Chapter 11

WOMAN AND MARRIAGE

In the Middle Ages, in Calvin and in our own time

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"Since the Fall, man has been desperately afraid of recognizing that a woman is his equal, his helpmate, his companion. Therefore, he has consistently tried to reduce her to something less than himself, a being he both loves and detests. Woman was either raised to the level of a hollowed saint and praised as the all-good, tender, passionless Madonna of heaven, or she was lowered to the vulgar sinner and berated as the all-evil, seductive, lascivious witch of Satan. Either she was an object of adoration or a vessel of lust; a virgin or a harlot. In neither case was she what God wanted her to be: woman".

J.H. Opthuis: I pledge you my troth (1975)

In his well-known book De vrouw (eighteenth print, 1975) F.J.J. Buitendijk says that it is a general idea that a woman can read a man like a book, but that the opposite is not true: a man can not understand a woman. She remains a riddle to him.

I hope, therefore, that the topic, as formulated in the above title should have adequate attraction, and that I won't have only men in the audience!

My intention is also to make my explication as simple as possible, so that it will be easy to follow. For this reason I have chosen to present the survey in the form of a broad overview rather than as a penetrating analysis of one or the other single aspect. Through that I hope to succeed in the request of the organizers of this congress, viz. that we should not only provide delectation for the expert on Calvin but also for the ordinary man and woman — something that can have some personal meaning for them.

In order, however, to justify myself should there be unnecessary criticism from the side of the experts, I will provide a short justification, which you need not read or listen to!

INTRODUCTION

A great deal for one lecture

My subject is very wide-ranging. There are, however, special reasons for this.

In the first place it is difficult to talk about woman without involving marriage and the family too.

In the second place it is difficult to reveal the traditional and the new as represented in Calvin's view on woman if one does not at the same time briefly compare him with the Middle Ages.

In the third place one would not to be confined to Calvin only — one would also like, if only in broad outline, to indicate the meaning of his vision on woman in terms of the situation we find ourselves in today. He had progressed beyond the Middle Ages — a few steps. But we, in our turn, have to decide whether we are going to take a further few steps forward. We have to study the Scriptural passages on which he based his view carefully once again.

More than just the Institutes and yet not all

The request of the Organizational Committee has been very explicit that all topics covered during this conference should let the light fall on Calvin's main work, the Institutes (1559). In this case it unfortunately appeared to be impossible: Calvin's magnum opus does not offer adequate material for the way in which I would like to tackle the subject.1

1 After I had studied, with the aid of F.L. Battles' computerized concordance on the Institutes, words such as mulier (= the female sex), uxur (= spouse, fem.) and matrimonium continue on page 186
We are thus forced also to look at his sermons and his commentaries.

This does not mean that one involves all of Calvin’s oeuvre. There are still other sources like his letters (especially the many directed at women in various circumstances). There are also other interesting themes such as, for example his relationship to specific women (also his own wife), their responses to this, his view with regard to the persecution of witches, as well as the way in which his view of woman was given shape in Strassbourg, but especially in Geneva. Was the theory superior to the practice, or did the practice at times appear to be more favourable than his views?

The set-up

Although a great deal of research can still be done in this field, and is being done (woman in the period of the Reformation becoming a popular field of study), we are yet not confronted with a complete terra incognita.

Apart from brief pieces about women in books on the sixteenth-century Reformation in general, I have found useful particularly two articles, viz. those of J.H. Bratt (1976) and W.P. de Boer (1976), and one larger work, viz. the book by A. Biéler (1963) as secondary sources.

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(= marriage) it became clear that although Calvin used these words often, he did not anywhere deal comprehensively with the woman questions concerning women which do come up are the following: as regards the civil order, the woman is not the image and the glory of God (I, 15, 4); his brief explication of the seventh commandment (II, 8, 41-44): his rejection of the doctrine of the Manicheans and Marconites that women (and therefore also Mary) would be childless and that Christ therefore did not really assume a human body (II, 13, 1-3); rejection of the idea that women (widows) in the New Testament really filled the office of deacon (IV, 2, 9); woman may not fill any church office and may therefore not baptize, not even administer the so-called emergency baptism (IV, 15, 20-22); that marriage is forbidden for priests (the celibate) is rejected on biblical grounds (IV, 12, 23-26) as well as the ideal of virginity for women (IV, 13, 18-19), and also the Roman Catholic doctrine regarding marriage as a sacrament is denied on the basis of the Word of God (IV, 19, 34-37).


Bratt and De Boer deal especially with the status and the role of women. Biéler’s approach is much more encompassing, and he touches on practically all themes to do with woman, marriage and family. I regard Biéler’s work as being reliable because he continually lets Calvin do the talking, and his own (Biéler’s) commentary and interpretation are limited.

Following this introduction, just a brief word about woman in the Middle Ages.

In the third section of this lecture I shall give a survey of Calvin’s vision of woman and the various issues surrounding woman along the lines of Biéler’s book.

In the fourth part a much more penetrating look is directed at how Calvin used particular Scriptural passages to justify what was, according to him, woman’s subservient position. At the same time an effort will be made to attach a personal interpretation to the relevant biblical passages in order to be able to determine what precisely should be the position of woman according to the Scriptures.

Before we come to the main course, then, first a little background to enable us better to understand and thus better to evaluate the contribution of Calvin.

WOMEN AND MARRIAGE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

When we keep in mind that the Middle Ages lasted about a thousand

3 My survey cannot even begin to be comprehensive. Fortunately this book by Biéler has just been translated into Afrikaans by Prof. M.J.H. du Plessis of the Department of French at the PU for CHE (and I used this translation gratefully). The IRS hopes to publish it in the course of 1987.

4 It is a pity that there is no room here to investigate earlier views of women (that is, prior to the Middle Ages). J.C. Coetzee (1975, Woord en Daad) indicates how the Old Testament revelation, Christ’s own actions and the practices of the Early Christian Church brought something totally new into the world of heathenism with regard to the appreciation of woman. In the eastern world she had been practically a slave of the man, punishable by death if she should be caught in fornication, while the man himself came off free. In the heathen religions she did play an important role, but merely as a sexual sacrifice to the goddesses of fertility.

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years (± 500 — ± 1500), you will understand that a heading like the above is more or less ridiculous. Add to this the class distinctions of the Middle Ages (nobility, middle-class, farm labourers and clergy), which means that one cannot merely speak about ”women” in the Middle Ages, and it becomes almost totally impossible to say anything meaningful about ”women in the Middle Ages”.

Thus what follows now you are to regard as a few fleeting thoughts by an amateur in the field who would like to learn more from the discussion.

A chorus of contempt

When we read what former writers — even Christians — thought of woman, we are not surprised by what we find in the Middle Ages. We give you a few fragments from the long song of disdain for woman.

Aristotle (a Greek philosopher, 384-322 BC) sees the feminine sex as a defect of nature. In his *Historia animalium* (69) he says amongst other things that a woman cries sooner, is more apt to be jealous, complain and scold. Besides, she loses hope more easily, she is more impudent, less reliable, harder to rouse to action and... she needs less food!

Tertullian (a Christian advocate from North Africa, second century AD) calls woman a gate to hell. Augustine (a well-known church-father of the fourth century AD) says: Together with man woman bears the image of God, but without man she does not have the image of God. Boethius (another philosopher from Christian antiquity, 470 — 525 AD) calls woman a temple erected on a sewer.

Medieval voices

Familiar themes are taken further: woman is cursed as a consequence of the sin of Eve, dishonest because she was made from the crooked rib of Adam, bestial because she associated with the serpent and lustful and crafty as a result of her biology.

Albertus Magnus (theologian of the thirteenth century) says: Abstinence in marriage is good, but not perfect, for widowhood is better and the best still is the virgin state.

Thomas Aquinas (most famous thirteenth-century theologian of the Roman Catholic Church) confirms the viewpoint of the heathen Aristotle, namely that woman is woman because of her lack of male characteristics! Woman is the coincidental result of a defect in reproduction. Actually woman is a miscarried man!

Even a cursory glance through Thomas’s *Summa contra gentiles* (cf. for example Book III, chapter 122-124 and Book IV, chapter 78) reveals that he did not have a high regard for sex and marriage either (although he regards marriage as a sacrament). For him sex is mere physical pleasure we have in common with dumb animals. Sexual intercourse cannot take place for the purpose of procreation. (Therefore there will be no more sexual love in the life hereafter.) He also sees the purpose of marriage as the begetting (and education!) of children.

He makes the following not very flattering remark about the feminine sex: ”Woman needs man, not merely for begetting children as in the case of other living beings, but also with a view to government, since man has a more perfect reasoning ability and more strength” (*Summa contra gentiles*, Book III, chapter 123, par. 3).

During the Middle Ages woman’s subordinate position was firmly established. She was the property of either her father or her husband. Her place was not determined by her personality or her capability but by her sex. Often a marriage for her was agreed upon while she was still a child and it had nothing to do with her personal happiness, but with financial gain for the family! (This, of course, also applied to young boys!)

Jacques de Vitry wrote in the thirteenth century: ”Between Adam and God in paradise there was but one woman. And she did not rest until she succeeded in having her husband driven from the garden of happiness and Christ condemned to the torture of the cross”.

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But she was also a second-rate figure in rabbinical Judaism: seldom tolerated in public, not accepted as a witness in a court case, together with heathens and slaves she could not be allowed in the court of the temple, and in the synagogue she had to sit in seclusion from the men. The Jew had to say a daily prayer of thanks to God: ”Thou art to be praised, O Lord, for making of me not a heathen, a slave or a woman!”
It is not my aim to go into all the different types of anti-feministic literature. There were anecdotes in rhyme (French: fabliaux) in which the deceit and malice of women received special emphasis, novels, jokes, allegories and long lists of women from antiquity and the Bible (from Eve down to the present generation) who dragged their men into misery. Perhaps you know the story of the mythical monster, Chichiface, who was only allowed to eat women who were obedient to their husbands. In 200 years he never found anything to eat!

This chorus of misogyny and misogamy is not particularly edifying. But to show that contempt for women is not something unique to the Middle Ages, as a last encore listen to this opinion from the seventeenth century: "Woman is a stinking rose, a pleasant wound, a sweet poison, a bitter pleasure, an enchanting disease, a pleasant punishment, a flattering death ..."

