Women’s Ordination and the Book of Church Order

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Joyce Borgman de Yelder listened intently. The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America had convened in Holland, Michigan. On Wednesday morning, June 13, 1979 a debate began which would decide whether she could be ordained to the office of minister of the Word. De Yelder’s request to her classis for ordination the previous June had led to a year long controversy in the church. The major issue was whether the Book of Church Order permits or does not permit the ordination of women. The problem centered around the meaning of the word “persons” as it is used in the Book of Church Order.

The Book of Church Order defines ministers of the Word as “those persons who have been inducted into that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established by the church.” Most Reformed Church members had always interpreted “persons,” in that context, to mean only men. Consequently to ordain a woman without an amendment to the Book of Church Order was illegal and a violation of the authority of the government of the church. Many advocated the ordination of women as ministers of the Word, but to ordain women before the Book of Church Order was amended was unacceptable to them. However, there were those who were convinced that “persons” should be interpreted to include women and men and that an amendment to the Book of Church Order was not necessary.

A second argument concerned the understanding of the teaching of Scripture concerning women’s ordination. Some contended that Scripture bars women from holding the office of minister of the Word. They were countered by those who appealed to the General Synod’s ruling of 1958 which declared that “Scripture nowhere excludes women from eligibility to the offices” (MGS., p. 328).

De Velder listened as the Synod debated whether the Book of Church Order permitted or did not permit the ordination of women to the office of minister of the Word. A majority vote of the Synod would determine the answer. She believed that a majority of the delegates favored ordination of women. But did a majority believe that the Book of Church Order permitted women’s ordination? Her career now hung on such technicalities. What would the General Synod decide?

The Government of the Reformed Church

The Reformed Church in America has its roots in the Reformed Church in the

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Netherlands which was formally organized in 1566. In 1628 Dutch settlers in the New World developed churches in New York. Like other churches in the Reformed tradition, the Reformed Church has an evangelical purpose "to minister to the total life of many by the preaching, teaching, and promulgation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works." The Reformed Church also believes that its mission is achieved most effectively when "good order and proper discipline are maintained through its government and standards." The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are its only rule of faith and practice. Its Constitution consists of the Government of the Reformed Church in America, the Disciplinary Procedures (which together are referred to as the Book of Church Order), the Liturgy, and the Doctrinal Standards which include the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism with its Compendium, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort.

There are four basic governmental units in the Reformed Church. These are the consistory, the classis, the particular synod, and the General Synod. These bodies exercise judicial as well as legislative powers. The General Synod is the highest assembly and judicatory and it alone determines denominational policy. Legislative it has the power to make all rules and regulations necessary to put into effect any and all the articles of the Constitution of the Reformed Church. A simple majority vote of the General Synod is needed for legislative and judicial action.

A different procedure is followed to amend the Constitution. Amendments to the Constitution are made only upon the adoption by the General Synod at a stated meeting, with recommendation to the classes for approval. This adoption and recommendation requires a majority vote of the Synod. However, at least two-thirds of the classes must approve a proposed amendment in order to secure its adoption. If an amendment is approved by the classes, the General Synod, at its discretion, may pass a final declarative resolution on the amendment. When the declarative action has taken place, the amendment becomes effective.

Three offices are employed in exercising the governmental functions in the Reformed Church. These are the minister of the Word, the elder, and the deacon. These offices are understood to be essentially functional in nature and are viewed in terms of service rather than status. The minister of the Word does not hold a higher office than the elder. "Designated elders" may administer the sacraments and properly qualified members may be licensed to preach the Word.

East, West, and Women's Ordination

New Brunswick Theological Seminary, begun in 1784, is the oldest theological seminary in the Reformed Church in America. Situated in New Brunswick, New Jersey, it claims the distinction of being the oldest theological seminary in the United States. By the end of the nineteenth century a sizable community of Dutch had settled in the midwest and was given permission to form a seminary in the "west." They chose Holland, Michigan as the site. The school was called Western Theological Seminary. Thus people began to speak of the eastern and western sections of the church. Popular opinion described the West as "conservative" and the East as "liberal." In the late 1960's the Reformed Church was on the verge of schism over a
proposal to merge with other denominations. The division appeared to be between the eastern and western classes.

