

A CAUSE OF DIVISION

THE HERMENEUTIC OF WOMEN'S ORDINATION

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and

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Introduction

There can be no doubt that the Christian Reformed denomination is fighting for its life over the issue of women in office. Many church members are convinced that the difference of opinion over women's ordination is due to differing views of Scriptural authority and hermeneutics (the method of interpreting Scripture). Indeed, many are convinced that the very doctrinal foundation of the church is in jeopardy.

Others are not so convinced.

In the Spring of 1991, the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary sponsored and published an essay entitled *A Cause for Division? Women in Office and the Unity of the Church* (hereinafter *Cause for Division*). Though it was written by Professor John W. Cooper, the brochure was revised in dialog with the faculty and issued under its imprimatur.

The central point of *Cause for Division* is that the contradicting views on women in office reflect neither differing commitments to the Bible's authority nor differing methods of Bible interpretation. Instead, the Calvin faculty endorses Cooper's conclusion that "*the differences among us have to do with the exegesis or interpretation of specific texts, not with hermeneutics, or with our high view of the Bible*" (9; numbers refer to pamphlet pages).

The conclusions drawn from this judgment are important.

Cause for Division insists that these differences are merely exegetical and do not touch the basic interpretive principles or the theology of the church. On the basis of this conviction, it concludes that separation from the Christian Reformed denomination by those whose consciences cannot accept a decision to open all offices to women is unwarranted and would even constitute "a sin against the church and its Lord" (9). Finally,

readers are assured that, because "responsible interpretation" has been used, the case for women's ordination will not take us "to the edge of the dreaded `slippery slope.'" Such interpretation will not lead us to bless "homosexual behavior" or ordain "those who practice it" (58).

A thorough analysis of *Cause for Division* would require a work longer than the pamphlet itself. Such an effort may be necessary, but the aim of this essay is more modest. The claim of Cooper and his colleagues that they are using a valid Reformed hermeneutic in defending women's ordination is crucial to their case. This assertion will be examined in some detail. We intend to show that *Cause for Division* fails to make a persuasive case for the thesis that the women's ordination discussion has nothing to do with a new view of Scripture or a new way of reading the Bible.

In fact, we are convinced that *Cause for Division* defends the argument for women's ordination with a hermeneutic which is at odds with our historic position as Reformed believers. It does so by using an unReformed notion of the "analogy of Scripture," one which pits the alleged Scriptural principle of the equality and correlativity of men and women *against* the specific teaching of those Scriptural texts which describe a differentiation of roles. Not only does *Cause for Division* provide no Scriptural proof for its notion of equality between men and women, but it also discounts those texts which spell out God's blessed order for the relationships between men and women in the home and the church.

We offer this brief review, therefore, with the hope that it will clarify the choices with which the Christian Reformed denomination is presently faced. Our conviction is that the women's ordination discussion does indeed reflect the presence of two quite distinct and incompatible approaches to Scripture and hermeneutics. Should the Christian Reformed denomination implement the new way of reading the Bible by permitting the ordination of women as ministers and elders, it will have officially and formally denied its confession of the authority,

sufficiency and clarity of the written Word of God to order the life of the church (*Belgic Confession*, Articles 5, 7 and 30-32).

A Consistent Reformed Hermeneutic?

Chapters four through six of *Cause for Division* present the outlines of what its author considers a valid Reformed hermeneutic. The importance of literary and historical study of the Bible is emphasized, along with proper attention to the theological dimension of Scripture—the "analogy of Scripture." This "analogy of Scripture" is properly described as the "the overall message of Scripture and its cumulative teaching on specific issues" and as the "clear teaching of Scripture" (21-22).

Much more could be said about what constitutes a valid Reformed hermeneutic, but our primary focus in the following paragraphs will be the pamphlet's use of the "analogy of Scripture." As we noted above, any "analogy of Scripture" is valid only if it meets two conditions:

- (1) it must communicate the *comprehensive* or full teaching of the Bible; and
- (2) it must be *clear*.

