

WOMEN IN MINISTRY: A RESPONSE

Marja J. Van der Veen-Schenkeveld of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands (GKN) and Gretha Heymans of the Dutch Reformed Church (N G Kerk) of South Africa expressed, in the *Theological Forum* of April 1998, their joy and gratitude when their respective synods opened up the ecclesiastical offices to women. When the Christian Reformed Church in North America made a similar decision in 1990, I could not share the joy of those who supported it. Why my sorrow? Our denomination lost its unity. The CRC has suffered membership losses ever since synod decided to allow women to serve as pastors and elders. Many asked, "How can two walk together except they are agreeing?" We now have different interpretations of the same crucial texts pertaining to the role of women in the church. This disturbs me. When we say that there are different interpretations on the position of women in the church, we are left with impression that the Bible cannot draw a straight line anymore. No wonder churchgoers are confused. I will summarize in brief the decisions made and the views expressed, which led to these changes in church policy. In 1975 the CRC Synod decided that the practice of excluding women from the special offices of the church (pastors, elders, deacons, and later evangelists) "be maintained unless compelling Biblical grounds are advanced for changing the practice." The synod of 1978 opened the office of deacon "to qualified women." The Synod of 1984 declared that "the man should exercise primary leadership and direction-setting in the home and in the church." And the pastoral letter sent to the churches by the officers of Synod 1985 said:

Perhaps the sharpest polarization is evident in the controversy which revolves around the role of women in the life of God's family. The synodical decisions (taken only after much prayer and extensive deliberation) involve, first of all, a reaffirmation of the 1984 decision that women may serve as deacons in the capacity defined by Synod 1984.

At the same time, synod ruled "the 'headship principle' implies that women are *not* (emphasis mine) to serve as ministers or elders."

In 1984 Synod believed that the Holy Spirit led them to say no to women elders and pastors. Six years later the decision was reversed. But the debate was not settled. The synod of 1994 said that "clear teaching of Scripture prohibits women holding the office of minister, elder, and evangelist." Despite synod's action, the matter was not laid to rest by those who strongly favored women in all ecclesiastical offices. The next year the latter managed to bring about a change in procedural rules allowing the ordination of women. Now they may be ordained to the office of minister, elder and evangelist during a five-year trial period.

In 1984 Synod declared that the Holy Spirit led them to say no to the ordination of women as elders and pastors. Did the Holy Spirit change His mind since 1984? I don't believe so. What has changed in our denomination is its position on Scripture. It is now a common practice to accept different interpretations of Scripture as equally valid. What are the implications of this new approach? In a short paper I can only touch upon some of the concerns, which I share with those who are opposed to the ordination of women.

LANGUAGE ABOUT GOD

Van der Veen-Schenkeveld argued changing times and situations demand a changed attitude toward the ordination of women. I will deal with this view later as I want to focus first on her apparent changed view of God, a departure from the confessional stance of the Reformed churches. She concludes her article with quoting with approval and appreciation Rachel C. Whalberg's poem *Women's Creed*, which refers to the Holy Spirit as she. "I believe in the Holy Spirit as she moves over the water . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit the woman spirit of God who like a hen created us and gave us birth and covers us with her wings." Why refer to the Holy Spirit as she? We cannot hurriedly dismiss the masculine imagery of God so predominantly used in the Scriptures. Are we allowed to think of the Triune God in line with what appears acceptable to contemporary feminism? There is no Biblical warrant for this change. The masculine imagery predominates for the Son and the Spirit and no less for the Father. No matter how one looks at the argument that identifies the Holy Spirit as female, there is no foundation for it. Though the Greek word for "Spirit" is grammatically neuter, when the Gospel of John refers to the Holy Spirit, the masculine form is used. The Spirit, like Jesus, is sometimes virtually indistinguishable from God. The coming of the Holy Spirit into the lives of believers is precisely what mediates the presence of the Father and the Son (John 14:23). The Spirit of God convicts people of their sin. (John 16:7-11). The Biblical language should be normative for Christian theology. The Holy Spirit of God is never called she.

TIME-BOUND

Van Der Veen-Schenkeveld argued that the apostle Paul was time-bound in his words to men and women. This view is commonly shared by many who advocate women's ordination. They argue, "What Paul, a crusty old bachelor, says about women reflects his rabbinical training. He was obviously anti-women." Are Paul's teachings about the role of men and women in marriage and in the church incorrect? If we accept that the Biblical text and teaching on the role of women in the church are time-bound, male-centered in nature, rabbinic in origin, the same could be true then of Paul's teaching regarding Adam and Eve, the divinity and humanity of Christ, our Lord's Second Coming, moral standards, and so forth.