In the 1970's a similar division developed over the ordination of women. The East was accused of supporting women's ordination and the West opposing it. Actually, as early as 1918 the East proposed the ordination of women as elders and deacons. In 1918 the Particular Synod of Albany and the Classis of Montgomery asked that the Constitution be amended by omitting the word "male" from Article IV, Section 42, which read: "The elders and deacons shall be chosen from the male members of the church in full communion who have attained the age of twenty-one years." This amendment would have permitted the ordination of women as elders and deacons. The General Synod did adopt the overture. Other eastern classes and particular synods continued unsuccessfully to propose the same overture to the General Synod through 1922. Ten years later, in 1932, the Classis of Westchester repeated the overture, followed in 1936 by the Classis of Bergen, then the Classis of Long Island in 1941, the Classis of Newark in 1945 and, once again, the Classis of Westchester in 1951. In 1952 thirteen related overtures came before the Synod. Seven opposed a change in the Constitution and six again asked for a deletion of the word "male." For the first time, the General Synod chose to give the classes opportunity to decide the issue by voting on the proposed amendment which would delete the word "male" from Article IV, Section 42. The classes rejected the proposed amendment.

In 1954, the General Synod appointed a committee on the ordination of women for the purpose of studying the issue and to bring before the church a statement concerning the scriptural basis for the ordination of women. The recommendation of that committee was brought before the 1958 Synod. The position stated: "Scripture nowhere excludes women from eligibility to the offices but always emphasizes their inclusion, prominence, and equal status with men in the Church of Jesus Christ." This statement was adopted by the 1958 Synod and became an official position of the Reformed Church.

The Synod of 1958, wishing to amend the Book of Church Order, sent the following proposal to the classes for approval: "the offices in the Reformed Church in America shall be open to women and men alike beginning with the year 1962." Classes denied the approval.

Not until 1967 did the General Synod send another recommendation for women's ordination to the classes. In 1969 the Synod asked the classes to concur in making the following changes in the Book of Church Order: (1) that the word "male" be deleted in regard to elders and deacons, and (2) to change the word "persons" to "men and women" in regard to the office of minister of the Word. Both recommendations were rejected but reappeared before the classes annually. In 1972 the classes approved the overture to delete the word "male." It had taken 54 years of debate and overtures to open the offices of elder and deacon to women.

The proposal to amend the Book of Church Order to read "men and women" instead of "persons" continued to be brought before the classes through 1978. It never received the two-thirds approval. Twice it was only one vote short of approval. Several classes argued that a change in the Book of Church Order was unnecessary because the meaning of "persons"
clearly includes women. They held that the proposed change was only for the purpose of clarity.

**Women are Ordained**

In 1973 the General Synod received a request to grant a dispensation from the professorial certificate to Joyce Stedge. A professorial certificate is granted to a student who has successfully completed the prescribed course of theological studies in a Reformed Church seminary and has been adjudged by the faculty to be a fit candidate for the gospel ministry. The professorial certificate entitles the candidate to an examination for licensure and ordination.

A candidate who has not attended a Reformed Church seminary, as was the case with Joyce Stedge, must secure a dispensation from the professorial certificate by making application to a classis. Rockland-Westchester examined Joyce Stedge and petitioned the General Synod for a dispensation from the professorial certificate. The General Synod requested that the faculty of New Brunswick Theological Seminary examine Mrs. Stedge. When this examination was satisfactorily completed, the Board of Theological Education recommended that the 1973 General Synod grant the dispensation.