We will argue that what *Cause for Division* identifies as the "analogy of Scripture" regarding the question of women in office is neither the comprehensive teaching of Scripture nor a message that can meaningfully be described as clear. If our claim can be substantiated, then the Calvin faculty's assertion that the case for women's ordination employs a valid Reformed hermeneutic will have been seriously weakened.

The clarity of their "analogy of Scripture"

Simply put, *Cause for Division* argues that "the positive analogy of Scripture teaches that, most basically and most enduringly, male and female are equal before God and correlative with each other" and thus that "the equality and mutuality of gender" is "most basic" (42).

Where does Professor Cooper find this comprehensive and clear teaching of Scripture? He points to three passages as proof.

First, Genesis 1:26-28 is cited. Here Cooper argues that

it is clear that both male and female image God. And it is equally clear that dominion over creation (the endowment of humans with the delegated authority of God himself) is given to male and female together. There is no hint of hierarchy or differentiation of roles in Genesis 1. Male and female are equal and correlative in imaging God and in exercising authority over creation. Genesis 1 provides the ultimate framework in terms of which the history from Genesis 2 and the rest of Scripture unfolds (42).

The logic of this paragraph is elusive, but the assumption seems to be that the exercise of authority over creation by both men and women *excludes* any assigned functional hierarchy among men and women. It is difficult to see why, since it is possible for that authority to be exercised in different ways.

On this point the example of the holy trinity is instructive. In the trinity, the divine equality of persons does not rule out functional differentiation in roles. Within the equality of essence there is a functional hierarchy as the Son does the will of the Father (**John 15:19; Phil. 2:5-8**), and as the Holy Spirit speaks only what he receives from the Son (John 16:13). In other words, the relationship among the persons of the trinity demonstrates that submission is compatible with equality.

The Bible teaches that men and women are created in the image of a triune God. It seems reasonable, then, that Scripture's

pattern of hierarchy and role differentiation among men and women may well be an aspect of that divine image. Despite what *Cause for Division* says, both male and female may image God and yet participate in a functional hierarchy and differentiation of roles.

Equally questionable is the assertion that the silence of Genesis 1 about hierarchy and role differentiation between male and female is significant. Actually, Genesis 1 passes over the matter because there the author deals with all of creation, while *Genesis 2* deals specifically with the creation of human beings. Consequently, the question of gender role relationships is dealt with in Genesis 2.

While Cooper asserts that Genesis 2 is only about the institution of marriage (44), which relationship must be subordinated to his principle of "gender equality and correlativity," the fact of the matter is that Genesis 2 is just as much about creation as Genesis 1. In terms of literary structure, we see that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 address creation from different perspectives. If either chapter must have priority in a discussion of gender roles, it is chapter 2, since this is where the question is particularly addressed. Just as one does not read a Peter De Vries novel for insight on how to fix one's car, so also one does not attempt to discover what the Bible says about gender relations in passages like Genesis 1:26-28, where the issue is not addressed.

Cause for Division takes us next to Revelation 22:5. Cooper argues in this connection that

Male-female equality is also the last word in Scripture. In fact it extends to the new heaven and earth, God's final Kingdom. Revelation 22:5, which pictures life in the New Jerusalem, says that the servants of the Lord God "shall reign forever and ever." Presumably both men and women are included among the Lord's servants. *In fact, gender is not mentioned* (and marriage no longer exists). What we see here, intended to last forever and ever, is the very same relationship that we find in Genesis 1 "As it was in the

beginning, is now and ever shall be." That is the most basic and most enduring line in Scripture on malefemale relations (42; italics added).

Again, it is difficult to see how the question of gender relations is addressed by this passage at all since, as Cooper concedes, gender is not even mentioned.