In Paul's time women had a prominent role in pagan religions. In the Roman- Hellenistic culture of his time, women played a leading role in religious life. For example, if Jesus Himself had been conditioned by the culture of his time, he could have appointed some women among the apostles in view of the fact that they would have been readily accepted in the Gentile world where the Gospel was to be preached.

When we turn time-boundness into an accepted norm for the interpretation of Scripture, we put God's Word at the mercy of human culture. We then manipulate His message. Biblical standards are either permanently true or permanently false. Who decides what is time-bound? On what basis? From which cultural perspective? Historic Christianity

always honored the Bible as normative for all time and for every culture. The Bible is the written message which comes from God. It is not merely a written record of the spoken words of God, but it is inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. It is God's normative Word. Although Reformed Christians have been fully aware that Scripture uses language and literary forms current in ancient times, they have always denied that God's revelation is essentially conditioned by transitory cultural trends. They denied that the Bible teaches views of God, the cosmos, and human life that are simply borrowed from surrounding cultures. Every culture is answerable to the Lord of history. Every human being is addressed by the Bible, irrespective of one's culture. And every human being has the responsibility to respond. Our task is not to make the Bible relevant for today or mold and shape it to suit one's agenda or feelings, but to find its relevance and to show its relevance for church and world. The Holy Spirit used the language and vocabulary of the social environment in which, the human authors of the Scriptures lived and worked. If Paul's teaching is considered time-bound and even contradictory to the Spirit of Christ, the Scriptures are no longer accepted as fully inspired. I agree with Dr. Carl F. Henry's observation:

It will not do to exhibit certain doctrines as the special strength of biblical religion if we simultaneously dismiss other teachings on the basis of pervasive cultural dependence. Without universal truths no authentic Christian theology can be affirmed in any culture (Vol.5, 1982:404).

PAUL AND REVELATION

Since the debate on women in office mainly centers on Paul's teachings, we should consider his basis of authority. Did Paul merely repeat the cultural thought patterns about women current in his time? Paul did not offer his own opinions. God communicated His will to Paul. Revelation provides information to later generations. God's Word is conveyed in intelligible human speech and its truth is valid for every culture in every age. Paul regarded himself as the mouthpiece of God. "We have not received the spirit of the world but the spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 Corinthians 2:12,13). And again, "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God" (2 Corinthians 2:17). Paul is sure that He presents His commands as bearing divine authority. "For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 4:2). Paul received an abundance of revelation (2 Corinthians 12:7). The "abundance" shows that Paul was competent to speak with authority on subjects other than our salvation. The apostolic authority of Paul was never detached from the authority of our Lord himself. Wherever the apostle speaks with authority, he does so as exercising our Lord's authority. If we accept Paul's message as part of the infallible Scripture, we must accept his teachings as valid for today. Our Lord doesn't change (Hebrews 13:8). Our God "does not lie" (Titus 1:2). His word abides forever (Isaiah 40:8).

Lord, Thy Word abideth,

And our footstep guideth;
Who its truth believeth
Light and joy receiveth.

PAUL THE APOSTLE

Paul is sure that his apostleship is not of human origin. Where Paul defends his authority as apostle, he bases his claim solely and directly upon his dramatic Damascus road experience, where he had heard the Lord's voice and received his apostolic commission. He declares that he was "sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Galatians 1:1). When he gives directions to the church, he claims the Lord's authority, even when no direct word of the Lord has been handed down (1 Corinthians 14:37; cf. 7:10). The supreme proof of his apostleship was his commission from the risen Lord. He had seen the risen Savior (1 Corinthians 9:1). So when Paul spoke he spoke with the same authority as our Lord. He wrote to the Thessalonians, "When you received the word of God, which you have heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). So the early church received the apostle's writing alongside the Old Testament as no less authoritative. If Paul's epistles are God's infallible word, we have no choice but to submit ourselves to them. Paul never considered his teachings as optional. If Paul spoke with divine authority how then can we dismiss his teaching as time-bound when it concerns the ordination of women? If Paul forbids women to teach in the church do, we have the right to overrule him? In 1 Timothy 2:11-15 as well as in the parallel passages 1 Corinthians 1: 3-16 and 14:34-35, Paul says that women should not teach or exercise authority over men. And he does not allow exceptions. What is this nature of teaching? Those who favor the ordination of women say, "If this is true, why allow women to teach catechism or Sunday school, or have them speak in a gathering? Are you not contradicting Paul?" These assertions are not in agreement with facts. Women prayed, prophesied, and exercised a teaching ministry in the early church (1 Corinthians 11:5; Philippians 4: 2,3; Romans 16:12). What Paul forbids are women exercising positions of authority within the church. The authoritative teaching in the church is restricted to the pastor or elder of the congregation.