It is clear that this Adam — in spite of difficulties — would not like to be without his Eve!

**Temporary change**

Since the twelfth century voices began to go up — especially from the urban middle class — against the subordinate position of women.

For instance, we find the following in an old manuscript in the Oxford University Library: "Women are preferable to men with reference to the matter from which they were made: Adam from the soil, and Eve from Adam; the place where they were made: Adam outside paradise, and Eve inside; in conception: a woman bore Christ which a man cannot do; in honour: Christ first appeared to women after his resurrection ... So St. Bernadice says: 'It is a gift of grace to be a woman — more women than men are saved' ''. And did not Peter Lombard say early in the Middle Ages that God made woman not from Adam's head because she was not meant to be his ruler, but not from his feet either, because she was not destined to be his slave, but from his side so that she could be his friend and companion.

All books, poems and other literary works from the time were written by men, however. We do get feminine works like the love letters from Héloïse to Abélard (published *inter alia* in 1974 by Betty Radice in the Penguin series under the title *The letters of Abélard and Héloïse*. From the tragic story of these two people one forms an idea of the terrible burden laid on the people by the ideal of celibacy and virginity). Furthermore there are the writings of a few feminine mystics and learned women. (Cf. for instance the Dutch poetry of Hadewijch and Sister Bertken in *Dat was gezelschap* by J. van den Bosch, p. 64 — 79.)

Only by the end of the fourteenth century there emerges a feminine writer who takes a stand against the degradation of her sex. She became famous especially for her attack on the well-known medieval poem *Le roman de la rose*. In the first part of the poem (completed before 1240 by Guillaume de Lorris) the ideal of courtly love is still propagated. In the second part (by Jean Chapinel de Meun about 1280) however, a brutal attack is made on the feminine sex. Against this attack in particular Christine de Pisan defended her sex with her pen.

**The basic point of departure**

Keeping in mind that the Middle Ages was the era of the doctrine of the two realms, one gets a better understanding of how it was possible that woman in this era was sometimes honoured and sometimes despised, now regarded as a saint and then again as a witch (or even a whore).

According to the two-realm doctrine the whole of life is divided into two levels, the one above the other. On the lower level we have the profane or secular field of nature. Raised above it is the sacral or holy field of grace. Through this bifocul lens the Middle Ages viewed everything in life — even woman, sexuality and marriage.

Of course it is wrong to localise good (holy) and evil (profane) in specific fields in this way, for evil (sin) and good (salvation) cannot be divided so neatly in this life. There are no fields in the universe (not even in the church) which are excluded from sin. Neither are there other fields (e.g. sexuality, ordinary "profane" work, etc.) which cannot be redeemed.

According to the (later) medieval doctrine of the two realms, if one really wants to serve God, one has to flee from the lower field of nature to the more elevated field of grace. This is exactly what Christ does not
want. He specifically prayed that God should not take us out of the world (where our calling is), but only that He should keep us safe from sin in the world (John 17:15). Asceticism is no solution!

For the medieval vision of woman the nature-grace doctrine had the following consequences: Marriage and sex was all right, but virginity was better. (This was also applicable to men, hence the celibacy for priests.) As a nun in a conven she would serve God far better, but at the expense of her femininity — which has been given to her by God himself. Her consolation would be to think of the Holy Virgin Mary.

If a woman chose marriage, it also came at the expense of her femininity. It is true that the church had made a sacrament out of marriage (like a condiment of grace on this natural institution to render forgivable the sexual intercourse which is supposed to be sin!), but actually she was the subordinate, property of the man, to satisfy his lusts and for the procreation of offspring.

Thus one could either look up to woman or look down on her, but one could not regard her as the man’s equal.

Virgin and lady

At the height of the Middle Ages (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) there actually were two cults alongside each other with reference to women: in the spiritual field there was the cult of the virgin and in the profane field there was the cult of the lady. The first was the cult of divine love for the clergy and the last the cult of the terrestrial love for the aristocracy and citizenry (laymen).

It is unnecessary to say more about the cult of the Virgin Mary (already widely diffused in the eleventh century). It was much more common in all layers of the population than the cult of the lady. Certainly it prompted many women to go and live as virgins in convents. There they would at least be free from the rule of men and the bother of marriage and children, and because they were somewhat elevated, they were more honoured, too.

In life in the convents — the only scope the church allowed women for many ages — women were given the opportunity to prove themselves. They did make excellent use of it and showed that they were capable of taking the lead and teaching no less than men.

It is to be doubted whether this was a solution to the “problem of woman”. Escapism is no use. There is also definite proof that the convents often degenerated into brothels!

The knight and his lady

The romantic lady cult forms the counter-pole (in the natural field) of the virgin cult. According to some writers the troubadours from France, the Minstrels from Germany and others of like mind from Italy played an important role in the propagation of the idea of courtly love. However, it was limited mainly to the aristocracy and citizenry. In this cult woman was also honoured, but in a completely different, worldly manner. This came to the fore in the new kind of love which the knight was bound to give to his lady.

When one keeps in mind that marriages among the aristocracy and citizenry were more often based on politics and money than on love, one can more easily comprehend this reaction. In feudal society there was no such thing as freedom in the choice of whom one wanted to love. (Feudal estates marry, but man and woman love.) Most of the time marriage was an arrangement by the parents who coupled children with a view to land-ownership.

This does not mean that we are glossing over the love which is described in for instance the De arte honesti amandi (1174 - 1186) by Andreas Capellanus. On the surface it may seem as if there is beauty in chivalrous love, but it is a thin veneer. Basically it is a plea for adulterous love. One of the premises of this love cult was that love between married people is impossible. The first rule (according to Capellanus) was: Marriage is no excuse for not loving! That which bound married people had nothing to do with true love. Thus true love might not only be sought outside marriage, it had to be sought there. So the lady idolized by the knight was always the wife of someone else.

Neither should one be deluded into thinking that the knight harboured a kind of platonic love for his lady. The ideal was embracing her and in the embrace carrying out all love’s directions. The seventeenth rule by Capellanus says: “A new love puts the older one to flight”; and his
thirty-first: “Nothing prevents one woman from being loved by two men, or one man by two women”!

Just as definitely as the wife stood in a subordinate position to her husband, the lady stood in a superior position to her adoring knight in this cult. The question is whether this contributed in any way to the elevation of woman (even though only of the aristocracy and rich citizens). Since the courtly ideals openly propagated adultery, this is a rhetorical question.

Christian and pagan love ideals

This tension can also be seen clearly in the above-mentioned work by Andreas Capellanus on The art of courtly love. In the first two parts of the work he gives a systematic explanation of the whole system of courtly love, which he finally sums up in a few basic rules. What is very peculiar, however, is that in part three he rejects the whole system, because he realises that it clashes with the biblical injunctions about love between husband and wife!

In his dissertation on Capellanus doctrine of love, F. Schlösser (1959) grapples with this problem! How can Capellanus possibly condone the heresy of adulterous love and then on the other hand speak in biblical terms? As a Roman Catholic Schlösser could easily have given the answer: the two-realm doctrine of nature and grace (or supra-nature)! As a result of this dual order Capellanus is incapable of seeing both worlds from one biblical perspective and consequently preaches a double truth (cf. Schlösser, 1959: 365-366). On the level of grace the biblical injunctions are valid for love between the two sexes, but on the natural level, man can indulge his sinful lusts!

However, the biblical injunctions mean nothing to woman: she is either a saint (which the Bible does not want) or a harlot (which the Bible rejects likewise).

Capellanus is a clear example of how the medieval doctrine of the two realms could not succeed in radically christianising life. Grace floated like oil on the water of natural life. And once the natural sphere slowly began to become of age and be emancipated, it brought about secularisation (rejection of the norms laid down by God). The idea of courtly love is a clear example: a completely pagan love religion.

R.H. Bainton, for instance, says the following: “Romantic love was the art of adultery. During the Renaissance the romantic notion began to fuse with marriage. One stage was the contention that if young people fall in love they should marry. The next step was to require that in order to marry they must first have fallen in love. The final step was to hold that if they ceased to be in love they should dissolve the marriage”. The Reformation of the Sixteenth century (1953), p. 258.

If the sixteenth century Reformation sincerely wanted to contribute to restoring honour to women, it would have to have begun in the first instance by breaking away from the profane-sacral dualism of the Middle Ages!

Actual practice speaks a word too

In order not to close on too sombre a note, I conclude with a quotation from Eileen Power’s Medieval Women (p. 34): “Such then were the contradictory ideas about women formulated during the Middle Ages and handed on as a legacy to future generations. On the one hand stood subjection, on the other worship; both played their part in placing women in the position they occupied in the Middle Ages, and in dictating or modifying the conditions of their existence in subsequent ages. Yet we should be wrong to consider either of these notions as the primary force in determining what the average medieval man thought about women. A social position is never solely created by theatrical notions; it owes more to the inescapable pressure of facts, to give and take of daily life. And the social position which these facts created in medieval society was neither one of superiority nor of inferiority but one of rough and ready equality. For in daily life man could not do without woman... Indeed something like camaraderie is to be found at times even in writings of churchmen about women...”

Restored in honour in the course of the Reformation?

What would the Reformation and then especially Calvin make of woman and of marriage? Would it continue denying her femininity by either idealizing her or making her contemptible? Would it elevate marriage (by making it a sacrament) and at the same time decry it (by regarding it as a mere procreative device for those who were not willing to opt for the celibate), without realizing what the most fundamental aim and purpose of marriage should be?
We know already that the Reformation restored marriage to its rightful place. The appreciation for woman within marriage rose unprecedentedly. But what of woman outside marriage?

In effecting a reaction one can also overdo things. Marriage too can be absolutized. We then find exactly the opposite of what pertained in the Middle Ages. Then the unmarried virgin was the highest ideal. When, in the time of the Reformation, the married woman is seen as the ideal, is there not the danger that the unmarried woman will be seen as the sinful one? Has the Reformation not perhaps succeeded in releasing woman from the convent only to lock her up in the house...?

**WOMAN AND MARRIAGE IN CALVIN**

In this version I make liberal use of the material which A. Biéler collected and collated from a wide variety of Calvin's works. In between I shall make my own observations.

