

Preaching and Preachers

"Rejection of the Biblical pattern of church leadership is not without cost. It leads to compromise of other Biblical truth, since the truth of the Bible is interrelated and in harmony with itself. Thus, if one rejects the teaching on women, one may also reject the teaching on divorce, homosexuality, abortion, and morality. This approach leads to the total accommodation and destruction of Biblical truth" . . . "The cost of accommodating Biblical truth in the area of church leadership is the eventual compromise of the entire Word of God" (pp. 132f. Mary A. Kassian. *Women Creation and the Fall*).

Report 29. Ad Hoc Committee to Gather Grounds for the 1990 Decision to Change Church Order Article 3

1. The New Testament teaches that men and women are equal in Christ as they were in creation; therefore, women as well as men may have the full privilege of using their gifts in the church.
2. There is no clear and unquestionable testimony of Scripture to compel the church to prohibit women in their equality in Christ from church office in all times, places and circumstances.
3. Synod is justified in not compelling but "permitting churches" to use their discretion in utilizing the gifts of women in all the offices of the church, "because after twenty years of study and discussion, members of the Christian Reformed Church have not reached unanimity on the teaching of Scripture on the issue of women in office."

Women's Ordination-How Justified? by Florence Kuipers. An appeal to Synod, 1992
Kuipers' key text for women in office is Galatians 3:28. She views it as a confessional issue. She takes an either/or position. If you don't agree with women in office you are denying women their rights. Once the decision to permit women office bearers is made all should abide by it. If you don't agree you should leave. Kuipers is asking Synod to adopt the following resolution:

The functions of church office are controlled by the institutional church under Christ's rule. Eligibility, however is mandatory for all confessing members based on personal freedom in Christ. Synod hereby declares that henceforth eligibility for church office is guaranteed, through provision of the Church Order, irrespective of gender, race, ethnic origin, or any other temporal social distinction.

Kuipers asks: What options do churches or individual members have if they cannot in good conscience agree with a synodical decision or a Church order regulation on women's ordination? Answer: It is not right for them to break the rules - If they say they cannot live with an unjust rule, they have but one option: to withdraw from the denominational covenant. Kuipers also charges that "the dual system we are now trying to serve can no longer be a way of life for us; we cannot serve two hermeneutics, two ways of reading the Bible, God and that which is not God."

The quotes and references clearly demonstrate that the women in office is not just a tempest in a teapot. It is not only a confessional matter, but also a different way of interpreting the Bible. If we accept the basic principles which have led to this new thinking about leadership in the church, we are compromising the Scripture, the Confessions, in other words the very Gospel itself.

Hermeneutics

Much is said about the new hermeneutic which has led to a different method of Bible interpretation. In one way or another, every Christian uses hermeneutics when reading Scripture. What do we mean by hermeneutics? Dr. Berkhof defined it as "the science that teaches us the principles, laws, and methods of interpretation" (p.11 L. Berkhof. *Principles of Biblical Interpretation. Sacred Hermeneutics*). Dr. Sproul says that the purpose of hermeneutics is to establish guidelines and rules for interpretation. These rules have been developed to safeguard us from misinterpretation and misunderstanding. The key rule is that Scripture is to interpret Scripture. Scripture is its own interpreter. No part in Scripture can be interpreted in such a way as to render it in conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in the Bible. Dr. Sproul, who holds to the historic Reformed view on Scripture, states that this principle rests on the prior confidence in the Bible as the inspired Word of God. He says, "It is, therefore, consistent and coherent. Since it is assumed that God would never contradict himself, it is thought slanderous to the Holy Spirit to choose an alternate interpretation that would unnecessarily bring the Bible in conflict with itself" (pp. 45-47 *Knowing Scripture*).

A minister in his study preparing his sermon applies hermeneutical principles as he approaches a Scripture text. His view of hermeneutics will guide him. Of course, he will use his imagination, his insights gained through his reading and life's experience. Yet the way he approaches Scriptures will largely determine the thrust of his message. Lindeboom, who has written extensively on the deteriorating situation in the Christian Reformed Churches in Holland (Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland) points out that it cannot be denied that no one approaches Scripture without some prejudice (p. 15 Ds. A. M. Lindeboom. *Moet dat zo doorgaan? Enkele kritische notities over het kerkelyk leven in de Gereformeerde Kerken*). We always have to make choices based on our view of Scripture. Lindeboom mentions that the Bible does not accept homosexual practices as normal. The only possible way to overcome this problem is to say that this Biblical teaching is no longer valid for today. And it is precisely on this view of Scripture that the GKN opened up all the offices of the church to practicing homosexuals. The spirit of the age has a strong influence upon the way many look at Scripture. C. B. Armstrong, a liberal scholar, admitted that theology is "notoriously susceptible to the spirit of the age in which it is written" (p. 54 *Creeds and Credibility. Contemporary Studies in theology*). Armstrong's own hermeneutical position shows how strongly influenced he himself is by the spirit of the age. He calls the first chapters of Genesis "clearly mythological". He says, "Christians of the twentieth century read Genesis for its religious value, but turn to science for the truth about primeval conditions" (p. 77 *Ibid*). That is why he calls the doctrine of creation a myth, claiming that "man appeared in the course of evolution" (pp. 80ff. *Ibid*).

