

ROYAL CHRISTIANS

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.” That’s what the Bible tells us in 1 Peter 2:9. We have a wonderful title. We are the most privileged people that live on the face of the earth. We, believers, members of the Church, the body of Jesus Christ, have the most esteemed position on the globe.

Still there so much gloom sadness and even, increasingly, despair. The true joy that ought to fill our lives is frequently missing or well-hidden. What causes such developments? Could it perhaps be that our faith is weak? Could it be that we express our belief in the Word of God but that there is less of a living out of that Word? What would cause such a development? Often one can hear that in the “olden days” our parents lived much more by faith. And then there is usually added, “because there was nothing else to depend on. We had nothing - only each other.” In those days people depended on one another and considered it a blessing of faith. They trusted God to look after them and found it as they received food, help, comfort and encouragement from one another.

Today we don’t really need that, do we? We all have sufficient to eat. We have places to live. In cases where basic needs are lacking we can turn to one or other level of government for help. If all else fails we can even go to the deacons. But on the whole there is little need and even fewer problems in overcoming it. At the same time there still seems to be poverty. Maybe it can best be described as a poverty of joy. Life goes from day to day, but the joy of faith seems so elusive. That food that we receive on the Lord’s Day seems so distant and unrewarding on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Yet the Word of God tells us to “Rejoice.” It is even repeated for a second time. (Phil 4:4 ff) Paul exhorts us via his letter to the Thessalonians to “Rejoice always...” (1 Thess.5:16).

In these and many other places of Scripture the command to rejoice is tied together with obedience and prayer, but also to the communion of saints. “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.” The context of Philippians 4:4 is similarly that it follows exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche to agree in the Lord and is followed by the counsel to do whatever the Philippians have received from Paul and a commendation for their kindness toward him.

So it appears that much of our task, our responsibility, our cultural mandate, our Christian walk of life, involves our brothers and sisters. And how does that sit with us? Sometimes one may wonder if we are afraid to speak about our faith issues with brothers and sisters in the Lord. A ‘professional’ seems much safer. A counsellor or a work buddy is easier to speak with about such personal things than our fellow saints. But that is not what the Lord teaches in His Word!

“You are a royal priesthood...God’s own people!” That’s what we have been told, and we believe it! But it appears that we must learn again to be what we are. Here and there people establish organizations to deal with counselling and depression, etc. But that is not the way the Lord wants us to be a hand and a foot to one another. He has given us to each other. Under the leadership and direction of the special offices in the Church He has directed us to help each other. We are to exhort, admonish, encourage, help, be patient, and seek to do good to one another and to all. And then the conclusion is rejoice, pray and give thanks. Each one of these commands is followed with a reminder that this is an on going, all-encompassing charge. We read, “Rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks in all circumstances.

Are we prepared to do a little self-examination? How are we doing in our responsibility over against our brothers and sisters? No, not even all of them, just the ones we know could use a hand, a kind word, a visit, a phone call, a ride, some help in the household, some instruction in raising their children, some advice on how to deal with their teenagers, etc., etc.

What about ourselves? Are we prepared to allow some of our brothers and/or sisters into our lives to let them help us? Are we prepared to let them be a gift from our heavenly Father? Or do we shun His gifts because we are embarrassed, or because we fear we might become embarrassed?

We are the future rulers of the world. But today we may (and must) already begin to develop our talents in this regard. This means that we must be able to counsel and guide, to exhort and comfort, to speak clearly about the world view (doctrine) by which we live.

If we are not able to do that with those who confess as we do how do we expect to be able to do with and for those who reject our world view (doctrine)?

Beyond our call to reign with Jesus Christ over all things we, royal Christians, also have a cultural mandate to subdue the earth and to develop it. What has happened to the notable talents that brought wonderful musical pieces that praise the Creator? Where are the Christian scientists who develop Scripturally based material from which we can see the glory our Father has put into creation. Where are the judges who mete out justice as prescribed by our God? Do we dare to speak out politically basing ourselves solely on the Word of God? Why do we so often fear to stand alone?

“The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” (Psalm 24:1) and “Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fullness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.” (Ps.16:11)

What we want to draw attention to is the real, true joy of being a member of Jesus Christ by faith and thus sharing in all His gifts and benefits. That joy does not always shine forth in our walk of life, or in our speech, and one wonders if it is always in our thoughts. And we know that everyone does not display their joy in the same manner. But we are not speaking of a constant laughter or a superficial happiness that tries to ignore the sad reality of sin and evil that still darkens the world around us and taints even the hearts of believers. What we are speaking about is the joy that the sure knowledge of salvation from that dark evil of sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord.