Furthermore, on what grounds is it asserted that the state of eternal bliss involves "the very same relationship that we find in Genesis 1"? Christ taught that marriage would no longer exist because people "will be like the angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:30). Given such a change in nature, one would more reasonably conclude that the relationships would be altered, than that they would continue unchanged. Certainly the absence of marriage in the eternal state suggests that the situation there would be quite different than that in Genesis 1.

Finally, we should also observe that the phrase "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be" is *not* the "most enduring line in Scripture" because, alas, it is not to be found in Scripture at all, but rather in the "Gloria Patri."

Next, *Cause for Division* refers us to Galatians 3:28. After conceding that the passage "is not a proof-text for women's ordination" and that the context is "about equality in justification by grace," the author goes on to argue that the text is nevertheless relevant to the issue. He finds this relevance in the phrase "one in Christ Jesus." Although the text itself does not mention the image of God, Cooper asserts that oneness in Christ involves the restoration of the image of God. "Here Paul plugs directly into that line which stretches from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, shown above," the writer argues (43).

It is true, of course, that union with Christ involves the restoration of the image of God. But *Cause for Division* has not demonstrated that Genesis 1 and Revelation 22 teach this gender equality and correlativity as essential to the image of God. At best, its argument is one from silence-i.e., these passages do not

speak of hierarchy and differentiation of roles; therefore, they teach gender equality and correlativity. Such faulty reasoning could "prove" many other "principles" from Scripture.

But more serious is that on the basis of this "clarity," the clear teaching of passages like Genesis 2, which *does* explicitly address the gender issue, is dismissed.

By any ordinary language definition of the word, Cooper's allegedly "clear" teaching of Scripture is anything but clear. He does not appeal to those portions of Scripture which are more clear in order to illuminate those which are less clear; instead, it seems that he does exactly the reverse.

The comprehensiveness of their "analogy of Scripture"

It would be reasonable to say that if the few passages cited in *Cause for Division* fail the test of clarity, then their so-called "analogy of Scripture" cannot claim to be comprehensive either.

This would be a correct conclusion; but too hasty a judgment may cause us to pass over a truly crucial question. That question is this: *Given the fact that virtually all the passages in Scripture which clearly do address the gender question seem to teach the principle of "different and complementary" rather than of "gender equality," how can Cooper and his colleagues explain away all of those apparently clear passages by means of a thinly supported philosophical principle of "gender equality and correlativity"?* The answer to this question will help us to identify exactly what sort of hermeneutic is really involved.

The true character of this hermeneutic

One might argue that Cooper's case for the ordination of women is simply an example of a valid Reformed hermeneutic poorly executed. This might be so if we were dealing simply with a series of faulty interpretive decisions involving individual texts. But unfortunate exegesis is not really an adequate description of

Cooper's methodology. Rather, one senses a drive for a comprehensive idea or principle by which to *explain away* passages throughout Scripture which he finds unacceptable.

Earlier, we referred to Cooper's principle of gender equality as a "philosophical principle." While some might question the use of the term "philosophical," the concept of gender equality seems to function as an abstract first principle by which particular and concrete instances are judged. Cooper and his colleagues show a persistent preference for the abstract general principle over the concrete particularities of Scripture.

It has been repeatedly noted that those in favor of women's ordination tend to pit general statements of Scripture, such as Galatians 3:28, against more concrete and particular passages, such as Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2.

The attractiveness of these general statements seems to lie precisely in the fact that they are general and, lacking specificity, can be "filled out" in keeping with the whim of the interpreter.

This can be easily illustrated with regard to the language of "equality." As the history of ideas shows, the idea of "equality" is a complex one. The civil rights movement in North America illustrates this well. In the context of race relations, does "equality" mean equality of opportunity, or equality of result?

Similarly, in the context of gender roles in the church, does "equality" mean spiritual equality before God, functional equality in the sense of the functional interchangeability of the sexes, or something else again? The term "equality" itself cannot answer these questions.

The abstract general idea must be filled with content for it to be meaningful-and *Cause for Division* has done precisely that. Professor Cooper has taken the opportunity to fill the notion of "gender equality" with his own agenda and to elevate his concept to the level of the "clear message of Scripture."