The president of the 1973 Synod, Elder Harry DeBruyn, was asked to rule on the constitutionality of granting the first dispensation to a woman. President DeBruyn presented his interpretation of the *Book of Church Order* and ruled that the application and the recommendation for the dispensation were within the provisions of the *Government*. A division of the house was called for and the Synod voted 152 to 83 to uphold his ruling. Overtures to the 1974 and 1975 Synods, which called for a reversal of this ruling, were denied.

After Joyce Stedge was granted the dispensation she received licensure from the Classis of Rockland-Westchester and the Classis of Mid-Hudson ordained and installed her as the pastor of the Accord Reformed Church in Accord, New York, on October 7, 1973. No complaints were issued against the action of the Classis of Mid-Hudson. Several overtures were sent to the 1974 Synod but they received no action. The Synod did, however, recommend “voluntary suspension of the attestation of licensure and ordination of women until action is taken by General Synod 1975.”

The next four years saw no ordinations of women to the office of minister of the Word. In 1978 the classes again defeated the proposal to amend the *Book of Church Order* but two classes, Brooklyn and Bergen, had already voted to ordain women. During the summer of 1978 three more classes voted to ordain women as ministers of the Word without waiting for two-thirds of the classes to approve a change in the *Book of Church Order*.

On June 25, 1978, the Classis of Brooklyn ordained Valérie DeMarinis Miller and on July 23, 1978, the Classis of Bergen ordained Louise Ann Hill-Alto. Constance Longhurst was ordained by the Classis of Raritan on October 15, 1978, and Klaire Miller by the Classis of New Brunswick on November 12, 1978. The Classis of Albany voted on June 20, 1978, to ordain Joyce Borgman de Velder but the Particular Synod of Albany, in response to a complaint, directed the Classis of Albany not to ordain de Velder. Complaints were also issued against the classes of Brooklyn, Bergen, and Raritan. There were no complaints against the Classis of New Brunswick.
A complaint, according to the *Disciplinary Procedures* of the Reformed Church, is “a written statement alleging administrative error.” The Judicial Business Committee of an assembly receives the complaint, hears the parties, and reports its findings and recommendations to its assembly. When the report of the Judicial Business Committee is presented the report may be “adopted, rejected, amended, or referred back to the committee. The decision of the assembly may be to confirm or reverse, in whole or in part, the action of the lower assembly, or to remand the case to it with instructions, or to conduct a new investigation.” The decision is determined by a majority vote of the assembly.

By the time the General Synod met in June, 1979, it had three complaints regarding women's ordination and the *Book of Church Order*. Many delegates expressed irritation with the five eastern classes which had voted to ordain women as ministers. There was widespread concern that some would leave the Reformed Church if their position lost in the Synod of 1979. Another east-west split seemed possible. Would Reformed Church unity be more important than women's ordination?

**Joyce Borgman de Velder**

At the time of the 1979 General Synod, Joyce Borgman de Velder was 29 years old and was the Associate in Ministry of the Delmar Reformed Church in Delmar, New York. She had grown up in a conservative Reformed Church in Fremont, Michigan, where she had responded to the church’s instruction to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. She had taken that call more seriously than many in that congregation intended. They did not believe that women should be ministers of the Word.

In 1968, de Velder went to Hope College in Holland, Michigan, and then to Western Theological Seminary. She received fine grades and was highly respected by the faculty. She was a caring person, easy going, and appeared able to withstand the pressures of being the only woman student in the M.Div. program. She endured the rejection of many of the men who thought she ought not to be there. By the time she graduated from Western Seminary in 1976 she had married. Just after her graduation from seminary, she was examined for licensure and ordination by the Classis of Muskegon, under whose care she had been placed throughout her years at seminary. She was granted a license to preach and to candidate for a call. Later that same year she was asked to serve as the Associate in Ministry at the Delmar Reformed Church in Delmar, New York. She went to the Delmar church feeling the pain of not being able to be ordained. Each year she waited for the classes to amend the *Book of Church Order* so she could request ordination.