That joy leads us to thankfulness. It leads us to pray (the chief part) that we may actively live as prophets, priests and kings (Lord's Day 12, HC). We pray that we may live actively, progressively toward what we have been promised and what we may begin to enjoy already in this life. We may and must live as 'royal christians', as a 'chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.'

PdB

THE CHURCH IN PROGRESS

[The following is part of an article that appeared in *Una Sancta* on July 19, 1997. For the sake of our Australian readers we will not repeat the entire article, but for the sake of our other readers we present the following excerpt as it falls within the theme we are dealing with. The Editors]

THE FORMATION OF THE CHURCH

Paul's words are just in time. We live in a time in which motherhood is underestimated. Little children tie you down. An abundance of children is not wanted. People postpone having children after the wedding; a career in study or business prevails. And when a couple starts a baby, as they say in our society, after the birth the mother must work. To stay at home is boring. She must develop her talents. And, if I am not wrong, that train of thought increases hand over fist in the church. Therefore: the Lord asks all the women today, from small to great, this question: 'Are you willing to devote yourself to Me in my kingdom? Is this the intent of your life: to produce children to the glory of the Lord?'

It's impossible to give instructions and solutions for all our personal situations in particular. In some cases it will be really necessary that a woman has a job. In other situations there are valid reasons to restrict the number of children or to postpone a pregnancy. But the question of the Lord for the women in the congregations remains: 'Is your attitude to life right? Do you see motherhood, having children - and I now add, appropriate to your situation and responsibility: as many children as possible - do you see this all as the calling and command of the Lord? Or do you look down on children in your heart? Or would you rather blossom out in another way? With a professional job, in part-time work? And do you put away your children at Oma's place or a child care centre? And do you cultivate your ambitions by the hand of worldly magazines or commercials on TV?'

Paul asks the women to 'examine yourself'. Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing. In this way she is rehabilitated to her office. Again she's allowed to be Eve - mother of all living. Thus the church is in progress. By means of the faithful exercise of our duties the Lord builds his church. This Word is trustworthy. Salvation is attached to it!

THE FINALIZATION OF THE CHURCH

"The Word is trustworthy! If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work." Not every brother becomes an elder. A bit further there's even a subdivision: there are men who become deacons. But again it's about our attitude to life, the direction of our life; but this time

relating to men and boys. And the Lord's question to them is: 'What do you want in your life? To earn money as much as possible? A well paid job? One course after another?'

Yes, they will say: 'we have to pay off our house. And I have the responsibility to look after my wife and children.'

Of course, Paul knows that quite well. But he asks them [in particular the young fellow brothers; Timothy was still young at this stage!] too: "Is it really your longing to become a bishop in the congregation? Are you busy with that? Club attendance? Bible study? A real effort in society? Are you training in such a way that when the Lord calls you to serve Him in the office you can respond to that calling positively? Or is it a difficult time for you when the church council makes a new slate for the election of office bearers? And do you heave a sigh of relief when your name is not on the slate?" As a young brother said to me, 'I have no plans to go to club; if I do I'll also be sitting in the elder's bench next year.

And therefore, with this statement the Lord touches their heart. 'If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work.' And Paul underlines this beforehand. 'The word is trustworthy!' In this way the Lord will finalize His church. The faithful service of the women in their office is completed with the office of the men. Because in this way the Lord preserves and finalizes His church. When men prepare themselves faithfully for their office, it will be a blessing for their family and the whole congregation. It's one of the means the Lord uses to build up his house and to give faith to a new and younger generation.

FAITHFULNESS IN OUR OFFICES

The world laughs about this. Everything circles around good health, a well-paid job, a four-wheel drive, fun and pleasure. But when you think about it, it is really boring without perspective. You would laugh as in the comic strip of Gasper and Hobbes if it were not so very sad: 'we start moaning, and then we begin squabbling about whose turn it is to microwave our meal.' As Paul says to Timothy: 'In latter times some will depart from the faith, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry and commanding to abstain from food which God created to be received with thanksgiving. Exercise yourself toward godliness. Come to Christ as to a living stone, that you also, as living stones, are built up in a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ'

This Word is trustworthy! If a man desires this, he desires a good work. The man will be saved with this mentality and attitude. In this world people will say: 'Should he do this? It's a waste of energy. With his possibilities he can go much higher. If he does this, there will be too little income coming in.' But the Lord says: "Church in progress. My work is still not finished on earth. And I will involve men in the salvation of others. To preserve and save the next generations too. And in fulfilling this office 'the Word is trustworthy!' We can rely on it.

