

Appendix

Women in the Pulpit?

During the discussion period after the first lecture at Moore College the question was asked: "*One contemporary criticism of the sermon was omitted in your lecture. There are many who are critical of the fact that preaching is an activity in the church, which is monopolized by men. Is there also truth in this contemporary attack on the sermon?*" I believe that this issue is so important that it should receive attention in this book on preaching. At the same time it is obvious that this attack is of different order from the ones mentioned in Chapter I. It is not an attack on the sermon as an institution, but rather on the tradition which, at least in many evangelical (and catholic!) churches, excludes women from all preaching activities. In our day not only self-professed feminists but many other women as well feel frustrated by this tradition and are beginning to query it.

Scriptural data

But is the Bible not quite clear about the matter? The New Testament knows only male office-bearers. Although it is true that there were many women among Jesus' followers, it is equally true that he chose only men as apostles. In the apostolic church, too, we find men as office-bearers (with the possible exception of female deacons; in Rom. 16:1

Phoebe is called "a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae"¹; many exegetes, however, are of the opinion that the term 'diakonos' here should not be taken as a technical term for an office-bearer, but rather as an indication of the function Phoebe performed, namely, of attending upon the poor and the sick of her own sex).

Moreover, there are some very straightforward passages, especially in the Pauline Epistles. In I Cor. 11:2-16 Paul speaks at some length about the head-covering of the married woman. She is not allowed to pray or to prophesy with her head unveiled. Emphatically the apostle states that the husband is the head of his wife. Furthermore, the man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. In I Cor. 14:34-36 Paul explicitly states that women should keep silence in the churches. They are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they want to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church. In Eph. 5:22-33 we again read that the husband is the head of the wife, and therefore the wives must be subject to their husbands in everything. Finally, in I Tim. 2:9-15 it is repeated that the woman must learn in silence with all submissiveness. "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over man; she is to keep silent".

All these statements are quite unambiguous. There can be no doubt that for Paul the only correct position for a woman was that of subordination to her husband; this had consequences for her place in the assemblies of the congregation: she is not allowed to teach but must keep silent.

A second line of thought

The matter, however, is not as simple and straightforward as it looks. There is still another line of thought in Paul. He speaks not only of subordination but also of reciprocity. In I Cor. 11 we also read: "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman

¹Cf. Sister Vincent Emmanuel Hannon S.U.S.C., *The Question of Women and the Priesthood. Can women be admitted to holy orders?* 1967, 71ff.

was made of man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God" (vv. 11, 12). In Eph. 5 the passage about the subordination of the women to their husbands is preceded by the exhortation to the whole congregation: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (v. 21). Paul even knows of fundamental equality. In Gal. 3:27, 28 he writes: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ".

It is quite obvious that Paul's thinking on the matter is rather complex. At times it even looks contradictory. Every student of Paul's writings has to face the question of how to reconcile these two lines of thought. It certainly will not do to solve the problem by taking just one line and ignoring the other. Unfortunately this happens too often. Traditional theology is always inclined to take the first series of texts as decisive and to bypass the second line, by declaring that texts such as Gal. 3:27, 28 speak of *spiritual* equality only (i.e., equality before God), but have nothing to do with office or preaching. Modern theology is inclined to take only Gal. 3:27, 28 as decisive and to see the other texts as merely time-conditioned. The whole idea of subordination is regarded as a matter of expediency for Paul, a kind of accommodation to the cultural pattern of that day. Both solutions, however, are too simple. Neither of them does full justice to Paul. Not only was he a very consistent thinker, but we are also faced with the fact that more than once both lines of thought occur in the same passage. It is therefore necessary to look very carefully at the issue in all its complexity.

The cultural pattern of Paul's time

It may be helpful if we first briefly examine this pattern, for it is evident that Paul wrote his letters against the background and within the framework of his own time. All his letters were occasional writings which dealt with concrete issues present in the congregations.

It is a well known fact that in New Testament times the woman as a rule had a very subordinate place, both in the

family and in society. As to her place in the ancient Greek family, Sister Vincent Emmanuel Hannon writes: "Both by custom and by law woman was under the authority and control of her father or husband. In the seclusion of the *gynaikonites* she played a respected role, but in almost complete ignorance, with no other occupation than monotonous domestic duties, with the poor compensation of absolute dominion in only a very limited sphere. On marriage she passed from the seclusion of her father's house to similar quarters in her husband's, where she lived as an unequal partner. At best this would be favourable to domestic existence, but the husband's concubinage and intercourse with *hetaerae* [courtesans, mistresses] coexisted, apparently without weakening domestic relation."² As to her place in both family and society, N.J. Hommes writes: "A woman was little more than doll and slave, hidden in the women's quarters, excluded from political and social activity. She was entirely at the mercy of parents, brothers and husband."³ These words describe the Greek situation. In Roman society matters on the whole were better. Although legally regarded as a mere piece of property in the possession of a husband, women enjoyed considerable freedom and importance.⁴ Learning, for instance, was open to them, and we know that many Roman matrons played important parts in politics and literature. Especially in Asia Minor women took a prominent part in public activity, in particular as (high-) priestesses.⁵ At the same time there was, in New Testament times, a widespread moral decline, which was marked by the growing prevalence of divorce and by the disintegration of family life. Derrick Sherwin Bailey describes it as follows: "Gradually infiltrating into Roman society, the baser elements of Greek sexual life undermined the severe puritanism of the early tradition, and produced a parody of the spontaneous naturalism of Hellenic sensuality in the coarse, brutal, and calculated vice for which the imperial city has ever since remained notorious. While stricter morals con-

