

Headship: Paul's Opinion. Or God's Ordinance?

In 1990, the CRC Synod voted to have women in all church offices. Delegates at this Synod voted 99 to 84 in favor of this drastic change. When I was told of Synod's decision I felt physically ill; I was devastated. For years I have been involved in the women in office debate through articles in *Calvinist Contact* and *Christian Renewal*. Why my sorrow? We have lost our unity. Our church will never be the same again. We now have different interpretations of the same crucial texts. The Holy Spirit is apparently speaking out of both sides of His mouth. And this thought disturbs me. I don't believe that the Holy Spirit has two different interpretations of the same Bible passages. When we say that there are different interpretations of pertinent texts dealing with the position of women in the church, we are left with the impression that the Bible cannot draw a straight line, and it can mean anything one wants it to mean. No wonder that many churchgoers are confused. Over the past 20 years, dozens of feminist articles, books and seminars have challenged the plain meaning of the Scripture. We have been told that "submit" does not mean submit, that "head" does not mean leader or authority, that "teach" does not mean teach, and so forth. What is right? What is wrong?

In 1984 the synod believed that the Holy Spirit led them to say "No" to women elders and pastors. Six years later the decision was reversed. Did the Holy Spirit change His mind? I don't believe so. What has changed in our denomination is its position on Scripture. The agenda of the world has set the agenda for the church. In seeking for a Biblical answer to the question of women's ordination, many church leaders and writers, whether they are aware of it or not, have been influenced by the feminist agenda. There has been a definite tendency to reinterpret the Bible in a way consistent with the current feminist views of the role of women in our society. A clear example is the change in the position of Swedish New Testament scholars. In 1951, all but one of the New Testament scholars holding academic positions in Swedish universities signed the following, in response to the efforts of the Swedish government to introduce the ordination of women into the Church of Sweden:

We, the undersigned professors and lecturers in the field of New Testament exegesis at two universities, hereby declare as our definite opinion, based on careful investigation, that ordination of women would be incompatible with New Testament thought and would constitute disobedience to the Holy Scripture. Both Jesus' choice of apostles and Paul's words concerning the position of women in the congregation have significance of principle, and are independent of circumstances and opinions conditioned by any particular time in history. The current proposal that women should be admitted to priesthood in the Church of Sweden must therefore be said to meet with grave exegetical obstacles.

This was said in 1951. Thirty nine years later it would be difficult to find one New Testament professor in Sweden who would endorse this statement. The reason for this change is not the discovery of new exciting Biblical evidence. There has not been any. Nor has the Bible changed, as Stephen Clark points out: "The climate of opinion has

changed, influencing exegetes to come up with opinions that are acceptable nowadays." In other words, the Bible is made to fit the thinking of this age. Rev. Derk Pierik, university chaplain in Toronto said, "I have made a 180 degree turn (on the issue of women in office) which has been very difficult for me. The Scriptures haven't changed but the glasses which I used to read them changed." And this is exactly where we are at in the CRC. Many have changed their view of Scripture.

You may say: The women in office issue is not serious. It is a storm in a teapot. I disagree. I don't like controversy. I am concerned about the multitudes of men and women who don't know Christ as Lord, Savior and King. The issue is serious. What is at stake is this – Will the church have its agenda set by the world or by the Word? Does the Holy Spirit teach the ordination of women and no ordination of women in the same breath? These are the questions; and they are *fundamental*. So the question is not, Should women be ordained or not? The question is: How do we interpret Scripture? What are the implications of the new approach? Let me share with you just one example of where the whole discussion can lead. Annelies Knoppers of the Committee for Women in the Christian Reformed Church wrote an article entitled, "Is the Bible a Hindrance to Women?" (*Partnership*, Summer 1990). Listen to what she says, and I am quoting just a few of her radical statements:

It wasn't until I encountered a woman minister in the pulpit that my image of God as male began to change. For some, the maleness of the Trinity is also a problem: a male God, a son, and a male or 'neutered' spirit? Even when it is suggested that the Spirit is female/feminine, that still leaves the trinity gender ratio two to one! How can a woman who has suffered because of her devalued status as a woman believe in a male Trinity? I try to see the humor in a lot of the gender patterns and language we use e.g., when we sing or read in exclusive male language about sin, I usually keep the language as it is. Overall then, these are some of my strategies for trying to stay in the church and to stay a liberationist, something I feel called to be. The overriding theme and belief that keeps me going is: God is the God of liberation, not oppression. Trust in God. SHE will provide.

