

MEN AND WOMEN IN ELECTED CHURCH OFFICE

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, MEMPHIS TN

OUR PURPOSE

In our process of electing deacons and elders, the congregation elects a Nominating Committee who in turn nominates particular members for church office. The Nominating Committee may nominate whomever they wish, and the congregation has the right, under the provisions of our by-laws, to amend the slate recommended by our Nominating Committee. Because members and visitors occasionally have questions about the role of women in church office, we, the Session, thought it wise to address this issue for the sake of the peace, purity, and edification of the church.

The Book of Government in our denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, says, regarding the rights reserved for the local church: “The particular church has the right to elect its own officers” (§6-2). At the same time, according to the Book of Government, the Session, which is elected by the congregation, is to confer with each candidate to confirm his or her suitability and to train candidates for service (§18-3k). It is a good system, and it is working beautifully in our church.

Through this paper, we seek to give pastoral advice to our flock concerning the role of women in church office and to alert the congregation as to our own conscience on this matter, a conscience which must be exercised in our examination of candidates for office. The Session’s view on this matter is not unanimous but the view of this paper is that of the overwhelming majority of the current Session, as well as the historic belief and practice of Second Presbyterian Church.

OUR VIEW OF WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES

The Bible teaches that God created men and women as equal partners, who together bear the image of God.¹ There are numerous examples of outstanding female leaders in the Old Testament,² and at the coming of Christ the woman was especially elevated in her role in society and in the church, particularly by the teachings and the inclusive ministries of Christ and the Apostle Paul.³ We know that we have not yet fully realized this biblical ideal, but we believe that women should be trained and encouraged to assume leadership, teaching, and serving roles for which they are gifted by God and called by the church in accordance with Scriptural teachings. At Second Presbyterian Church, we have many godly women who are able and willing to serve, and we shall continue to challenge habits and traditions which limit their development and service and which have no biblical warrant.

We also believe that God created the male and female differently and complementarily and has assigned the man distinct leadership roles as husband in marriage and as elder in the church.⁴ There are a number of Bible passages

¹ Genesis 1: 24-31; 2: 1 - 25.

² Judges 4; I Samuel 25; II Kings 22: 14-20; Esther 1-9.

³ See Luke 7:36-50; 8: 1-3; 24:1-12; Acts 18:18; Romans 16:1-3, 6, 12, 15; I Corinthians 11:11, 12; Galatians 3:26-29; Philippians 4:3; etc.

⁴ The terms “complementarian” and “egalitarian” are commonly used to denote the two primary viewpoints on this subject. Generally speaking, the complementarian (representing the view taken in this paper) believes that the genders are equal in their dignity and also assigned different but complementary functional roles. The egalitarian believes that the genders are equal in dignity and that there are no gender-based limitations for women in marriage or in church leadership.

which touch on the issue of gender roles⁵, but perhaps the definitive passages would be Ephesians 5:21-33 on marriage and I Timothy 2:11-15 on church leadership. Since I Timothy 2 is the primary Scripture passage which leads us to believe that church eldership should be restricted to qualified men, let us look carefully at this text.

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—² for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. ⁵For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.⁷ And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles. ⁸I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.⁹ I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.¹¹ A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve.¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.¹⁵ But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.” 1 Timothy 2:1-15

Most scholars suggest that in this text the Apostle Paul seems to be discussing the issue of propriety in worship. He urges prayer in verses 1-8, and he urges modesty in verses 9-10. In verses 11-15, probably still in the context of worship, he seems to be teaching that the woman’s role is to be restricted in some ways. This text presents four primary questions that need to be addressed:

- 1) Whom is he restricting;
- 2) What is he forbidding;
- 3) Why is he restricting those people from those functions; and
- 4) How does this relate to the ordination of elders?

