

Reformed Feminism? A Critical Look

"It isn't a pleasant task. Nobody enjoys controversy within the churches, fighting the good fight against those who are supposed to share it with us. But as long as the Church has been in this world it has been compelled to battle the enemies within its gates. And as long as it continues, it will have to do that. For we know that the forces of untruth will not be content with attacking the Church from without; they will always try to get inside where they can be much more effective."

the late Dr. Eldersveld

Joan D. Flikkema, executive secretary of the Committee for Women in the Christian Reformed Church, asked, "Based upon your concept of headship, what advice would you give in the following situations?" One case supposes that parents have a twenty-year old daughter in college who feels called to enter a seminary program and prepare for the ministry. As the parents converse with her, they believe that her call is real and her desires are well founded. The daughter is concerned that she will not be able to find employment in her denomination when she has completed her training because she is a woman.¹ Since Joan Flikkema already presumes that the parents agree with their daughter, they will obviously tell her to either persuade the church to conform to her convictions or to look for another denomination.

If my daughter would tell me that she feels called to become an ordained minister of the gospel, I would tell her that the Scriptures plainly forbid the ordination of women.² The Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself. The Holy Spirit-inspired Word of God is the objective standard by which to test our thought and actions, and I would tell her that she should test the spirits of our age.³

Years ago only philosophers talked about emancipation from oppressive forces. Today emancipation has become a popular slogan. In 1968 students in Paris wrote on a wall, "Only total emancipation is real emancipation."⁴ Sociologist Alexander Mitscherlich said that we are now on the way to a fatherless society. Our patriarchal society must make way for a new free society.⁵ The title of Mary Dale's book *Beyond God the Father - Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* says it all.⁶

Emancipation and feminism are like twins. Feminism has become a social movement claiming political and economic equality of women with men. Its roots can be traced to the early and mid nineteenth century, with its struggles for women's rights and social reform movements. Mary Milligan notes that many of the concerns raised in the nineteenth century were rediscovered by the feminist movement of the 1960's. She says, "A powerful second wave of feminism arose in the 1980's and continues its impact on culture, society, and religion today."⁷

Rosemary Reuther calls feminism "a third force in the revival of religion."⁸ Its unbiblical influence is also felt in the Christian Reformed Church.

Feminists crusade for equal rights. Women should have equal rights in the work force, but this issue has also led to a direct attack on the position of women in the church. Feminists speak of discrimination within the church. For them the access to all offices in the church has become a matter of justice. Calvin College professor Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, an evangelical feminist, defines a feminist as "a person of either sex who thinks men and women are equally saved, equally Spirit-filled, and equally sent. *To be a Christian feminist is to be concerned about justice.*" (Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff says, "The question that women in the church are raising is a question of justice."¹⁰)

However, if we accept the idea that justice should determine the opening of all offices to women, we begin to walk on a slippery slope.

In an article entitled *Gay Adults Should not be Denied the Benefits of Marriage*, Thomas B. Stottard told the story of two lesbians, Karen Thompson and Sharon Kowalski, of Minnesota. He used it to illustrate what, according to him, are the painful effects of the monstrous injustice "of depriving millions of gay American adults the marriages of their choice."¹¹ Evangelical feminists don't agree with the ordination of homosexuals. They believe that the Scriptures forbid this practice. Yet the gay movement argues that justice demands that they should have the same legal rights for their relationships as those enjoyed by the heterosexuals. The question of justice doesn't remove the role difference between men and women which have been established in creation.

The feminist movement charges that biblical references are sexually prejudiced. Margie Whynot proposes that one way to change the system is to redefine the religious language and symbols used to oppress.¹² Mary Milligan says that our patriarchal culture has led us to draw on male language for God when other words would have been equally appropriate.¹³ She charges that among feminists and many denominations the traditional Trinitarian formula-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is male dominated.¹⁴ This has led to some extreme positions. For example, a theologian at Vanderbilt Divinity School urges a trinity of "Mother, Love and Friend."¹⁵

The feminist agenda has also led to a subtle reinterpretation of the Scriptures in a way consistent with the current views of the role of women in society. This shows that the women in office debate is not just a gender issue. The focus is on Scripture itself. Did the apostle Paul write out of a particular, cultural, sociological framework, reflecting his social environment? Are his statements less than authoritative?

What would I tell my daughter if she would express to me her desire to enter the ministry? I would not question her zeal or motivation. I would plead with her to give up her dreams and seek some other avenue of service in the church. I would also point out to her that the church has always been prone to surrender to the spirit of the age. History provides ample proof.

When we let feminism or any other "ism" determine the nature and content of scriptural teaching, the authority of the Christian faith is being undermined. We may not let the

agenda of the world dictate to us how we should interpret the Scriptures. Ideologies and movements come and go. The Word of God abides forever.

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

Bibliography

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- 3 I John 4:1.
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- 6 *Ibid.*
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- 14 *Ibid.* p.44
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