Can you understand why I am disturbed? The Committee for Women is celebrating their victory. But I am saying, "Annelies, you are dishonoring God's Word. What you write goes directly against what the church has taught, not only the CRC, but the true church universal."

How do we read the Bible? A young lady told me, "The apostle Paul seems to hate women." Many feminists see the apostle Paul as one who teaches the inferiority of the female and thus excludes them from leadership positions in the church. His teaching on headship has led to the entrenchment of male chauvinism in the institutional church. Sometimes we read or hear these remarks: "Oh, this is the opinion of Paul, a crusty old bachelor; a man reflecting his own rabbinical training. His head was stuffed with ideas about women, which were current in his time. His society treated a woman as an ignoramus, a plaything and a slave. Paul was obviously an antifeminist, a man who

held the view that was so commonly taken at that time. It is emphasized that at that time, woman was in a very debased position. Everybody throughout the world then held that view; a woman was 'good' as it were, a slave. And as this was true even of the Jews, the Apostle was just a rabbinical Jew." So runs the argument.

Does the Bible teach as true, outmoded and incorrect views of life, history, the origin of the world, the role of men and women in marriage and in the church? Does what the Bible commands first-century Christians, also apply to us? What if we accept the view that the Bible is time-bound, culturally conditioned? And here is my concern: If the Biblical texts and teachings on the role of women in the church are culturally conditioned, male centered in nature, rabbinic in origin, the same could be true of those Bible texts and teachings regarding Adam and Eve, the incarnation of our Lord, the teachings of the second coming, moral standards, and so forth. Why should I accept that I am a sinner? Paul says, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Why should I accept this as true? Let me say this. Those who claim that Paul was bound by the customs of his time have no convincing argument. In Paul's time, women had a prominent role in pagan religions. In the Roman-Hellenistic culture of Paul's time, women played leading priestly roles in the religious life. For example, if Jesus Himself had been conditioned by the culture of His time, as many today claim, he could have appointed some women among the apostles, in the view of the fact that they would have been readily accepted in the Gentile world where the Gospel was to be preached.

PAUL AND REVELATION

Paul's message was not just for his time. What he said about the role of women in church is for all time. As soon as we accept time-boundness as a valid principle, we put God at the mercy of human culture. We manipulate His message. Biblical standards and statements are either permanently true or permanently false. There is no in between. Who decides what is time bound? On what basis? From which cultural perspective? Historic Christianity has honored the Bible as normative-for all time and for every culture. The Holy Spirit used the language and the vocabulary of the social environment of the times in which the human writers of the sacred Scriptures lived and worked. It is high time that we listen anew to what God has once-for-all said in Scripture and once-for-all revealed in Jesus Christ. For the church today there is nothing more vital than the recovery of the authority and the truthfulness of Scripture and its application to all dimensions of life. If Paul's teaching is considered time-bound and even contradictory to the Spirit of Christ, then the Scriptures are no longer considered as fully inspired. Paul did not give 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 any culture in any age. Paul regarded himself as nothing more or less than the mouthpiece of God. Paul said, "We received not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which 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" (I Cor. 2:12,13). And again, "For we are not as the many, corrupting the Word of God; but as of sincerity, but as

of God, in the sight of God, speak we of Christ" (1I Cor. 2:17). Paul is certain that his knowledge of God is not of human origin. His apostleship, he declares, is "not from man, neither through man" (Gal. 1:1). The apostle presents his commands as bearing divine authority: "For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus" (I Thess. 4:2). If we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God then we must accept its teaching as valid for today.