²*Op. cit.*, 51.

³N.J. Hommes, *De vrouw in de kerk*, 1951, 81.

⁴Sister Hannon, *op. cit.*, 58.

⁵*Op. cit.*, 56.

tinued to prevail in many of the provinces where the former ideals of marriage and family life were preserved, the cities and ports of the Mediterranean seaboard rivalled or instructed the capital in licentiousness."⁶)

It is against this background that we have to read Paul's letters. It explains, for instance, why in his letters to the congregation at Corinth he writes so much about the position of the woman and about sexual matters in general. "Corinth had been the centre of profligacy perpetrated in the service of Aphrodite, where at one time a thousand female hierodules surrounded the shrine. This degrading licence in the name of religion was equalled only by the idolatrous worship of Diana at Ephesus."⁷ It was not without reason that the Greeks had coined the verb 'to corinthianize', which meant: to go on a spree, to paint the town red!

In this cultural climate the Christian message that in Christ there is neither male nor female meant a tremendous change. In Christ man and woman are equal! But this could easily lead to new extremes. The Christian gospel of freedom was constantly in danger of being misinterpreted in the prevailing libertine atmosphere. As a matter of fact, Paul's letters give the impression that this actually happened. Some newly converted Corinthians fell prey to such abuses as incest and fornication, as if there were no limit to the new freedom (cf. I Cor. 5:1-5; 6:12-20). Some married women were apparently inclined to behave in the assemblies of the congregation in a manner which seemed to be unbecoming to women of their status. They prayed and prophesied with their heads uncovered, i.e., without wearing a veil (I Cor. 11:5). During the discussions at the teaching/preaching services some of them monopolized the conversation (I Cor. 14:34, 35) and were bent on teaching the men a lesson or two (I Tim. 2:12). In other words, they were Christian feminists before the word was invented.

In this situation Paul had to give leadership to the congregations. He did it in a very specific, concrete way. He did not write treatises about the relation husband-wife or

⁶Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *The Man-Woman Relation in Christian Thought*, 1959, 4.

⁷Sister Hannon, *op. cit.*, 105.

about the place of the women in the congregation, giving a full and balanced exposition, but in each case he gave concrete instructions which applied directly to the local situation. Naturally, we have to take these instructions seriously, but we should also realize that they have to be read within the framework of that particular time and particular stage of development in the Christian church.

Paul's view

When we try to summarize Paul's view, there is no doubt in my mind that his starting point is the fundamental equality of both sexes. This is the startling new element in the Christian message: 'in the Lord' or 'in Christ' husband and wife are equal before God! Paul makes this clear in two passages. First, in I Cor. 11: 11,12, where he says: "Nevertheless, *in the Lord* woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made of man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God". Most commentators agree that "whatever God arranged at creation when He made man the head, as far as being 'in the Lord' is concerned both are altogether equal".⁸ Herman Ridderbos says it even more forcefully: "It is not said here that 'in the Lord' marriage has received another destiny than it had by virtue of creation; it is said, however, that in the Lord the principle of reciprocity, mutual dependence and service to one another in love, applies and comes to effect in a new way".⁹ The second passage is Gal. 3:27 and 28, where Paul says that there are not two classes of Christians: a higher class, namely, the men, and a lower class, namely, the women. "As many of you as were *baptized into Christ* have put on Christ" (v. 27). Consequently the Jew has no inherent privileges over the Greek. The free man has no inherent privileges over the slave. The man has no inherent privileges over the woman. They are *all one in Christ* and therefore equal before God. As baptized Christians they *all* share in the gifts of the Spirit, the so-called charismata.

⁸R.C.H. Lenski, *I and II Corinthians*, 1946, 446.

⁹Herman Ridderbos, *Paul. An Outline of his Theology*, 1975, 307.