1. Whom Is The Apostle Restricting?

We believe the Apostle Paul is speaking of women in general in I Timothy 2:11-12. Some biblical scholars, however, suggest that since Paul refers to some “idle” women in I Timothy 5:13 and some women “who worm their way into homes and gain control of weak-willed women” in II Timothy 3:6, then the Apostle’s real concern must have been to restrict heretical female teachers from spreading their ignorance among other women.⁶ On the contrary, we believe that the Apostle was a very strong promoter of women in ministry leadership (see footnote 3) and would not have restricted all women (which is what the text actually says) if he meant only to correct a limited abuse.⁷

Other scholars suggest that Paul’s intention was only to limit first century Ephesian women, and not all women in all the churches. They say that Ephesus (where Timothy was serving at the time) was a radically feministic community, and the Apostle did not want the Church to mirror the same excesses that appeared in the surrounding

⁵ On gender roles in marriage: Colossians 3:18, 19; Titus 2:4, 5; I Peter 3:1-7. On gender roles in church leadership: Luke 8:1-3; Acts 18:26; Romans 16:1-3, 12; I Corinthians 11:2-16, 14:33-38. See Claire Smith, *God’s Good Design* (Matthias Media, 2012) for an excellent overview of relevant passages.

⁶ This would be the view of Gilbert Bilezikian (*Beyond Sex Roles*, Baker, 1985); of Gretchen Gaebelein Hull (*Equal To Serve*, Revell, 1987); Stanley Grenz (*Women in the Church*, IVP, 1995); and of Ruth Tucker (*Women in the Maze*, IVP, 1982).

⁷ Notice how the Apostle Paul deals with individual cases like Peter in Galatians 2:11-14; Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:2; Hymenaeus and Alexander in I Timothy 1:20; Demas and Alexander in II Timothy 4:10, 14; and Philemon. This man was not shy about personal correction! There is also no case in his writings of restricting an entire class of saints in order to correct a more localized problem.

pagan culture.⁸ We believe, however, that the more thorough studies⁹ show that Ephesus was a rather typical Greco-Roman culture, suggesting that Paul's concern was not just limited to the circumstances in Ephesus, but has universal applicability.

2. What Function Is He Forbidding?

The Apostle Paul says "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission." We know, however, from Acts 18:26 that Priscilla privately instructed Apollos, and we know from I Corinthians 11 that women in the early church were praying and prophesying, fulfilling Joel's prophecy which Peter cited in Acts 2:17, 18.¹⁷ "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." Acts 2:17, 18

We also know from many places in the Scriptures that women were fulfilling a variety of leadership roles in the early church.¹⁰ Obviously, then, the Apostle does not mean to say here (or in I Corinthians 14:34) that women should not teach men at all, nor exercise leadership in the church, nor pray or prophesy publicly. What does he mean? He reveals his intent in verse 12: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent." The Apostle is forbidding women from exercising a particular type of teaching and a particular form of authority, but what type of teaching and what form of authority?

In order to discern what the Apostle is prohibiting in I Timothy 2:12, we must remind ourselves of the context: Paul is discussing here the church at worship. The sort of teaching, then, that seems to be forbidden of women, is the authoritative preaching of the Word to men in the church's public assemblies for worship. Likewise, the authority that is restricted here seems to be the sort of authority over men that pastors and elders exercise in the government and discipline of the church, especially as it finds expression in the oversight of the church's pastoral, teaching, and worship ministries. Some scholars suggest that the word used here for "authority" ("authentain," the only usage in the New Testament) means "to usurp authority," and therefore, they say, the Apostle is simply forbidding the disobedient women in the congregation from domineering or inappropriately usurping existing authority.¹¹ Exhaustive studies¹² have shown, however, that the more likely translation of authentain is simply "to have authority," suggesting a categorical prohibition by the Apostle.