HEADSHIP

Paul called women to submit to the headship of man in marriage (Ephesians 5:22f.) and in the church. He teaches that the leadership role in the church is not appropriate for women, not because they are any less capable or competent than men, but because of the order for men and women as established by God in creation (1 Timothy 2:13,14). Paul does not permit it because it is against the very creation as ordained by God. In his commentary on these verses Dr. William Hendriksen remarked:

The tendency to follow was embedded in Eve's very soul as she came forth from the hand of her Creator. Hence, it would not be right to reverse this order in connection with public worship. Why should a woman be encouraged to do

things that are contrary to her nature? Her very own body, far from preceding that of Adam in the order of creation, was taken out of Adam's body. Her very name Ish-shaw was derived from his name - Ish. (Gen.2: 23)

It is when the woman recognizes this basic distinction and acts accordingly that she can be a blessing to the man, can exert a gracious yet very powerful and beneficent influence upon him, and can promote her own happiness, unto God's glory (1957:109f.). Not only Paul but the Lord himself appealed to the creation account to explain God's original intent for human relationships (Matthew 9:3). This shows the foundational importance of the creation account for understanding that the role of the women in the church is not a consequence of the fall into sin, but on the pre-fall order of creation. The basis of Paul's teaching on women then is God's original purpose in creation. Mary Kassian, who disciples, counsels and teaches women, puts the discussion on leadership within a sound framework of reference, when she writes:

The leadership Adam provided was without chauvinism. The help Eve provided was akin to the help God Himself provides. Adam gave loving guidance to the relationship without domineering his wife. Eve willingly and gladly submitted to Adam's leadership as his equal counterpart (1990:20).

And throughout her book *Women, Creation and the Fall*, Mary Kassian discusses the role of leadership in the church from this perspective of mutual, yet different servant roles.

If we accept Paul's teaching on headship, we can understand why he forbids the ordination of women. Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi warned:

To encourage the blurring or elimination of role distinction God assigned to men and women in the home and in the church means not only to act contradictory to His creational design, but also to accelerate the breakdown of the family and the church structure (1987:193).

Gretha Heymans writes that she was taught that being a woman was worth less than a man. She said that she came to realize that women were second-class citizens. I never discovered this in Scripture. I want to stress that the headship principle does not put a woman into an inferior position. She is full of honor. If a man lusts for power, he is committing a sin. Christians are saved to serve. The office of elder and minister is also synonymous with service. The apostle Paul, who wrote so much about church leadership, never equated it with status, position and domination.

Christian leaders are called to serve (Luke 22: 24-27; cf. also Matthew 20:26b-28 and Mark 10:42-45). In paganism leaders dominate and abuse. Dr. B.J. van der Walt rightly observed that office, authority and power which are not borne by the service motive become monsters - but in the end self-devouring monsters (1997:271).

THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN

Paul is not a male chauvinist. He simply recognizes the creation order. A man is a man. A woman is a woman. He does not abolish the distinctions between male and female. And he has also had a high view of women. He stresses that in Christ there is neither male nor female. (Galatians 3:28) This text seems to be one of the key texts used in support of the ordination of women. But this passage does not eliminate the different social roles for men and women established at creation. It declares the sexes equal in their relationship to God. It affirms that Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, males and females are alike justified by faith in Christ. Only in this sense Paul relativizes the importance to a particular race, social class, or gender differences.

Dr. Carl F. Henry points out:

Paul...stressed the dignity of women and their equality with men, and emphasized reciprocal responsibilities of husbands and wives. At a time when women were condemned to menial tasks, and intellectual pursuits were reserved for upper class males alone, it is remarkable that the apostle--in the very passage in which he excludes women from teaching in public assemblies, stipulates that they are 'to learn in silence', that is, they are to be taught (1 Tim.2:11; cf. 1 Cor.14:35). In a society in which women were not learners, Paul's emphasis on the education of Gentile female believers is noteworthy (Vol. IV, 1979: 515).

The ordination of women? Although some say that it is just a matter of interpretation, I am convinced that it has no Scriptural support. The CRC Synod of 1961 said that we may not pass judgment upon what Scriptures should be or do or say, but rather Scripture passes judgment upon what we should be, do and say. These were wise words. We may not sit in judgment upon the Bible. We may not interpret the Scriptures in the light of contemporary feminist or any other agenda.

The debate on women in ecclesiastical office is still being waged in many denominations around the world. It has led to discord within in many congregations, divided families, broke friendships and even led to the formation of new denominations. Therefore, I plead with those favoring the ordination of women and those opposed to continue to search the infallible Word of God, to submit to it, to pray for the Church, to speak the truth in love, and to treat each other with dignity and respect.

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