, lead, prod, heal, and disciple in a way that enables every member of the body to reach their full potential as creatures created in God's image and to claim their calling as prophets, priests, and rulers with the sovereign servant Jesus Christ.

In sum, the authority of women and men in ministry is given to them by the triune God, who is the author of the first creation and the finisher of the new creation which exists within and beyond human history. Those called by God are called to exercise their authority in a way which builds up and makes new and seeks goodness and delight, wholeness and harmony, equality and productivity. As God welcomes and persuades men and women into partnership, so must those who represent God. As God opposes all partnerships which misunderstand or abuse the servant authority made manifest by Jesus Christ, so must women and men who share in Christ's ministry.

But as one contemporary theologian, Letty Russell, concludes, the true nature of Christ's servant authority is not always clear from the church's past.¹⁹ In fact, it is often obscured by its exercise as domination, competition, and power over others in the church. Russell points out that among God's people, "consciously or unconsciously, reality is seen in the form of a hierarchy or pyramid."²⁰ Spinning out the image of God's kingdom, many have concluded that by divine order God is at the top, men are next, and women are below them. In the name of God's authority as king and father, women have been placed in submission to men and have been excluded from certain roles in society and the church, and consigned to others. But "the gospel confronts the old image of kingdom as domination and exclusion and replaces it with a new image of kingdom as love and community."²¹

Those who seek to understand God's authority must look not only to the past, but also to the future. From the future the authority of God's new creation is breaking into the present. And past traditions find themselves in tension with

a future hope, not yet fully realized, but already seeping into the present like cool streams in the desert. Speaking from, and trusting God's future, the church might best describe God's kingdom of love as a household of freedom for all people. It is a household where hierarchies do not divide and oppress. It is a household in which God's hospitality—practiced in the life of the Trinity, revealed in creation and redemption—welcomes all people to full participation. The banquet table of the Lamb is already spread, and people are already coming from east, west, north, and south to share in the feast of God's household of freedom.

The church is a sign in the world of God's new creation—God's household of freedom. God keeps urging women and men, young and old, Jew and Gentile, to be free and equal partners in this household. Right now women and men are being called to new roles as they live out God's alternative future in the present. They are people of God's new creation—"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

As women and men of God's new creation, the RCA has been given new ears for hearing. The RCA can hear in the story of the first creation a call to live in God's image as equal partners caring for creation. In the stories of the widow of Zarephath, Miriam, and Deborah, the RCA can hear God calling women to serve in the many ways which God intends. In the stories of Mary and Martha, Phoebe, and Prisca, the RCA can hear the affirmation that among Jesus' disciples there is neither male nor female. All are one in Christ. In the stories of RCA women who minister in church school classrooms, in serving at the Lord's Table, in preaching and teaching, God's Spirit can be heard calling women to new roles in this denomination. In all of these stories of women who followed God's call, one can see God's future breaking in, refreshing the view of the past, and transforming the RCA's life in the present.

Among the many arguments offered against the opening of all offices to women in the RCA was the argument that this inclusion of women "might tend to diminish men's sense of responsibility in the life and work of the church."²² Some feared that if women assumed those roles in the church which traditionally belonged to men, then men would abdicate their responsibilities. The men would have no way to serve in the body of Christ.

In reality, there is no end to the work of ministry. In addition, as women are free to assume new roles, so also are men. Women can preach and men can disciple the children. Women can serve at the Lord's Table, and men can serve at the soup supper. Together, women and men can lead the people of God. Whoever has the gifts can assume the ministry. The commission acknowledges that there are social and practical realities which make such changes difficult for the church. Nevertheless, the commission believes that the Spirit is calling the church now to encourage full Christian freedom and leadership for both women and men.

By the authority of Jesus Christ, who was at work in the world's creation, was crucified on the cross, and is the firstborn of the new creation, the whole church has been called to serve in the name of Christ. The Spirit equips every member with unique gifts and calls each to a particular service. The church confesses that "believers one and all share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts," and that all "should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 55). It is the church's duty to encourage the development and use of the Spirit's gifts in the lives of girls and boys, men and women.

Whatever one does in the name of Christ must reflect the servant authority of Christ. Whatever role one assumes in the name of Christ must be assumed with humility and for the sake of building up the body and renewing God's creation. Jesus said, "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:42-43). The RCA must confess that it has not always welcomed the servant leadership of women in the church. However, the RCA can celebrate the inbreaking of God's new creation and the upbuilding of God's household of freedom in which women and men can fill every servant role authorized by Jesus Christ, who is our Servant and our Lord.

NOTES:

¹ Walter Brueggeman, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970), pp. 532-542.

² Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 118.

³ All Scripture references are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁴ Jane Depsey Douglas, *Women, Freedom, and Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 62.

⁵ Jouette M. Bassler, "The Widow's Tale," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, (1984), p. 30.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), 6, 33, p. 282. For further reading on this subject see: Douglas, *op cit*.

⁷ See for example: Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

⁸ RCA, "Reports of the Committee on the Ordination of Women to the General Synods of 1957 and 1958," p. 42.

⁹ *Idem*.

¹⁰ *Idem*., p. 43.

¹¹ *Idem*., p. 74ff.

¹² For further reading on this subject see for example: Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1982); Mary F. Belenky, et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

¹³ For further reading on this subject see for example: James Alsdurf and Phyliss Alsdurf, *Battered into Submission: the Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1989); Marie H. Fortune, *Sexual Violence: the Unmentionable Sin* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983).

¹⁴ RCA, "Domestic Violence," *MGS 1986*, pp. 94ff, and "Child Sexual Abuse," *MGS 1987*, pp. 50-58.

¹⁵ *Idem*., p. 95

¹⁶ Edwin Mulder, "Full Participation," in *Celebrating Women*, pp. 44-47.

¹⁷ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), vol. 2, p. 84.

¹⁸ CRC, "Report 44, Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination," p. 693.

¹⁹ Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

²⁰ *Idem*., p. 33.

²¹ *Idem*., p. 83.

²² RCA, "Reports of the Committee," pp. 5-6.

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