**Request for Ordination**

In April, 1978, de Velder decided to request ordination from the Classis of Albany. On June 20, 1978, the classis met in a little country church in Onesquethaw, New York. After much debate it voted that evening, 24 to 15 (8 abstentions), to grant
her request. But de Velder left that meeting with mixed feelings. She was pleased to be promised ordination. However, she was hurt when a woman elder from her congregation spoke against her request, and by a minister who said: “You know I love you Joyce, but I couldn’t vote yes.” Just as disturbing were those who believed that she wanted to be a test case and felt that this was none other than a backdoor strategy, alien to the proper conducting of church affairs. De Velder had tried to explain that her request was more than a desire to be a test case. As they knew, Valerie DeMarinis Miller was to be ordained on June 25, 1978, and Louise Ann Hill-Alto was to be ordained on July 23. Why did the church need another case? A petition had been written quickly that evening to suspend any action the classis might take, but not enough people signed it. De Velder was instructed by the president of the classis to form a committee and plan the date and service for her ordination. The date was proposed for Sunday, December 3, 1978.

Following the June 20, 1978, meeting of classis, six complaints were sent to the Particular Synod of Albany. One of these was from the woman elder in de Velder’s congregation who, while she favored the ordination of women, was opposed to such ordinations in the Reformed Church until the Book of Church Order was amended. Five of the complaints were found to be irregular, and their authors were instructed that the proper corrections should be made within twenty days. One complaint was found in good order and a hearing was set for February 7, 1979.

Meanwhile de Velder waited for the October 17, 1978, meeting of classis for approval of the date for her ordination. On Sunday, September 14, 1978, she and the Rev. Gerard Van Heest, the senior pastor of the Delmar Church, met with the congregation after worship to explain what was happening and to answer questions. Just before the service a paper was “mysteriously” circulated, the content of which had to do with why de Velder should not be ordained. It was signed by “a group of concerned church members.”

At the classis meeting, October 17, 1978, de Velder was stunned when the December 3 date for her ordination was rejected by a vote of 33 to 8. There was little discussion but the same woman elder, who had previously objected, made a strong speech in opposition to her ordination. The rationale given by the classis for the denial was that it would be best to wait until the Particular Synod of Albany had ruled on the report of the Judicial Business Committee.

A special session of the Particular Synod of Albany was set for February 17, 1979, to hear the complaint against the Classis of Albany. With this information the classis at its regular session on January 16, 1979, approved de Velder’s request to set her ordination for Sunday, March 4, 1979, provided the Particular Synod of Albany upheld the decision of the classis. The vote was 33 yes, 10 no, with 3 abstentions.

Two weeks before the Particular Synod of Albany was scheduled to meet, de Velder and the members of the Vocational Development Committee discovered that the Particular Synod Judicial Business Committee had overlooked an important step in the process, which if not corrected, could invalidate their report at the Particular Synod hearing. The Judicial Business Committee had failed to let the original com-
plainants rewrite their complaints and appear before the committee. This procedural oversight was corrected but only days before the Synod met.

The Particular Synod

Joyce de Velder went to the hearing of the Particular Synod of Albany with the words of the woman elder still in her ears. The morning before, the elder had called her and made accusations that were not easily forgotten. Now she listened as the Judicial Business Committee read its recommendation:

The Committee voted three to one in favor of sustaining the complaint submitted by the First Reformed Church, Wynantskill, New York. Therefore, the Committee recommends for adoption by the Particular Synod of Albany the following resolution: Resolved that the Particular Synod of Albany sustain the complaint of the First Reformed Church, Wynantskill, New York against the action of Albany Classis in voting to ordain Joyce Borgman de Velder as minister of the Word.

De Velder was astonished.

The original parties defended their positions. Elder John Hintermaier spoke in favor of the complaint and the Rev. James DeVries defended the classis. Debate and questioning followed. Then the Rev. Richard Lake, chairman of the Vocational Development Committee, moved to reject the recommendation of the Judicial Committee, and instead confirm the action of the Classis of Albany. The motion failed: 15 yes to 16 no, with one ballot illegible.

