

Worship in the Household of God: a defense of the lay reading of Scripture in PCA churches

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Introduction to the debate within the PCA context

In parts of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), there has been a renewed interest in the question of who may read Scripture in public worship.¹ In particular, there has been advocacy on the part of some to limit the reading of Scripture to ordained elders (and ministerial candidates and licentiates), with a particular emphasis on the duty of Teaching Elders to be the primary readers of Holy Scripture in public worship. Some, following their conscience and convictions on this matter, would like for presbyteries to begin enforcing this more narrow practice, at least in the examination of ministers. This is a practical question, one worth consideration as a matter of good order within the church. Likewise, it is an opportunity to ask whether we are allowing secular culture from ages past or present to affect our worship, rather than letting the Holy Spirit speak through Scripture alone (Westminster Confession of Faith [WCF] 1.10).²

But as a matter of historical fact, since its beginning in 1973, the PCA has never adopted a uniform book of worship and most presbyteries have allowed Sessions latitude on this issue in accordance with the “grassroots” nature of our denomination (e.g. Book of Church Order [BCO] 39-3). Whether or not that is wise, this is the denominational practice we have inherited. Indeed, the first PCA church I joined in 1987 had laypersons, including women, regularly read Scripture in public worship.³ Lay persons reading Scripture in worship is not a recent development within the PCA despite the claims of some. Later, I was ordained and served in a PCA church in which

¹ Some of the arguments in this paper are in part a response to a very fine, unpublished internal study done for a committee of Blue Ridge Presbytery. If and when that study is published, I will endeavor to update this paper with appropriate footnoting. That said, the unpublished study largely calls attention to arguments and historical references already available to the public, and I have endeavored to interact with them in that manner. I thank the author for making his study available to me and for his welcoming interaction and feedback. Similar thanks are offered to Jacob Gerber. Both men helped me improve and temper my paper.

² “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” (WCF 1.10).

³ Anecdotally, it has been told to me that as the PCA adopted its non-binding Directory of Worship at the 3rd General Assembly in 1975, a young Teaching Elder made a motion that the word “male” be added to BCO 50-2, but that motion was defeated. Correlating this anecdote with Morton Smith’s account would indicate that this was an attempted amendment to a motion from the floor which added, “some other person” to BCO 50-2. In any case, the PCA arrived at its current practice and it has remain unchanged for almost 50 years. See: Morton Smith, *Commentary on the Book of Church Order* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 2nd ed., 1994), p. 408.

only ordained men read Scripture and led in worship. (In fact, only men could serve as ushers and greeters.) I was happy in both PCA settings and assumed that the PCA had a settled peace on allowing for this diversity of practice between congregations. Quite purposely, we are broader than the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and other NAPARC denominations on matters such as this, even though not all within the PCA are comfortable with this broadness.⁴ I myself appreciate the logic of denominations which have set prayer books (though that alone does not settle this particular question). Nevertheless, we must conform to the rules of our own denomination and that conformity works both ways. We cannot require a narrowness of others on a matter which the rules do not.

This diversity of practice is affirmed by the PCA's 2017 Women in Ministry Report (WIM), received by the 45th General Assembly, in its recommendation 5, which reads in part:

That sessions consider how to include non-ordained men and women in the worship of the church so as to maintain faithfulness to Scripture, as well as utilizing the gifts God has poured out to His entire church....

Rationale: Within a complementarian framework, there is substantial, non-controversial opportunity for non-ordained men and women to participate in the leadership of a worship service, in the spirit of 1 Corinthians 14:26....

Fifth, within the parameters of Larger Catechism 156, the session might authorize various persons to read Scripture. Granting that many sessions are convinced that the reading of the Scripture before the sermon is part of the sermon, there are other occasions to read Scripture in worship liturgies, such as responsive readings.⁵

Here we see the balance that the PCA has recognized. It grants that some Sessions (not all) wish to limit the reading of the Sermon text to the preacher, and it proposes that there are other opportunities for laypersons (including women) to read Scripture in worship, such as (but not limited to) responsive readings. This moderate language also suggests a possible compromise for churches troubled by this issue to consider, which we will take up later.

Therefore, because of the PCA's longstanding tradition on this issue, the remedy for those who wish to enforce more uniformity on this matter is the constitutional amendment process. Those advocating for change need to propose amendments to the Confession of Faith, Catechisms or the Book of Church Order in order to achieve the desired conformity. Proposed amendments to the BCO would most likely need to be made to the Directory of Worship, granting the relevant sections full constitutional authority in the same manner that the chapters on the sacraments now enjoy (BCO 56-58; as well as BCO 59-3 on marriage).

⁴ NAPARC stands for North American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. See: <https://www.naparc.org/>

⁵ https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/studies/2017_WIM.pdf, p. 61.

To be clear, I believe such an amendment process would be divisive, and if successful, would likely split the PCA irretrievably – not because the issue is of supreme importance of itself, but because it would signal a further clamping down on the Christian liberty in worship which has been granted to congregations since the PCA’s beginning. Those who have strong opinions on the matter should ask what it is worth it to prohibit laypersons from reading Scripture in public worship across the denomination. For instance, those on the board of the Gospel Reformation Network should ask if they really intend for this to be one of the six main platforms they advocate for within the PCA, along with such laudatory goals as church planting and personal piety.⁶

But if and until such amendments to the constitution are approved, freedom on this issue can and should prevail across the PCA. Likewise, as loyal churchmen, it is incumbent on PCA elders not only to teach their own Biblical convictions on the matter but also to enjoin their members to a spirit of unity and forbearance on such a secondary matter as they have opportunity to worship with or join other PCA congregations. Those who believe that their Christian freedom is violated by such diversity of practice should appreciate that this diversity is also rooted in that very freedom (Romans 14; WCF 20) as different Sessions apply the Regulative Principle to their own congregations. They are also free to practice their Christian freedom by joining other denominations if their consciences so dictate.

On a personal note, I know many of the men who argue for this and count them as friends. I appreciate their desire for a greater predictability in worship among PCA congregations. However, it is hard for me to believe that they would wish to lose hundreds of congregations over so secondary a matter, even if they hold to their own position with a sense of great clarity and zeal. Whether they should have such zeal is the purpose for which I write. I hope to show that there are good Biblical and Reformed arguments for including laypersons in the reading of Scripture in worship.⁷ At the very least, I hope this paper might provide them with some theological and ecclesiastical pause, that this a matter on which good and reasonable men may differ (BCO Preliminary Principle 5).

This is what I mean. It is one thing for elders to hold discussions amongst themselves on this matter in terms of the good order of the church within the Reformed tradition, trying to convince one another of their positions. It is quite another to attempt a backdoor conformity on the matter across the PCA by a retroactive and particular reading of Westminster Larger

⁶ Based upon the end of the talk given by Gospel Reformation Network (GRN) Executive Coordinator, TE Jon Payne, and reinforced by TE Rick Philips’s talk at the GRN May, 2022 conference: <https://www.youtube.com/c/GospelReformationNetwork>. Dr. Payne’s concerns are further elaborated in his interview with RE Brad Isbell in which he states that the GRN has folks monitoring PCA websites and taking note of which ones have women read scripture: <https://presbycast.libsyn.com/jon-payne-on-the-2022-grn-conference-the-run-up-to-the-pcaga>

⁷ As I will note later, many of these arguments are made by Dr. Richard Gaffin et al in the 1993 OPC report on the question. <https://opc.org/GA/unordained.html#Report>. Much thanks to Jacob Gerber for pointing out this study in his article, <https://gospelreformation.net/who-is-permitted-to-read-the-word-publicly-to-the-congregation-in-the-pca/>

Catechism (WLC) 156, which can surface in the examination of candidates.⁸ I say it is “retroactive” because for many of us who have been ordained for decades, a plain reading of WLC 156 did not require any sort of stated difference to be made, much less an exception to be declared by Presbytery. In fact, it could be argued by some that those who argue for a narrower interpretation should be the ones who state their difference with WLC 156, since their interpretation adds words to WLC 156 which simply are not there. But either way, I believe forbearance should be the rule. Yet it is a bit surprising that this has become more of a widespread issue rather suddenly, and we wonder what is behind this reenergized concern, and whether it is part of a larger cultural movement at work within the PCA.

Moreover, the issue is beset with at least four complications. The first complication is that it is a highly technical question. It involves the exegesis of limited Scriptural data, including several notoriously difficult interpretive passages. Second are several theological issues which stem from the magisterial Reformation as our forefathers sought to maintain a balance between the authority of church office and the priesthood of all believers. Third, within the PCA’s context, it involves the study of the precise wording of WLC 156, 158 and the BCO. A fourth complication is the practical question as to what exactly non-ordained persons would be prohibited to do, and what that says about the types of church cultures we wish to build.

It seems to me that in order for any constitutional amendments on the prohibition of the lay reading of Scripture in worship to be successful, they would need to navigate all four of these complications decisively. The amendment(s) would need to 1) demonstrate beyond doubt that only elders or those training for the ministry were permitted to read Scripture publicly in the New Testament church; 2) demonstrate that the prohibition does no harm to other Reformed theological principles and practices; 3) prove that the more narrow reading of WLC 156 (and BCO 50-2) is both obvious and required; and 4) show itself consistent with other activities it would continue to allow laypersons to do in worship (such as a lay missionary reading verses in their report to the congregation).

On top of these four complications, there are cultural implications that lie behind the discussion. It would be easy to sidestep these and focus entirely on the technical questions at hand. Indeed, as the BCO’s Preliminary Principles make plain, discussions on church polity must begin with truth, seeking to become of one mind together on what is true and plain from Scripture. But in doing so, we can often underestimate the various cultural pressures we are each under which may bias our approach and presuppose our conclusion.

