

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 1 F. WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

The role of women in the church

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1. This matter, like all matters which affect the church, must be determined from clear Scripture. The sacred Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the only source of teaching and right practice in the church. They are the only judge of all teachers and teachings. Practical considerations may deeply affect a particular problem; nevertheless, they cannot be put in the place of Scripture. They may, however, give support to scriptural teaching.
2. The Bible gives no specific directions on the subject of the role of women in the church. What we do find is a pattern of activity which functions as a guide or direction to the church. There are also a few passages where a clear principle is developed.
3. The New Testament shows that a comparatively large number of women were actively engaged in serving Jesus Christ and his disciples in various capacities:
 - Mary and Martha and others mentioned in Luke 8:1-3 and 23:49
 - Lydia (Acts 16:15) and Priscilla (Rom 16:3,4)
 - Philip's daughters (Acts 21:9) and other prophetesses
 - Euodia and Syntyche (Paul says of them that 'they shared my struggles in the cause of the gospel, with Clement and my fellow workers', Phil 4:3)
 - Phoebe (Rom 16:1,2)

However, none of these women worked independently. They were helpers, supporters of the Lord and the apostles. There was no woman among the Twelve (Luke 6:12-16), and there is no indication of any women among the Seventy (Luke 10:1-20)

4. This picture of the activities of women coincides with the directions of the few New Testament passages which speak more directly of the role of women in the church.
5. It seems that when the disciples were alive there was no real problem about the role of women in the church. So the matter was not taken up more fully than it was. The prevailing custom was that women generally took a supportive rather than a leading role in society.

It is important to note, however, that when the matter of women's role in the church is taken up by the apostle Paul (the only apostle to do so), it is argued from principle, not custom. By contrast, Paul falls back on custom after his complicated argument in 1 Corinthians 11 concerning the wearing of veils during worship.

6. The passages which come into consideration are 1 Corinthians 11:2-10; 14: 33b-36; and 1 Timothy 2:13,14. These lay down the principle of subordination and reserve for women in the church. Or to put it negatively: women are not to take a leading, independent, authoritative role in the church. Note: a congregation of women would, of course, have to have women officers.
7. On the basis of the above observations we make the following specific applications:
 - a. The rule of the apostles excludes the possibility of women acting as pastors and shepherds of congregations. It probably would eliminate the position of elder also, although something may depend here on how the office of elder is understood. [Editor's note: *in 1987 General Synod voted to permit women elders, on the understanding that the auxiliary office of elder does not have real or implied authority over people. See DSTO II D 1(a) and D 1(b).*]
 - b. Exclusion from the office of pastor and church leader does not mean that Christian women have no satisfying and rewarding ways in which to serve the congregation and church. We may mention here activities such as:
 - teaching children and adults in Sunday-schools, parish schools, and Bible classes
 - visiting and counselling people in institutions (hospitals and prisons) and conducting devotions there as opportunity offers
 - taking part in congregational meetings, and assisting in congregational worship – except in acts which specifically belong to the office of the pastor
 - conducting devotions under pastoral direction in various church organisations, specifically in youth groups and women's guilds
 - holding any offices in the church or congregation which do not imply the exercise of rule and authority.
 - c. With regard to the question of the right of women to act as delegates to a convention of the church, the decisive question is: does the office of synodsmen imply an exercise of authority which according to the apostle a Christian woman should not exercise? It has been argued, on the one hand, that
 - 1) delegates represent congregations; and
 - 2) synodical conventions, 'as the highest constitutional authority of the church, with power to direct and control', clearly exercise church government.

Therefore it is improper for women to function as synodical delegates.

On the other hand, it has been argued that

- 1) women have equal status with men in carrying out Christ's commission in the local congregation. They cannot logically be deprived of that right in conventions of the church; and
- 2) voting at synodical conventions is a means of reaching a consensus rather than an exercise of authority.

Since no clear case can be made for the view that for women to act as delegates at conventions involves an unbiblical exercise of authority, we conclude that the right to act as delegates at conventions of the church may be granted to men and women alike.