This is not at all to suggest that biblical interpretation should ignore the broader overarching themes of Scripture. Rather, we must identify such themes with great care. In particular, such themes should bear some agreement with particular teachings throughout the canon (the authoritative body of Scripture). We should note, however, that *Cause for Division* nowhere appeals to anything that can legitimately be identified as such a theme. Instead, it has taken language out of context from Scripture, subjected it to philosophical refinement, and then proclaimed this to be the "analogy of Scripture" on the issue of gender.

* * * * *

Thus, *Cause for Division* is not following a valid Reformed hermeneutic at all. Rather, its hermeneutic might aptly be characterized as an "*idealist hermeneutic of autonomy*." It is *idealist* in that *Cause for Division* is preoccupied with a general principle or idea at the expense of the concrete and the particular. It is *a hermeneutic of autonomy* because Cooper and his colleagues have filled the abstract concept of gender equality with their own content, rather than allowing the whole teaching of the Bible to provide this content.

What about 1 Timothy 2:12?

Having stated the general principle by which all relationships are to be judged, the pamphlet goes on to adopt the most dubious interpretations of specific passages so as to subordinate them to its controlling principle.

Cooper's treatment of 1 Timothy 2:12 is a particularly striking example. He correctly observes that the Greek verb *authentēin* (NIV: "have authority") sometimes has the connotation of "domineer" or "usurp authority." But he incorrectly uses this fact to argue that what Paul is forbidding is not the female exercise of church authority per se, but the use of this authority in a domineering way.

Now, this argument overlooks one obvious grammatical problem, namely, that in this verse Paul *connects* teaching *and* the exercise of authority, and forbids *both* to women. The grammatical structure in question is two Greek infinitives (*didaskein*: "to teach"; *authentēin*: "to exercise authority" or "to domineer") joined by the Greek word *oude* ("and not," "nor," "neither," "not even"). In his defense, Cooper does note that the relationship between teaching and exercising authority "*may be coordinate*" (italics added). As a matter of fact, all modern Bible translations render it as a coordinate construction for the simple reason that, as we shall see, this is really the only possibility.

But Cooper thinks otherwise. He claims it is possible that the second verb (domineer) explains the first verb (teach), so that the apostle is supposedly forbidding a woman to "teach so as to dominate" (50). This interpretation is alleged to be "equally correct grammatically" (53). But is it?

"Grammar" is a misleading word here. It is true that no basic grammatical rules of subject-verb agreement are violated by Cooper's suggested reading. However, the grammar of syntax (the way words are put together in combinations) shows that a Greek writer simply would not express such a thought by joining two infinitives with "and not." The word *oude* joining two infinitives

in this way, in a context where behavior is being forbidden, creates the overwhelming presumption that the relationship is coordinate. That is: *both* teaching *and* exercising authority in the church are being forbidden to women.

There are, of course, several very obvious ways that Cooper's idea of "teaching in a domineering way" could have been expressed, if Paul had wanted to say that. For example, Paul could have said *hos authentēin* or *hoste authentēin* ("teach in a way so as to domineer"). Or, as would be more consistent with the apostle's literary style, Paul might have used a clause to explain how the idea of "teaching" was being limited. The rendering Cooper proposes is really not even a theoretical possibility.

A Slippery Slope?

As noted above, the faculty members of Calvin Seminary assure their readers that the method of interpretation they employ will not lead to blessing "homosexual behavior" or to ordaining "those who practice it" (58). This is mere assertion on their part, since they nowhere describe the hermeneutic used to support homosexual behavior. Unfortunately, close examination reveals that *the hermeneutic involved in arguments for an allegedly "biblical homosexuality" parallels the Calvin faculty's hermeneutic almost to the letter.*

Here too people appeal to a dubious general "principle"-in this case, the idea that the Bible's overriding theme involves "liberation," and that gay and lesbian liberation is part of this. With this "principle" established, people then argue that the men of Sodom were condemned, not for their attempted homosexual rape of the angelic visitors, but for their failure to show hospitality. Similarly, interpreters insist that the New Testament prohibits only certain kinds of homosexual relationships, such as pederasty, and not homosexual behavior in general.