We will take up these cultural pressures in the conclusion, but for now it is enough to note two underlying factors coloring the discussion. First, all the pressure at the moment is from one direction. I know of no concerted effort to require more restrictive PCA churches to have non-elders read Scripture in worship. They have been granted their freedom in Christ on this. It

⁸ WLC 156 reads: “*Question: Is the Word of God to be read by all?* Answer: Although all are not to be permitted to read the Word publicly to the congregation, yet all sorts of people are bound to read it apart by themselves, and with their families: to which end, the Holy Scriptures are to be translated out of the original into vulgar languages.”

does not seem too much to ask for that same freedom in return as their fellow Sessions do their best to follow Scripture, the PCA constitution, and their own consciences on the matter.

Secondly, for many (but not all) of those who are most concerned, it is not just a matter of laypersons reading Scripture, it is particularly a matter of women reading Scripture publicly in worship. They simply disagree with the forbearance on this shown in the PCA's Women in Ministry Report from 2017. But it is important for those who allow lay readers to answer their questions, not with appeals to cultural relevance or being more "missional," but with sound Scriptural exegesis, theological reasoning and consideration of the PCA's polity and tradition. We must argue for what is true, not what seems most culturally relevant.

What then of the arguments themselves? We turn to those now in order: arguments from Scripture, theology, the PCA Constitution, and finally, practical concerns. In considering these, this paper is not an attempt to provide a comprehensive study, or a point by point rebuttal of every argument raised. Much has already been done, notably in the OPC's 1991 report, co-authored by Dr. Richard Gaffin of Westminster Theological Seminary, accompanied by two minority reports.⁹ It is likewise beyond the scope of this paper to offer a comprehensive history of exegesis of the texts or a historical survey of Presbyterian practice or directories of worship. Rather, we will attempt to frame the issues for our day and our denomination and demonstrate that the complexity of the Scriptural and theological questions involved should not make this a cause of division within the PCA. Within the broad confines of WLC 156, who reads Scripture in worship is a matter of judgment and Christian freedom.

I. Scriptural Questions

As we turn to the Scriptural data within the New Testament, we note that it is tempting for either side to argue its case selectively. This is made more tempting because, in fact, there is very little data to go on. Simply put, we have no set example of what New Testament Lord's Day worship services looked like, nor specific commands as to who is to lead which parts, apart from preaching and the fencing of the Lord's Table, which were to be done by elders (I Tim 2-3, I Cor 11). Certainly, assertions may be deduced from "good and necessary inference" (WCF 1.6), but in order for them to be binding on churches committed to the Regulative Principle, these assertions should be demonstrated decisively. In other words, they must not just be "good" inferences, they must also be "necessary" inferences – beyond reasonable dispute. To require something of our churches that is not readily proved from Scripture is in fact a violation of the Regulative Principle of Worship.

⁹ As noted above: <https://opc.org/GA/unordained.html#Report>. The report itself was never incorporated into the OPC Directory of Worship. In 2016, the OPC clarified that only ministers, elders and probationers may lead worship. The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP) received a non-binding report in 2022: <https://app.box.com/s/5fqgxy9yx6tvc2ms5gcn0kya9qrr9kf3> which seems to be something of a shift from their 2005 report: <https://arpchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Women-In-the-Church.pdf> I think is fair to say that some NAPARC churches have moved in a more restrictive direction on this question in recent years. Whether that is due to Biblical reformation or to some other cause is in part what this paper examines, and whether the PCA should follow suit or maintain our broadness within NAPARC, with both its strengths and challenges. Either way, it is important to note that these sister denominations exist for those whose consciences may lead them there.

I Timothy 4:13 and the “office” of reader

As we look at the Scriptural data, two things may be observed. First, while holding to the Regulative Principle of Worship, we must not make the mistake of confusing descriptions for prescriptions. For instance, Paul told Timothy to “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (I Tim 4:13). This is hardly surprising, given Timothy’s office as evangelist (2 Tim 4:5) and bishop/elder (I Tim 4:14).¹⁰ As we look for the elements of worship commanded in the New Testament, this verse provides a clear example. And it is certainly true that in our day some churches need to recover the Biblical practice of actually reading Scripture in worship, rather than just a verse followed by a non-exegetical message. But that command alone – and the example of early church practice – hardly precludes other members from reading Scripture as well under Timothy’s oversight, if they were otherwise qualified. That is in fact, what being an evangelist (very possibly a sub-apostolic office which ceased with the closing of the canon), entailed – overseeing the training of others (e.g. II Tim. 2:2). That Timothy was to read Scripture himself does not mean that others also did not read in his presence, as if he alone possessed that privilege. But nothing in this verse says the reading of Scripture was limited to elders only.¹¹

And yet it is said that the Regulative Principle of Worship requires that we find a positive warrant from the New Testament for every practice in worship. Depending on what is meant by “practice,” this is to misunderstand the principle and a confusion of categories. It is true, that in contrast with the Normative Principle, the Regulative Principle requires elements to have a positive warrant, and that is where WCF 21 gets its list, and to which we limit ourselves: prayer, reading of Scripture, preaching, singing of psalms (and hymns), and the sacraments, as part of our regular worship. But the Regulative Principle does not attempt to proof text the forms or circumstances of worship, which is left to the “light of nature and Christian prudence” (WCF 1.6). So the question of who may read the Scripture as part of worship may not in fact require the positive warrant which some seek. The Bible must be read, but who reads it may be judged to be a form or circumstance of worship, rather than an essential aspect of the element itself.¹²

But even if who reads Scripture is positively warranted by the New Testament, is I Timothy 4:13 as determinative as some suppose? We have our doubts as mentioned above. Moreover, it is not the only command to read Scripture publicly. In I Thessalonians 5:27, Paul writes, “I adjure you (ὁμᾶς) by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brethren.” And to whom is the letter addressed? “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (I Thes 1:1). It is addressed to the entire church, and the entire church is commanded to

¹⁰ On the office of evangelist, see Thos. Smyth, Ecclesiastical Catechism of the Presbyterian Church, Q. 73. https://books.google.com/books?id=Z2Q3AAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

¹¹ For an argument that the context of I Timothy 4:13 insists that only elders in our day be permitted to read Scripture in worship, see <https://gospelreformation.net/who-is-permitted-to-read-the-word-publicly-to-the-congregation-in-the-pca/>.

¹² So also the Gaffin et al report cited above: “While the reading of Scripture is an elemental matter, *who* reads it is circumstantial....” <https://opc.org/GA/unordained.html#Report>.

have the letter read. Who is to read it? Paul simply does not say, when he could have explicitly directed the elders to do so.

Therefore, assuming that Paul understood his inspired letters to be Scripture, which Peter also affirms in 2 Peter 3:15-17, Paul is commanding the whole church to read his letters. Likewise, in Colossians 4:16, Paul writes, “And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.” Paul commanded the congregation to read his letters, inspired Scripture, most likely during their gathering of worship on the first day of the week (I Cor 16:2). Who did these readings? We simply do not know.¹³

One might object, surely Paul intended one of the elders to conduct the reading. But that is an assumption with no basis in the text. It is not a terrible guess, but should we take an assumption and make it a hard and fast rule for every church everywhere? If we are to take Paul’s command to Timothy as normative and binding on our day, why then may we not do the same with these commands to the whole church at Thessalonica, Colossae and Laodicea? Perhaps those are the normative commands we are to obey, commands to the whole congregation to have Scripture read – by some literate member who is otherwise not specified.

What we do know is that within a generation or two, congregations appointed non-ordained “readers” to read Scripture, followed by an exposition by the pastor. In the First Apology of Justin Martyr, dated 155-157 AD, we read:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.¹⁴

Origin makes the same observation, making a distinction between the reader and the preacher.¹⁵ They were different people. By the third century, it appears that the reader became its own lay “office” and in time served as a step on the way towards ordination. According to the Apostolic Tradition, “A reader is installed as the bishop hands him a book. He has no laying on of hands.”¹⁶

¹³ The question of whether Lord’s Day worship services closely imitated synagogue services is both unsettled, and not determinative to our question. See e.g. T. David Gordon’s Review Article: *The Westminster Assembly’s Unworkable and Unscriptural View of Worship?* In Westminster Theological Journal 65:2 (2003), accessed here: <https://www.galaxie.com/article/wtj65-2-14>

¹⁴ Justin Martyr, I Apology 67.3, as quoted in Valeriy A. Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Brill: 2010), p. 155.

¹⁵ Alikin, p. 176.

¹⁶ Tradition of the Apostles 11 (tra. A. Steward-Sykes). Cf. Euseb., HE 6.43.11 (Rome, 251 CE), as quoted in Alikin, p. 179.

Thus, we can observe three matters from the early church just after the time of the New Testament. First, they took the reading of Scripture with the utmost seriousness. Second, certain laypersons were appointed to read Scripture, not just the preachers. Third, it was not just any layperson, but those who were literate, properly appointed and given this privilege.¹⁷ As we will see later, during the Reformation, many Scottish churches followed this example with official “readers” to assist the pastors in worship.

But what about during the time of the New Testament church itself? Valeriy Alikin offers us his interpretation of early church practice:

Before the rise of the office of reader, ordinary members of the community who were capable of reading must have performed the reading of Scripture in Christian gatherings. Testimony of this may be found in Revelation 1:3 which pronounces a blessing upon the “one who reads.” Obviously, this reader has no official capacity, for here the participle ἀναγινώσκων is used instead of the noun ἀναγνώστης. On the other hand, in I Timothy 4:13, the responsibility for reading is laid upon the community leader, that is, “Timothy....” At first sight, these writings seem to differ as to the question of who performed the reading in the gathering. But this is probably due only to the character of I Timothy.... I Timothy does not exclude that the reading was undertaken by people other than the head of the community.¹⁸

One does not have to agree with Alikin’s interpretation of Revelation, other than to note that the simple (and singular) positive warrant in I Timothy 4:13 is not as simple, nor as exclusive as some may believe.