A second motion was made, this time to adopt the recommendation of the Judicial Committee. This was affirmed: 20 yes, and 12 no. Then it was moved to direct the Classis of Albany not to ordain de Velder. This passed: 20 yes, 9 no, with 1 abstention.

It was clear there would be no ordination on March 4. Only one procedure remained. The Classis of Albany could complain the action of the Particular Synod to the General Synod. De Velder immediately talked with the President of Classis about arranging a special meeting of the Classis of Albany, since an intent to complain had to be filed within thirty days. The Classis of Albany met in special session on March 6, 1979, and voted unanimously to complain against the action of the Particular Synod of Albany. This was difficult for de Velder to understand, for some of the people who had voted to adopt the Judicial Committee's report and to direct the classis not to ordain were now complaining against their own action.

A committee to prepare the complaint was formed and the Rev. Allan Janssen was appointed coordinator. Janssen had just come to the classis in January, 1979, and de Velder believed this to be a blessing indeed. He had studied the minutes of the Judicial Committee and had discovered what he considered to be administrative errors on its part and consequently on the part of the Particular Synod. Thus a complaint by the Classis of Albany was issued against the Particular Synod of Albany for administrative errors in accepting a report that was based on erroneous findings and for accepting the work of a synodical committee that had apparently failed to conduct its business according to the procedures outlined in the Book of Church Order. The com-
plaint was approved by the classis on March 20, 1979. From there it was sent to the General Synod for distribution to the Synod’s Judicial Business Committee. De Velder then had two months to wait for the decision.

**The General Synod**

The issue of women's ordination and its relation to the *Book of Church Order* was central in many people’s minds when the 1979 General Synod opened. What would the President of General Synod have to say about it? And what had the Judicial Business Committee decided? At 2:30 p.m. Monday, June 11, the Rev. Harvey T. Hoekstra gave the presidential address. He stressed the importance of church unity stating: “We must find our unity in diversity; this is to say that we must respect each other’s deepest convictions and understandings and to recognize that God who has made us his people by his grace accepts us both.” Then he gave his point of view about the *Book of Church Order* and women’s ordination. He addressed the action of the classes which had ordained women and concluded:

1. According to the generally recognized interpretation of the *Book of Church Order* the ordinations of women to the ministry of the Word which have taken place have violated that understanding.

2. Those involved in these ordinations did not do so out of wanton disrespect for or disregard for the *Book of Church Order*. For them, the intolerable ambiguities of women gifted of God and trained for ministry in churches eager for them, finally compelled what, for them, was obedience to conscience.

De Velder was disturbed. That was not the position of the classes nor of the women who were ordained. They did not believe the *Book of Church Order* had been violated. The ordinations of her sisters did not take place by “obedience to conscience” but because the *Book of Church Order* permitted them. She wondered how influential the President’s position would be. She realized, as did the delegates, that his report, written before the decision of the Judicial Committee was known, was contrary to the recommendations of the Judicial Business Committee. The delegates had received that report when they registered. Why had the President taken a position that differed so from the Judicial Committee’s?

Wednesday morning, June 13, 1979, de Velder listened as the chairman of the Judicial Business Committee read the recommendations:

> It is the finding of the Judicial Business Committee of this General Synod, that no deliberate, intentional or actual violation of the *Book of Church Order* took place on the part of the classes complained against. Moreover, we find that in each instance they acted in good faith and in accordance with the requirements of the *Book of Church Order*.

The Committee had received three complaints, one regarding the ordination of Valerie DeMarinus Miller, another the ordination of Louis Ann Hill-Alto, and the third was the complaint against the Particular Synod of Albany directing the Classis of Albany not to ordain de Velder. The recommendations of the Committee were to uphold the ordinations of Miller and Hill-Alto and to direct the Classis of Albany
to ordain de Velder. The vote of the Committee was four yes and one no. The attorney from the Particular Synod of Chicago had not attended the meetings. Of the four voting yes, three were ministers representing the eastern particular synods and one was an attorney representing the Particular Synod of Michigan. The attorney voting no represented the Particular Synod of the West.