3. Why Does Paul Not Permit Women to Teach or To Have Authority Over Men?

Paul gives the underlying reasons for his prohibitions in verses 13-15. These verses have produced much controversy and speculation, but we believe, at base, the Apostle is rooting his instructions in three trans-temporal, trans-cultural principles: creation, fall and salvation. Although a plain reading of Genesis 1-3 might not yield for us the same conclusions as those of the Apostle, Christ gave His apostles the inspired authority to interpret the Old Testament for us and to give us truths we would not otherwise discern for ourselves.¹³ It seems, then, that the

⁸ This would be the argument of Catherine and Richard Kroeger in *I Suffer Not A Woman* (Baker, 1992).

⁹ There is an impressive presentation, for example, in *Women In The Church*, edited by Köstenberger, Schreiner, and Baldwin (Baker, 1995), as well as in the works of Susan T. Foh *Women And The Word Of God*, and James B. Hurley, *Men And Women In Biblical Perspective*. See also *Biblical Foundation for Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by W. A. Grudem (Crossway, 2002) and *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, edited by John Piper and W. A. Grudem (Crossway, 1991).

¹⁰ See footnote 3.

¹¹ Phillip Payne, *Libertarian Women*, (*Trinity Journal* 2, 1981); C. D. Osburn, "Authenteo," (*Restoration Quarterly*, 25[1], 1982); Katherine Clark Kroeger suggests that authentain means "to engage in fertility practices!" ("Ancient Heresies and a Strange Greek Verb," *The Reformed Journal*, 29[3], 1979).

¹² See, e.g., Chapter 3 and Appendix 2 in *Women in the Church*, ed. by Köstenberger et al.

¹³ Matthew 10:19-20, 16:17-19; Luke 12:12; John 17:20; I Corinthians 14:37-38; Ephesians 3:4-5; I Thessalonians 2:13; II Timothy 1:9-11; Titus 1:1-3; II Peter 1:18-23.

Apostle was saying that this prohibition is for all times and all places (as he said in I Corinthians 14:33, “As in all the congregations of the saints...”). In verses 13-15, it seems that the Apostle is saying 1) by virtue of creation only qualified men should rule and teach authoritatively in the church; 2) the order of the fall suggests that the prescribed order in I Timothy 2 best serves us; and 3) by fulfilling whatever roles God gives us, we shall realize at last our full salvation in Jesus Christ.

4. How Does This Text Relate to the Ordination of Elders?

A number of scholars suggest that there are so many uncertainties and ambiguities in I Timothy 2:11-15 that we should simply discount the text all together. Indeed there are some things here difficult to understand, as there are with many texts,¹⁴ but we cannot condone the dismissal or the distortion of any Scriptural text.¹⁵ We do not have to understand everything in a text in order to understand something in the text.

All of us should be able to agree on the following:

1. This is a relatively late letter of the Apostle Paul, following many happy experiences with female leadership in his ministry;
2. The Apostle is forbidding women from doing something that is apparently not forbidden of men;
3. The prohibition has to do with some form of teaching and some type of authority; and
4. Paul gives reasons for the prohibitions from his interpretation of Genesis 1-3.

Furthermore, we believe I Timothy 2:11-15 applies directly to the question of who should serve in the office of elder. Although the word “elder” does not appear in Chapter 2, the Apostle has mentioned two primary functions of the elder in I Timothy 2:12, namely, teaching and ruling. Additionally I Timothy 3:1-7, which immediately follows, gives a detailed description of the qualifications for eldership. The Apostle may have in mind more than the eldership in 2:12, but probably not less.

OUR CONCLUSION

Our conclusion is that both men and women should be encouraged to exercise leadership in the church and to use their spiritual gifts in accord with the Scriptures. We believe that both men and women are biblically eligible to serve in the office of deacon and that men only are biblically eligible to serve in the office of elder.

Our Answers To Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Don't we have to take the differences between our culture and first century culture into account when we read Paul's instructions to Timothy?