Note, also, importantly, that this sort of proof texting is not the way we approach other matters regarding forms or circumstances in worship. If we were to do so, we would look in vain for choirs, instruments, soloists, robes, stained glass, pulpits, amplification, nurseries, children’s lessons or the church calendar. But few in our day wish to regulate worship by such a biblicist approach to the New Testament data on all of these matters. The Reformed faith as it developed is not a primitivist, Restorationist faith. And many who would look to a positive warrant for who may read Scripture do not do the same consistently with these other matters. There are NAPARC denominations that come closer to that approach (e.g. RPCNA), but that is the PCA’s heritage, tradition or polity.

But even if one is convinced that we require positive warrant that others beside elders may read Scripture in worship, we may in fact well have it in I Thessalonians, Colossians and Revelation, not to mention the prophesying in Corinth, which we will consider below.

¹⁷ So Alikin: “.... public reading in the ancient world called for some technical accomplishment. It is understandable, therefore, that churches gradually preferred not to rely on the unpredictable presence of someone who was able to read in public, but appointed some educated and trained person in the congregation to serve as official reader. The socio-cultural counterpoint and analogy of this reader was the reader acting at Graeco-Roman banquets.”, *ibid*, p. 179.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

New Covenant Worship

A second matter that is clear as we evaluate the Scriptural data is that the New Covenant era is freed from the regulations of the Old Covenant, which were but shadows of the reality to come (Col 2:17; Heb 8:5; 10:1). This is precisely the question the first Jerusalem Council argued over and pronounced upon decisively in Acts 15. Paul applies these same principles to the Galatians when he tells them it is for freedom that Christ has set them free (Galatians 5:1). While the particular controversy in the Galatian churches had to do with circumcision and the inclusion of Gentiles, Paul makes clear that Christ has instituted a new covenant community, one in which a simple freedom in worship replaced the detailed rituals of the Old Covenant with its many rules and burdens (cf. Acts 15:29). Christians today come to worship in that freedom, knowing that the demands of a holy God have already been met in the life and death of Christ. Within that theological context, it is hard to imagine Paul wishing to reimpose priest-like regulations of who may or may not read Scripture among God's people.

The point is that examples from the Old Covenant era are useful only by analogy. They are part of the shadow – a reflection of, but not the reality which has now come in Christ. New Testament worship is at the same time, both simpler and superior to the Old Testament in its worship. The Westminster Confession makes this clear in its discussion of ordinances in 7.6:

Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the new testament.

The pictures of this more glorious, yet simpler New Covenant community are found throughout the New Testament. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon His people, both men and women, as prophesied by Joel and declared by Peter, that “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17). As the gospel spread into the diaspora and Jews and Gentiles were alike saved by faith, they gathered into congregations to celebrate Christ's resurrection and sit around the Lord's Table as equals (I Cor 11; Gal. 3:28).

Within each congregation, Christ then raised up elders to lead and serve the body (Acts 20, Phil 1:1, Titus 1:5-9). Paul makes clear from I Timothy 2-3 that these elders were to be men, reinforcing the family structure (I Tim 3:15). It is they who were to teach with spiritual authority as those who were called and ordained to the task. But it is hard to see how this ecclesiastical, family structure is undermined in any way by other members of the family simply reading God's Word as part of the church's worship. By analogy, are only fathers to read the Bible during family worship, or might others be invited to do so?

But this does not answer the question whether laypersons actually read Scripture in these new Lord's Day services as the gospel spread and Gentiles were brought into the Church. As noted above, we are simply not told definitively either way, though the Church Fathers certainly suggest it is the case. Is it possible there was such a clear understanding among the first churches

that God's written Word was so connected to the preaching of the Word that only elders could read it aloud in formal worship (even those texts which were first spoken by lay women, e.g. Judges 5, the Magnificat, etc.)? Perhaps, and it is true that there is a certain consistency to this assumption, but it is still just that. Moreover, if so, the early church soon parted from that practice with its addition of the office of "reader."

And given I Thessalonians 5:27 and Colossians 4:16, is it also possible that a teaching elder preached God's Word, but in other parts of the services a scroll could have been passed to and read by any of the able brothers or sisters as they sat around the Lord's Table? Why not? Were they not free from Old Covenant ordinances with its regulations and priesthood? Were not some laypersons, both men and women, literate? And were not others prophesying God's Word directly without the aid of scrolls (Acts 21:8-14; I Cor 12-14)? After such prophecies, would it have been remarkable for God's written Word to then be read by other lay persons, who were also fully part of the royal priesthood which the gospel created (I Peter 2:9)? After all, early churches almost all met in houses, either in small rooms or courtyards. What did these worship services, these family gatherings around the Lord's Table look like? The best scholarship makes educated guesses but admits that finally, we simply do not know. Why then make a hard rule of something for which there is such scant Biblical evidence?

I Corinthians 14

The closest picture we have of a typical service comes from I Corinthians 11-14 as Paul tries to answer various questions the Corinthians posed to him. Making our analysis even more difficult however was the presence of certain spiritual gifts and even direct revelation which ceased with the closing of the canon. In Corinthians 14:26-36, Paul writes:

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up....

the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached? (I Corinthians 14:26, 34-36)¹⁹

At the time, men and women spoke in tongues (probably other languages) and prophesied, all of which was to be done decently and in order, and in a spirit of catholicity with other congregations (cf. I Cor 11:5; 12:4-11; I Cor 14:36, 40).²⁰

¹⁹ While I Corinthians 11:1-16 may also be relevant to the discussion, there is disagreement about whether Paul is discussing worship services in that text or more informal gatherings. Either way, I accept the fairly standard view that "covering" was some kind of custom of the day, of wives showing respect to their husbands publicly. Gospel equality (Gal. 3:28) does not upend basic family or societal structures but rather reorders each role as ones of service within those structures (e.g. Eph. 5:21-6:9).

²⁰ "Calvin, in commenting on 1 Corinthians 14:40, makes a striking and perceptive observation in this respect, and one that is not always appreciated: 'The Lord allows us freedom in regard to outward rites, in order that we may not think that His worship is confined to those things.' If we have understood him correctly, Calvin is

Other articles and reports have done an admirable job with these chapters, notably the PCA's 2017 Women in Ministry Report (WIM) and the OPC's 1991 Report on the Involvement of Unordained Persons. The Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley likewise issued its own report in response to the PCA's report.²¹ All of these are valuable contributions. Of considerable note, however, is the undoubted difficulty of interpreting I Corinthians 14:26-40. As New Testament scholar Wayne Meeks drily observed: "(I Cor. 11:2-16 and I Cor. 14:33b-36) are not the most lucid passages in the Pauline letters, and a small mountain of literature about them has by no means relieved their obscurity."²²

It falls then to us to observe that there is no uniform, agreed upon interpretation of this text to which all Reformed exegetes are required to adhere. An individual may be convinced of their own exegesis and try to convince others of it, but to require uniformity of exegesis on such a notoriously difficult text goes beyond what our Confessional bonds require, as long as other principles (e.g. male eldership) are not violated.

In fact, I Corinthians 14:34-35 is so difficult to understand in context that Gordon Fee suggests that it is actually a gloss. Others contend that Paul is quoting the Corinthians' erroneous opinions back to them, as he appears to do earlier in the epistle, e.g. 7:1. Yet others believe that Paul is instructing wives (γυναῖκες) to respect their husbands (ἄνδρας) in public worship. Still others believe that this instruction was particular to the Corinthian setting of the day and has no current application. The PCA's report sides with the more conservative and likely approach favored by D.A. Carson that Paul is prohibiting the authoritative interpretation of prophecies which would be reserved for elders, akin to preaching. If so, this accords well with Paul's instructions in I Timothy 2:8-15.²³

But then we must ask a question. If lay persons, both men and women, were permitted to prophesy in worship, as Paul insists (followed by interpretations by one or more of the elders), then when prophecies ceased, what followed in the early churches? And to which elements of the worship service is the reading of God's Word more closely connected and parallel – to the

saying that the church has been given latitude in ordering worship to keep us from confusing (mandatory) elements and (discretionary) forms, from confounding what is essential with what is circumstantial, and he is reminding us that such confusion is a likely result when we are bound too strictly to particular forms or seek to enforce conformity in the church to a single pattern." <https://opc.org/GA/unordained.html#Report>.

For further development of this theme, see David Anderson Bowen, *John Calvin's ecclesiological adiaphorism: distinguishing the "indifferent", the "essential", and the "important" in his thought and practice, 1547-1559* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1985).

²¹ Op. cit. For the Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley's report, please contact See also William Castro's article: <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/1-corinthians-1432-did-god-rea.php>

²² Wayne Meeks, "The First Urban Christians" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 70.

²³ See Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); pp. 688ff; CK Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: AC Black, 1971); W Harold Mare, *1 Corinthians, Expositors*, Vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) pp. 275ff; See also footnote 9, p. 12 of the PCA's WIM: https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/studies/2017_WIM.pdf,

prophesying of God's direct revelation - or to preaching? Many of those who would restrict the reading of God's Word to ordained elders today insist that reading Scripture - even without comment - is an act of pastoral authority in and of itself, and thus closely connected to the act of preaching.²⁴

But there is some question, exegetically, as to the logic of that conclusion. Perhaps reading the Word publicly is more akin to prophesy, God speaking His authoritative Word to His people through a simple vessel, one of His people, lay or ordained. But then the Word is applied and interpreted only by those whom Jesus appoints as pastors within the Body, those of sound doctrine and gifts and who are ordained by the Church so to do. Reading is not preaching, and to equate the two is a confusion of categories, and possibly a misunderstanding of the Reformed view of pastoral authority and theology of the Word as we will see below.

But before we move on, we do a disservice to Paul's point in this section of Corinthians if we miss the main point for which he wrote it. Paul did not just write these instructions to answer their specific questions and give rules governing worship, but even more to point them to what matters most - Christian love for one another. That is why between chapters 12 and 14 he writes these famous verses:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.... Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (I Cor 13:1, 4-6).