And to every one who is faithful in his office, and that applies to men as well as to women, young men, and young women, boys and girls, the Lord will say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord. [Cf. Matthew 25:23]. This Word is trustworthy!

W. Van der Jagt

“Now you are the body of Christ.”

1 Cor.12:27a

The Bible compares the church to the human body. As the body has many members all with different functions, so the church has many different members. The members of the church differ in age, in character, in work, in capabilities etc. The church is not a uniform mass of people. The image of the body also shows that all these members are united. The hand cannot do without the foot, and the eye cannot do without the hand. God so made the body that all these different members with their functions, fit together into a beautiful whole. So also the congregation is one. All the differences that are there have to function in the upbuilding of the whole body. You cannot say “I am different therefore I do not fit.” On the contrary, God gives these differences so that we may complement each other.

There is yet another element to this image of the body. The Bible also uses it to show our communion with Christ. He is the Head, we are His body. As the body is ruled by the head, so Christ rules the church. As the body cannot do without the head, so the church cannot do without Christ.

In 1 Cor.12 we read the words; “Now you are the body of Christ.” To whom is Paul speaking? Who are these “you”? He addresses the church, yes, to be more precise, the congregation in Corinth. He does not say, “You are a part of the body of Christ” but, “You are the body of Christ.” The local congregation is called the body of Christ and individually we are members of this body. As members of the congregation we are members of the body of Christ and so may share in all His benefits.

I like to connect this to something I have said before. Then I said that we are to gather where we are called, namely with the congregation of which we are a part. Our membership is connected to a local church. The words of 1 Cor.12 underline this as well. In this local congregation we have our place and task. Here we have the task to use our talents and gifts for the well-being of the other members. Family ties or friendships should not overrule this. I say this because that can happen. The danger is not unrealistic that other relationships can start to overrule the place we have in the congregation.

I will give some examples. It is not unusual to see that when there is a baptism family and friends come from far and near to witness this. In the history of the church it has been a problem that baptism was postponed because of family. I do not think that this is a concern at this point. Due to our mobility, family and friends can be here without too many problems. What’s wrong with this? Isn’t it wonderful to watch this? No doubt it is a joy for the family to see the baptism of a young family member. Yet, the danger is there that baptism is seen more and more as a family affair or even a social affair, rather than a gift to the congregation. The Lord added the sacraments to the Word for the strengthening of the church. The Form for Baptism says that we administer baptism for the glory of God, for our comfort and for the upbuilding of the congregation. The family is not even mentioned.

True, we do not discount the family, but it should not receive undue attention. What can happen now is that because family was at the baptism of our child, we feel obliged to attend the baptism of a nephew or niece; otherwise we end up with sour faces in the family. There is no obligation to go and do this. There is the obligation to see your place in the local congregation. The Lord gave baptism to the local congregation.

What applies to baptism, applies also to other special events such as public profession of faith and ordination of officebearers. It has become quite common that when there is public profession of faith the church is overloaded and the other churches are rather empty. The whole family and many friends are invited to attend. Young people travel from one church to the next wherever there is profession of faith. Here also there can be a sense of obligation. Family and friends came here when my child made profession of faith, so I have to go there as well. I believe that these customs are overdone. A few years ago we had to advise people to go to a neighbouring church because there was no more room. Other churches have had to rent other facilities. We run the danger that it becomes a family or social affair, and we lose the awareness that this is first and foremost a matter of the congregation. There is no need to go and attend these services in sister churches. There is the calling to be gathered with the body to which we belong.

There is yet another example I would like to touch on, and that has to do with the Lord's Supper. The Church Order allows for guests to attend Lord's Supper by means of an attestation. When someone presents an attestation of a sister church he is allowed to participate. This does not mean, however, that every guest in the audience should come. It is not true that the call to come eat and drink applies to all who are sitting in the church. This call comes to the body of Christ. There is nothing wrong with being a guest and not participating at the Lord's Table. This guest has his or her own place at the table in the church where he or she is a member.