A. Yes. We must always read the Bible carefully in order to transpose the author's teachings from his day to ours; but in the case of Paul's First Letter to Timothy, we should take several things into account:

1. These are not the opinions of a young chauvinistic believer. Paul promoted the ministries of women his entire Christian life. One could fairly say that he was a radical reformer of gender roles in his day. It is useful to notice that it is near the end of his ministry when he writes Timothy and forbids a woman to bear rule in the church. What we have in I Timothy 2, therefore, is the most mature thinking of a man who had actively promoted female service and leadership in the church. This chronology, of course, strengthens his argument.
2. Paul not only gives the instruction, but also gives his rationale in I Timothy 2:13-15. We do not altogether understand his reasoning here, but he roots his instructions in creation, the fall, and redemption. If the Apostle

¹⁴ II Peter 3:15-16.

¹⁵ We disagree with one of the common egalitarian arguments against applying this text, viz, that the text is too difficult to interpret. E.g., see Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church*, pp. 247-249 (IVP, 2003).

wanted to lay down a trans-cultural, trans-temporal principle, we wonder how he could possibly have made his case any stronger. We fear that relativizing this text would invite the relativizing of the entire Bible.

3. Some have argued that in I Timothy 2 Paul is addressing a unique case in which poorly trained women were leading weak-willed women astray; but the Apostle is not here forbidding the poorly trained, but women in general; and he is not here forbidding them from teaching weak-willed women, but men.

Q. If the reference in I Timothy 2:13-14 to creation and the fall is intended to make the preceding passages trans-cultural and trans-temporal, then why shouldn't the reference to creation in I Corinthians 11:12 likewise make Paul's instructions in that chapter concerning head coverings and hair length trans-cultural and trans-temporal?

A. In both I Corinthians 11 and I Timothy 2, Paul makes trans-cultural, trans-temporal appeals for male headship in certain aspects of corporate worship. In I Timothy 2:12, this principle is applied to two practices, teaching and ruling, both of which are basically practiced in the same way today as in the first century. On the other hand, in I Corinthians 11, the principle of male headship is applied to the culturally relative issues of veils and hair length, both of which are based on contemporary social conventions,¹⁶ which, of course, change with time. (Paul says, "does not the very nature of things..." in I Corinthians 11:14—an appeal to culturally relative common sense.)

Q. Isn't there a redemption trajectory¹⁷ in the Scriptures that allows for seed concepts to grow and mature over time, as in the case of the Christian view of slavery since the time of biblical writings? Wouldn't this dynamic affect the way we look at some of the apparent restrictions upon first century women's leadership in the Scriptures?

A. There is indeed a progressive theological and ethical development through the ages in the Church, as we grow in our understanding of the Scriptures and seek to apply the truth of God's Word to ever changing cultural contexts. We must be careful, however, also to realize that these trajectories must be biblical trajectories; that is, when the Scriptures teach a principle that is rooted in creation (as in I Timothy 2:11-15), such a principle transcends time and culture; whereas in the case of slavery, the Scriptures never suggest that it is founded on creational principles¹⁸ but rather is a regulation of a practice that was prevalent in the cultural context of the biblical writers.

Q. Are we not running the danger of resisting the Holy Spirit if a woman senses a call to the eldership?

A. We believe the Bible is the voice of the Holy Spirit, and He seems to have spoken on this issue. When anyone senses that he or she may be induced to ministry, there are three important questions to ask:

1. What do I sense God wants me to do?
2. Does the Bible encourage or forbid it?
3. Is the Church confirming this ministry and/or calling me to this ministry?

All three components of a "call" need to be present before one can move ahead confidently.

Q. If we forbid women from assuming the authoritative teaching role of ruling elder, then why do we allow women to teach mixed Sunday School classes and to supervise men on our church staff?

¹⁶ Look at the helpful explanation in Hurley, pp. 162-184.

¹⁷ See William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (IVP, 2001).

¹⁸ See Thomas Schreiner, "William J. Webb: *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*, A Review Article" (*The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*), and Wayne Grudem, "Should We Move Beyond the NT to a Better Ethic?" (*Journal of Evangelical Theological Society*) and Webb's response to Schreiner, "The Limits of Redemptive Movement Hermeneutics" (*Evangelical Quarterly*, 2003).