This is not to say we cannot debate and even try to adjudicate on details of the faith and practice. But even as Paul answered the Corinthians' questions, he wanted to remind them of why things should be done decently and in order, and why men's and women's spiritual gifts should be celebrated: that they may love one another. If we are to be Pauline and Scriptural, this is always what we must major on in such discussions. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

And so respectfully, I believe the arguments that we may restrict the reading of Scripture in worship to elders by "good and necessary inference" from Scripture are simply not strong enough to impose as a rule on every congregation. As Paul says about a similar matter in Romans 14, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.... Therefore, let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother" (Romans 14:5; 13).

II. Theological Questions & Practical Impact

As I have read the various articles and papers arguing for Scripture to be read by pastors only in the worship service, I have appreciated many of the reasons given. Decent arguments can

²⁴ Cf. Gerber's article: <https://gospelreformation.net/who-is-permitted-to-read-the-word-publicly-to-the-congregation-in-the-pca/>

be made for the restriction in terms of good order. The pastor is trained to read the Bible well, while many laypersons are not. The pastor will handle it with the holiness and solemnity it requires, while that is less certain of some laypersons. The reading, particularly before the sermon is connected to the actual preaching, so it might invite confusion to have two different persons leading. Teaching elders are given the privilege to preside over the sacraments, so there may be a certain symmetry to only allowing them the right to read the Word. (To be clear, many of these articles encourage or at least allow for ruling elders and other men training for the ministry to also read on occasion.) There is a simplicity, a tidiness, a certain order and logic to all these reasons. It proposes a predictable and more uniform worship culture across the PCA, one in which pastors lead all or most parts of the worship service.

But we make a grave mistake to elevate these arguments of good order to the level of theological article and requirement, and to do so may undermine other theological principles which the Reformed faith has held dear. That is why it is not a simple matter of making a new rule and telling those of broader mind to simply conform on this secondary matter. For them to conform may violate their own consciences as they understand Reformed theological principles. The OPC report does a good job of exploring the different kind of theological balances which the Reformed faith brings to the discussion.²⁵ The church is the pillar of the truth (I Timothy 3:16), but it is also the household of God (I Timothy 3:15). It is at once both a formal gathering to worship a holy God, and a family gathering around the Table. That is the genius of Christian worship, one made possible only by the gospel. We are sinners forgiven only by the atoning blood of Christ, and at the same time children adopted by our heavenly Father. Christian worship must keep this balance in place. It is both formal and informal, holy and simple, grand and accessible, all at once.

Sitting together as equals under the Word of God

One principle of the Reformed faith that reinforces this balance is that Jesus does not just give his power to officers. Our BCO makes that plain: “The power which Christ has committed to His Church vests in the whole body, the rulers and those ruled, constituting it a spiritual commonwealth” (3-1). While that does not settle the present question, it serves as a useful reminder to those who wish to emphasize the authority of the pastor over against that of the congregation.

The BCO goes on to assume that the written word of God does not belong to the Presbytery where Teaching Elders hold their memberships but to the congregations themselves as they gather for worship. For instance, if there is a group of saints with no elders present, they are still to gather for worship, and yet none of them should preach or perform the sacraments (though a ruling elder may exhort if present). The BCO instructs:

Churches without teaching elders ought not to forsake the assembling of themselves together, but should be convened by the Session on the Lord's Day....
In like manner, Christians whose lot is cast in destitute regions ought to meet regularly for the worship of God. (BCO 4-5)

²⁵ <https://opc.org/GA/unordained.html#Report>.

Notice the last sentence. Christians without elders are still to gather for worship. Presumably one of them would read the Scriptures. It is true that this is an exceptional situation. The point is that the reading of the written Word cannot – for theological reasons – be tied to the ordination of persons. If we believe that it is, I suggest we have gone beyond the Magisterial Reformation’s doctrine of the Church, and entered into semi-sacerdotal territory, granting too much authority to ordination.²⁶ Now, I am convinced that none of my brothers have slid this far, theologically. Yet, it is a suggestion about the type of culture an emphasis on pastoral authority can unintentionally communicate to regular members as we push back against an over democratization of authority within many churches.²⁷

For instance, it has been said to allow laypersons to read Scripture or to lead in prayer is “denigrating” the Word of God and “denigrating” prayer. This may be true in terms of the practical quality of the reading, or the praying. But think about what the restriction – for theological reasons - communicates to regular church members, those who are baptized and in union with Christ. That to allow them to read God’s Word as brothers and sisters equal with their elders is somehow to denigrate the very Word given to them for their salvation. And think about what it communicates to them, intentionally or not, about their elders’ views of their own importance.²⁸

The authority of God’s Word does not come from who reads it, but from the very Word itself as Westminster makes clear: “By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein.” (WCF 14.2). We make a fundamental error, fraught with dangers, if we believe it is tied to the office of pastor itself. It is, in my opinion, a denial of basic Protestant principles, even within the Magisterial tradition.

Likewise, it has been argued that having women read Scripture undermines a husband’s authority at home, or somehow adds to the sexual confusion of our age. I suspect that if a husband, pastor or Session feel a loss of authority from laypersons reading God’s Word in worship, there may be other issues at hand. In my experience, true pastoral authority is gained by care and visitation, by elders becoming servants among the sheep, not by being the public face of the means of grace on the Lord’s Day.

²⁶ I am not alone in observing this. From the OPC report: “In contrast (to Roman Catholic and Anglican worship), Reformed worship has taken on a strongly “prophetic” cast, with the preaching of the word dominant. But where Reformed worship is so structured that the presiding minister is the only participant with an individual role, and if in the solemn assembly the people may address God only as the minister does on their behalf and are not free, on occasion, to do so individually, then the question has at least to be asked whether, despite its intention, such worship does not betray its prophetic genius by leaving an unmistakably sacerdotal impression.” <https://opc.org/GA/unordained.html#Report>.

²⁷ For an example of arguments which may go too far in this regard, see Rick Philips’ talk at the May 4-5, <https://www.youtube.com/c/GospelReformationNetwork>

²⁸ For instance, OPC pastor Gregory Reynolds writes: “(Paul) places the public reading of Scripture on a par with preaching. This means that denying that the reading of Scripture in public is an authoritative and interpretive act diminishes God’s Word. I am not saying that this is necessarily intentional. But, when the reading is not done by an ordained minister, the authority of the Word is diminished.” https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=341

I understand that those who argue that PCA worship services should be led by its ministers are concerned about our church cultures, and often (rightly in my judgment) about certain slippery slopes, whether that is the slope of gender roles, democratization of authority or the loss of reverence in worship. I understand that they fear the accommodation of PCA churches to secular cultural norms and expectations in a way that threatens the integrity of the Reformed faith.

May I suggest that the way to counter those slippery slopes is not to over-react and lose the balance the Reformed tradition and the PCA has cultivated in these matters? Nor is it to try to return to some imagined past golden age in which the Reformed faith got this (and nearly everything else) right. May I suggest that to over-react may lead to its own forms of slippery slopes if yet from other sides of our culture or past imbalances? Is it not possible to so overemphasize male authority or the pastor's role in worship that we begin to mimic those churches with authoritarian pastors, those "men of God" who may not be questioned? Clearly, proponents will object to this, but we hide our heads in the sand if we do not realize this is a dynamic in some corners of the Reformed world. One small way to counter this danger is to not restrict the public reading of God's Word to only a handful of men within the congregation. There is a balance to be had.

To permit a personal anecdote, as I discussed this issue early on in my ministry in my current pastorate almost 20 years ago, I will never forget what one Ruling Elder said to me. "The Bible does not belong to the Pastor. It's important for the congregation to see you sitting under the Word, same as they do." I have often thought of that, of what it means for me to model faith to them as I preach God's Word. Certainly, part of that is to model boldness, of clinging to the truth of God's promises, and loudly proclaiming His excellencies from the pulpit, in the power of the Spirit (I Cor 2:1-5). It also means reading God's Word to them with conviction and joy, which I have the privilege to do several times each service, as our BCO instructs (BCO 50-1).

But modeling faith to my congregation is also to be one who is first, a listener to God's Word, just like them (James 1:19-25). It is to be a man who has the humility and the faith to receive God's word from someone "lower" than me, even as great David once listened to Abigail, and the Apostles to those faithful women proclaiming the Lord's resurrection.²⁹ Of course, there are ways outside of worship to do that as well, but the Lord's Day worship service is the only mandatory gathering of God's people. What does it say to the congregation that for some reason between the Call to Worship and the Benediction, elders can only hear God's Word read publicly from fellow elders, and not from "regular" believers like them? Are not pastors

²⁹ In his lectures on I Timothy, Luther, while reinforcing male headship in the church, also says this about I Timothy 2:15: "If the Lord were to raise up a woman for us to listen to, we would allow her to rule like Huldah." Martin Luther, *Lectures on 1 Timothy*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 28, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1973), 280. While I take it that the Lord will not raise up any more prophets or prophetesses before His return, Luther's attitude is still instructive. As the PCA has learned from the recent DASA report, the Lord does raise up women whom Sessions need to listen to. One small way to reinforce a culture within the PCA that women will be respected and heard is if our worship services are not male dominated in the way they are led from start to end. While not determinative to the question, who may or may not read Scripture in our congregations does send a message which should be considered in light of the DASA report: <https://dasacommittee.org/committee-report>

also to be as little children, longing for the pure milk like newborn babes, modeling for our people what it means to sit under God's Word with them (Luke 18:17; I Pet 2:2)?

After all, where do pastors get their authority to preach? It is not by virtue of their gender or their title, but only from Christ in His Word, as they are called by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by a court of the Church (BCO 16-1). In other words, the pastor is a man who is first a Christian, and only second a pastor. He is to sit under and submit to God's Word just as much as any member. He is not just their spiritual leader; he is also their brother. A congregation should observe their pastor(s) sitting under God's read word just as any other sinner saved by grace, simple Christians like them.

One can then observe that for many of us, this is about more than regulations and rule keeping. It is a principle. It is about a theology of the Church and of pastoral office. There are principles of communion, humility, and yes, equality that carry greater weight than whatever practical advantages there may be in allowing only pastors and elders to read the Word publicly.