**A time of transition**

H.J. Hillebrand (1973: 196-8) indicates that in the course of the intellectual ferment of the sixteenth century in the fields of theology, literature, and art a new concept of woman carne to the fore. He adds to this that it is very difficult today to determine whether, and if so, what results this had with regard to the role of woman in the home and in society. It is difficult for us today to decide whether women received more or fewer hindings from their husbands!

Woman was, so to speak, brought back to earth. In the Middle Ages she was an ethereal and spiritual being, with a mystical and extra-wordly beauty, who evoked no ordinary human emotions and who simply elevated all thoughts in the direction of heaven. The Virgin Mary had been, as we have seen, the model for the spiritual qualities of true womanhood. Now, however, she became a being made of flesh and blood again. The sexual part of mankind was again seen as a gift of God not subject to sin more than any other sphere of existence.

This “return to earth” did not, however, take place with the reformers in a secular manner as also happened in the sixteenth century. As a result of the stress on the fact that God called man to service in all spheres, woman could also be proud of the fact that she was wife, housewife and mother. In this way she could enact her God-given responsibilities.

According to Biéler, Calvin was conscious of the new trends towards emancipation of women, but he remained basically conservative.

**Reformation was essential**

The necessity for Reformation emerges clearly from the first chapter of Biéler’s book on the morals of the sixteenth century. He relates things such as the influence of the many wars (and the resultant loose morals among the soldiery), the widespread immorality among the clergy (in spite of the ideals of the celibate and of virginity — or perhaps precisely because of the celibate), the enormous scope of prostitution among the ordinary people (public bathing houses became brothels), the origin and the spread of venereal diseases, titillating songs, dances and dress, extravagant eating habits, inns with bad reputations and many more.

**Method of renewal**

There had been efforts at Reformation in Geneva both before and after Calvin. And these efforts had not been limited to this one city. (This is a further proof that Calvin was no tyrannical moralist!)

Calvin was convinced that sins in this field not only had to be judged passively, but also had to be opposed actively. These sins, after all, were directed at both God and man. For that reason not only the individual but also the church and the state had a duty in dealing with this.

Biéler constantly draws attention to the fact, however, that these changes
did not take place in the first place because of the external measures of force of the church and the state. Calvin did not want any legalistic moralism. The renewal came about primarily because of the faithful preaching of the Word of God. Morality gradually, spontaneously, changed because of this.

One can try to impose a certain moral level on the people by means of law enforcement, but one cannot bring new life to a community by this means. Moral life has to be a spontaneous outflow of faith, the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in man.

The purpose of marriage

According to Calvin marriage is an institution of God Himself, to be contracted also in his Name. For that reason it cannot be regarded as a kind of contract simply entered into according to the wishes of two people (parties), and which could by the same token be broken again.

The purpose of marriage is the unity of the married couple in love, fidelity and faith. In this Calvin differed from the Roman doctrine according to which marriage was primarily intended for the procreation of the human race.

Calvin also spoke against the general custom then that parents should arrange marriages for their children. In Article 8 of his Marriage Ordinance (1545) he said that no father or guardian had the right to force a child into any marriage. The children themselves had the right to choose for themselves, and should they not choose to accept the choice of the parents, they were not to be punished for this.

Calvin also added that, after the Fall, marriage had become an essential cure for sin (in the field of sex).

Calvin thus has a much more elevated vision of marriage than the Catholic Church and even than Luther⁶, who regarded women mainly as a means provided by God for the sexual relief of men and for the production of children.

Sex restored to its rightful place

The Reformer of Geneva was of the opinion that two concepts of the erstwhile church prevented marriage from coming into its own: the contempt of the sexual and the elevation of the celibate.

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hips, so that man can be wise. But the orifice where the dirt emanates, is small. In women the opposite is the case. That is the reason why they have much filth, and little wisdom” (D. Martin Luthers sämmtliche Werk, 61, 125).

Eve really receives a broadside. When Adam was on earth alone, everything went well. But when Eve was added, everything disintegrated. Women have the tendency to believe lies and nonsense and this quality they have inherited from Eve.

Woman has to stand under the authority of man, because she is too weak to control herself (op. cit., 93, 112). God did not create the female sex to govern. Luther’s ideal for womanhood is that of being a wife and a mother: “Women were created for no other purpose than to serve men and to be their helpers ... Let them give birth to children until they die — they were created for that purpose” (op. cit., 20, 84).

Elsewhere he states: “Women are like a nail knocked into the wall of the house ... she has to stay there. The hearth represents Venus on a seashell, because just as a small carries his house with him, so the woman has to remain at home and care for the household” (Weimar Ausgabe, 42, 151). And: “She likes staying at home, enjoys it in the kitchen ... does not enjoy going out ... does not enjoy conversing with others” (Weimar Ausgabe, 25, 45).

In the place of the Medieval virginity and convent life, marriage and motherhood now came as the only two ways in which women could fulfill their God-given calling. Martha, the obedient woman, who serves God through her daily domestic work, becomes the ideal woman. She replaces her sister Mary, who would rather listen to Christ, as well as the Virgin Mary.

It may therefore be correct to maintain, as some do, that Luther freed woman in some sense, but then only in a limited sense — he freed her from the cloister to cloister her up in her home! Where the unmarried woman had been the ideal previously, the married now became the ideal. Some researchers even argue that the persecution as witches of unmarried women and widows at the time might have been the result of the unuttered fear of relinquishing the popular view (that woman was intended only for marriage).

⁶I offer only a few flashes to give an idea of how Luther saw woman. From her anatomy he deduces the following: “God created man with broad shoulders and not with broad
From his writings it is very clear that Calvin did not deny the physical side of life. He did not regard sex as such as sinful. If one should think that one's marriage should be polluted by sexual intercourse with one's wife, one should be guilty of false religious piety. It does not help to regard sexual intercourse contemptuously under the guise of religious fervour, and then to be unable to refrain from indulgence oneself!

By the way: Because Calvin was not afraid of sexuality anymore (although he did feel a little uncomfortable because of the possible enjoyment attached to it!) communal singing in church was also introduced. (The Roman Church did not allow this because of a fear of possible sexual excesses!)

The rejection of the celibate and of virginity

If sexuality then is not to be regarded as a sin, one should also not seek sanctity outside marriage (by way of the celibate and of virginity), but it should be realised within the institution of marriage itself. The celibate is not to be regarded as being higher than marriage, but the opposite is to be seen as the truth: marriage is the rule and the unmarried state is the exception.

Calvin also stated clearly which two exceptions could be regarded as being permissible. These include a situation when God should call someone to service in a way in which it would be better if the person should be unmarried, so better to serve God; and a situation when it is physically impossible for one to marry (here he distinguishes three types of disability: by nature, rendered thus by others, or rendered thus by oneself).

He also stresses, however, that a more chaste life in itself should not be the purpose of the unmarried. Even when it is permissible, the unmarried state should not be seen as being superior to the married state. It only has value if the person called to the state is thus rendered more able to fulfil his calling. It is a foolish deduction that in itself the unmarried state is a virtue which will please God. Rome is totally wrong in elevating the celibate and virginity above marriage, because marriage in itself is a calling from heaven. Did not God at the creation of Adam already say that it is not good that man (Adam) should be alone? If man places a prohibition on things which are free to be used in accordance with the Will of God, then it becomes a diabolical tyranny.

The Roman Catholic Church wished to be even stricter than God Himself, and for that reason their ideals perished in the hard practicality of everyday life.

No sacrament

In the Roman Catholic Church we encounter the curious situation that, although the celibate is regarded more highly than marriage, it is not a sacrament, whereas marriage is a sacrament. (We have already observed earlier that this might well be the "sauce of grace" intended to render marriage more acceptable.)

Calvin also rejected this heresy. We can only accept as sacraments those specifically instituted by Christ Himself, viz., baptism and holy communion. And the fact that we may not regard marriage as a sacrament does not in the least mean that we regard it slightingly. For Calvin it was merely a different kind of institution of God Himself.

In Calvin's view we often find the concept of a half and a half making a whole, that is, the view that it is only in marriage that man becomes whole, "complete". He also stresses the fact that marriage is the basic cell in the social structure of man.

A breakthrough

One thing is very clear. Although Calvin did not completely break with the dualism of the doctrine of the two realms of nature and grace in some fields (such as in his anthropology), he clearly broke with it in his view of marriage. Life was no longer divided into, physical (sexual) — spiritual, marriage — celibate, laymen — special people (clerus).

Calvin rejected both the sacral and the secular view of marriage of respectively the Roman Church and the vulgar popular views of the day. According to both these views man had to seek happiness outside marriage. According to the former this had to happen through abstinence (the celibate) and according to the latter in the other extreme, viz., loose flirtations. Calvin unmasked both as culs-de-sac: one's true happiness and fulfilment lay within marriage, not outside it.

In the sphere of ordinary married life, too, one has a calling to serve
God. More: the calling has to be the rule within this field. Where the Roman dualism tended to see only man’s spirit as the temple of God, Calvin repeatedly stresses the biblical truth that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.

It is also a step in the right direction that Calvin should once again pinpoint the essence of marriage as residing in love in the sense of mutual fidelity, as opposed to views which saw the core of marriage as residing in the biological (procreation), in the economic, the political or even the ecclesiastical fields. Marriage is based in sex and directed at mutual fidelity, and the two may not be divided. Although sexual communion does not create love, it does strengthen and affirm the fidelity.

Fundamental equality but still subservience

The man of Geneva had no doubt at all that man and woman were fundamentally, spiritually, equal before God. In marriage — and, according to Calvin, also in the rest of society — the wife, however, is not the equal of man but subservient to him. In this Calvin is the child of the church of his day!

Is it not a little paradoxical to support both the concepts of equality and inequality of man and woman?

We, as children of the twentieth century, would of course like to know exactly how Calvin could manage this, and what his grounds could be for such a view. You won’t be wrong in your guess: As a biblical thinker he finds support for his view in the Scriptures.

One could divide his reasons in an argument from the perspective of creation and an argument from the Fall. Genesis and Paul both teach that the woman was created after the man, out of the man and for the man. Furthermore, it is also clear that sin came into the world as a result of the first woman. (Not that this absolves the man of all guilt, Calvin adds very scrupulously.)

You have to think about Calvin’s reasons carefully. In the fourth section of this paper we will deal with them in detail. One could not refrain, however, from listening to two of Calvin’s contemporaries who held the opposing view also based on an interpretation of the Word of God!