Our point is not that such arguments for "biblical homosexuality" are valid or convincing. They are not. Rather, the point is that *there is no significant hermeneutical difference* between such arguments and the Calvin faculty's argument for women's ordination. We set out on a "slippery slope" when we draw terms or concepts from a few texts, subject them to philosophical refinement, and use the results as a controlling principle to rule out what Scripture does say with clarity on a particular issue. Under such circumstances, Scripture is little more than a "wax nose" to be twisted this way and that.

The Extent of the Problem

Further evidence of the profound theological differences present in the Christian Reformed denomination is to be found in the pamphlet itself. In summarizing the case *against* the ordination of women, *Cause for Division* concedes that the opponents' arguments rest on a significant number of passages which teach or imply the functional differentiation and hierarchy among the genders. Not only is the case against women's ordination the church's historic position, but it is also "solidly based on Reformed hermeneutical principles" (37).

Surprisingly, Cooper and his colleagues acknowledge that "the clear implication of this consistent analogy of Scripture is that women ought not to hold (some or all) offices in the church" (38). Take careful note here: *Cause for Division* claims not only that the case against women's ordination employs an analogy of Scripture, but more: its analogy of Scripture is consistently employed!

Contrary to its stated intention, the Calvin faculty will be forced to admit, finally, that *the differences among Christian Reformed people are not merely about the exegesis of specific texts, but extend also to the level of the analogy of Scripture*. One group (opponents of women's ordination) discerns in the Bible a clear, comprehensive, and consistent teaching of hierarchy and functional differentiation among male and female. Another group (advocates of women's ordination) claims to see something radically different—a clear and comprehensive teaching of "gender correlativity and equality."

The final result of all this is that *Cause for Division*, written and published to demonstrate a fundamental unity of allegiance to Scripture, ends up contradicting its own central thesis!

By Cooper's own admission, the two groups in his denomination do not agree even on the content of the "analogy of Scripture," on that clear and comprehensive theme or principle

inherent in Scripture's message, by which the exegesis of individual texts is to be evaluated.

This is a serious matter, for basic agreement on the "analogy of Scripture" is necessary on the practical level for any confessional and Scripturally-oriented church. In the absence of such agreement, the Christian Reformed denomination is rapidly becoming like a number of other mainline denominations in which pluralism and diversity are tolerated on a host of important theological matters. These religious groups are united by little more than adherence to practices of government. We fear that the consensus that once existed regarding the basic outlines of the Scriptural witness has been eroded to the point where, on the very practical level, organizational unity is becoming impossible to sustain.

Conclusion

By now the discerning reader has identified the significant difference between Calvin Seminary's question, *A Cause for Division?*, and our answer that the hermeneutic of women's ordination has surely become *A Cause of Division* within the Christian Reformed denomination.

Let us put the shoe on the proper foot: whatever ecclesiastical division the Christian Reformed denomination suffers is not the result simply of a synodical decision which a few malcontents are refusing to swallow. The truth is rather this: *the synodical decision to permit women's ordination has brought to the surface the already existing division resulting from incompatible views of Scripture's authority and incompatible methods of Bible interpretation.*

Our central point, then, is that the hermeneutic of women's ordination has been, is, and will remain, *A Cause of Division*. This claim is not first a prediction for the future, but an assessment of the present. We pray fervently that the LORD will see fit to use this pamphlet to awaken our Christian Reformed readers to humble submission to His Word, that they may return to that Word's authority and full teaching. And we sincerely hope that the LORD will use these pages to warn and alert our non-Christian Reformed readers of the pitfalls and snares into which they too may fall, if they fail to be diligent in spiritual devotion and discipline.