Thus, it should be clear, for many in the PCA, this is not just a matter of looking for "loopholes," or of what we may get away with. It is certainly not a matter of trying to accommodate ourselves to secular culture or radical feminism. It is not an attempt to be "missional" (whatever that is). Rather, we find positive, Reformational, theological reasons for allowing qualified laypersons, men and women, to read Scripture in public worship. It is a way to visibly reinforce and illustrate the great truths expounded in WCF 26.1, "The Communion of the Saints:"

All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.

The Word of God belongs to the people of God. One way to demonstrate that is to allow regular members in good standing to read the Word of God to the people of God in the worship of God, all by grace. Not as an act of pastoral authority but as one brother or sister to another. And then, in proper fashion, after the example of Acts 6, 20, I Corinthians 14, and I Timothy 2, the pastor applies what is read with the training, calling and approval granted to him. This also is good order.

It is a way of communicating symbolically to the congregation that they are valued members and share in Christ's power, on top of vibrant congregational singing and participation in the liturgy. They are not to preach or to preside over the Sacraments, because they have not been set aside to do so. But as members, they can participate by more than just showing up on a Sunday and staying in their own pews. For instance, many of us do not have standing choirs because we do not find them in the New Testament. But we do find the reading of Scripture commanded. This is one part of worship that qualified brothers and sisters may participate in, as they are appointed and approved by the Session (BCO 50-2).

Think also of the theological balance this communicates, if I may again use my own example. In a typical worship service at our church, we have around six or seven Scripture readings, seven occurrences of prayer, and around seven psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Pastors (or those training for the ministry) lead all the times of prayer, except for the Offertory prayer led by a Deacon and the time of Congregational Prayers led by a Ruling Elder. Occasionally a layperson prays for the children up front as well.

In terms of Scripture in our worship service, the pastors lead in all of the Scripture readings except for one. The pastors lead in the Call to Worship, the Confession of Faith, the Pardon for Sin, the Sermon Text (normally), the Benediction and the texts connected to the Sacraments. The only text read by laypersons is the Scripture reading after the Sharing of the Peace (though on occasion they read the Sermon text instead). By that count, the pastors read five-six passages, and laypersons read one. It seems like the smallest of concessions to demonstrate that Jesus shares His power not only with rulers, but with the ruled (BCO 3-1). Ministers alone continue to preach and administer the sacraments (as well as moderate their sessions). Should the denomination take away this one Scripture reading from our members to reinforce elders' authority as those called by God to lead? It is true that when lay persons read, I have sometimes been frustrated by the quality of the execution. But I am also frustrated with some of my own preaching. In either case, God's Word is still effectual, and we do not know how the Holy Spirit moves. After all, Paul said he was a poor public speaker, depending on God's power rather than his own eloquence (I Cor 2:1-5).

Could PCA churches do a better job of training those who read? Probably so, after the example of the early Church and the Reformation Scottish Church, as we will see later. But for us, the "lack of excellency" at times has been well worth the balance it brings to worship, as argued by Dr. Gaffin et al's report to the OPC. Worship is a formal occasion before a holy God, done in awe and reverence. But in Christ, He receives us as children. Lord's Day worship is also a family coming together around a common table with all of our flaws. Our worship is made acceptable by God's grace, not our precision. After all, pastors are hardly perfect no matter how well we prepare ourselves for the service. For my own church, no one comes for the performance because there is none. They come to be part of a family centered on God's grace. And always, each Sunday, I am encouraged to see a wide range of God's people read His Word, hearing the promises of God spoken in a variety of voices. We who are many, are one (I Cor 10:17). Along with singing together, it is one small way we may imitate the picture given to us at Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured on all peoples, and all spoke the Word of God in their own voices.

One Teaching Elder, who is otherwise very "Old School" put it like this to me. Inviting laypersons to read Scripture in worship for one small part of the service, helps "break the fourth wall" between the congregation and God. He said it has been messy at times, but "gold" in terms of congregational ownership of the service. It is one way of communicating to them that they are equals, co-heirs of life, along with their elders. They do not look to their elders as intercessors or prophets, but rather as servants raised up among them and gifted to teach and pray - as their brothers, sinners saved by grace just like them. This is not just a matter of looking for clear rules about who may or may not do what in the gathering of the saints. It is about cultivating a certain kind of church culture. For many of us, too much would be lost by imposing new and narrow rules, rules that cannot be sustained as necessities from Scripture or Reformed theology.

Three Subtle Dangers

Finally, by way of summary, let us consider again a few subtle but dangerous complications that may arise from some of the theological reasoning which is given for prohibiting the lay reading of Scripture. (Once more, we are speaking to theological reasons, rather than arguments concerning good order.) Three dangers come to mind.

The first danger is to unintentionally tie the spiritual authority of God's Word to the one who reads it. Proponents of restriction would allow for anyone (I assume) to read the Bible during Sunday School, or in a Bible Study, but they appear to give the Bible additional authority in the precise period between the Call to Worship and the Benediction, as if that time is somehow especially set aside by the minister's presence, rather than by the Holy Spirit. In rightly elevating the importance of Lord's Day worship and the office of pastor, some appear to go too far in this. The power and the authority of the Word is the Word itself, and not from who reads it or preaches it (I Cor. 2:1-5; Heb 4:12; WCF 14.2). But that truth can be undermined if one insists upon tying the reading of God's Word to the office of the one reading it.

Second, there is the danger of pushing this restriction to its logical conclusion, which is that no layperson may speak the Word of God at all between the Call to Worship and the Benediction. Most proponents (but not all) allow for responsive readings, and even for missionary reports with a Bible verse, and so forth. Many have soloists, both men and women. But why? Do we see any definitive, positive warrants from the New Testament for any of these? Examples of mutual sharing and encouragement (cf. Col. 3:16) can be argued as general descriptions of the Christian life, not prescriptions for actual worship services. It is here that some see this inconsistency and insist on even stricter restrictions. So: if a layperson (1) recites the Word of God in unison with others, while remaining in his or her pew, we are told that is allowed (even commanded). But (2) if they are invited to the front and read Scripture from the lectern, that is forbidden. But why?

Somehow, allowing the second is considered "leading" in worship, when - theologically - all they have done is: 1) move location; and 2) spoken singularly, rather than in unison with other believers. Once more, there may be good arguments from good order for the latter practice to be reserved to pastors and elders. But to forbid lay reading for theological reasons appears to be inconsistent if we then allow for responsive readings. The Word of God does not lose its authority based on where it is read, or by how many believers. So if we push this restriction to its logical conclusion, we may only allow pastors (and perhaps elders) to speak aloud during the worship service (apart from singing). That is not a church culture that many of us would wish to be part of. But, theologically, what is to prevent it if we start down this path? Slippery slopes can come from many sides, and the slope into excessive pastoral authority, beginning with the worship service is one we would do well to avoid.

There is a third theological danger that may arise from equating the authority of reading Scripture to the authority of preaching (as is argued from ἡσυχία in Timothy 2:12). That danger is the possible inadvertent undermining of male-only ordination. The danger is that in the New Testament era, laypersons, both men and women prophesied God's Word, as we have seen. If

women spoke God's direct revelation, which was then to be interpreted authoritatively by elders (cf. I Cor 14, so D.A. Carson), then it seems that would be roughly equivalent to women reading Scripture today in worship, followed by the sermon by an elder. But if the mere reading of God's Word itself is pastorally authoritative and tied to pastoral office, what are we to make of these women prophets in the New Testament era, much less Huldah? Didn't they prophesy with divine authority? And if they had divine authority, were these prophetesses then a form of pastor? We would say not, but if the authority of their revelation is akin to reading Scripture, then that unintentionally offers aid to the arguments for women's ordination today. What keeps us from this error is a proper understanding of I Timothy 2:12 that maintains the clear distinction between reading and preaching. Reciting God's Word, by prophecy or mere reading, is not the same as preaching. Preaching is to be done by elders, who, to reinforce the model of the home, are to be men. Thus, rather than reinforcing male ordination, too closely tying the authority of reading of Scripture to the authority of preaching may inadvertently have the opposite effect.³⁰

Even if one believes these dangers are overstated, those who would restrict the reading of Scripture to pastors or elders must still make the case from Scripture and Reformed theology that an element of worship is not only the element itself, which is regulated, but who performs it in every case. That the Bible should be read in worship is not debated. It is commanded, one of the few, simple means of grace given to God's people in this era of redemptive history. Many PCA Sessions have judged that who reads the Scripture, under the guidance of WLC 156, is a form or circumstance of worship, rather than an essential aspect of the element itself, and at the moment, nothing in the PCA constitution contradicts this view.

Every congregation is to read Scripture in worship reverently (WLC 157), but who is to read on every occasion is a matter of judgement. If we believe that every element of worship requires leadership by elders as essential to the element itself, then I suggest we have unintentionally moved away from the priesthood of believers and towards the more Romish sacerdotal approach to church office. One way to guard against this slippage is to continue to restrict the preaching of God's Word to those men called and ordained to it (WLC 158) while allowing for approved laypersons to read God's Word as a separate part of the worship service. This practice also reinforces the pastor's own position before God as a listener first, and a preacher second, an important lesson every Teaching Elder should embrace.

III. Confessional Language & the BCO

The Directory of Worship for the PCA is prefaced with this statement, adopted by the Third General Assembly and called, "temporary" although it has stood for almost 50 years:

³⁰ For instance, the Presbytery of Mississippi Valley's (PMV) Report puts it this way: "Paul and the New Testament affirm that women were prophets in the apostolic church. That reality does not mean that women may assume leadership in the church's worship today. Male and female prophets were the instruments through whom God revealed himself to the church in the foundational age of the apostles (Eph. 2:20). The New Testament restricts the *preaching* of special revelation to men, specifically to the church's elders (1 Tim 2:12). So, while God revealed himself through prophets who were male and female, He limits the authoritative interpretation, explanation, and application of special revelation to the elders." The PMV report, while not supporting the lay reading of Scripture, still appears to make a distinction between these prophecies and the authoritative preaching of God's Word. Why then not make the same distinction between preaching and the reading of God's Word today?