Women, too receive the gift of prophecy and pray in the company of the believers (I Cor. 11:5).¹⁰

But it is equally clear that Paul nevertheless accords a specific place to the woman, in both the family and the congregation. In both cases it concerns *married* women. According to Paul there is a certain 'order' in the family: the man is the head of the wife (and therefore of the family) and the woman is subordinate to her husband and has to be subject to him. The same idea he applies to the assemblies or worship services of the congregation. The woman must be silent, for she should remain subordinate (I Cor. 14:34). She should learn in silence with all submissiveness and not teach or have authority over men (I Tim. 2:12).

At this point Paul closely adheres to the cultural climate of his time, and he seems to do it quite deliberately. We see this also in the case of slavery. He neither approves nor rejects it. He accepts it as a factual situation and exhorts the believers to behave as believers *in* this factual situation. Although there is the fundamental break-through of equality in Christ, the apostle makes no attempt to revolutionize the existing cultural and social patterns.

Does this mean that the headship of the man and the subordination of the woman within the family is a cultural phenomenon only and that we can ignore it, because it no longer fits in with our cultural situation? This conclusion would be too simple. Again we must say that Paul's view is much more complex.

Arguments

When we study the arguments used by Paul (it should be noted that he never deals with his congregations in a

¹⁰This seems to imply that the commandment of silence in I Cor 14 and I Tim. 2 cannot be taken absolutely, unless one assumes that the apostolic church had two different kinds of worship services, one in which the women were allowed to pray and to prophesy, another in which they had to be completely silent. Or one has to assume that this verse does not refer at all to assemblies of congregations but to "other opportunities" (so Lenski, *op. cit.*, 437) or "other possibilities" (so F.W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1953, 251). Most commentators, however, favour the idea that 'praying' and 'prophesying' here does refer to the worship services (cf. I Cor. 14:26-33) where prophecy is mentioned as one of the regular elements in the worship service of the apostolic church).

high-handed way but always treats them as mature people!), we see that in the various passages he uses arguments of different kinds. Actually there are three kinds of arguments.

a. *A Christological argument.* In I Cor. 11 this is the starting point of the whole passage: "The head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (v. 3). With the exception of God, no one is autonomous, not even Christ. We find a similar argument in Eph. 5: "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body" (v. 23). The emphasis, however, is slightly different. The relationship between husband and wife has its analogy in the relationship between Christ and his church. Nevertheless, there is a clear 'order', just as in I Cor. 11.

b. *An argument from creation.* We first find this in I Cor. 11:8 and 9, where Paul writes: "Man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man". This same argument returns in I Tim. 2: "Adam was formed first, then Eve" (v. 13), to which is added a reference to the story of the Fall: "And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (v. 14).

c. *An argument from culture.* Several times Paul uses this argument. E.g., in I Cor. 11:6-15 - "it is disgraceful..." (v. 6); "is it proper...?" (v.13); "does not nature teach you...?" (v. 14); "it is degrading..." (v. 14). Also in I Cor. 14:35 - "it is shameful...".

The weight of these arguments

How shall we estimate the weight of these arguments? It seems to be evident that the first two arguments, which are of a *theological* nature, constitute the real core of the apostle's view. According to him, in creation God has established a definite order for the relationships within marriage: the husband is the head of the wife and the wife is subordinate to her husband. In the work of re-creation in Jesus Christ this order has not been abolished. To be true, husband and wife are fully equal in their relationship to Christ and to God (I Cor. 11:11, 12; Gal. 3:28; cf. also I Pet. 3:7 - "joint heirs of

the grace of life"), but the basic order within marriage, as established at creation, remains inviolate. I believe that this idea of a definite order is the lasting element in Paul's view of marriage.

At this point there is a distinct difference when compared with his view of slavery. Feminists often overlook this. They point out that later on the Christian church rejected slavery, in spite of the fact that Paul seems to have accepted it as a matter of course (cf. I Cor. 7:17-24; Philemon). Why then, they ask, should we today not reject his view of the headship of the man as well? They seem to overlook that nowhere Paul grounds the subordination of the slave to his master on the creation order. But in the case of the headship of the man and of the subordination of the woman within marriage he does just that, and if we wish to abolish it, we must realize that we contradict the apostolic doctrine at this point.

Nevertheless, the theological arguments do not solve every problem. The question still remains of how we should express this headship of the man and this subordination of the woman in actual practice. At this very point the *cultural* argument appears to play an important part in Paul's reasoning. He himself formulates the relationship from the perspective of the cultural situation of the period. Apparently he does not wish the women of the congregation to create a stir by their behaviour but admonishes them to be "quiet" and "submissive", terms which were very common in those days. To describe the process N.J. Hommes uses the following illustration: "As the colour of a river is co-determined by that of its bed, so the colour of the New Testament message about the woman is co-determined by its 'bed' in the ancient world".¹¹ Herman Ridderbos virtually says the same thing, but in a more theological fashion: "The deeper motive, i.e., the place that from the beginning God chose to ascribe to woman in her relationship to man, therefore finds its concrete form in the manner in which it is proper according to custom that a woman conduct herself in public and is to know her place with respect to man....It is clear that there is

¹¹N.J. Hommes, *op. cit.*, 159.