A. We believe that the immediate context of Paul's comments in I Timothy 2 is a discussion of propriety in worship ("I urge...prayers...for kings...lift up holy hands...dress modestly."). We, therefore, believe we should restrict our interpretation to the clearest application of this text, namely, that the office of ruling elder and the authoritative preaching of the Word in worship should be restricted to qualified men. We would suggest that, in the case of Sunday School teaching, each class might want to study this issue and, with the consultation of the officers and pastors, make a careful determination. Perhaps some classes will want to use teaching teams of a woman and a man, or a part-time woman teacher, while others will gladly use a full-time woman teacher or a full-time man teacher. Concerning our staff, we believe that church staff supervisory roles that do not require ordination may be filled by women as well as by men, since these roles do not require the authority of eldership.

Q. If God has called women to be prophets (Acts 2:17-18) and the order of mention in I Corinthians 12:28 could suggest that the calling to be a prophet is higher than that to be a teacher, then why is it not permissible for a woman to be called to and serve in the "lower" position of teacher?

A. We agree with the scholars who point¹⁹ out that the order in which the various ministry gifts are mentioned in I Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11 makes no statement about the relative authority of those ministering. We believe that the teaching office requires a ruling authority that is not equally required for prophesying. Notice, for example, that in I Corinthians 14:29, others in the congregation were to judge the prophesies as to their accuracy. The New Testament prophets, unlike the teachers, did not proclaim the doctrinal and ethical standards by which the churches would be guided,²⁰ nor did they exercise governance in the churches, but the teachers did; therefore, it makes sense that the gift of prophesy is given to and exercised by all, and that the authoritative teaching office is exercised by the elders. We should also note that there is a difference between the office of authoritative teaching and the gift of teaching which is given to and exercised by both men and women.

Q. Concerning marriage, in Ephesians 5:21, isn't Paul actually speaking of mutual submission in marriage?

A. Paul certainly teaches in several of his letters that all believers should love one another and consider each other better than themselves, and here we can surely see an obvious encouragement to universal mutual submission in the Body of Christ and in marriage; but specifically in this text, Paul is speaking of the Spirit-filled life (5: 18), which includes joyful worship and singing to the Lord (5:19, 20) and submission to proper human leadership (5: 21-6:9). When Paul speaks of submission he says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ," and then gives three examples: wives to husbands, children to parents, and slaves to masters. Clearly, the marriage relationship is unique among the three mentioned, in that there is partnership, mutuality, and shared leadership; but just as clearly, the common element in all three relationships mentioned is that there is an authority in the relationships which is to be honored, observed, and supported. This is borne out in the parallel passage in Colossians 3:18-4:1, as well as in the teaching of I Peter 3: 1-7. Surely this is applied very differently today than in the first century, but there remains nonetheless a principle of submission in every age.

Q. Are we consistent when we say that women are equal to men in dignity and yet submissive to their leadership as husbands and elders?

A. We believe so, because it is fundamental to the Scriptures that "there is neither...male or female," (Galatians 3:28), and at the same time that we should "submit yourselves...to every authority instituted among men." (I Peter 2:13) This union of equality and submission is precisely the choice of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who is equal with the Father, and yet willingly submissive to His Father's will in order to glorify Him. We see no contradiction or inconsistency with the notions of equality and subordination, because we believe the Bible teaches both.

¹⁹ For example, Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Crossway, 1988), pp. 140ff

²⁰ See D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Baker, 1987), pp. 160ff.

Q. Why is this issue important?

A. We believe this issue is important for three reasons:

1. The way we interpret and apply the Scriptures is vital to the life of the church. By examining this paper carefully, one can see that we value a straight-forward reading of Scripture texts, taking literary and historical contexts seriously, and faithfully applying what the Bible says. On the other hand, we think the interpretive principles used by many egalitarians leave the church open to relativizing any biblical text that makes people uncomfortable.