The Directory for Worship is an approved guide and should be taken seriously as the mind of the Church agreeable to the Standards. However, it does not have the force of law and is not to be considered obligatory in all its parts.

While this is not the place to debate the history or the wisdom of that decision, it is a distinctive of the PCA, at least in contrast to some of our NAPARC cousins. The variety of worship that this distinctive has led to has been frustrating to many. It is also likely true that some PCA churches have not taken the Directory of Worship with the seriousness of mind which this statement calls for, which adds to the frustration. When it comes to the reading of Scripture, the Directory gives this guidance in BCO 50-1:

The public reading of the Holy Scriptures is performed by the minister as God's servant. Through it God speaks most directly to the congregation, even more directly than through the sermon. The reading of the Scriptures by the minister is to be distinguished from the responsive reading of certain portions of Scripture by the minister and the congregation. In the former God addresses His people; in the latter God's people give expression in the words of Scripture to their contrition, adoration, gratitude and other holy sentiments. The psalms of Scripture are especially appropriate for responsive reading.

This is followed up by further instruction in BCO 50-2:

The reading of the Holy Scriptures in the congregation is a part of the public worship of God and should be done by the minister or some other person.

Some see these two paragraphs as contradicting one another, which is after all, possible, given that the BCO is a (very) human document. But they don't need to, if Sessions take 50-1 seriously – that the Pastor is to lead in the reading of Scripture. But that does not preclude the possibility of others also reading – even in the same service. That is what 50-2 affirms. This appears to be the position that the WIM in ministry report takes, as cited in the introduction. Note that BCO 50-2 says “some other person” not “some other officer or licentiate.”

And it is not as if this wording came out of nowhere, regardless of how it made it into the BCO at the PCA's Third General Assembly which approved the Directory of Worship (see footnote 2). As early as 1894, the PCUS's Directory of Worship stated:

The reading of the Holy Scriptures in the congregation is a part of the public worship of God, and ought to be performed by the minister or some other authorized person.³¹

But what are we to make of the argument that, despite its wording, 50-2 only has in mind other elders or more likely, licentiates and other men training for the ministry? A renewed argument has been made for that based on a certain reading of WLC 156, which reads:

³¹ As cited by Brian Tallmann here: <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/the-public-reading-of-scriptur.php>

Question: Is the Word of God to be read by all?

Answer: Although all are not to be permitted to read the Word publicly to the congregation, yet all sorts of people are bound to read it apart by themselves, and with their families: to which end, the Holy Scriptures are to be translated out of the original into vulgar languages.

The argument is that the authors of the Catechism clearly meant that only ministers, elders and probationers (those training for the ministry) are to be permitted to read the Word publicly in worship. One may consider the various articles and talks cited above to ascertain the strength of the reasoning, but in short it attempts to draw a straight line from the Westminster Directory for Public Worship (WDPW, adopted in Scotland in 1645) to the Larger Catechism (adopted in 1647).³²

This reasoning is further argued from the days-long debate for the WDPW surrounding who may read Scripture, in which those who advocated for a broader position were ultimately defeated by those who wished to restrict the reading of Scripture to ministers.³³ Those who argued for more leniency included Scottish minister Robert Baillie, who wanted to continue the Scottish reformation tradition of lay “readers,” largely for practical reasons – as a ministry to the overworked pastors themselves.³⁴ Given the prevailing side in this 1643 debate, it is then argued that the PCA should follow the same reasoning which governed the debates surrounding the Westminster Directory of Worship, which, it is argued lead directly to WLC 156 a few years later. Therefore, it is argued, the lay reading of Scripture is prohibited by the PCA Constitution.³⁵

³² e.g. Gerber, Tallman, Philips, *op. cit.*

³³ Of some note is the report of the minister of the French Church in London who stated that the reader’s “was a distinct office from the pastor’s according to practice in Reformed Churches. The pastor expounds the Word and applies it; doctor expounds it and not applies it; and then a reader that neither expounds nor applies.” Thomas Leishman, *The Westminster Directory* (Edinburgh: Wm Blackwood & Sons, 1901), pp. 91-92.

³⁴ BB Warfield’s summary of the debate: “Of more importance than any of these usages, at least for the conduct of the public services, was the loss by the Scots, through the Westminster Directory, of the office of ‘Reader.’ From the Reformation down, the former or liturgical portion of the Scottish Sabbath service - the opening prayer, the lessons from Scripture, and the singing of a Psalm - had been conducted by a ‘Reader,’ the Minister taking charge of the services, and indeed commonly entering the church, only when he ascended the pulpit to preach. The Westminster Divines found no Scriptural warrant for the office of ‘Reader,’ and, much against the wishes of the Scots, enacted that the Minister should conduct the entire service. ‘Reading of the Word in the Congregation,’ they set down in their Directory, ‘being part of the Public Worship of God (wherein we acknowledge our dependence upon Him, and subjection to Him), and one means sanctified by Him for the edifying of His people, is to be performed by the Pastors and Teachers.’ The only exception they would allow was that they permitted candidates for the ministry occasionally to perform the office of reading, as also that of preaching, on permission of their Presbyteries.” Accessed: https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/warfield/warfield_westminwork.html

³⁵ For a discussion of these precise debates, see B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Press, 1908), as accessed *ibid*; Thomas Leishman, *The Westminster Directory* (Edinburgh: Wm Blackwood & Sons, 1901), pp. 92, 190f.; and more recently Chad Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors: The Westminster Assembly and the Reformation of the English Pulpit 1643-1653*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), pp. 63-72.

What are we to make of these arguments? First, we sympathize with the frustration of those who think WLC 156 forbids lay reading, given what they know about the WDPW. It seems clear to them that the same debates which went into the WDPW should interpret the Larger Catechism. It appears to be a straight line and proponents do not appreciate what they see as ignorance, dodging or obfuscation on the part of modern subscribers. But though I am sympathetic to these frustrations, their frustrations do not take the place of the actual words in the Catechism. We have to deal with what we have.

Second, it is important that we don't come to WLC 156 until after exegetical evaluation and theological reflection on the question, as we have attempted to do. Our secondary standards are just that, human documents which are meant to serve the Church in its work, not the other way around (cf. WCF 1.10). As we have attempted to demonstrate from both Scripture and theology, there are good reasons why the lay reading of Scripture in worship should be allowed and even encouraged. While we appreciate that the Westminster Divines were themselves exegeting Scripture to come to their conclusions, we are not bound by how they exegeted specific texts (e.g. the prooftexts assigned to the Westminster Standards), much less so for a document that is not even part of the PCA constitution.³⁶

Third, simply put, the PCA does not subscribe to the Westminster Directory for Public Worship. It is important historically, but it literally has no constitutional relevance to the PCA. Even less so are the debates surrounding its adoption. While the historical studies are much appreciated and even fascinating, they are not determinative for the PCA, founded in 1973 with its own (non-binding) Directory of Worship. Many in the PCA on the more formal side of worship today would find the WDPW foreign to much of their current form of worship, with its neglect of written prayers, the Gloria Patri, the Apostles Creed, and even the Lord's Prayer, except on occasion.³⁷ Moreover, the PCA does not prescribe the same restrictions on other issues of worship to which the Puritans of the Westminster Assembly held but which are now widely

³⁶ For instance, on the prooftexts given for WLC 156, Gaffin et al comment: "The texts appended to Larger Catechism 156 (Deuteronomy 31:9, 11-13 and Nehemiah 8:2-5) are directives for priests to read the law to the people. This makes a prescriptive appeal to these texts (and, implicitly, to the Levitical order), for New Testament worship, that is more than they can legitimately bear. We do not deny an analogy, in terms of office, between old covenant priest and new covenant minister (cf., e.g., Isaiah 66:21). In view of that analogy, among other considerations, it is surely *appropriate* for the minister to read the Scripture passage from which the text for his sermon is taken. But may that practice be made *mandatory*? To insist that it must or, further, that any other reading of Scripture is the exclusive prerogative of the presiding minister is unwarranted, and seems to rest on an overdrawn use of Scripture (and the Levitical analogy). Also, it does not sufficiently appreciate that all (not just some) in the congregation, as Spirit-and-fire baptized (Luke 3:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13), are the refined and purified "sons of Levi" (Malachi 3:3). <https://opc.org/GA/unordained.html#Report>

³⁷ "By these 'novations' the use of 'read prayers,' and even of the Lord's Prayer, in public worship, was discountenanced, as was also the use of the Gloria Patri, and of the Apostles' Creed in the administration of the Sacraments, and the habit of the minister to bow in silent prayer upon entering the pulpit. No one of these usages, on which the Scots laid much stress, except the use of the Lord's Prayer, is prescribed by the Directory;" in Warfield, accessed at: https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/warfield/warfield_westminwork.html

embraced by most PCA churches, such as choirs, instrumentation and the celebration of Christmas and Easter. As the Reformed faith matured, and further studied Scripture, it learned to react less harshly to the many errors of Roman Catholic and high Anglican worship of the 1640s. In any case, the 1975 approval of the Directory, with the wording of BCO 50-2, *de facto* sided the PCA with the report of the French Reformed church and the Scots at the Assembly with their desire to continue having non-ordained “readers” in worship.

Fourth, WLC 156 is not a question about the regulation of worship. If it were, we might have expected more precision. It is a question and answer about the accessibility of the Bible to the whole congregation and encourages its widespread reading. It even sidesteps the question of literacy within the congregation. We should not therefore misuse it to regulate public worship in a manner which the words themselves do not uphold, except to affirm simply that “all are not permitted to read the Word publicly to the congregation.”