What did all this mean? Had the three eastern synods, where the ordinations had taken place, dominated the committee? How could it be that the Book of Church Order was not violated? If this were the case then why had the last six General Synods recommended amending the Book of Church Order to include women explicitly in the wording? Why had the judicial process not been used six years before? These were the question of many of the delegates.

**Debate on the Floor**

The Synod was instructed that the floor was open for discussion. However, there could be no applause in support of positions. Delegates were to maintain utmost respect for each other's views. The atmosphere was that of controlled tension.

A man spoke against the recommendation. He contended that the fact the General Synod for the last six years voted to amend the Book of Church Order indicated that a change of the Constitution was necessary to permit the ordination of women. Ordaining women in order to change the Book of Church Order through the judicial process was a backdoor, deceitful method, he insisted.

The next delegate spoke for the motion. He argued that the action of the classes in ordaining women was neither a deceitful nor an underhanded procedure. The classes had acted in good faith, believing that the Book of Church Order permitted such ordinations.

A man from California argued that when the Scripture says there is neither male nor female, it is to be understood in terms of salvation. The relation of male and female in the administration of the church is different. Women are not to have authority over men. Besides, he spoke, the life of a pastor is very demanding. Sometimes they are called out in the middle of the night. Women are mothers of children. They can't just leave those children... I'm not a male chauvinist... but the problem in our society and families today is working mothers.

The Rev. Bert Van Soest, a former president of the General Synod, spoke for the motion. The previous day, when the floor was open for discussion of the issues before the Synod, Van Soest made an informative statement about the nature of "church order," and "custom and practice." He said that he could sense the ambivalence of the delegates about the Book of Church Order as it presently stands and the practice that exists within the church. But, he said, I think that we should not forget that parliamentary procedure or church order is determined by the practice of the church and that it is to serve the good of the church. Many times in our local churches, in our homes and schools the rules and procedure have to be changed in order to meet the practice of the people. Van Soest reminded the Synod that in principle and in practice the
Reformed Church has used the gifts of women and given them the right of voice and authority within the church in almost every aspect. Then as a denomination, he continued, we gave them that right as elders and deacons. There is no higher office in the Reformed Church than elder. The preaching of the Word is not a greater right than to serve as an elder in the Reformed Church. So in practice throughout the Reformed Church we have acknowledged the right of women to the offices of the church. Our ambivalence comes at the point where our church order does not agree with our practice.

Speaking for the motion Wednesday morning, Van Soest reminded the delegates that the last six General Synods wanted the church to interpret “persons” as male and female. The General Synods, he said, have affirmed that women have a right to be ordained ministers of the Word. I conclude, he summarized, that this body has said that “persons” is to be interpreted to include women. Our practice has changed but the classes haven’t. The practice of the church should determine the rules of the church. I hope we can become consistent about what we have already done.

The Rev. William Thompson then surprised the delegates by speaking for the motion. The day before he had spoken against the ordination of women, claiming that women were not to preach or have authority over men. But, he said, he had been reflecting on President Hoekstra’s report which called for conducting the Synod after the spirit of the New Testament church at the Council of Jerusalem. I agree, he said, that there are many parallels to what we are doing here and the situation recorded in Acts 15. But there is one way in which the situation in Acts 15 is not parallel to this Synod because the first Council dealt with the matter of the process of salvation. The essence of the Christian faith was at stake. The Council managed to come to an agreement which involved a compromise. Neither side won completely. But the Holy Spirit won that day because unity was maintained. I am not in favor of women’s ordination, Thompson said, but this issue isn’t that important. This issue does not injure the gospel. It is a matter of conscience. I can live with this. What is important is that we must have unity in the Reformed Church in America even if it is unity in diversity.