In her Discours docte et subtil Marguerite de Valois maintains that the fact that the woman was created after the man (according to the Bible) is in no way a proof of her inferiority but rather of her superiority. According to Genesis, after all, God created his creatures in an ascending line, in an ever greater degree of perfection. The one coming last, the woman, is therefore the best, the nearest to God, the utterly perfect. She also provides concrete examples: the body of the woman is more attractive, more delicately finished. And as regards the soul of the woman, God prefers the tranquil, calm, devoted spirit to the rough, rebellious and bloodthirsty soul of the man.

Without necessarily agreeing with Marguerite, we can see from this already that one has to be careful not to want to deduce too much from the specific moment of creation (after Adam) of Eve. Calvin’s other arguments for the subservience of the woman might be equally wobbly. Are the results of the Fall (including the tyranny of the man over the woman) a fact or a norm? Should the disharmony between man and woman following the Fall, or the curse of God on sin be a law for us? I do not believe so. For that reason I also do not believe that out of the fact that Eve sinned and was punished by God (amongst others in the sense of difficulties in pregnancy and desire for her husband) the principle may be deduced that she also has to be subservient to the man.

But we anticipate. Let us see how a male philosopher-medic from Calvin’s time stood up for woman. Cornelius Agrippa rightly warned that we should not deduce too much from Eve’s seduction and curse. Did not God’s warning and prohibition for Adam already exist before Eve came into the world? And as regards Eve’s punishment: Did not Someone come to expiate her sins?

The meanings of the names of the first married couple offered Agrippa material to elevate the women above the men. Adam means earth and Eve means life. Old father Adam was taken from the lifeless earth, while mother Eve is the creature of God Himself, seeing that she was made from material already purified. Her body is therefore purer, more refined. She has no beard (sic!). When she bathes, the water becomes cleaner rather than dirtier — as is the case when her husband comes to have a bath. During pregnancy she can digest everything (ouch!) and she is even able to give birth without the assistance of the male sex (vide the Virgin Mary!).

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From the viewpoints of Marguerite and Cornelius we can see clearly that Calvin did not live in a time anymore in which the subservience of the woman to the man was accepted without any opposition. There were already clear signs of protest and emancipation.

Qualified subservience

To Calvin's credit, however, it needs to be said that he did not support unqualified subservience of the woman. Sin did have the result that man became a tyrant and woman a slave, but it need not be like this. The man is the head from before the Fall, and even more afterwards, but this does not mean that he is allowed to oppress the woman.

Man and woman have equal rights in the sexual fields, because the man is not the master of his own body, just as the woman is not the master of her body.

But the shape that the authority of the man should assume also indicates clearly that the subservience of the woman is qualified. The authority of the man is situated in service and in sacrifice. It is then rather an authority of comradeship than of oppression. Calvin offers the man the example of the unselfish service of love and the denial of self of Christ in his relationship with his bride, the church. In this way the man's wife should be more precious to him than his own life. Calvin was, without any doubt, no champion of the suppression or the contempt of women.

In her turn the woman has to bend to the man as the church to Christ: spontaneously and willingly. Neither may the weaknesses of woman be an excuse for the man not to keep to the unbreakable commandments of God, nor may the weaknesses of the man be an excuse for the woman not to keep to the injunction of obedience to the man.

The Third Person in marriage

Calvin then also does not tire of stressing that it is only in Christ that marriage finds its true character again. In continuing communion with Him marriage is daily renewed, restored, and can there be unity and mutual willingness to serve. Outside this understanding man tends to tyranny and woman to autonomy.

Our Reformer places special stress on the idea of communal prayer which seals the unity in Christ and which is the only thing making possible mutual forgiveness between man and wife.

Marriage to an unbeliever?

In this regard Calvin distinguishes between a marriage that already exists and one which still has to be solemnized.

In the case of an existing marriage between a believer (or rather someone who became a Christian within marriage) and an unbeliever there is no reason to break the relationship, because, as he maintains, the piety of the one has more value in sanctifying marriage than has the unbelief of the other to desecrate it.

In the case of intended marriages, the Scriptures, however, have clear injunctions that one should not even try to pull in the same yoke with an unbeliever.

As regards marriage with members of other Christian faiths (such as Roman Catholics, for example) Calvin enjoins caution in judgement, seeing that people of other (Christian) convictions than Protestantism may not be regarded as heathens.

Abstinence, military service, respect

As compulsory military service today makes great demands on the young married life of couples, this was also the case in Calvin's time as a result of the many wars. He states that it is not without reason that the Bible (Deuteronomy 24:5) enjoins that men may not do military service during their first year of marriage. They first have to be granted the opportunity to establish mutual truth properly.

We have already seen that Calvin did not regard abstinence in the field of sex as a virtue in itself. For that reason he also establishes clear guidelines for abstinence in marriage.

In the first place (and this is already clear in what he says about military service) it should only be for a limited period — even though man and wife should voluntarily decide about it.
Secondly it has to be voluntary with full agreement from both parties, and one of the two may not take such a decision alone.

In the third place the only reason for this has to be that it might enable one to render God better service.

Calvin was only too conscious of the fact that a man could within marriage too commit adultery with his wife. Even within marriage everything is not simply permissible. There can be shamelessness within marriage which is just as wrong as fornication. For that reason the spouses have to behave themselves with dignity and act respectfully towards each other.

Widows and the unmarrieds

Young widows who do not marry again can run even greater risks than those who remain unmarried. Calvin therefore advises them to marry again.

It is striking (as far as I have been able to ascertain) that Calvin says nothing about unmarried men or women who could and might have married, but who were unable to find a mate. I wonder whether Protestantism did not, as a result of reaction against the Roman ideal of the celibate, go too far and overemphasized marriage. One often gets the impression that if someone has not been married by a certain age he should be pitied, as if an unmarried person has missed the bus. Such an attitude — even though one does not realize it — places the same overdone emphasis on marriage and the sexual as we are often so quick to reject in the society surrounding us. Marriage and sexuality are not the whole man, or the central facet of life.

Divorce and remarriage

As happens today, people in Calvin's day often divorced about frivolous, unimportant things. The argument was advanced then too that it was better to dissolve the marriage rather than to continue an abnormal marriage.

Calvin says that when we act like that, we are seeking a cure outside the Will of God. The solution for a marriage that has landed in a crisis is not simply to try another marriage!

We have already seen that marriage for Calvin (on the basis of the Scriptures) was not a mere contract between two parties which could be entered into and broken at whim. The only true solution then rested in restoration from Above. Patience, trust and reconciliation were needed.

Apart from the Will of God, there are also concerns of public order to be kept in mind. According to this Calvin — and this differs from the Roman Church — does allow divorce on two grounds.

The first case is adultery, through which it is established that married unity has been broken. It is better to have the right divorce than to live on in bigamy. Here one should thus rather leave one's wife than to live on with more than one wife. Calvin approves divorce on the basis of adultery only, however, in the case of the adultery being committed by only one of the parties. His Marriage Ordinance (1545) states clearly that, if the man should fall into adultery as a result of the behaviour of his wife, or vice versa, both are guilty, and they may not request a divorce on the grounds of adultery.

The second ground for divorce may be found in the case where the unbelieving marriage partner may be rejecting the believer. The opposite is not permissible (as has already been mentioned above), viz. that a believer may reject his unbelieving partner and divorce him/her.

Apart from these two there can be no other sin or circumstance to justify divorce. Perhaps there had been people who had tried to justify divorce on the grounds of a stroke, of paralysis, leprosy or one of the other incurable condition, because Calvin rejects this and says that the Holy Spirit gives one the strength under such conditions to continue in the married state.

Calvin is not only ahead of his time in that he does allow legal divorce, but also in the rights that he accords to women. In his Ordinance (Ordonnances sur les Mariages) of 1545 he also grants a woman the right to request a divorce on the basis of adultery in her husband — in contradistinction to the double standards which had obtained up to then.

The remarriage of divorcees Calvin only allowed in the case of people divorced for legal reasons. (Should this not be the case, remarriage was excluded, as the previous marriage was then deemed to be existing still.)
Idleness and gossip

When Calvin comes to this kind of topic, one can clearly see that he is still a child of his time. There is nothing better for a woman to do than housework, because this keeps her from indulging in idle pursuits which might give rise to curiosity and gossip.

In one of his commentaries, amongst others, he says that "... gossiping is a disease among women and it becomes worse with the years. Women think that they do not enjoy a conversation if they do not tattle and gossip. In this way it happens often that old women may set fire to various houses by their gossip as certainly as if they had set fire to them with a fire-brand".

In the church the greatest danger on the part of the woman is fanatic piety. This is a striving towards piety for the sake of piety purely. This prevents one from letting oneself be truly led by the Word of God. Many women fall into this spurious piety and never come to the truth.

Is Calvin perhaps prejudiced here, or is he speaking from hard experience?

Clothes and fashions

As is the case in our own day, clothes had been something of an issue. This had also been true of both sexes. (In our case it has been the issue of hats for women and at present the issue of a suit for men in worship services.) The temptation is great — especially for the sake of the ladies in the audience? — to go into details about the fashions of the period.

One wonders really whether anything has changed since the sixteenth century if one hears that Calvin accorded his fatherland, France, the doubtful honour of having taken the lead always in seductive fashions. "Of all the nations in the world there is not one so changeable, daring, exaggerated and inconstant as the French."

He had no appreciation for the fashions of the day which made the men wear frills and lace like women and women strutted around in hats with plumes and buckles like soldiers, so that it was even difficult to distinguish between the two sexes. (Who does not here think about the struggle in our own country of a decade or so ago about the issue as to whether it was permissible for women to wear slacksuits to church, seeing that it would look too much as if one wore men's clothing!)

Of the women he says: They are dressed to kill, daring and loose and each day they wear a new disguise! Their dresses are so wide that one cannot approach closer than one metre to them, and they turn like windmills in the huge contraptions.

Who is not reminded irresistibly of the windmills for hats that women wore to church up to a few years ago? Speaking of hats: it is understandable that Calvin should have insisted on "hats" for women in church. The way in which he did this, however, is reminiscent of the way in which many contemporary arguments about clothes sound: If women are allowed to come to church without a covering for their heads, it won't be long before they come to church with their breasts uncovered, and reveal themselves in church as if there were a pub sign outside!