... a relativizing element in this appeal to custom and the 'commune measure', insofar, that is, as the (sub-ordinate) position of woman with respect to man is to be given expression in a manner that must be considered appropriate for a certain time and culture".¹²

Consequences

All this has important consequences for our present situation. In the first place, for the relation man-woman in the *family*. From the cultural point of view our situation is quite different from that in Paul's days. Even when we recognize that the *basic order* of headship-ordination still applies, we must at the same time admit that the *shape* of this order has changed drastically. Today, at least in our Western culture, marriage is basically experienced in terms of *partnership*, i.e. husband and wife regard and accept each other as partners who both share the full responsibility for the success (or failure) of their marriage.

But there are also consequences for the place of the woman in the *congregation*. In our Western culture it is not "disgraceful" or "improper" for a woman to speak at a congregational meeting or in a mixed adult Bible class. As a matter of fact, we should find it extremely strange, to say the least, if at a congregational meeting or a Bible class the women literally kept silent. Even very traditional churches have accepted this! The whole cultural climate has changed (and let us not forget that this was largely due to the impact of Christianity itself!). But we cannot stop at congregational meetings or Bible classes, but must extend this principle also to the worship services of the church. Here, too, we cannot avoid the task of determining what in our day the place of the women should be, in accordance with the cultural patterns of our time. Undoubtedly, we shall reach different decisions from those reached by Paul. This is not a matter of disobedience or a lack of loyalty. As a matter of fact, I am convinced that Paul would approve of such an action. Our real problem may be that we do not have a clear understanding of the cultural situation in the apostolic church. At that

¹²Herman Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, 462, 463.

time the headship of the man did not allow for any position of authority for the woman, in whatever sphere of life. Such a position of authority would threaten or even destroy his headship.

In our culture this is quite different. In an American paper on this subject I recently found the example of a woman being principal of a high school, while her husband worked in the same school as a janitor. This may be an extreme example, but it is certainly not impossible in modern society. Does this mean that in this particular case the husband is no longer the head of the family? When relationships in the family are healthy, this is not at all necessary. The same is true of the royal family. Even though Queen Elizabeth is the head of the United Kingdom, this need not exclude the headship of Prince Philip in the family. There is a story about Queen Victoria and Prince Albert which nicely illustrates our point. One day they had a quarrel and Albert withdrew into his own private rooms. A few hours later Victoria knocked at his door. When he called out: "Who is there?", she replied: "The Queen". The door remained locked! When a little later she knocked again and he repeated his question, she answered: "Your wife." This time he opened the door and the quarrel was soon patched up.

What about the pulpit?

Does all this include the possibility that women engage in preaching activities? I believe the answer can only be affirmative. In our culture no one objects any longer to women addressing public meetings. As a matter of fact, we find this quite normal. For the very same reason no one will call the church revolutionary (Paul's great fear!), if it ordains women and allows them to preach the Word of God. On the contrary, the church may well be in danger of putting up unnecessary obstacles for the progress of the gospel, if she perseveres in her attitude of barring women from the pulpit (and from ordination). Again I venture to say that it is a safe assumption that Paul, if he were alive today, would encourage the church to accept women for the teaching ministry

(and ordination), and that he would do it *for the very same reason* which in his own time he put forward against the idea. Today he presumably would say: "Brethren, it is *not proper* that we ignore the gifts of the women, seeing that they make such a great contribution in almost every sphere of life".

Paul was certainly not anti-feminist in the modern sense of the term. It never was his intention to hold women in tight control at all costs. His upholding of the creation order in the family did not mean that in his eyes the man was the 'boss'. On the contrary, he exhorted the men to love their own wives as their own bodies (Eph. 5:28) or as themselves (v. 33; cf. also Col. 3:19). He even said that in the Lord they are both equal! Paul most certainly was no misogynist. More than any of the other apostles he made use of the gifts and services of women in the congregations, also for the spreading of the gospel (cf. Rom. 16:1,6,12; Phil. 4:2). It is striking how many women are mentioned in the list of greetings in Rom. 16. Paul must have had a good relationship with women. They, on their part, must have liked him. I think they saw him as the man who stood up for and protected their position. Today we may feel that his words in Eph. 5 about the headship of the man and the subordination of the women are harsh and unacceptable, but I am sure that the women of Ephesus rejoiced when they read: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her....Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself...Let each one of you love his wife as himself" (Eph. 5:25, 28,33).

What a world of difference there lies between these words and the notorious remark ascribed to the Greek orator Demosthenes: "We keep hetaerae for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily requirements of the body, wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households!"¹³

¹³Demosthenes, *Against Neaera*, par. 122.