Therefore, when someone does not have an attestation, don't make a big issue out of it. No, the person cannot celebrate here, but is that such a problem? It is not, when that person sees his or her place in their own congregation. The sacraments are given for the local congregation. If a member of a sister church has an attestation, fine, but if not, or if the person is not a member of a sister church, don't blow it out of proportion. That person is called in his or her own congregation to celebrate.

These are some examples, which may generate some discussion. In our discussion we should remember and focus on the main point. The main point is: "You are the body of Christ." That body is the local congregation, Let us then see the gifts we receive in being a member of His body and use these gifts for the well-being of the other members.

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REFORMED CHURCH OF THE UNITED STATES

At a certain time there was only one classis (Eureka classis) left that remained faithful to the reformed doctrine. The other churches of this large denomination merged with the Evangelical &

Reformed in 1934, which is now the United Church of Christ. The small remnant is the true continuation of the RCUS, and the continuation of the German Reformed Church in America, and dates back as far as 1710. A book was published in 1996 to commemorate the 250th synod, held that year in Eureka, S.D. The book includes the history of the RCUS. It is available from Inheritance Publications.

Recently the matter of Women Voting in Congregation Meetings has been raised in this denomination. As the Canadian and American Reformed Churches are in close contact with this federation and our sister churches in the Netherlands have already established Ecclesiastical Fellowship with them, it is of interest to us how they view and deal with this controversial issue.

Representatives of the RCUS have also voiced words of warning to the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in the Netherlands at recent Synods when they dealt with this issue. As the reports about this matter are lengthy we will provide them piece meal. Recognizing the drawbacks of divided articles we will try to assure that each segment presents a complete article.

Women Voting in Congregational Meetings

The Eureka Classis has appointed three special committees to study the role of women in the church and, particularly whether women have a biblical right to exercise the vote in the congregational meeting. These committees presented their reports to the Classis sessions in 1965 and 1968. The response of the Classis to each of these reports is noted after each report. In response to an overture from one of the Consistories for advice on the subject of women voting, the 1976 Classis ordered the Publications Committee to reprint the previous Classis reports on this subject and send them out to all the Consistories before the 1977 session of Classis. The Publications Committee herewith makes these reports available to the Consistories and to all persons who desire this material.

Norman Jones, Chairman
Publications Committee

Reformed Church in the United States Report One: The Place of Women in the Church

In the study of the place of women in the church it is important, first of all, to note the equality of men and women in their relationship to God as individuals. This equality is apparent in the first mention of men in the Scripture for it is stated that man, male and female, was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). The relationship of man and woman to God is that each is the creature of God, created in God's image and in this they are equal. This being the case, we would expect that this equality would remain in man's redeemed relationship to God, which is what we find (Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 11:11, 12).

However, that this equality in individual relationship to God does not imply identity or even equality in the created order of the universe is apparent from the placement of man and woman in their respective, and different, positions in that created order. This happens in Genesis immediately upon their creation and continues as long as the created world lasts. To conclude that Christ or his followers institute changes in the creation order is to ignore the fact that New Testament teaching

on the position of men and women, in either the home or the church, rests directly upon the original economy itself (Mark 10:5ff.; 1 Cor. 11:7-9; 1 Tim. 2:13).

Our problem then is to learn from Scriptural precept and example just what is the women's place in that part of the created order which is the church. That the church is rightly called a part of the created order is seen from the application of creation ordinances to it (1 Cor. 11; 1 Tim. 2:3). Some confusion of this point often occurs because of the church's intimate concern with man's relationship to God, but such teaching as that of Jesus concerning the absence of marrying in the resurrection point out to us the very reality of the church militant's place as a part of this present created order, wherein marriage is indeed an honourable estate in all.

I. Considering then the Scriptural examples and precepts, we notice first that women are found in many places of privilege and even leadership in the church. Below are given a number of examples of such position in the church, grouped in a somewhat arbitrary order. These could, of course, be easily multiplied. There are quite a number of prophetesses mentioned in the Bible, most often in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament (Miriam - Exod. 15:20; Deborah - Judg. 4:4; Huldah - II Kgs. 22:14; Noadiah - Neh. 6:14; Anna - Luke 2:36; Phillip's daughters - Acts 21:9). One instance of a woman judging Israel may be found, namely Deborah (Judg. 4:4).