Does this mean, then, that father John had been insensitive to the beauty and the charm of the female sex, and the elegance imparted to women through wearing beautiful clothes?

In no sense. But he also noted realistically that beauty could be deceptive and even dangerous. It could be dangerous not only for those succumbing to beauty but also for the beautiful. Although beauty is a gift of God, one finds barely one woman in ten among the beautiful who does not effect her own downfall by demanding the glory of the beauty for herself! Physical beauty can also be a great affliction.

Calvin was directed not so much against fashion as against the fickleness and capriciousness of fashion, which caused women to act unpredictably and become spendthrift. He wanted to maintain a balance between asceticism and waste. You might be getting curious to know which criteria Calvin applied to judge whether a specific type of clothing could be regarded as acceptable or not. He clearly struggled with the balance between the two points of departure: clothes are not the be-all and the end-all, but clearly also not of no concern. On the one hand one's piety is not determined by what one wears. On the other hand one's appearance (gestures and clothes) cannot be distinguished completely from one's service to God — one's outward appearance is testimony of one's inner disposition. Excesses in clothing then mostly
indicate, according to him, something of a spiritual problem. "If it is so that one should render testimony through what one wears of one's fear of the Lord, then it should also be expressed through a modest choice of clothing ... the clothing of a modest woman should be different from that of a whore".

He does acknowledge, however, as we know only too well, that it is not always easy to determine exactly where the line has to be drawn. He does not want to prescribe a fixed way of dressing for all times and all places. If the clothes worn in a specific place at a specific time are decent, then he has no objection if they are worn by the believer. Should the clothes, however, clash with the demands of the Word of God, then it is the duty of the Christian to maintain distance.

But what then are his final criteria? In the first place practicality and comfort, in the second place modesty and honour and in the third place simplicity. Clothes, in the first place, are intended to protect us from heat or cold. Modesty means that one has to be clothed respectably and not in a daring fashion. And as against extravagance and vanity he sets the ideal of soberness and simplicity.

Parents and children

Although the family really falls outside the scope of this paper, one should really say something about it briefly. This is, according to Calvin, an important facet of the life of a woman.

He stresses for his countrymen that they should again see their children as a gift of God. Then they will care for their children better, and they will be less concerned about them. On the thorny issue as to how illegitimate children can be a gift from God (as this might imply that He plays along with sinners) Calvin responded that they too are a gift from God in which He proves that his grace far outweighs sin.

Calvin states — and this is typical of his time — that God is more honoured through the birth of sons. He adds to this (probably in the light of the horrifying custom of the murder of girls at birth) that daughters should not be rejected.

Calvin impresses on the hearts of the women that the road of faith ran through motherhood and daily, humble duties. Their hard housework

had more value for God than many of the so-called achievements of people admired by others.

Parental authority

In contrast to marriage (where the man, according to him, has all the authority) the wife shares in the practice of authority in the family. Calvin says very beautiful things in this regard, of which only a few flashes might be repeated here.

He states that the fifth commandment contains a promise (a long life in peace) which is valid not only for the family but also for all other relationships of authority in society. Obedience to one's human superiors also means a step in God's educational process to bring man to subjection to his Will. The purpose of all authority then, is to bring man closer to this ideal of subjection to the Will of God.

God, however, is the Source of authority. Parents can only have authority over their children because they have been granted the mandate by God. If they should forget this, they become tyrants and they darken the vision that their children might have upon Christ. Children, in their turn, are obliged, because their parents have been appointed by God, to render respect and love to their parents, irrespective of whether the parents might be worthy of it. Just as parents are not freed of their task of caring for their children just because the children might be difficult, so children are not absolved of obedience just because the parents might have weaknesses.

Should children then truly obey their parents "in all things" (Ephesians 6:1)? Are there no limits to parental authority? No, there are. The condition is: without sinning against God. Calvin states it very beautifully that it is obedience that we owe to our parents and to others in authority, and that this is only one part of the honour, love and obedience that we should render to God. If someone in office should thus demand of us action that is against the Will of God, then we are bound not to be obedient at this particular point, because they have at the same time ceased, at this point, to be obedient to the function imposed upon them by God. This "right of revolt" is also applicable to princes, landowners and other authorities when they should want to cause their subjects to contravene the Law of God. No authority, in his view, is absolute and unconditional, but has been ordained by and is subject to the Highest
Authority.

*Education — raising children*

Calvin complains — and wouldn’t he still be doing it today! — that many parents of his day give more attention to their oxen, cows and horses than they give to their children. Raising children is also primarily a matter which should not be determined by the interests of the parents but by the Will of God. Parents have to be strict yet patient and refrain from being cruel and unkind.

Although communal religious devotions do not take away the necessity of personal religious devotions, they should be at the centre of family life.

Calvin himself says — and this is remarkable for his day — that the husband should help the wife with her domestic responsibilities and motherly duties. Mutual help and support are essential.

Members of the family have to help each other and be involved with each other. Bonds of blood, however, may never play a more important role than the bond of faith. Love and obedience to God precede all other bonds. Béllier maintains that although Calvin loved his own family and his own fatherland, he was never a religious nationalist (Christian-National in South African terms!). Obedience in faith was a primary concern for him.

**The woman within the perspective of society**

To my mind Calvin here makes the same mistake that we still tend to make today: Because the married woman within marriage is subservient to the man, woman has to be subservient to man in general too. He says this explicitly. This is even true of young unmarried men and of young women and of widows! In accordance with the principle that each societal structure is sovereign in its own sphere, it is, to my mind, possible that a woman could, for example, be principal of a school (also with male teachers on the staff — even her own husband!) without the principalship affecting the authority of her husband within the confines of her marriage.

We do have to concede to Calvin’s credit that he does relativize this idea of his. Paul’s view was not absolute for all times and all places, but pertained to the specific circumstance of Corinth. In the same way, Calvin says, the social subjection of the woman to the man is simply a question of an external, public, temporal and transitory order. It is thus very relative as against the fundamental spiritual equality of the two sexes.

This has brought us back again, however, to the central issue as to whether Calvin could justify his ideas about the subservience of woman on the basis of the Scriptures. This brings us to the third and the last section of this paper in which our own vision with regard to the place of the woman is more clearly elucidated.

**Recapitulatory evaluation**

Calvin is not always very clear about the precise position of the woman. There is often a duality in his thought: equal with the man and yet not equal. This is perhaps clear when we keep in mind that Calvin was confronted with two very extreme viewpoints. On the one hand the traditional disdain or depreciation of the Middle Ages in regard to women. On the other hand there were the radical trends of his day such as, for example, the Anabaptists, who demanded complete equality. Calvin did not wish to be associated with either.

Calvin was a child of his time yet was also a pioneer responsible for something new. In this paper we have stressed this especially by comparing his view with the Medieval view. One could also compare him on this point with his contemporaries (co-Reformers, Anabaptists, sixteenth-century Humanists and Roman Catholics). In contrast to the preceding Middle Ages one could, however, in recapitulation at least mention the following new, original perspectives in Calvin (and in some of his contemporaries):

(i) He broke through the nature-grace schema of the Middle Ages, so that man could serve God not ascetically outside marriage but within marriage. Marriage, and through that womankind, came to be restored in large measure.

(ii) The celibate was rejected and sexuality was acknowledged.

(iii) The idea of marriage as a sacrament fell away.
(iv) Love and fidelity are the primary considerations, and not pro-
creation, economic or political issues. The choice of a marriage
partner was therefore not the province of the parents but rested with
two people voluntarily marrying out of love.

(v) Spiritual equality of man and woman is the essential norm and
social inequality is a changeable historical fact.

(vi) The woman should have the same rights (in divorce, for example)
as the man.

Although John Calvin had been bound to his time in many respects —
as we all are - he did open the door for a re-appraisal of the woman
and of marriage.

WOMAN AND MARRIAGE IN OUR TIME — A CRITICAL LOOK AT
CALVIN’S EXEGESIS

As has been stated in the introduction, this section will consist of two
sub-divisions. In the first place we are going to see which Scriptural
passages Calvin uses to found his viewpoint about the subservience
of woman. In the second place we will attempt to find a new exegesis
of the relevant Scriptural passages in order to attain to a contemporary,
distinctive vision of the status of woman.

Calvin’s Scriptural appeal

One need only read Calvin’s sermons on, for example, I Corinthians
11:4-10 or 1 Timothy 2:12-14 to see that the subservience of woman
within and without marriage was to him a matter of course. In his
sermon he even appeals to similar customs among the heathens! We
are more interested, however, in how he can justify his viewpoint on the
basis of the Scriptures. It is good, then, to start right at the beginning,
with Genesis.

*Explication of Genesis 1 to 3 in the light of Paul*

In Genesis 1:27 we read that God created man in his image, as his
representative — He created them man and woman. We cannot deduce
any inequality from this, because it is stated without distinction that man
and woman are image of God. Calvin, however, makes a distinction:

the woman is only the image of God “in the second degree”. By this
he means that although she is the image of God in the spiritual sense,
she is not in the present earthly disposition. Therefore she is the equal
of the man in the spiritual sense but not in the natural order. I am con-
vinced that Calvin here introduces a distinction into Genesis which does
not really exist. The old schema of nature — grace, which he did suc-
cceed in breaking, but which he has not been able to shake off com-
pletely, is probably here making him guilty of a delusion.

Calvin is also not very clear on this point. In certain “natural” fields (such
as for example in the field of family life) he accords the woman a more
equal status than he is willing to accord her in the “spiritual” field of
the church — precisely the opposite of what we should have expected.

From Genesis 2:18 Calvin deduces that man is a social being needing
a mate. One can deduce from this verse not so much subservience as
mutual involvement. It appears, however, that Calvin did not understand
the meaning of the word help/heifer (ezar) correctly. He saw it as a type
of adjunct or assistant, an auxiliary (adjumentum inferior). The Hebrew
word help never, however, in the Bible gained the meaning of sub-
servience or of inferiority. In fact: in many of the Psalms God is called
the help of man (and the same Hebrew word is used). And yet this does
not mean that man becomes the superior of God!

Calvin here introduces the idea, however, that the man is the leader,
the authority over the woman. If he wanted to deduce this consistently
from the fact that God calls the woman the helper, then he should
really have seen the man as the one requiring help!

If God describes the woman as the help for the man, it does not at all
mean that she is inferior. The word rather indicates someone (as also
when the word is used of God) who offers support and strength!