There were several speeches on the importance of Reformed Church unity. Then three minutes before the closing of the morning session, Dr. Elton Eenigenburg was recognized. Dr. Eenigenburg is professor of ethics and theology at Western Theological Seminary. For six years he had been the parliamentarian for the General Synod and for thirteen years was a member of the Committee on Church Government. He was largely responsible for drafting the wording of the Book of Church Order. For many, Dr. Eenigenburg and the Book of Church Order were synonymous.

Dr. Eenigenburg began: “I intend to vote in favor of the recommendation.” He then told how he had been preoccupied with the report of the Judicial Business Committee since he first received it several days before. He was especially impressed, he said, with the report’s repetition of the phrase “custom and practice,” one which it employed four times.

This accent on “custom and practice” in the report moved him, Eenigenburg said,
to reflect on the fact that we so often fail, in our Reformed Church discussion, to distinguish carefully between our “written law,” that is, our Book of Church Order, and what we designate “custom and practice.” We try desperately to identify the two. But they can’t really be identified with one another; they are clearly different from one another. “Custom and practice,” which has been with the human race from the very beginning, constantly works to change “written law.” In acknowledgement of that fact we used to call our Committee on Church Government the Committee on the Revision of the Constitution, accepting the fact that from year to year our “custom and practice” was saying to the Book of Church Order (then called the Constitution) that some changes were necessary. The “written law” was asked to catch up, in many instances, with “custom and practice.” Eenigenburg noted that in his thirteen years as a member of that committee he had been impressed again and again with the fact that the Book of Church Order does not always take the first step in dictating what “custom and practice” shall be; on the contrary, it is frequently asked to catch up with “custom and practice.”

From some time now, Eenigenburg said, we have had one Book of Church Order but two different kinds of “custom and practice,” an older way and a newer one. In the older view the personal pronouns and the word “person” or “persons” referred to the male gender when referring to the minister of the Word. They did not have a general or generic meaning, as is claimed by the advocates of the newer view. The “custom and practice” of some centuries dictated that it should be understood that way. But we are in a very different time now, in many respects a “revolutionary” one. We ought not argue anymore about the pronouns and the word “person.” A majority of the representatives at General Synod in six recent years, and a large majority of the forty-five classes, have declared that in their understanding, contemporary “custom and practice” was demanding that those words be read in the new way. The Book of Church Order would not even have to be changed. Eenigenburg declared that the unity of the church requires that the classes, which alone have the authority to ordain people to the ministry of the Word, be permitted to ordain women, if they felt led to do so.

Decision Draws Near

Joyce de Velder was elated by Dr. Eenigenburg’s speech. It was comforting to know that the man who so highly valued the Book of Church Order believed that it permitted the ordination of women to the office of minister of the Word. She hoped he had convinced th others who were against the Judicial Committee’s motion because they thought the Book of Church Order was violated. But one thought disturbed her. What if some classes would decide to adhere to the older custom and practice and not ordain some of her close friends who were waiting for ordination?

De Velder felt that a vote would come soon. The complex of issues kept tumbling through her mind. Would the General Synod agree that “persons” in the Book of Church Order included women? Would some hold out for a change in the Book of Church Order which specifically permitted women’s ordination? How widespread was
the feeling that a woman’s place was primarily in the home? How many, despite the 1958 ruling, still believed that Scripture prohibits the ordination of women?

The Synod voted to adjourn for lunch, but to continue its discussion at 2:00 p.m. Joyce de Velder knew that a vote would come soon. But what would the General Synod decide?

Sonja M. Stewart was one of twenty seminary professors invited by the Association of Theological Schools to attend a Case Method Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California during the summer of 1979. The purpose of the Case Method Institute is to teach professors how to write and teach "cases." This case follows the model developed by the Harvard Business School for teaching decision making and problem solving.

A case is a recording of an actual event and is written from the perspective of a person affected by it. A case provides enough information for others to enter vicariously into the historical situation and make their own decision in regard to it. A case is left deliberately unresolved so that the reader may discover the process of how the decision was made. Since this article is written as a case it does not follow the usual format of scholarly papers.
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