2. The way we respond to cultural challenges to Scripture truth is vital to the life of the church. We don't have the privilege of choosing where the battle lines will be drawn between the Church and the world. Those who oppose biblical truth choose those lines. Our duty is to respond by faithful obedience to and proclamation of God's Word regarding those issues. For almost 2000 years the vast majority of the global church has followed the line of thinking taught in this paper. Although the egalitarian West has been challenging these views for many years, we must always remain faithful in our conduct and in our teaching.

3. The way we shepherd the church is vital to the life of the church. The biblical role of the elders is to pastor the flock,²¹ a function similar to the role of the husband.²² The New Testament texts which teach the loving and sacrificial headship of husbands in a Christian marriage (see footnote 4) are consistent with and supportive of male eldership in the church.

Q. Why are these issues so controversial in our society?

A. There are many reasons. On the one hand, there is an obvious backlash from the many abuses of male leadership in our society and in the church. On the other hand, there is a tendency on every sinner's part to overthrow God's ordained authority structures. The solution is only found in the total freedom and total submission that we experience in Jesus Christ.

Q. Wouldn't you say that there is a greater danger of chauvinism in the church rather than feminism?

A. Yes, there probably is, yet we would not want to foster either sinful attitude. Rather, we want to be open continually to healthy changes in attitude and practice in our life together. We would like to talk, work and pray together to demonstrate through our relationships the same respect and value for women as practiced in the ministry of Christ and His apostles, so that we facilitate the full development and use of the spiritual gifts of men and women alike.

Q. Doesn't the Bible say that a deacon must be the husband of but one wife, suggesting that deacons should be men only?

A. We believe that Paul in I Timothy 3:12 is teaching that the deacon must be monogamous, and he uses the male gender since this was the most common case in his day. By this teaching, however, he was not saying that deacons necessarily had to be married nor that they had to be male. Note Phoebe's role as a deacon (Romans 16:1: the word "servant" in the ESV translates the Greek word for "deacon"). Also note that the nature of the deacon's office is one of service (Acts 6:1-7), and therefore does not include the "authoritative teaching" of I Timothy 2:12.²³

²¹ I Peter 5:1-5

²² Ephesians 5:25-30; 6:4

²³ It is true that the act of ordination includes the investiture of authority upon the ordinand; and therefore, some complementarians object to the ordination of female deacons. A deacon, however, is invested with the authority not to teach and rule, but rather to serve, thus not violating the precepts taught in I Timothy 2.

Q. How can we be assured that the women's perspective on various issues is properly presented to the Session?

A. Sometimes it is not adequately presented, but this is what we try to do:

1. If we know that an issue is sensitive, we actively seek input from our Women's Ministries leaders, our female staff, and our wives.
2. When we make mistakes we reconsider and change, Lord helping us.
3. When we engage sensitive pastoral work with our female members (for example, marriage restoration), we try always to have mature women help us so that we have a full perspective on the issues.
4. We constantly encourage all of our members to communicate their opinions to us. (We have found that Second Presbyterians are pretty good at that!)
5. Our Sessional committees actively recruit both men and women to serve.

Q. If the Bible clearly teaches our view on this issue, why do so many disagree with us?

A. We do not know all the answers to this question, but we believe and teach our views, not because we are either "traditionalists" or "progressives," but because we are convinced that this is what the Bible teaches; and if the Bible teaches this, then it is God's gracious will for His beloved people. In short, we believe this is the way to know and experience God's pleasure in this area of our lives.

We happily serve in a denomination in which local churches are free to disagree on this topic.²⁴ This is an important theological area that deserves continuing dialogue, and we believe that this issue should not cause a break in fellowship among individuals or churches, but rather mutual instruction. Even though we do not ordain women to the eldership, we will continue to serve with those who do, in presbytery and in general assembly; and we continue to welcome people into our membership who love Christ and who may beg to differ on this issue.

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²⁴ See EPC Book of Government §9-2.