What is our presupposition? How do we approach Scripture? If we claim that the Bible is culturally conditioned and time bound, we can do anything we like with it. But if we claim that the Bible is God's Word and that the Bible interprets itself, we must accept what it plainly says. Mary Kassian's observation on the question of ordination of women is worth noting, "What Paul said is that women are to be silent in church meetings. He either meant it or he did not. If we maintain that he did not, then we put ourselves into the position of being able to call into question any of his writings. We thereby strip Scripture of its authority as the Word of God. Although we may not be comfortable with what the Apostle Paul said, we only have one viable option. We must take what Paul says at face value and compare it to the rest of Biblical teaching on the topic" (p. 107 *Women, Creation and the Fall*).

Dr. Henry Vander Goot, Professor of Religion and Theology, Calvin College, in his well reasoned book, *Interpreting THE BIBLE in theology and the church*, shows that Bible interpretation is NOT for the experts and church leaders only. He says that the overall sense of the Biblical story is directly comprehensible to the Christian. The Bible is a Word that comes from God. And as we read it, we must bow before its authority. Vander Goot rejects the whole modern notion of culturally conditioned/time boundness of Scripture. He says, ". . . the reader must be ready to let his own previous world view, be taken over by the view of the Bible" (p. 38 *Ibid*).

Because the Bible is God's Word it "must be allowed to dictate its own rules, rules that get at the text through what it says the way it says it" (p. 63 *Ibid*).

Preaching and Preachers

Preaching, more than any other aspect of church life, sets its stamp on the individual believer and congregation. The Reformed faith has always emphasized that the primary task of a minister is preaching. He is a minister of the Word (Eph. 4:12, 17; 2 Tim. 4:2; Luke 8:11). Rev. J. C. Sikkel described a minister as a servant of the Lord who speaks on His behalf. He proclaims God's Word to the Lord's people (p. 86 *Dienst Des Woords*). Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones claims that "there is surely nothing which is more serious, nothing which gives one such a tremendous sense of responsibility as preaching." A preacher may never lose the element of dread and responsibility when he enters the pulpit (p. 259 *Knowing the Times*). He says that preaching is not an inspired utterance in the sense that the Scriptures are, but in another sense, it is an inspired utterance because the Holy Spirit is giving it and using it. The vital element is a reliance upon the Holy Spirit (p. 276 *Ibid*). And since the Scripture is Holy Spirit authored, preaching can be defined, therefore, as the proclamation of truth revealed in Holy Scripture, the supernaturally inspired Word of God (cf. p. 209 R. B. Kuiper. *Scriptural Preaching. The Infallible Word*).

Through the preaching of the Word the Lord gathers in His church, feeds His flock, builds up His body (Eph. 4:16). The preacher is the herald, who in the name of His king, brings a message to the King's people (Mark 6:12; 16:15, 20; Luke 9:2; Acts 8:5; 9:20; 1 Cor. 1:23; Ga1. 2:2).

The Reformers considered preaching as central to a worship service. They saw it as a divinely appointed means of instruction in Christian doctrine and conduct. Preaching, therefore was expository, the systematic setting forth of the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Word of God. Calvin taught that it must be in spirit an exposition and application of the Word of God.

The church comes together to hear the Word of God. In this preached Word, God appears in the glory of Christ. Through it the congregation is called upon to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:19f). Sound preaching is of utmost importance for the well being of the local church, but also for the denomination. When the message changes and the old boundaries are moved, deformation is at the door (cf. p. 195 Dr. Ph. J. Huyser. *De Ouderling and De Prediking*). The church is not just a gathering of individual believers who gather together for a worship service; the church is the pillar and ground of truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

The Preacher And His Tools

A Reformed minister uses the Scripture as the basis for his sermon. He either chooses a single text or a larger passage. After he has selected his text he must try to understand its message within its context. This demands the process of exegesis. Exegesis can be defined as the explanation of the Bible. The preacher wants to discover the meaning of the text, its original intent, and how its message can be applied. And he wants to know where the text is located in the development of redemptive history. Though he uses commentaries, Bible dictionaries etc., he still must come to an independent position on the text chosen. He also will ask the Lord to show him what its message is for his congregation. And as he exegetes, he will use the hermeneutical principles he has learned.