It also emerges from the fact that God said that He would make some-
one for the man who would be suited to him, that is an equal partner
with the man. (The new Afrikaans translation then also renders it that
she is the equal (of the man).)

Calvin propounds three reasons why the man is the head and the su-
perior of the woman: a historical argument (order), an archaeological
argument (origin) and a teleological argument (aim and purpose).
He founds his historical reason on 1 Timothy 2:13 ("For Adam was first formed, then Eve"). Calvin does express a little doubt here, when he says that Paul's argument does not seem all that sound to him, as John the Baptist preceded Christ, and yet he was not superior to Christ. Yet he does not let go of his conclusion that Eve, as a result of the fact that she was created after Adam should then of necessity have a lower rank than Adam.

From 1 Corinthians 11:8 ("For the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man") he deduces his archaeological argument. As a branch is not more important than the trunk or the root of the tree, so the woman is not more important than the man. He draws the conclusion again that the woman is a sort of adjunct to the man. One could well ask whether Adam should not then be subservient to the dust from which he was formed! The son of a queen, after all, does not remain ever subservient to his mother just because he was born of her. Above all: Only one woman was formed of a man. Subsequently all men have been born of women!

1 Corinthians 11:9 ("Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man") provides Calvin with his third (teleological) reason for the subservience of the woman. Here too one cannot deduce female subservience from Genesis. Calvin had to introduce Paul into Genesis. And after looking at Genesis through Pauline spectacles, he returns to Paul's explications, which offer a beautiful explanation of the story of Genesis! It is a circular line of reasoning, because Genesis does not confirm Paul's vision of woman.

This is still quite apart from the fact that subservience does not have to mean inferiority (cf. for example Mark 10:43, 44!).

If Calvin had confined himself to man and woman in marriage it would have been understandable, as the Scriptures are very clear about the authority of husband over wife in marriage, but in his sermon as well as in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:4-10 he says that it is valid for all women (married and unmarried) that the man is the superior and the figure of authority because it was so ordained by God.

How Calvin could manage this seems inconceivable, because it is not at all certain that these Scriptural passages deal with man and woman in general. The Genesis story as such deals exclusively with Adam and Eve. Perhaps Calvin read Genesis in the light of 1 Timothy 2:8-15, which gives the impression of dealing with men and woman (in general) in the congregation. I get the impression, however, as if Paul here specifically has in mind the man-woman relationship within marriage. When the Greek aner and gune are used together in one sentence (as the subject and the object), it is usually safe to assume that they should be translated as husband and wife unless the context indicates man and woman. And the context here indicates husband and wife within marriage. There is a reference to a specific marital relationship and also to motherhood (verse 15). Paul also deals here with authority, and authority always presupposes a specific relationship, such as marriage. It is impossible that Paul should here be advocating the authority of one person over others in any possible relationship. Paul here specifically calls women within marriage to the acknowledgement of the man's authority within marriage.

Thus, instead of using Paul for his argumentation, Calvin rather abused him!

Up to this point Calvin has, on the basis of the fact that the woman was created after the man, came out of and lives for the man, "proved" her subservience, that is, on the basis of the order of creation. The story of the Fall in itself strengthens him in this viewpoint.

The punishment meted out to woman in Genesis 3:16 ("... and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee...") and 1 Timothy 2:14 ("And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression") moulds Calvin's thought towards the formation of the following conclusion: because the woman fell into sin (first), the man will rule over her.

It has to be clearly stated in advance that there is no question here of the rule of the male sex over the female sex, but of the authority of one man over his wife within marriage.

Calvin was, of course, immediately confronted with the problem that he had already stated before that the woman had been subservient to the man before the Fall. He evades this problem by saying that Eve was obedient voluntarily before the Fall and not so voluntarily after the Fall. Adam's authority also changed into a tyranny.
The problem lies with what precisely Paul means. I can hardly believe that Paul should prescribe the curse of the Fall as a norm for women. If we believe that Christ can redeem us from our sins, then we cannot at the same time wish for the continuation of the punishment which has been suspended. How can pain and suffering in childbearing and subservience to the man simultaneously be used as an effect of sin and as a norm for her position as against the man? If this were the case, then the medical profession should be prohibited from relieving the pain of childbirth, and also weed-killers (Genesis 3:18).

Olthuis (1975:10, 11) says that "It is important to emphasize that the curses of the Lord are just that — curses, not commands to obey ... The domination of man and subordination of woman is a distortion of the original intention of the Creator ... Thus, the words of curse are not norms to guide our male-female relations. For instance, the curse does not mean that man ought to rule over woman or that man and woman ought to live in pain. The disorder of the fall is not to become an order we try to maintain".

Or should we see the punishment of God as grace at the same time, in the sense that authority (of the man over the woman) has become more essential in the corrupted marriage following the Fall, and that this is what God means when He says: "... he shall rule over you"?

These texts also, however, give Calvin the opportunity to explicate the vices of womankind: she talks too much, she is idle, curious, she loves daring clothes, etc. etc.

Calvin does not always, however, speak so slightly of women. He also stresses her equality with the man — at times, and in certain senses.

Equality — also within the church?

Seeing that it is not of importance for us, I do not provide Calvin's Scriptural proofs of the equality of man and woman. They are equal, it seems, on the following points: in their humanity, as image of God (although the woman only in the spiritual sense), they are equal in authority and honour in the family, and in the right both have (on the basis of adultery) to demand divorce.

In reality the woman is only the equal of the man in the private field (family life). One would think that, because she is also the equal of the man in the spiritual sphere, she should also be allowed to be on an equal footing with the man within the church. This is not the case, however. The church, just like the state, belongs to the public domain.

Calvin therefore has problems with women in history — and in his own day — occupying positions of authority in the church and in the field of politics. After John Knox had so raged about government by women in his The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regimen of women Calvin made a stand about this in the preface to the second edition of his Isaiah commentary which he dedicated to Queen Elizabeth. This amounts to the fact that exceptions are permissible even though it is against the order of nature.

Such exceptions are usually one of three: divine judgements, emergency situations or action of women in private life. (The latter, of course, is not really an exception but rather a way in which Calvin justified the actions of some women as leaders.)

We already know that for Calvin the prohibition on speech and teaching, the covered head and the prohibition of any guidance by the woman in church could not be suspended, and then it is not difficult to forecast what he would do with the many Scriptural passages in which women are described as having taken the lead.

The prophetess-general, Deborah, had to act because Barak was too weak-kneed. Her action could thus be justified because it was an emergency situation and God's judgement over the man. In Acts 2:17 ("... and your daughters shall prophesy ...") which quotes from Joel 2:28, Calvin generalises the idea of prophesying to such an extent that he could not possibly have any more objections to the text. Priscilla (Acts 18:26) taught Apollo privately. Also the prophesying daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9) did not prophesy in public. The message of Christ's resurrection was first preached to women (just as Eve was the first to receive the promise of the Messiah — Genesis 3:15), and they also became the first disseminators or preachers of this. In this instance Calvin cannot try to maintain that this was not done in public. His justification is therefore that it was God punishing his (male) disciples through their weak faith by giving the task to women temporarily to shame them!
De Boer (1976:269) does not act unfairly toward Calvin when he says of this kind of explication: “The basic pattern for Calvin’s outlook on the role of woman had been set by Paul’s allusions to the created structure ... the biblical material is read through these glasses and made to fit this structure as well as possible. But ... sometimes it took some ramming and cramming to make them fit, and sometimes it took an almost high-handed explaining away of the text to keep the structure. Calvin was a prince of exegetes, and read the Bible message so well on so many subjects. But the beautifully consistent structure he built on the subject of woman has its ragged seams and its threadbare weak points. It is less than a perfect explanation of the biblical materials and invites other attempts at putting the Bible all together on the subject”.

Surprising openness

Calvin did not, however, maintain his viewpoint about the woman in the church consistently. In his explication (in his commentaries and sermons) of the well-known Scriptural passages which enjoin woman to be quiet and to subservience in the church he often made concessions because he realized that Paul was concerned with customs bound by time and place. These were not divine, universal commandments. Calvin reveals that he is keenly aware of the fact that Paul had to apply such measures in Corinth and Ephesus because of specific circumstances. He also realized clearly that decency, decorum and respectability were relative concepts depending on specific cultural conditions. What Calvin has to say in his *Institutes IV*, chapter 10, paragraphs 29, 30 ties in with what we read in his sermons and in his letters.

Bratt (1976:11) also fixes the attention on this when he says: “It appears that Calvin is wavering between the position that the prohibitions in Corinth are normative for the church of all time and the position that this is a localism and an ad hoc situation ... Calvin's estimation of passages in 1 Corinthians, so frequently marshalled in favour of the traditional view, are not necessarily indicative of a timeless principle. He does set the door slightly ajar at the point but then he slams it shut when he thinks back on the 'created order'”. De Boer (1976:263) summarizes this as follows: "If love leads the way and order and decorum are maintained, then apparently women may teach in the church in the appropriate cultural settings. Calvin again shows his awareness that not a biblical command or biblical prohibitions were applicable across the board at all times and in all situations”.

It is also very clear that sources outside the Bible determined Calvin's exegesis of specific Scriptural sections about woman and marriage. C.J. Blaisdell (1976:20) justifiably says that "Calvin's exegesis was by no means created in a vacuum... Social and biological assumptions of the sixteenth century informed his attitudes, his exegesis and his sermons ... In this respect Calvin was probably no different from his contemporaries Luther, Zwingli and Bucer, or, for that matter, Loyola or Cajetan".

At the same time, with regard to specific points, Calvin was also ahead of his time. A Bieler is therefore correct in maintaining (1963 : 80) that Calvin did not in principle exclude the new principles brought about by a new era with regard to women.

We — and woman and marriage today

The “new era” which started in the sixteenth century and which would bring about changes for women has now been going for at least four centuries. One could say that this would have been enough time for woman to have been released from her secondary position, and in fact a great deal has happened. In most countries women have been granted the vote, and practically all professions are accessible to women today. Women are no longer confined to pinning on diapers and to being caterers in kitchens.