Our Lord does not change (Heb. 13:8); God is a God "who cannot lie" (Titus 1:2); whose Word abides forever (Isa. 40:8). If we believe this then we must accept the Bible as trustworthy, as the indicator of God's will for mankind. With respect to historical facts, we must accept the Bible as accurate and consistent at all times. Paul received an "abundance of revelation" (II Cor. 12:7). The "abundance" shows that Paul was competent to speak as God's prophet on subjects other than our salvation. The apostolic authority which speaks forth in the New Testament is never detached from the authority of our Lord Himself. Wherever the apostle speaks with authority, he does so as exercising the Lord's authority.

PAUL The APOSTLE

Paul didn't write as an ordinary citizen; he was not a private individual, writing private letters to some people he is interested in. No! He is writing in a very special way; he is as a matter of fact, a servant of Jesus Christ, and he has a particular task allotted to him, and he is anxious that the believers should know this. He writes as an apostle. Where Paul defends his authority as an apostle, he bases his claim solely and directly upon his commission by the Lord (Gal. 1,2); when he gives direction for the church, he claims for his Word the Lord's authority, even when no direct word of the Lord has been handed down (I Cor. 14:37; I Cor. 7:10). Paul is always careful to assert that he is an apostle. He provides certain definite proofs of that fact. The supreme proof was this, that he had seen the risen Lord (I Cor. 9:1). To be an apostle, however, was to be one who not only had seen the risen Lord, but who must be able to claim, and substantiate his claim, that he had been called and appointed especially to be an apostle by the Lord Himself directly. Paul and Peter and John claim that very thing, and the whole basis of their authority is founded upon that. So that when they spoke; they did not speak as men only. Just listen to what Paul says in I Thess. 2:13: "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when you received the Word of God which you heard of us, you received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God, which effectually worketh also in that you believe." So the early church received the apostle's writings alongside the Old Testament as no less authoritative. We may not like this; it may not be our modern view, conditioned by 20th century secularism and positivism. But 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. The modern day feminists are wrong in their attempt to distinguish between the teachings of Paul the apostle and the teachings of Paul the rabbi. If Paul spoke with divine authority, how then can we claim freedom of choice as far as the role of women in the church is concerned? Either Paul was right or mistaken. If Paul spoke with divine authority, how then can I

accept women as pastors or elders? If Paul forbids women to teach in the church, do we have the right to overrule him? In I Tim. 2:11-15, and the parallel passages I Cor. 11:3-16 and 14:34-35, Paul says that women should not teach or exercise authority over men, period. There are no conditions attached which would allow exceptions to Paul's command. What is this nature of teaching Paul speaks about? Those who favor women in office say, "If this is so, why do you allow women to teach catechism or Sunday school, or have them speak in a gathering?" Such accusations are not valid because the epistles of Paul show that in Paul's ministry women prayed, prophesied, and exercised a teaching ministry (I Cor. 11:5; Phil. 4:2,3; Rom. 16:12). *What Paul does forbid women to do is to exercise positions of authority. The authoritative teaching in the church is **restricted to the pastor or elder of the congregation**. Paul forbids women to teach as the leaders of the church because this would place them in a headship role of authority of men. This role is inappropriate for women, says Paul, not because they are less capable or competent than men, but because of the creational order for men and women established by God (I Tim. 2:13).*

HEADSHIP

What does Paul mean by headship? He bases his teaching on the order of creation (I Tim. 2:13,14). God first made Adam; afterward Eve. Not only that, but he made Eve for the sake of Adam, to be his helper (Gen. 2:18-25). Neither is complete without the other (I Cor. 11:11). In His sovereign wisdom, God made our first parents in such a manner that it is natural for him to lead, for her to follow. The Reformed New Testament scholar, William Hendriksen, comments on I Tim. 2:13,14: "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 body, far from preceding that of Adam in the order of creation, was taken out of Adam's body. Her very name- Ish-sha- 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. Not only Paul, but the Lord Himself appealed to the account of creation to explain God's original intent for human relationships (Matt. 19:3)."

