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Bias in the Discussion about Men and Women in the Church

During the last few years there has been intense discussion in the Reformed Churches (Liberated) about the position of women in the church. In all of this it is evident that it is not easy to have such a discussion with an open mind. Some believe that the heart of this matter involves the authority of Scripture, and that allowing women to be ordained to church offices is equivalent to giving in to the spirit of the age. Others believe that the gifts which God has given women may and ought to be used widely in the congregation, including church office. How is it possible that we find it so difficult to have an open mind in discussing the position of women in the church? Why is the discussion so strained? Why is it so hard to maintain our unity?

I would like to suggest four reasons:

1. A sensitive subject
The question as to the position of women in the church is a sensitive subject. It has to do with our identity. Some are deeply convinced that God has called women to a servant role in the family and the church, and that God has called men to a leadership role in the family and the church. The discussion about women in church office is for them thus a discussion about one’s identity. Others are deeply convinced that God has called men and women to both a servant and a leadership role in the family and the church. From this perspective, men and women ought to use their gifts, and there is no separate territory for each sex. For those holding this view, this issue is so important that it is part of their own vision of themselves. It doesn’t matter, in this case, whether you are for or against women in church office: if you question the essence of someone’s identity, or feeling of self-worth, then the reactions can be heated and emotional. And that is so in this case.

2. Lack of knowledge
A second difficulty concerns a lack of knowledge about the subject at hand. I have regularly asked supporters of women in church office why they are for it, and how we can explain the so-called “women-ought-to-be-silent” texts. I have seldom heard a convincing answer. I have also asked opponents of women in church office if they are aware of the exegetical problems of the “be-silent” texts, and how we ought to deal with the “women-have-the-right-to-speak” texts. Similarly, I’ve rarely heard a good answer to that question. We must simply come to the conclusion that – whether we like it or not – many participants in this whole discussion have a limited knowledge of the Bible, and that, nevertheless, they are convinced of their own opinion.

3. The Good Question
A following difficulty is involved in the question: what is actually a good question? I suggest several possibilities of formulating questions: (a) May a woman serve in a church office? Or (b) What is the place of women in the congregation? If you formulate the question in this way, then you run into the following problem: apparently women are the problem, and there’s nothing wrong with the position of men. You can also formulate the question differently, as follows: (c) Why are only men to be given church offices? Or (d) What is the place of men in the congregation? With these formulations you get the feeling that men are the problem. It is only being honest when we say that the discussion often is carried on via questions (a) or (b). However, no one knows whether they are good questions or not. And actually there is no one who can “objectively” determine what are the best questions to ask.

4. Theological reflection does not lead to an unambiguous answer.
A fourth difficulty is involved in the experience that theological reflection does not lead us to an unambiguous answer. There are Biblically orthodox theologians who are completely convinced that women ought not to bear church offices, and there are Biblically orthodox theologians who are completely convinced that women may bear church offices. By the way, this is also true for experts who are not theologically trained. Apparently, people read the Bible in different ways, weigh the arguments in different ways, and have other reasons to support their positions. And that doesn’t have to be wrong. It can certainly be legitimate to look anew at the Biblical arguments, as long as we don’t cherish the illusion that a new committee will come up with an unambiguous conclusion which everyone will accept as balanced and authoritative.

If we think about the results of such arguments as mentioned above, we can become despondent. How can...
Men and Woman

Identity in Christ

Humanly speaking, there is no third way. We cannot at the same time have women in church office and not in church office. But spiritually speaking there is a third way: we find our identity in Christ. I hope and pray that broader official gatherings will give a good example of this for congregations to follow. I hope and pray that the generation which “gives leadership to the churches” will show us the way forward. And if the broader gatherings fail in this, and if the generation experiences its own limitations, then there is only one attitude possible: that of humility. In this way we must follow Daniel’s example by saying: “we have sinned” (Daniel 9:5).

Room for other arguments

The acknowledgement that theological reflection will not lead us to an unambiguous standpoint may give us room to allow other arguments to be used or even to reach definitive conclusions—without us landing in the waters of relativism. We may pose questions such as: What does the next generation think about this issue? How can the church blossom? What helps to provide a good witness to this postmodern generation? A church which realizes that God works in the line of the generations, which knows that the Spirit gives gifts, and which confesses that every congregation can be a missionary congregation, takes these kinds of questions seriously. It could be very fruitful to go into an intensive dialogue with the younger generation concerning being a congregation, and with missionary churches about witnessing in our age. This in order to discover what it means to be in Christ in our age, with an eye to the gifts which God has given men and women. For the generation which is represented in the various church bodies and which bear a special responsibility for these kinds of discussions – and I am one of such people – this will not be easy. It demands a listening ear and the willingness to ask deep questions. It demands that we try to discard prejudices and to have an open dialogue about being a Christian in our age.

This article is a translation of the Dutch article, published on the website of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (Liberated): http://www.gkv.nl/kerkplein/opiniereportages/discussie-mv-in-de-kerk-vaak-niet-onbevangen/, and aims to be a contribution to the ongoing discussion.