Preaching may never lack substantial Biblical content. And when the Scriptures are faithfully explained doctrines will be learned. Al Martin defines doctrinal preaching as "preaching which is always disciplined by that framework of the whole counsel of God. It refuses imbalance and lopsidedness, and seeks to set every individual facet of truth into the context of the whole spectrum of divine truth" (pp. 16f. *What's Wrong With Preaching Today?*). In other words, the whole counsel of God must be proclaimed. We must not isolate one truth from another.

To turn our back on doctrinal teaching based on Scripture will lead to heresy. Systematic preaching is of necessity doctrinal preaching. Dr. H. Blamires aptly said, "For if there is truth and orthodoxy, there is also error and heresy. It follows that any attempt to attain doctrinal clarity and stability will bring to light a mass of heresies underlying contemporary thinking" (64 *The Secularist Heresy. The Erosion of the Gospel in the Twentieth Century*).

John Calvin often used the phrase "sound doctrine" or "healthy doctrine". Sound doctrine is healthy for the soul. It leads us to fear the Lord and to love our neighbour. It protects the sheep (2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 2:1; Co1, 2:8) Sound doctrine helps the Christian

to steer a steady course. Calvin warns against shepherds who have been stricken by the illness of curiosity. He says that leaders of the church, councils and synod cannot add to the truth. Their deliberations and decisions had to be conformed to the Word of God (pp. 61-65 Louis Goumaz. *Het Ambt by Calvyn. Een Samenvatting naar zyn commentaren op het Nieuwe Testament*).

Sound doctrine is vital to the church. I wholeheartedly concur with Dr. Robert D. Preus' charge, "when the doctrine of the Gospel is denied or ignored or compromised, or when false doctrine is tolerated, terrible things happen in the church: people are deceived, lives are hurt, friendships and relationships destroyed" (Foreword. *Anatomy of an Explosion. A Theological Analysis of the Missouri Synod Conflict* by Kurt E. Marquart). Why is doctrine important? Because practice is based on thought. That is why the apostle Paul began his letters with an exposition of doctrine.

In his sermon preparation, a Reformed minister will also use his theological training. He attempts to learn what others have taught about the truth he has discovered. But as we discuss theology we must keep in mind that not all theology is Biblically sound; much of modern theology is not even Christian. Theology is only helpful when the theologian accepts the Bible as the Word of God. Dr. Theodore Plantinga comments, "If we want good fruit, we must pluck it from a good tree, and if we want theological guidance that will enable us to deepen our understanding of scripture, we must read theologians who build on the proper foundation" (p. 74 *Contending for the Faith*).

The church has a long history. We are not the first ones dealing with a text. It is worth a minister's time and effort to consult what St. Augustine, Luther and Calvin taught. The older Reformed works of Kuyper and Bavinck, just to name a few, should not be neglected either. A Reformed preacher cannot do without consulting classical theology, though he must keep in mind that theology may never be his master. It remains only a tool to help him gain a better understanding of Scripture.

Theory leads to practice. Whatever a pastor believes or does not believe goes into his sermon. As John Robbins points out, "The relationship between theory and practice is the relationship between cause and effects. If a person believes correct theory, his practice will tend to be correct. . . It is a major theoretical mistake of the practical men to think that they can ignore the ivory towers of the philosophers and theologians as irrelevant to their lives. Every action that the 'practical' men take is governed by the thinking that has occurred in some ivory tower – whether that tower be the British Museum, the Academy, a home in Basel, Switzerland, or a tent in Israel" (pp. 60f *Logical Criticisms of Textual Criticism* by Gordon H. Clark).

A preacher with a high view of his calling will spend considerable time in sermon preparation. The time spent in his study is crucial. What he does there has an impact upon his congregation. What he believes about Scripture, the hermeneutics he uses, the exegetical tools he employs, the theologians he consults determine the content of his sermon. And, therefore, orthodox churches have always been selective whom they invited to occupy their pulpit. They wanted to be faithful to Paul's injunction, "Keep

watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28).