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7 De Boer (1976:271-72) came to the following conclusion about Calvin and women: “He was aware of the cultural conditioning that was back of some of Paul's directives. He foresaw changing times and new situations bringing about new ways of living in church and society. He was even willing in regard to women's role to make important concessions that did not really fit with his principle of her status of subjection by creation. There was an openness about Calvin that shines through even the rigid consistency of his views about women. He seems to have sensed that his position did not answer all the questions or deal adequately with all situations".

One tends, with reference to this, to say with a sigh: Had only the Christian leaders of the twentieth century — in South Africa too — something of Calvin's openness!
The only exceptions is still the church — or some churches.

This struck me again recently. Our eldest son made his personal confession of faith (in the Reformed Church of South Africa) at the age of seventeen and also obtained the vote. He could now participate in the election of (NB: male) elders and deacons. Seeing the shortage of deacons he will most probably have the privilege within three or four years of serving as a deacon.

Next to him in the same seat there was his mother, who gave birth to him and who reared him. SheDispose of far more wisdom than her son can dream of having at present. She, however, does not have the vote in the church and can also not have the privilege of serving on the church council.

Is Paul the obstacle?

From our discussion of the texts drawn from Genesis it has become clear that we cannot justify the inferiority of the woman on that basis. Calvin could only do that through the spectacles of his own interpretation, and because he interpreted Genesis through the eyes of Paul.

For that reason, in the last section of this paper, we will look once more at some of his judgements.

I would like to venture two statements.

The first is that Paul probably did not intend all the prescriptions in the relevant sections of his epistles to be applicable to all places at all times.

The second is that I am convinced that Paul at times says something quite different in the relevant Scriptural sections than we are used to reading into them. The challenge here is therefore to study the sections in question carefully once again.

The stress will fall especially on the second statement.

“Time-bound” positivations

Just a very brief explanation of the first statement. I know that it is a very slippery field in which I am venturing to move. The argument against

this is usually that, if one has once ventured onto this path, the authority of the Scriptures is impugned. How then can one determine which Scriptural judgments are time-bound and which have universal meaning? Where does one draw the line?

There is some truth in this. There are those who regard the Word of God merely as a time-bound document of thousands of years ago, which can have nothing more to say to the man of today. There are also academics who, by means of the distinction between time-bound packaging and supra-historical content rob the Scriptures of authority to a large extent.

It does not, however, help to shove a very real problem from the table without reflecting on it seriously.

Is the great art of using the Bible correctly not precisely situated in this ability to distinguish between the permanent will of God for mankind and the temporal arrangements, single prescriptions, unrepeatable commandments for specific people who lived in history at specific times and under unique circumstances? An example to illustrate this: I am not called today to sacrifice my son as Abraham was. But from Genesis 22 it is still possible for me to deduce that God wishes me to love Him above all else, yes, even above my own child, and that I should always obey Him — even though I might not know where the road is leading.

Everything contained in the Word of God is (historically) true, but that does not mean that it is binding for us. (Cf. for example all the instances of Biblical figures sinning). In this regard I would not like to recommend the distinction “historic-normative”, seeing that this might create the impression that the Bible is (partly) not normative, and also because in the history of philosophy it is too heavily loaded (for example, fact-value, nature-grace, temporal-extra-temporal. "Historie-Geschichte", form-norm, etc.). It might be a good thing, however to distinguish between the timeless (eternal) Will of God, the time-directed (contemporary) Word and the time-bound or time-determined reaction of man on the Will and Word of God. God’s Word, while linked to a certain time, is not bound to it!

The Scriptures abound in time-bound positivizations by many people about the unchangeable Will of God in many spheres of existence. Some people have respond to the Word of God in obedience, and others have responded in disobedience. We have to try to reach the “timeless” Will
of God via these manifestations of obedience (and disobedience). And we have to try to positivize or concretely apply these for our own time. If we want to take over positivizations of the past for our own time, we are lazy, disobedient to God, and we may even be doing our neighbour an injustice.

Some theologians maintain that one only has the right to regard biblical judgments as time-bound or time-determined if the Bible itself indicates them as such. Such cases are not all that abundant, however. If Paul, for example, in Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:22 orders slaves to be obedient to their masters, it does not really imply that slavery should be permanently sanctioned! Calvin can be an example to us in this. Although he did at times acknowledge this somewhat hesitantly, he still clearly realized that it was problematic to apply Paul’s injunctions about woman and marriage just like that in one’s time. The first step to be followed in attaining a contemporary application is to study the relevant Scriptural passage carefully again (my second statement above). Let us wipe the glasses we have been using up to now carefully — this also includes getting rid of the dust of the sixteenth century — and see whether we might not perhaps gain a new vision on woman and marriage.

The texts to be studied

The most important Pauline texts are the following:


I am not going to discuss all the passages in detail and in succession, as that will consume too much time, but rather deal systematically with the same themes which occur in the passages. First I would like to indicate that there can be no question of inferiority in the woman even though the man might be the figure of authority in marriage, but that the woman should be seen as an equal partner with the man. Following that we will have to check what Paul meant by saying that women had to refrain from speaking in the church, and that they had to wear a head-covering. Are these injunctions binding for all times and all places?

The décor

In view of the fact that one usually understands something that somebody says better if the background is not unfamiliar, it might be a good idea if one knows the background against which Paul and Peter wrote.

Although it is not stated explicitly in the Scriptures, we do know today that Paul, in his epistles had to join the struggle especially with the Gnostics. They introduced all kinds of heresies into his young congregations. As regards the relationship between man and wife, they preached absolute equality, which gave rise to women rebelling against their husbands. They even rejected marriage (cf. 1 Timothy 4:3).

This was not Paul’s only problem, however. He also had to fight on a second front, that of Judaism. Where the Gnostics taught equality or even the superiority of the woman, the Judaists underlined her inferiority.

Paul chose, as far as I am able to ascertain, a third way, viz. neither concurrence or subservience but partnership. The equality of the sexes did not for him mean similarity, and the distinction also did not mean division or even inferiority. Galatians 3:28 ("There is neither ... male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus") was also written by Paul!

It is interesting to note anew that Calvin also had to fight on two fronts. The Anabaptists, for example also set the woman in the forefront, while the Roman Church did not allow her to come into her own. Although Calvin was married to an former Anabaptist, Idalette de Bure, he still contested this group fiercely. We have also already seen that he did not reconcile himself with the Medieval vision of woman and marriage. He does acknowledge the unity of which Galatians 3:28 makes mention, as witness his commentary, yet (cf. his sermon on the same Scriptural passage) he limits the unity and the equality to a small field, viz. the spiritual. I do wonder whether this is not perhaps a little artificial. Does our spiritual unity in Christ not also determine our everyday life, the here and the now?

The cultural mandate

In Genesis 1:26-28 it is told that God made Himself a representative to rule in his place, viz. man and wife. His command to them then is:
"Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it and have dominion over ..." (Verse 28).

It is clear that the so-called call to culture in its entirely (thus also the dominion over the earth) is directed at the woman also. God does not limit her call to the "be fruitful and multiply" part.

After, out of and for

We have already seen that the simple fact that the woman was created after the man is no reason to think that she might be inferior. The same is true with regard to her having been created out of the man. With regard to her being created for the man, it is good not only to read 1 Corinthians 11:9 ("Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man"), but also a few verses further on: "Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord" (11:11). The man is therefore also for the woman! This is a mutual and not a one-sided involvement. It does not say that the woman has been made for the man to be a servant to him, but to be a helpmate.

A helpmate

About the word help which has been so hopelessly misunderstood in history we have already said enough to indicate that it did not mean something inferior but rather something indispensable, a strength and a support. We might add here that God nowhere in His Word limits the help to, for example, sexual communion and having children.

The head

In 1 Corinthians 11:3 ff. Paul provides the following hierarchy: God is the Head of Christ, Christ of the man and the man of the wife. In Ephesians 5:21 ff. this is repeated slightly differently: as Christ is the Head of his (bride) church, so the man is head of the wife.

In the same way as the word help has been misunderstood, the word head has been misunderstood. Contained in the word head is the concept of origin or of beginning. And as we have already seen, the fact that the woman was made out of the man does not at all indicate inferiority. Head does not mean a figure who dominates. It also does not indicate the right of disposition. In 1 Corinthians 7:4 it is stated explicitly: "The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband. And likewise the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife". We thus find the idea here again that Paul sees man and wife as people with equal rights, directed at and involved with each other.

To have a man as head over one does not render one inferior. And for a man to be head over a woman does not render him superior.

Did not Christ Himself say: "... The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is the greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. For who is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? Is not he that sitteth at meat? But I am among you as he that serveth" (Luke 22:25-27).

If we further keep in mind that Paul sees the authority of the man over the wife as a reflection of the authority of Christ over us, then we find in this a challenge for the married men! Christ's service was not to his own advantage, but to the advantage of his servants.

Our standard conception of authority is often very far removed from the biblical doctrine in this regard!

The focus in authority lies with the responsible office emanating from God rather than with the person. The man then has to see to it that his marriage complies with the norms laid down by God.

Obedience is not subservience

I have already said this once, but would like to underline it. Seeing that Paul so often used Christ as example (cf. for example Ephesians 5:24, 25) we might as well also do it. In 1 Corinthians 15:28 it is said that the Son will subject Himself to the Father. If one should postulate that Christ because of obedience to the Father was then to be inferior to Him, then one would be a heretic. But He was even obedient to his earthly father and mother (cf. Luke 2:51).

Usually we tend to think that Paul only teaches that the wife has to be obedient to the man. To our great surprise, however, he says in
Ephesians 5:21 — even before he commands that the wife should be obedient (verse 22) — that man and wife should be mutually submissive! For the umpteenth time, then, we find in Paul the underlying idea of mutual equality and therefore mutual responsibility and indebtedness. It is not a matter of the one partner having only duties and the other having only privileges!

In Ephesians 5:32 Paul says that a wife should show respect for her husband. In 1 Peter 3:7 the men, however, are given the same injunction with regard to their wives.

One cannot, after all, from the fact that only the men are enjoined in Ephesians 5:25-30 to love their wives, deduce that wives should then not also love their husbands! Paul, however, stresses that certain aspects of the relationships among men and wives were not right in his day. Men used their wives as possessions and as sex objects instead of loving them warmly. And women were urged by heretical preachers not to be obedient to their husbands. For that reason they had to be newly enjoined to be obedient.

