

## Preachers, Creeds and Credibility

Synod 1989 (Acts, p. 433) declared that "the women in office" should not be regarded as a creedal matter, but as a "church order matter". This statement was also cited by Synod 1990 (Acts, p. 654) in support of the ordination of women elders and ministers. When Dr. DeMoor, associate professor of church polity at Calvin Theological Seminary, was asked for an explanation he said that "though the creeds reflect a time in the life of the church when such eligibility was unthinkable, they do not deliberately raise the question and answer in one way or the other. In other words, there is no clear intent to bind the church on an "issue not contemplated." The women in office is a "new question". And since "the creeds had no intent to bind us (and therefore do not bind us) to a particular interpretation of the Pauline or any other biblical texts as they may relate to the 'new' question" (p. 3 *CTS In Focus*, Spring 1991). But DeMoor begs the question. If he is correct then we have a new understanding of the binding of the creeds. He readily admits that the authors of the confession did not raise the question of women office bearers. But since the question is raised today we don't have to accept their interpretation of Paul. If this is true, what of other Biblical teachings confessed by the church but questioned today? Should the doctrine of election become a church order matter because Dr. Harry Boer questions this doctrine as confessed by the Canons of Dort? Do we bind ourselves to the confessions with reservations?

This was certainly not the intent of our forefathers. They wrestled with the Scripture to come to a sound understanding of God's revelation and summarized its teaching in concise language. Dr. H. Bavinck said that in 1834 the secessionists (Afscheiding) had returned to the original intent of the confessions. And this action resulted in their expulsion from the Dutch Reformed state church. The Secessionists declared, "We have not changed. We are the continuing Reformed Church. We have kept the historic confessions intact" (p. 354 Prof. C. Veenhof. *Volk van God*).

The Christian Reformed Church in North America uses the same argument for women in office as their Dutch sister church (GKN) once did. In 1967, the Synod of the GKN decided to open the special offices to women on the basis of proven need for their service. Synod also noted that it could not find sufficient Scriptural evidence to prevent it from taking this action. But to accomplish this, a change had to be made in the church order. Today's CRC has actually taken the same route. In 1965/66, when the question was still debated in Holland, some Reformed scholars pointed out that it was strange that the position of women in office is only now understood. For centuries the church never saw it and never taught it. It could not be found in Scripture. But now, like the dawn of a new morning, the church is seeing the light. Prof. Dr. H. N. Ridderbos said that we may not overlook specific statements in Scripture. He made special reference to 1 Tim. 2:11-15. In this text Paul puts the question of headship within the framework of the creation order. And the creation order does not permit women in office (p. 122 *De Positie van de Vrouw in De Kerk*. Referaat van prof. Dr. W. Van 't Spyker).

Florence Kuipers, in her appeal to Synod for opening all the offices to women, believes that "women's ordination (or 'eligibility for church office' in the context of Article 3 of the Church order) is basically a confessional issue and that gender relationships, as much as they are involved, are not the bottom line. The issue is confessional in every respect – from our common confession regarding the offices of Christ and his believers (see Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day XII) to the official church's and every member's response to the office in the form of acts of obedience. In assuming the obligations of church office we testify to the general requirements and fulfillment of 'being' in Christ." Kuipers sees the question within the framework of human rights. She would prefer a revision of the confessions for inclusive language (*Women's Ordination – How Justified?*). But this would cut the church off its historic understanding of the confessions and to redo them to fit views conditioned by modern secular culture and feminism.

Obviously, I am of the conviction that the women in office question is not a church order but a creedal matter. In this question, we are faced with a new way of looking at the Bible. Confessions are not the private property of individual believers or even a Synod, which meets for 10 days each year. The confessions belong to the Reformed church as a whole. Unfortunately, as Dr. Lekkerkerker observes, there is a growing distance between what the church officially says in its confessions or liturgical forms and actual practice (p. 38 Dr. A. F. N. Lekkerker. *Oorsprong en funktie van het ambt*). Through the confessions the church says, "these are the truths we believe together." we confess them together as a church. They express what we believe to be the eternal truths as revealed by God in His Holy Word. Through the confessions we articulate and defend the Word of God. In other words, a confessional article has the same authority as the Word of God until it is shown from Scripture itself that this is not so. Since the Holy Bible fully expresses the mind of the Confession, Art. 7, Scripture teaches us to hold on to our confessions (Heb. 3:1; 4:14). Our Christian faith is anchored in the confessions. Our spiritual life requires order and structure so that individualism and one-sidedness are banned and the totality of the Biblical faith is maintained (p. 45 Ir. J. Van der graaf. *De Kerk in Het Midden. Een Positiebepaling vanuit het reformatorisch belyden*). And so when one joins the church he binds himself to its confessional stance. If the confession cannot be accepted, the church cannot be joined.

A confession is a formulation of Scriptural truth for the instruction in the faith, for the opposing of error. They are accepted within their historical context and not with reservations. They are normative for our faith and practice. As Dr. Edward J. Young observed ". . . the creeds are nothing more than attempts upon the part of man to formulate accurately what it was believed the Bible taught. How much loving and devoted labor has gone into the writing of these creeds! How much care and precision has been exercised in their composition! The reason for such loving devotion is to be found simply in the fact that the authors of the creeds were striving to the best of their ability to set forth what they believed the teaching of the Bible to be" (pp28f. *Thy Word is Truth*). Therefore, a Reformed preacher must be in full agreement with them. A church order article is never normative for preaching; the creeds and confessions are.

A Reformed preacher has been called to proclaim the Gospel with clarity and as it has been historically understood. John Calvin demanded of pastors a strict agreement with the doctrines of the church as expressed in the confessions. He did tolerate some individual private interpretations. However, these opinions were not permitted to be taught in public (p. 53 Dr. L. Praamsma. *De Belydenis in de Crisis*). If a preacher could not do this, he would break the confessional unity of the church. Dr. Plantinga describes this unity that should exist within a denomination as a "confessional unity, a unity rooted in a common creed. The confession is what all of the church says together, the faith which the members profess jointly." These creeds and confession are often called "doctrinal standards" to which the denomination has officially committed itself (p. 105. *Contending for the Faith*).

The Second Helvetic Confession calls ministers "stewards of the Mysteries of God". A pastor is commanded "not to please himself, but to execute that only which he has received in commandment from his Lord (p. 155 *Creeds of the churches*. Edited by John H. Leith). The duty of the minister is "to gather together a holy assembly, therein to expound the Word of God, and also to apply the general doctrine to the state and use of the Church, to the end that the doctrine which they teach may profit the hearers, and may build up the faithful" (p.159 *Ibid*).

The women in office question is not a church order but a confessional matter. Since a minister is bound to the Confessions he may not advocate from the pulpit anything which contradicts the truth as historically understood by the church. And since the elders are the overseers of the pulpit, they have to guard the orthodoxy of what is proclaimed from it. Deviation from the confessions leads to serious consequences for the church. Harry Blamires warns, and I believe rightly so, "If the language of doctrinal propositions and of liturgical forms is generally obsolete and irrelevant to our time, then the Christian Faith is itself obsolete and has no significance for our generation" (p. 89 *The Secular Heresy. The Erosion of the Gospel in the Twentieth century*).