Several women are found in places of privilege in the company of Jesus' followers. They are found often at Jesus' feet (Luke 7:38; 10:39), ministering to him (Matt. 27:55-56) and they are first at his tomb to discover his resurrection (John 20:1). Many other places of prominence are given them in the history of redemption. We think of Ruth the Moabitess, Esther the queen, Mary the mother of Jesus and, not least of all, those women who are among those with the apostles in the upper room after Christ's ascension.

II. Next we consider women as they are found taking part in the general ministry or serving work of the church ("ministry" here refers to the work of the church in general service, as exercised by the individual believer in his office as believer and does not refer to the official ministry of the special officers, namely, deacons and elders). Paul tells us that each member of the church has certain gifts and that each member is to use his or her gifts for the good of the whole body. We find this injunction followed by the people of God throughout the Scriptures. The serving work of the church is perhaps better examined if seen in a threefold division:

1. The administration of the Word of God;
2. The administration of rule; and
3. The administration of mercy.

We find women frequently administering the Word in more or less private situations. The Samaritan woman Jesus meets at Jacob's well goes into the city to tell its men about him saying, "Is not this the Christ?" (John 4:29). Anna the prophetess speaks out about the baby Jesus to all those who await the redemption of Israel (Luke 2:36). Priscilla is mentioned with her husband as expounding the way of God more clearly to Apollos (Acts. 19:26). Women are present at the meeting of prayer in the upper room (Acts 1:14), and are by Paul given the task of teaching the

younger women proper Christian demeanor (Titus. 2:4). Women are also found widely administering mercy throughout the history of the church. The Shunammite woman provided a room and support for Elisha (II Kgs. 4:10); women were ever ministering to the Savior during his earthly work (Matt.27:55-57; Dorcas is only one of several women who are mentioned in Acts as serving the church in this way (Acts 9:36) and the case of Phebe as related by Paul in Rom. 16:1-2 is another example of this work of mercy in the hands of a woman. Her case also raises the question of whether there was an official order of deaconesses set aside in a way similar to the other special offices in the church. In answering this question it must first of all be noted that this use of the feminine noun diakonos is the only such use in the Bible, so not a great deal can be concluded from it alone, particularly since this is not a very definitive use. Apart from telling us that she had helped Paul and many others nothing is said of her position.

Secondly, if this is a reference to a special order of deaconesses it is the only such reference in the New Testament and were there indeed a special office of “deaconess” we would expect mention of it elsewhere. Although this is an argument from silence it is strengthened both by our first point here and by the universal use of men in the other offices of the church. The burden of proof would seem to lie upon those who see such an official designation here.

Thirdly, let it be observed that although the noun diakonos is not used elsewhere in the scripture in reference to a woman, its parent verb diakonein is and that with reference to unofficial duties (Matt. 27:55). This would indicate that the noun also could be used to express the thought of service in an unofficial capacity (those who find a special office here must insist that the noun can be used of nothing else). We conclude, therefore, that it is most unlikely, though not completely impossible, that the special office of deaconess existed in the apostolic church. This will be discussed more later.

Finally, we do find women administering rule in the church but that only in a limited way. We have Miriam, the sister of Moses, leading the women of Israel in dancing before the LORD (Exod. 15:20) and we have Deborah judging the children of Israel in Mount Ephraim (Judg. 4:4). Upon close examination the rule which Miriam exercised is seen to be a rule only over other woman and that not a commanding authority but a leadership through example. It was indeed an exercise of rule, as is any real leadership, but not with the binding power of dominion. The case of Deborah, on the other hand, was a case of actual exercise of authority over men as well as women, over “the children (Heb. ‘Sons’) of Israel,” all of them. Examination of this instance, however, leads to the conclusion that this is the exception that proves the rule (cf. Isa. 3:12). It is only in the direst need of leadership that Deborah is raised up, and in her dealings with Barak it is seen that this is not the natural order of things; in fact, it is a shame for her to lead the army of Israel against Sisera. It is a shame for Sisera to be delivered into the hand of a woman and it is only after Barak refuses to go without Deborah that she agrees to accompany him. The raising up of Deborah is then often viewed as the sign of a judgement upon Israel for sin rather than a situation which is to be imitated.