I get the honest impression that Paul lays more stress on the mutual submissiveness to the will of God than on the obedience of the wife to the husband. By saying this I do not deny the biblical injunction that the man is the head of the marriage. Where, however, does one find greater submissiveness than in the self-sacrificial love of Christ for his church? And this is precisely the kind of love to which the man is enjoined (Ephesians 5:25).

The weaker sex?

In 1 Peter 3:7 mention is made of the woman as the weaker sex. If "weaker" had here been meant to mean inferior, then Paul could hardly have enjoined men in the same verse to honour their wives! I also do not feel that "weaker" in this regard should of necessity only be understood in the purely physico-biological sense. The probability is great that Paul had by that also meant the socially weaker position of the woman in the male-dominated society of the time.

Saved through motherhood?

After Paul had again stressed that Eve had not been created first, and that she had allowed herself to be seduced, he says in 1 Timothy 2:15: "Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety". The passage has been something of a headache for exegesis.

One could of course declare that Paul is here pointing out to the woman her place as mother in the house. But how is that then that she can be saved through this? We do not believe, after all, in deserving anything. How then can the woman gain salvation by having children?

In Ephesus the conditions because of the Gnostic influences had apparently been even greater. Women eagerly reached for the Gnostic doctrine of equality of the sexes in order to dominate the men. Even during religious services the women embarrassed the men by interrupting them. Paul therefore enjoins them to be silent.

I think that one should understand this statement as follows (cf. M.D. Roberts, 1983). In the first place Paul is most probably here first of all directing a blow at the Gnostics who despised marriage. By giving birth woman cancels the creational priority of the man. Adam might well have been the first to be created, but after him all men were born of women. By becoming a mother, a woman also avenges herself on Satan for his seduction. She propagates the "seed", viz. Christ which will destroy the snake. This in itself has no salvation value, and the woman cannot in this way render herself redeemed. She can only be redeemed as a woman when in love, faith and a sober life of modesty she perseveres. In this way she reveals the maturity of faith of someone who wishes to learn. Then she is redeemed from the command of silence which Paul enjoins upon her in the preceding verses. (From this we can already see that Paul's injunction to silence was not a permanent one. We will return to this issue.)

Equal partners

The only conclusion that we can draw from the foregoing is that, although man and wife are different, yet they are equal. They are each other's fellow-beings. Although the man is the carrier of authority in marriage, it does not render the wife inferior, forcing her to act as his concurrent, his rival.

The Scriptures regard the bond of marriage as being inextricably linked
to the covenant of God. If one does not live directly in accordance with the covenantal prescriptions of God, the marriage is directly affected. And no one who lives in disharmony in marriage can live in harmony with God (cf. the closing section of 1 Peter 3:7).

**Does the woman have a place in the church in Paul’s vision?**

We would here like to have a brief look at Paul’s commands that women have to wear a head-covering in church (1 Corinthians 11:5, 6, 10) and that they may not speak during services (1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 and 1 Timothy 2:11, 12).

Where in the foregoing it has been a matter of Paul not being understood properly, we have to do here with my second postulation, viz. that these had been time-bound injunctions, applicable only to the women of Corinth and Ephesus — or then also to women of today acting as the women of these cities who had acted to deserve these injunctions!

**Veils, hair and hats**

At present we do not have so many problems in my own church with the issue of hats. The whole turmoil around this issue has died down and most women come to church without covering their heads.

I do not believe that this is wrong. In Paul’s day, however, for a woman to appear unveiled in public was not only unfeminine but a disgrace. Probably the heathen women also removed their veils in the course of religious rituals. Paul wished the women to distinguish themselves from their heathen sisters in this way. A woman had to indicate by this that she accepted her role as woman. If she did not do this, she might as well cut her hair (a custom then among prostitutes) and look like a man. (It was the general custom for men then not to wear their hair long (verse 14). Today a covering for the woman’s head does not have this meaning any more and it has therefore become a meaningless habit to wear a hat.

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It is not too clear what Paul means in verse 7 when he says of the woman that she “is the glory of the man”. The original Hebrew word for glory (kabod) indicates weight, value, honour. In describing one person as the glory of someone else is to describe the person in terms of the one that he reveals.

Thus the man reveals, if he seeks the honour or glory of God, the glory of God himself. The woman is the glory of the man because through him she can be fully woman — just as he can only be fully man through the woman.

Another difficult passage is encountered in verse 10: “For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels”. The question is as to whether the translation here is correct. Does it deal here with the man’s power or authority (exousia) or does it point to the woman’s own power or authority? To go into this in too much detail, however, will mean making too wide a detour.

**A woman has to be seen but not heard**

The usual exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 is that it is a universal norm that prohibits participation of the woman in religious services (apart from singing and sitting together).

The problem is then immediately that this should be equally true of the head-covering. Another, more serious problem is that Paul does allow women to pray and to prophesy (1 Corinthians 11:3-16).

I think that we will already have made some progress if we keep in mind that in this whole section (1 Corinthians 14:26-40) the issue at stake is not really the place of the woman in the church, but the orderly progression of the service. It also does not deal primarily with the question of submission to the man but with God’s demand that there should be order (cf. verses 33 and 40).

We already know that the Gnostically-inspired women in Corinth and Ephesus disturbed the good order through their behaviour and their interruptions. In the light of this Paul’s prohibition: “And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in church” (verse 35) is readily to be understood and not at all harsh. Paul is thus here concerned as much with the

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8 Cf. in this regard the very clear study by J.C. Coetzee: *Vrouhoede in die erediens (Women’s hats and the divine service)* of 1977.
restoration of the order in marriage (where presumptuous women threatened the authority of the men) as in the church.

We have already seen in the case of 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 that it was the failure of the women of Ephesus to persevere in love and in faith that forced Paul to enjoin them to silence. This is true, however, only for as long as they did not convert themselves. The translation of verse 12 (“But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence”) might then in the light of the Greek verb (epitrepō) also be amended as “But I suffer no woman for the moment to teach ...”

I am not going to go into the problem of women in church offices here.9

It is clear from the Scriptures, however, that the woman had a more important role in church and society than we might ordinarily think.

A woman could be a judge (Judges 4:4), manager of an estate (Proverbs 31:14-24), a prophetess even in the Old Testament (2 Kings 22). From the New Testament emerges the important role that women played in the church. Phoebe (Romans 16:2) was a deaconess. In the same chapter Paul mentions a whole number of other women who helped him in the dissemination of the Gospel: Tryphena and Tryphosa, Olympas and Priscilla, the wife of Aquila. The latter married couple helps us — 2000 years ago already — to relinquish many of our stereotyped views of the division of roles in the church. Together they offered hospitality to Paul, the travelling missionary (Act 18:1-3), together they took in Apollo to teach him further (Act 18:26), and together they were willing to put their lives on the line for the Gospel (Romans 16:3-5), and together they organized a home congregation (1 Corinthians 16:9). As man and wife both of them made a special contribution to the dissemination of the Gospel.

And now to continue

If you should get the impression that my sole aim had been to bring Calvin’s view of women into discredit, then you would be wrong. We have learnt a great deal from him: he stimulated us to reflect further in the light of the Scriptures.

If you should maintain that the problem of woman in the Bible and church is far more complex, then you would be right. My purpose has simply been to make clear that (in contrast to views of the past and of the present) woman ought not to be regarded as being inferior on the basis of the Scriptures.

Sexuality is not merely a matter of the physico-biological. It is also not simply a matter of fortuitousness as Simone de Beauvoir would like to make us believe in her famous _Le deuxième sexe_ I et II (first edition 1949). According to her a woman is not born but made. She is a product of her upbringing and education, and these are prescribed by men.

Man and woman are both complete and yet different. A woman is different in the way in which she walks, talks, sings, feels, thinks and believes — just as a man is different from a woman in the way in which he looks at the world around him, in the way in which he buys and sells — and loves.

Because a woman is different from a man she also has a unique calling which she can only fulfill in her own unique way. Her emancipation does not lie in an effort to be like a man, but precisely in her being a complete woman.

I also do not believe that we are entitled to limit the scope of the woman in the whole expanse of the kingdom of God on the basis of Scriptural strictures. She need not be locked up among the four walls of her house — with her husband as custodian! — as wife, mother, nurse, cook and

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9 I think that one of the great obstacles preventing us from coming to clarity in this regard is the fact that the Calvinist principle of sovereignty in each sphere is not applied here. Because the man is the head (the authority) in marriage, the wrong conclusion is drawn that he also has authority over women in other societal relationships.

J.C. Coetzee, for example, says that one cannot deduce from the Scriptures that women have to be subservient to men — only that wives should be subservient to husbands. And yet he says: “The call to dominion by the man and the call to subservience by the woman have to be maintained, also in the church” (_Woord en Deed_ article, p. 18). As is to be expected, one then has problems with the status of unmarried women in the church. Therefore, for example, he asks (p. 19) whether unmarried women and widows should not be granted the vote in the church. Such a distinction between two kinds of women in the church does not appear to me to be a very good idea, however.

There may be other biblic grounds why women should not have the vote in the church or fill church offices, but these should definitely not be because the Bible teaches that the woman in marriage (a different societal structure from the church) should be subservient to the man as the carrier of authority.
housekeeper. The woman does not at all need to confine herself to the traditional female roles.

Did not Christ Himself point in this direction when He visited Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-41)? Martha, the typical caterer for the church — which we know so well — knows precisely what her sister’s role should be. She even speaks to the Lord about the fact that He can allow Mary to sit at His feet and to listen to Him (traditionally the domain of the men) instead of letting her go to the kitchen and to do her work there. Christ (who had no objection to dealing with women at this level, in fact, not even a bad Samaritan one! (cf. John 4)), reproaches the reproacher. Mary has done right. Martha is worried about many things, but only one thing is necessary... Christ mentions that one quality is lacking in Martha without pinpointing it, but from the context it is clear that it is not one dish or the other which He would still like to have, but rather spiritual communion with Him.

Mary and Martha both loved Him truly. Each proved their love in their own unique fashion. It was only when Martha tried to impose her way on her sister that Jesus spoke in friendly rebuke.

Let us then cease to prescribe to each other unnecessarily (men to women and women to women) how the Lord should be served. Let us grant the woman freedom in Christ — in the church too — to serve the Lord in accordance with her gifts and talents granted to her individually by the grace of God.

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After completing this paper I also read the following two books which I want to recommend to those who are interested in what the Bible really says about woman: