

Session to Session

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The Christian Reformed Church, Women, and the Bible

by W. Robert Godfrey

On a 99 to 84 vote, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), meeting this June in Grand Rapids, acted to open the offices of minister, elder, and evangelist to women. This action does not change the Church Order of the CRC immediately. The change will go into effect only if ratified by a future synod. A vote on ratification has been scheduled for 1992 at the earliest.

This action came as a great surprise to most in the church. Serious discussions about women in ecclesiastical office have been going on for about twenty years in the CRC. In 1978, the synod approved opening the office of deacon to women. That controversial action was not ratified until 1984. There have been a number of study committees through the years reaching a variety of conclusions as to what the Bible teaches on women in office. The synod of 1990 received a study report that outlined the strongest biblical case for women in office and the strongest biblical case against women in office. The study report offered no advice as to which was the better case. Most people expected that the report would be referred to a study committee for a year or two to decide which case was better and advise the synod how to act.

The advisory committee handling the report at synod, however, very unexpectedly recommended that further study would not really clarify anything and that the synod should simply open the offices to women. After about ten hours of debate on this recommendation on the floor of synod, the recommendation was adopted.

The synod offered four grounds for its action. First, it concluded that the study committee had shown that there was no clear prohibition in the Bible against women in office. Second, the synod had decided that the issue of women in office was a church order, not a creedal, matter. Third, synods in the past have permitted changes in local congregations that have not been imposed on all congregations. Fourth, office should be understood as "service" and "function" (not authority).

The action of synod and the grounds offered are astonishing because they are radically unreformed. Reformed church

polity has always taught that there must be positive biblical warrant for the government of the church. Belgic Confession Article 30 says that "we believe that this true church ought to be governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught us in his Word," a spiritual order exercised by persons "who are faithful and are chosen according to the rule that Paul gave to Timothy." But the synod ignored passages of Scripture like I Timothy 2:11,12 and I Corinthians 14:33,34, and made no effort to support its conclusions with arguments from Scripture. The synod also violated Church Order Article 31. Article 31 states that the decisions of earlier assemblies can only be changed on the basis of "sufficient and new grounds." The Synod of 1985 had decided that the Scripture closes the offices of minister and elder to women. But the Synod of 1990 offered no grounds to overturn the earlier synodical decision.

The relatively large vote at synod for such an unreformed action suggests that the change in the Church Order will be ratified in the near future. For Reformed people the great question now is whether this action is an isolated incident or one that points to a larger problem in the church. Is this action a simple mistake or part of a widespread departure in the CRC from the Bible and Reformed Christianity?

The evidence is accumulating that there is growing and

Continued on page 4

Prophecy Today? Part II

by O. Palmer Robertson

[Part I concluded with a discussion of five foundational passages on prophecy in the Old Testament. The fifth of these passages was Deuteronomy 18.]

The text in Deuteronomy points to a singular prophetic figure that shall resemble Moses in a distinctive way. The passage does not say "prophets the LORD your God shall raise up to you." Instead, it states: "A prophet like me the LORD your God shall raise up" (Deut. 18:15).

Israel's experience under Moses cries out for one who will come that is greater than Moses. If the purpose of God's covenant actually is to be fulfilled, then a prophetic Mediator must come who in his person is more than Moses. As significant as the ministry of Moses might have been, it

Continued on page 2

Session to Session

Prophecy Today? continued from page 1

did not achieve the oneness between God and people that the covenant was intended to realize.

This prophet like Moses anticipated in this passage would speak the word of God with a power that would climax the shadowy form of Moses's revelations. Like Moses and his successors, this coming prophet may be rejected by the people. Yet because of the certainties of the covenant, he will succeed in his prophetic ministry where the original Moses failed.

In this light, it is not surprising to find the Apostle Peter applying this passage from Deuteronomy 18:15 directly to Jesus in the book of Acts. Jesus is the "servant" (*pais*) who is like Moses in that he mediates the word of God (Acts 3:22,26). But he is also "son" of God (*pais* as well) who unites God with his people in fulfillment of the word of the covenant mediated through the prophets. If the Son of God himself now is the prophetic mediator of the covenant, then the ultimate goal of the covenant has been realized. For to receive the Word of God from the Son is to receive the Word of God from the Lord himself. Now that through Christ the prophetic mediator of the covenant is himself the God of the covenant, the oneness between God and his people originally intended in the covenant has been established. Now the office of prophet will find its final realization in this one person who is Son of God and also prophetic mediator of the covenant.