Fifth, and critically, in terms of actual subscription and stated differences, what matters are the words actually written in the WCF and Catechisms. It is to the words that we subscribe, not the intentions or debates surrounding another document to which we do not. And simply put, a man need not – indeed, logically, cannot – state a difference with words that simply are not there. The Westminster authors are clear enough two questions later in WLC 158:

Q. By whom is the Word of God to be preached?

A. The Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.

They could have chosen to state it as plainly in WLC 156 if they wanted to but for whatever reason chose not to. They could have written something like, “Although only ministers, elders and probationers may read the Word publicly to the congregation, yet all sorts of people are bound to read it, etc.” The fact is, they simply did not. We must deal with the words we are given, not the words we think they meant. And the plain wording of WLC 156 is that “all are not to be permitted to read the Word publicly” but it does not define who the “not all” are. That is left up to our judgment; in the PCA’s case, to each individual Session.

I realize this ambiguity is frustrating to those who have great clarity and zeal in their own mind about what the Westminster authors intended on the heels of winning the debate over the Scots regarding the WDPW a few years earlier. But the fact is, the authors of WLC 156 wrote what they did, and it is to its words which we subscribe. In fact, given the wording of WLC 156, I think it could be argued that those who believe that we must restrict the public reading of Scripture to pastors, elders and candidates should be asked to state their difference with the Catechism, and an exception given to them. It is actually they who add words to the Catechism and thus arguably differ from the precise wording.

Obviously, as a respected view within Presbyterianism with a long pedigree (at least before 1894), such a position should be allowed. But candidates with this view should also be asked whether they would require their own narrower reading for other candidates and churches. They should be examined to see if they can uphold their vows to maintain the peace of the PCA in good conscience, with its long-standing diversity on this issue. Meanwhile, proponents of a

more restrictive view are certainly welcome to offer clarifying language to WLC 156 by way of Constitutional amendment according to the process laid out in our BCO. But if and until then, what is written is written, and the language of WLC 156 does not forbid the lay reading of Scripture in worship under Sessional oversight.

At the same time, it should not be “anything goes” either. Our BCO gives discretion to local Sessions to oversee their own worship services in keeping with the grassroots nature of our denomination (BCO 12-5.e). These are men who are trained, examined and ordained to office, who are to be known for their wisdom and maturity. And it is Sessions of these types of men who then apply WLC 156 according to their best judgment in light of Scripture. There is a vast middle ground between “just anyone” reading Scripture and only pastors. In our zeal to protect the reverence of worship within the PCA, we should not commit the fallacy of the excluded middle. For close to 50 years, the PCA has had a settled peace on this matter, granting freedom to local churches to follow their own consciences on this. I believe that peace should not only continue but be actively fostered by everyone on different sides of this issue; for all to recognize that forms and circumstances of worship like this are much closer to adiaphora than to essentials.³⁸

Of course, it is true that advocates for the more restrictive view are able to marshal plenty of support from historical Presbyterian sources, especially leading up to the Old School/New School divide in 1837. This is undisputed. And that history should be honored. But as we have previously mentioned, conservative Presbyterians had also moved on from other Puritan over-reactions as the Bible continued to be studied and applied faithfully. It is beyond the scope of this paper to interact with all of this historical material, while granting that the majority of evidence in the two centuries following the Westminster Assembly favors the more restrictive view. At the same time, the PCA was founded in 1973, not the early 19th century. It chose not to restrict lay persons, male or female, from reading Scripture when given the chance in 1975 as BCO 50-2 was adopted. Either way, church history is not Scripture. We are still a Sola Scriptura denomination (cf. WCF 1.10).

As someone who has long admired the Puritans, I recognize the desire to hearken back to an older era. In his classic book, *The Work of the Pastor*, Scottish minister William Still warns against idolizing different periods of church history. He points out that among Reformed evangelicals, we can identify with a particular era from the 17th through 19th centuries and be tempted to try to return the Church to that period in every way, missing that era’s blind spots.³⁹ We thus make a grave mistake if we think the Church of our era is the only one prone to worldly influence from the surrounding culture. After all, it is a concurrence of history that the 200 years following the Westminster Assembly was when the chattel slave trade most flourished. To their credit, many Presbyterians opposed this evil, but many others – even the ones we are most likely to quote and approve on other theological matters – did not. Shall we look to them alone for wisdom when it comes to matters of pastoral authority and/or the privileges of lay membership? Likewise, I do not think it is irrelevant to point out that developing democracies did not even

³⁸ On this general topic, see Bowen, op. cit. (see footnote 19).

³⁹ William Still, *The Work of the Pastor* (Ross-Shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2010), Chapter 3.

grant women the right to vote until the early 20th century. Perhaps Presbyterians from ages past were also influenced by their own age and secular cultures, not just the Scriptures alone. We should take that into account when appealing to history on this matter.

I was struck by a statement by Lookout Mountain Presbyterian Church (PCA) regarding the role of women at their church as part of a brochure written in response to the PCA's 2017 WIM report. After stating that their views are grounded in Scripture as well as their support for the equality of men and women, Lookout Mountain Presbyterian states:

Our commitment to the teaching of Scripture alone means that we also want to avoid elevating the cultural standards of any previous era to the status of Scripture.

We seek conformity to Scripture alone, not the promotion of ideals that are rooted in traditionalism or nostalgia.... We seek to be a church where every person is equipped to use his or her gifts to the fullest in the service of Christ and his Kingdom.⁴⁰

While the question of who may read Scripture is not a question strictly about what women may or may not do, it is the issue of most concern to many, as previously noted. And so as we consider the history of Presbyterianism from the Westminster Assembly to the establishment of the PCA; and while fully committed to male eldership as required by I Timothy 2-3, we should also be mindful to not impose a culture from centuries past that was as much influenced in its views towards women and laypersons in one direction as ours is today in another. There is a balance to be had, as we seek to be true to the Scriptures and the Reformed faith in our own time.

Practical Questions

Many of the practical questions have already surfaced as we considered the various theological questions. Our theology affects the kind of church cultures we are trying to build, as it should. But again, it seems that many who advocate against the lay reading of Scripture simply draw the line somewhere else regarding what laypersons may do. We recognize that this is due to a sincere desire to protect the elements of worship and the Regulative Principle. At the same time, they are also using their best judgment and drawing the lines more broadly than others who believe they are also being equally Biblical. For instance, in the appendix to the Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley's report, they report:

Women occasionally address the congregation during announcements, mission reports, and the like during worship services. They sometimes recite Scripture before the congregation during worship on occasions such as singing an offertory, making an announcement, and offering a mission report. We do not view these occasions as reading Scripture publicly to the congregation as an element of

⁴⁰ Accessed: https://lmpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Womens_Statement_BrochureUpdateFinal.pdf

worship. To our knowledge, women are not permitted to read Scripture to the congregation as an element of worship....

Neither of these principles in anyway forbids women from participating in church choirs, from singing solos, from performing musical instrumentation, or from providing musical direction in the course of a public worship service. To the degree that they have found justification within the regulative principle of worship, musical instrumentation, vocal solos or ensembles, and musical or vocal direction have been deemed circumstantial to the element of the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (see WCF 1.6). That is to say, these activities find their justification in their supporting the congregation in its work of corporate expressions of praise. As such, there is no barrier to non-officers, whether men or women, fully participating in these activities.⁴¹

Obviously given the theological views expressed above about the Church as the family of God, we are happy to see so many activities encouraged for laypersons in worship, both men and women. But one has to ask whether the lines they have drawn are so clear from the Bible itself, and if so, where they find such warrant. For instance, why does reciting Scripture during a ministry report not actually cross into being an element of worship (such that a woman may do it)? And, if such reports are not actually elements of worship, why they are allowed to be done in worship at all? Such inconsistencies appear to be based on preferences and established practice rather than undisputed warrant from the New Testament.

As an anecdote, a longtime MTW missionary contacted me before coming to share with our church. He asked whether we would permit his wife to answer questions during a Q&A as part of their presentation during Sunday School. I said, certainly, but is this actually an issue in some PCA churches? He said that it was. The point is that we need to be careful about stating that the lines we draw as Sessions are the only Biblical lines allowed. Some things are left up to “the light of nature and Christian prudence according to the general rules of the Word” (WCF 1.6). We hope we have demonstrated that when it comes to preaching, the Scriptures forbid that to those not called to that office, including women. But when it comes to reading Scripture in worship as part of the New Covenant community, the New Testament is not nearly so clear, and in fact, may well seem to encourage it.

Another practical question that is sometimes raised is that if a Session allows laypersons to read Scripture in worship, may they introduce the passage? Or does that somehow become a form of authoritative teaching and should be forbidden? It is a good question which Sessions should carefully consider. My own answer is that a brief introduction to put the passage in context does not come close to authoritative preaching and most everyone hearing these sorts of introductions knows that to be the case. If, on occasion, a lay reader goes too far and begins to actually exhort the congregation from the front in a way that exceeds the spirit of I Corinthians 14:26, the elders should speak to them and put a stop to that as a general practice. But the same would hold true for any unordained worship leader. A simple practical solution for those

⁴¹ *Report of the PMV Study committee on the Role of Women in the Church*, pp. 21-22. Contact the Stated Clerk of PMV to receive a copy.

concerned about this is to have laypersons simply announce the chapter and verse, read the text, followed by “The Word of the Lord,” and then return to their seats.

Early on in this paper, I suggested there may be a compromise for churches which are troubled by this issue. This is suggested by the wording of both BCO 50-1, 2 and by the 2017 PCA’s WIM report. In short, BCO 50-1 states that pastors are to read the Word. BCO 50-2 states that “some other person” may also be selected to read the Bible. Because of the strong conviction of some that reading the Word is connected to the authority of preaching, it may be wise for Sessions to limit the reading of the sermon text to the preacher himself, while allowing for earlier readings in the service to be conducted by either an elder or an approved lay person. While that will not satisfy everyone, such a judgment appears to me to reflect the wisdom found in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 – a judgment which clearly sides with the freedom found in the gospel, while also making concessions to the sincere concerns of those who desired for the Church to maintain holiness (cf. Acts 15:22-29).

