

Now Long Will Tolerance Last?

At a conference on "Partnership and the Gospel," Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff said that on the issue of the ordination of women, conservatives and liberals should be able to live with each other's differences. He said that our goal must not be to snuff out the ways women appropriate the Gospel, but these ways must be brought into the office of deacon, elder and minister. We must show tolerance. "We don't need everyone trying to sing bass," Wolterstorff said. "We need each one trying to find his place in the chorus."

At a recent classis meeting (March, 1991), I was asked whether I could live with a two-track interpretation of Scripture on the place of women in the church. Whether conservatives can live with this rather unusual situation is not the question I want addressed in this article. Synod's decision has led to a host of unanswered questions. Those who favor women in office all sing the song of tolerance. But what will happen to the unity chorus once the battle has been finalized in their favor? I fear that conservatives may very well be coerced into submission. I am neither an alarmist nor a pessimist, but a realist. The Canadian Presbyterian Church's recent history is a case in point.

In 1953 the General Assembly appointed a special committee to explore the place of women in the church. In 1954 this committee presented its recommendations, which resulted in a broadening of its mandate to the ordination of women, as well as the authority to consult with women in the process. In 1960 the Presbytery of Guelph, Ontario received a request from a woman for permission to be ordained and made an overture to the Assembly asking for a "speedy decision." But the assembly didn't rush into anything. The year 1961 became a watershed. The Assembly passed a resolution to accept women as elders. The next major event was the ordination of the Rev. Shirley Jeffrey at Appin, Ontario on May 29, 1968. You would think that the pro-women in every office would now be satisfied. This was not to be. In 1979 an overture was brought before the Assembly, "begging for changes of attitude and language in the church in order to end various kinds of prejudice which ordained women were experiencing." All this sounds very familiar. What the Canadian Presbyterian pro-women in office faction took to do in twenty-five years, a like-minded group in the CRC wants to accomplish in less time.

Where did the radical change in church polity and practice leave those who were convinced that it did not have a solid biblical and confessional basis? Conservatives began to talk about the "liberty of conscience." They hoped that their historic Reformed view would be respected. But this was not to be. They had to submit, or else. In 1981 the church refused to license candidate Dan MacDougall because he would not participate in the ordination of a woman minister or elder. The ground for this action? ". . . his refusal to participate in the ordination of women as elders and ministers would prove a serious obstacle to the emergence of women as elders and ministers in the congregation which he served and would create the potential for division within the congregation." The conservatives were considered the trouble-makers! Conform or else! Whether you have sound biblical reasons for not conforming did not seem to matter. A conservative pastor, Rev. John Vaudry commented, "It is especially tragic that young men of strong Christian

conviction and love for our denomination are at present being barred from serving the Lord in the Presbyterian Church in Canada simply because on one point ... they hold a dissenting view. To my mind this is a grave injustice that must surely grieve the Spirit." Appeals were made to the freedom of conscience clause as recorded in the twentieth chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith. This chapter asserts the biblical principle of liberty of conscience in all matters which cannot be clearly supported from Scripture. The conservative Presbyterians hold the view that the ordination of women falls in this category. But this argument was not accepted.

In 1982 the Assembly made this remarkable statement, "Ministers and elders already ordained and inducted within the Presbyterian Church in Canada have freedom of belief on the question of the ordination of women, but do not have the freedom of action." In other words, pastors who want to remain true to the historic Reformed position on the issue are asked by their church to violate their conscience. If this is not coercion, what is it?

What if Synod 1992 ratifies the Church Order to officially open the offices of elder and pastor to women? Will a 1993 candidate for the ministry who cannot participate in their ordination be barred? What if a minister-with many years of service-refuses to participate? What will be the reaction? These legitimate questions should be addressed by this year's synod.

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