Through his person all the terrors related to the confrontation with God at Sinai are now removed. The fearsomeness once associated with standing in the presence of God evaporates when the mediator of the covenant is God himself, now standing among men as their servant (*pais*).

The history of kingship in Israel found its climax in Christ the king. The history of priesthood in Israel found its climax in Christ the priest. So also the history of prophetism in Israel finds its climax in Christ the prophet. He is the promised mediator *par excellence*. The Old Testament experience of a series of men who spoke God's very words finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ the prophet like Moses who also excelled him in every way.

Prophecy about Prophecy in the Old Testament

Having considered the testimony of these foundational passages about prophecy, it is now appropriate to consider a central Old Testament passage that has significance for understanding the phenomenon of prophecy as it appears in the New Testament. The classical "prophecy about prophecy" in Joel 2 links the Old Testament experience with the New Testament phenomenon.

The word of God through Joel declares: "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy" (Joel 2:28a). In anticipating the future, Joel uses the identical term for "prophecy" found throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Does this word suddenly have a new

meaning? Is Joel expecting a different kind of prophecy than that described in the foundational passages already considered?

No. Joel himself elaborates on the significance of his prediction: "Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions" (Joel 2:28b).

Where did Joel get the idea that the prophetic word would be communicated through "dream" and "vision?" Was he the inventor of these concepts?

No, Joel draws on the passage in Numbers 12 that so clearly describes the origin of prophetism in the days of Moses. Joel's terms for "dreaming dreams" and "seeing visions" are identical with the words used in Numbers 12 to describe the communication of revelation throughout the ages. Joel's language also parallels the description of the "seeing" of a "vision" that frequently serves as the heading of a divinely inspired prophetic book.

So what did Joel expect? What would be the experience of God's people with respect to prophecy in the future?

Joel predicted a widespread manifestation of prophetic revelation in the future. The consummation of the ages would be accompanied by extensive revelatory experiences. Appropriate to the glory of Messiah's coming would be an unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit, bringing with it many new revelations from God. Old men would "dream dreams" and young men would "see visions." Both phrases describe experiences of a revelatory nature, drawing on the context of Numbers 12.

The New Testament indicates the fulfillment of this "prophecy about prophecy" in several passages. Quoting Joel, Peter declares that the Old Testament prediction was fulfilled at the pouring out of the Spirit of prophecy at Pentecost (Acts 2:16). At this point, young men "see visions" and old men "dream dreams."

The Spirit's outpouring on the disciples at Pentecost did not cause them to hallucinate. They are not conjuring up religious ideas in the tradition of the false prophets. Neither are they achieving new levels of human insight. Instead, they are undergoing revelatory experiences. The language used repeatedly throughout the Old Testament period now applies to the prophets in a new covenant context.

This same understanding of prophecy continues throughout the book of Acts. In Acts 11:27,28, some "prophets" came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus "predicted through the Spirit" about future events. The term translated as "predicted" literally means "gave a sign." This terminology further relates the experience of Agabus to the communication of revelation.

Agabus's prophecy immediately became the basis for concrete action on the part of the disciples at Antioch. He revealed that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. Recognizing the distress this famine would bring on the disciples already suffering in Judea, the disciples at Antioch decided to provide help by sending a gift to the elders through Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:29,30).

Clearly this experience of the new covenant prophet fits the Old Testament pattern. Agabus issued his prediction as the result of a revelational experience. By no other means could he have known of the development of a famine in the future other than by a direct revelation from God.

The phenomenon of prophecy in a new covenant context appears once more in Acts 21:8-11. Paul and Luke are staying at the house of Philip the evangelist, who is said to have "four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy" (v.8). It should be remembered that Paul, who by this experience knew first-hand of the gift of prophecy as it was possessed by the four daughters of Philip, later gave approval to a women's "prophesying" in the church (I Cor. 11:15).

But what is the nature of this "prophesying" as done by the daughters of Philip? The immediately following verses clarify the question. The prophet Agabus comes down from Judea and speaks revelationally by the power of the Holy Spirit. He predicts that Paul will be arrested in Jerusalem, which no one could know apart from a revelatory communication from God.

Once more it becomes clear that the idea of "prophet" in the New Testament is the same as the idea of "prophet" in the Old Testament. Only by a direct revelation from God could Agabus have known that Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem.