"This shows the foundational importance the Bible attaches to the creation account for understanding the subject of the role relationship of women in the church, not on the consequences of the fall into sin described in Gen. 3, but on the pre-fall order of creation presented in Genesis 1 and 2. The foundation of Paul's teaching is not the use of the fall, but God's original purpose of creation. Remember, what Paul writes is Scripture, so the critics are not arguing with Paul, they are arguing with God; they are arguing with the Holy Spirit. Those who oppose headship as taught by Paul put themselves into the position of saying that they believe the Bible as long as it does not contradict what they happen to believe as 20th century modern people. If we

accept Paul's teaching on headship, we can understand why he forbids the ordination of women. Let me quote Samuel Bacchiocchi:

To blur or eliminate the role distinctions God assigned to men and women in the home and in the church, means not only to act contrary to His creation design, but also to accelerate the breakdown of the family and church structure. The pastor fulfills a unique symbolic role in the church as representative of the heavenly Father, Shepherd, High Priest, and Head of the church. A woman pastor cannot appropriately fulfill such a symbolic role because her Scriptural role is not that of a father, shepherd, priest or head of the church. Thus, to ordain women to serve as pastors/elders means not only to violate a divine design, but also to adulterate the pastor's symbolic representation of God.

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. Contrary to what we are led to believe, Paul had a high view of women. He employed women in the service of the Gospel (Rom. 16:13, Phil. 4:3). In the church, women were given an honorable status. He emphasizes that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28). In relationship to Christ, there is perfect equality. Anyone who maintains that Paul holds women in low esteem should re-examine the epistles. If these epistles are honestly interpreted, one will have to admit that in many ways, man is able to bestow upon a woman the full honor which according to Paul's teachings, should be bestowed upon her (I Cor. 7:14; 11:7; 11:11; Eph. 5:25-33). 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 church assemblies, stipulates that they are to "learn in silence," that is, they are to be taught (I Tim. 2:11; 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.

When we let feminism, or any other "ism" determine the nature and content of Scriptural teaching, the authority of the Christian faith is undermined. As soon as reason is on the throne, God's Word takes second place or even less.

Women in church offices? No! I am convinced that this is unbiblical. Synod 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 are wise words. We may not sit in judgment upon the Bible. We may not let the agenda of the world dictate to us how we should interpret Scripture. We may not interpret

Scripture in the light of contemporary thinking. David Martin Lloyd Jones wrote these telling words:

The choice for us today is really as simple as it was for those first Christians in the early days. We either accept this authority or else we accept the authority of modern knowledge, modern science, human understanding, human ability. It is one or the other. Let us not be confused by the modern argument about a changed position. On the one hand, trusting to human ability and understanding, everything is flux and change, uncertain and insecure, ever liable to collapse. On the other, there is not only "the impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture," but there is the Light of the world, the Word of God, the Truth itself.

What is your choice? I choose for God's Word as it is, as the Reformed church has believed it throughout the centuries, as professed in the creeds and confessions. Synod of 1990 has said "yes" to women in office. For the two years we study the gender changes in the Church Order. In 1992, if Synod ratifies these changes, we will have women functioning in the offices of the church. My position goes directly against the decision of Synod. I grieve for the church I love. My position is that the conservative churches should align themselves with the Alliance of the Christian Reformed Church (CRA). There is historical precedence for this in both Europe and North America. And we must continue to pray for the church, speak the truth in love, and treat each other with dignity and respect. Above all we should not be motivated and driven by fears. The Word of God shall not pass away.

"Lord, Thy Word abideth,
And our footstep guideth;
Who its truth believeth
Light and joy receiveth."

Rev. Tangelder
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