Life together in the New Testament church was not always easy. Cultural differences and strong opinions on preferences could dominate discussions. But in each case, the Apostles insisted that Christians find a way to live together, dying to themselves and majoring on the grace found in the gospel. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” As a denomination, we must find a way to love one another despite differences on such secondary matters, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:2).

Conclusion

Why have I written at such great length on this subject? First, because it is a compelling issue for many in the PCA and their arguments have historical weight and should be taken seriously. This is particularly true when it comes to the advocacy for good order within the Church and the many practical advantages of having Teaching Elders read the Scripture.

Second, I wrote this because it became interesting to me and challenged me. The fruit of this study was to reexamine my own theological presuppositions and reaffirm beliefs about the nature of the Church and the nature of the pastoral office. At the same time, as I read about the ancient and Scottish church’s approach to the “office” of reader, and reconsidered again the wording of BCO 50-1, I have been reminded to handle the issue more carefully. Reading Scripture is a solemn duty and privilege. Congregational worship is not just a family gathering where we may encourage one another, but also a family gathered to hear from Almighty God, both law and gospel (WCF 14; 21; 25). I would do well to remember not only WLC 156 & 158 but what lies between them, WLC 157:

Question: How is the Word of God to be read?

Answer: The holy Scriptures are to be read with an high and reverent esteem of them; with a firm persuasion that they are the very Word of God, and that he only can enable us to understand them; with desire to know, believe, and obey the will of God revealed in them; with diligence, and attention to the matter and scope of them; with meditation, application, self-denial, and prayer.

This is a good reminder for all of us, and insofar as this and other studies enjoin us to such high and reverent esteem, they will have served a valuable purpose. I know I can do better.

But there is a third reason I have written, and it is where I began. Who may read Scripture in worship seems to have become more of an issue recently, and I am unclear as to why. But in my view, this debate may be something of a test case, a synecdoche for some of the cultural struggles within the PCA, almost a proxy battle as we continue to decide what kind of denomination we are going to be.⁴² It is true there are some PCA churches that should pay greater heed to BCO 50-1 and other parts of the Directory of Worship, even if it is not officially binding. This is not so much a matter of “high” vs. “low” churches, since churches with different styles differ on the question of lay reading. But it is a matter of what Paul wrote to the Corinthians, that the Word of God did not come to them only (I Cor 14:36). We are a denomination, and we should listen to one another’s concerns on both the substance and style of our worship.

At the same time, as I noted at the beginning, the concern for greater uniformity on this is largely from the more restrictive side. To speak plainly, as the GRN and other interest groups within the PCA push for greater conformity on this issue, we will see whether the middle can hold or not. It appears to me that from what some have said, they do not want the middle to hold if it means “compromise.” They would be happier with a “smaller but purer” PCA. However, the question is always purer in what, and purer at what cost.

If those with the more restrictive view manage to “reform” the PCA on this question, and assuming they cannot convince the rest of their point of view, where would those of us with a broader view go? Would the PCA split into two permanent “synods,” a GRN-type PCA and the more Keller-influenced PCA? What would Paul think of this sort of fracturing (cf. I Corinthians 1, 3)? The broader side on this does not believe in women elders, nor are many likely to give up lay readers, so would they need to form a denomination “between” the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the PCA? The thought seems ludicrous, a further splintering of what is already a splintered conservative Presbyterian world. And this would occur when other NAPARC denominations already exist which would provide the greater uniformity in worship that the more restrictive side seeks.

But it does not have to be this way either. We do not have to fracture over such secondary matters. The same Paul who wrote I Corinthians 14 and I Timothy 2 also wrote Ephesians 4:1-3, Romans 14:14 and Philippians 3:15:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with

⁴² While beyond the scope of this paper, I believe many of the tensions we are now seeing in the PCA come closer to the Old School/New School disagreements in the 1830s than to the modernist/fundamentalist controversy in the 1920s. For historical interest, see this 1839 account by (New Schooler) Erastus C. Benedict in *The American Biblical Repository* 1839-04: Vol 1 Issue 2, pp. 472-500. Accessed here: https://archive.org/details/sim_biblical-repository-and-classical-review_1839-04_1_2/page/472/mode/2up?q=harmonious

patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Paul calls us to grace, humility, love and unity; and to be patient and grant one another freedom on matters of Christian wisdom and judgment. We are grateful that this has been the approach of some, such as the Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley:

That PMV encourages the churches of PMV carefully to examine the use made of women and non-ordained men during corporate worship on the Lord's Day, in order to ensure that the elder-led character of New Testament worship is reflected in our services.⁴³

PMV is clear where they stand. They ask their Sessions to consider their arguments. But they do not (as far as I can tell) require a conformity which the PCA constitution does not. I disagree with their conclusions, but they still leave it to Sessions to determine what the "elder-led character of New Testament worship" looks like in each congregation.

Summaries

In summary, this paper has attempted to first show that, exegetically, the New Testament is not determinative of who may read Scripture in public worship. I Timothy 4:13 is likely prescriptive for pastors today, but it does not exclude the possibility that others may also read. This is reinforced by the appointment in the early church of unordained "readers" in each congregation, a practice the later Scottish (and French Reformed) churches also instituted. Old Testament examples and prooftexts may be helpful by analogy but are nevertheless part of the shadow which has been replaced by the simpler but more glorious New Covenant worship (WCF 7.5). I Corinthians 14:23-40 is a notoriously difficult text to interpret. Therefore, we should be extremely hesitant to make any binding rules from a particular exegesis of that text. That said, the PCA's WIM report makes a reasonable suggestion that "lay prophesying" by men and women was permitted, but only the elders were to give authoritative interpretations. This is roughly parallel to reading Scripture and preaching today. At the very least, the ambiguity of the Scriptural case should give proponents pause before making a rule for all congregations. In other words, prohibiting lay reading does not meet the standard of being both a "good" and "necessary" consequence from Scriptural deduction (WCF 1.6). Therefore, the judgment of charity should take precedence in this matter.

⁴³ *Report of the PMV Study committee on the Role of Women in the Church*, pp. 18. Contact the Stated Clerk of PMV to receive a copy.

Second, theologically, we considered how Jesus grants His power to both “ruled and rulers” (BCO 3-1); and that the distribution of this power might be reasonably reflected in the reading of Scripture. We also considered the value of a pastor sitting under the Word of God with his congregation, as an equal co-heir of life, modeling for them humility and faith. We likewise suggested possible theological dangers that may unintentionally follow from the prohibition of lay reading, some of which have occurred in the history of the Church. In short, there are several good theological arguments which stem from Reformational thinking which support the lay reading of Scripture in worship. This theology is for many of us both precious and important to the kinds of church cultures we believe the gospel should cultivate. Allowing both lay and ordained readers in worship is a positive reflection of the unmerited grace and spiritual equality championed by the Reformed faith.

Third, we considered the actual language of the PCA’s BCO and the Westminster Larger Catechism in light of the debates surrounding the Westminster Directory for Public Worship. We agreed that in many PCA churches more attention should be paid to BCO 50-1. But when it comes to WLC 156, we attempted to demonstrate that the more restrictive reading fails in a number of ways. While sympathizing with certain frustrations, what matters in the end is: 1) Scriptural exegesis & theological formulation; 2) which documents the PCA actually subscribes to; 3) what WLC 156 actually addresses, which is not the regulation of worship; and 4) the actual wording of WLC 156, which does not define who the “not all” is in terms of who should not read Scripture publicly. We judge that the argument for a more restrictive interpretation falls short, not just Scripturally and theologically, but also in terms of the PCA’s constitution as it currently stands.

Finally, we considered some practical questions and concerns that arise from both practices and suggested that drawing a line is not as clear cut a case as many believe it to be. We also suggested a possible compromise that takes the primary concerns of all sides into view, along with lessons that can be learned for those who have been too lax in this area. Finally, we conclude that who may read Scripture in worship is not an issue which should divide the PCA, as we learn to live with our differences, major on the majors, and celebrate God’s grace to us in Christ, along with the Christian freedom which accompanies such grace. In fact, this discussion gives us an opportunity to appreciate and love one another all the more within the same communion, despite disagreements regarding such details of worship.

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### **Appendix: Recommendations for the PCA on the Reading of Scripture in Public Worship**

As this is largely a paper about the reading of Scripture within the PCA, it seems fitting to offer a few practical recommendations in keeping with this paper’s conclusions and arguments.

1) Presbyteries should continue to allow liberty on this issue in their candidates and churches. It is both a secondary matter and one that is not readily proved from Scripture either

way. Officers should model and teach a peaceable tolerance on this issue as their members have occasion to worship with and/or join other PCA churches. Those members who, in good conscience, cannot tolerate such diversity of practice within the PCA may, as an option, be encouraged to find denominations more suited to their convictions (BCO 2-2).

2) Sessions and Presbyteries should allow reasonable stated differences to WLC 156, especially to those candidates who wish to restrict the reading of Scripture more narrowly than the wording of WLC 156. At the same time, Sessions and Presbyteries should inquire of candidates whether they can minister peaceably within a denomination that allows for diversity of practice on the matter.

3) Sessions should study the matter carefully, particularly the arguments from the New Testament and the attention given to those arguments at the Westminster Assembly. They should study the instructions in the PCA's Directory of Worship "seriously as the mind of the Church agreeable to the Standards." PCA pastors who read little or no Scripture in their worship services should be encouraged to begin doing so in accordance with BCO 50-1 and WLC 157.

4) Sessions which do not allow for the lay reading of Scripture should consider other substantial ways they can reinforce the dignity and full equality of every member in worship, male and female, in accordance with I Peter 2:9 and BCO 3-1. They should consider other ways in the worship service that the Pastor can model humility, faith and equality with his brothers and sisters in Christ (Gal 3:28).

5) Sessions which allow for the lay reading of Scripture in worship should carefully consider: a) whom they appoint to read and how they are trained, both in terms of character and gifts; b) how to facilitate the reverence that is enjoined in reading God's Word from WLC 157; and c) consider normally reserving the sermon text for the preacher alone to read.

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