It is in this context that the role of women as "prophetesses" in the New Testament church should be considered. A woman might be regarded as a "prophetess" if she functioned as an instrument of divine revelation. If revelation were continuing today, then it might be expected that women as well as men might legitimately "prophesy" in the church today. But because revelation has ceased, women should not be expected to "prophesy" in the church today.

These references in Acts provide testimony concerning the actual experiences of both Peter and Paul with the gift of prophecy in a new covenant context. As such they provide a natural backdrop for the explicit treatment of the subject of prophecy by these two key apostles.

Peter and Paul's Testimony Concerning Prophecy

Peter explicitly discusses prophecy in the last of his writings. He recognizes the significance of his remarks, as the introductory phrase indicates: "Know this first," says Peter (II Pet. 1:20,21). He intends to discuss a matter of extreme importance.

Peter declares that "no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation" (NIV). The prophetic word communicates truth from God that otherwise could not be known. The insight of man could not originate this understanding of the will of God. "For prophecy never had its origin by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (II Pet. 1:21).

Peter does not treat prophecy as though it were equiva-

lent to keenness of insight. Instead, he describes the experience of divine revelation. According to Peter, all truly prophetic experiences partook of this same character. There is no exception. No (true) prophecy came by the will of man. All (true) prophecy came by the revelation of God's Spirit.

More particularly, Peter identifies this revelational experience with the words that the prophets *spoke*, and not just with the words the prophets *wrote*. The revelational experience of the prophets was not limited to their canonical writings. All that came through them in the way of "prophecy" was the very word of God, whether spoken or written.

These holy men of God spoke as they were "borne along" by the Holy Spirit. B.B. Warfield provides the classic explanation of this phrase:

What this language of Peter emphasizes . . . is . . . the passivity of the prophets with respect to the revelation given through them. This is the significance of the phrase: "It was as borne by the Holy Spirit that men spoke from God." To be "borne" . . . is not the same as to be led . . . , much less to be guided or directed. . . . He that is "borne" contributes nothing to the movement induced, but is the object to be moved. [Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "The Biblical Idea of Revelation," in *Revelation and Inspiration* (Grand Rapids, 1981 repr.), p. 23.]

They were "borne along" by the Holy Spirit as a ship is carried by the wind. Peter emphasizes that there is no exception to this phenomenon as it relates to prophecy. All prophecy is of this sort. Holy men of God spoke as they were "borne along" by the Holy Spirit.

Peter's representation of the prophetic experience finds full support in the description of Paul. In Ephesians 3:2,3, Paul states: "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation." The New Testament consistently represents a "mystery" as a truth about God's redemptive program once concealed, *but now revealed*. This "mystery" now has been "revealed" by the Spirit to God's only apostles and prophets (Eph. 3:5). The two offices of apostle and prophet are joined together as the vehicles of divine revelation. Those extraordinary offices were the instruments by which God made known his revelation in the new covenant context. The substance of this "mystery" once concealed but now revealed is that the gentiles are fellow-heirs, fellow-participants, fellow-members in the body of Christ (Eph. 3:6).

It is rather interesting that Paul does not speak about a prediction of the future when he refers to the "mystery" that has been "revealed." Instead, he describes insight about a theology of the church. He declares that the "forth-telling" of the apostles and prophets was revelational. The basic truth they taught about the role of gentiles in the church was not a prediction about the future, but a divine declaration about the present. Yet it clearly was regarded as "prophetic" in nature.

[To be continued]

Session to Session

Christian Reformed Church, continued from page 1

widespread departure in the CRC from its historical Reformed commitments. Various articles in *The Banner* (the denomination's magazine), some policies of the Home Mission Board, some of the teaching at Calvin College, some of the ecumenical associations, changes in worship and life-style in the churches—all point to a serious deterioration in the Christian Reformed Church.

Certainly there are and will continue to be many good Christians in the CRC. But the evidence is strong that the CRC is rapidly ceasing to be a disciplined, confessional Re-

formed church. Members of the CRC who want a Reformed church will soon face a difficult decision: Will they seek to be Reformed as a minority group in the CRC, or will they secede to form a new church?

Initial response to the synod's action in conservative circles in the CRC seems to be sharply critical. Discussion of secession if the action is ratified is much more widespread than any one might have anticipated. A secession now seems likely, but its size and timing are uncertain. All Reformed Christians should pray for wisdom and faithfulness for those in the Christian Reformed Church. Ω

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