

## **God's Ordinances and Christ's Gospel of Salvation**

**By Hillie van de Streek**

Kuyper strongly advocated women suffrage in church, but not in politics. Hillie van de Streek explains the difference from the theology of Augustine.

“The woman is such a wonderfully well-organized being, out of which, according to God’s ordinances, a stream of blessing for all of our society can flow forth as from a fountain of a flourishing life, provided she occupy her own place and nothing prevent her....”<sup>1</sup>

This 1907 citation from Kuyper effectively illustrates his thoughts about the place of women in the society. The struggle for women suffrage blew across the borders from abroad and at the end of the nineteenth century entered Dutch public debate. It did not leave the orthodox Protestant membership untouched. Kuyper kept himself occupied with this theme throughout his entire career. It was a long journey of reflection that began in 1867, when he as a young pastor wondered why women were excluded from the right to let their voice be heard in the Reformed (Hervormde) Church. His involvement in this subject finally ended on his deathbed in 1920, with the sigh that the Anti-Revolutionary Party would have done better in the 1916 constitutional changes by granting the suffrage to women. The Party, including Kuyper, had always bitterly opposed it.

### **The Social Question**

Kuyper was a man with many faces, but also a child of his time. The question as to the place of women in society was new, certainly for Neo-Calvinists like Kuyper. Just like socialists and Catholics, Neo-Calvinists were occupied in the search for a contemporary principal programme in answer to the great economic and social challenges of the day. Industrialization had put an end to the traditional society with its agriculture, small businesses and commerce and, in addition to mechanical methods of production in factories, drew the changes of social structures with it to the cities. Next to the family system with its hired hands and maids, a top layer came into being with a growing labouring class in the cities. The miserable circumstances under which these labourers lived and worked and the growing

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Kuyper, “Hoofd en hart,” *De Standaard*, February 2, 1911.

cleavage between rich and poor led to a great social question in which the place of women drew significant attention.

## Feminism

In addition and simultaneously, feminism made its debut as the result of the struggle for equal rights of the French Revolution and in reaction to the capitalist economy. The first feminist gulf aimed at the legal equality of men and women. In addition to improvement in the education of girls and women and of their labour conditions, critical attention emerged in feminist circles to the right to a system in which the opinions about women were fixed. The life of Kuyper's contemporary, Aletta Jacobs (1854-1929), was exemplary. She was the first woman in the Netherlands to pursue medical training and devoted herself to the civil rights of women, especially to women suffrage.

Confronted with the transition to a new economic era and the emergence of the feminist movement, but also of socialism, Kuyper tried to show his Gereformeerde and anti-revolutionary followers the way. From the Neo-Calvinistic perspective, what was the new “own place” of the woman that led to “a stream of blessing” for the society? Kuyper’s statements over time indicate an orientation with as benchmark the Bible as the revelation from God, while the theology and confessional documents came from the time of the Reformation, the juristic framework of the Kingdom of the Netherlands from 1815 and its naturalistically coloured vision on reality around him. In this contribution, I hope to shed light on Kuyper’s perspectives on basis of these benchmarks, perspectives that from the point of view of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are characterized by contradictions. Yes, to suffrage in the church but *not* in politics! How does that work?

## The Position of Women in the Church

Kuyper and his followers recognized a historical connection between their own actions and those of the earlier Calvinism of the Republic of the United Netherlands. He wanted to adjust the Reformed tradition that emerged from that earlier period to his own time. For this purpose, he borrowed from the reputable German theology of the nineteenth century, but especially also from the Dutch theologians from the sixteenth century and from the time of the Second Reformation or Reveille (+/- 1600-1750), a movement that began after the Synod

of Dordt in 1618. Kuyper regarded himself as its heir. That he already at an early age tended towards renewal is evident from his critical question of 1876, when he asked himself why women were excluded from the suffrage that was introduced in the Reformed Church. He noticed that the new rule “approved approximately halving the congregation by excluding all sisters.... But I ask, are women on the average not the principal or the core of the congregation?” He thought that suffrage in the church was modeled too closely after civil suffrage. This step did not seem all that strange, for ever since the establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815, Protestants regarded the Reformed Church<sup>2</sup> as the national church with a close relationship between the royal house, the state and the church. Kuyper was of the opinion that a non-ecclesiastical power should never constitute the benchmark for ecclesiastical activities. He proposed that the foundation of ecclesiastical decision making was to be found in “the principles of the Reformation” and in “the line of historical ecclesiastical developments.” Therefore he regarded the entire church order under which they had by now lived for half a century as unlawful. The order was imposed by royal decree in 1816, a step that Kuyper saw as “a deed of caesaro-papal arbitrariness at the top.”

## Renewal

Kuyper contained himself with this critique in 1867, but a good thirty years later he returned to the issue of women suffrage in the church after the formation of the Gereformeerde Churches in the Netherlands, an act in which he participated. In the meantime, he had grown into the foreman of Neo-Calvinism and strove for a renewed Reformed Church in a Gereformeerde sense. The denomination took over the Presbyterian-Synodical structure of the earlier Reformed Church of the Republic, with the local consistory or church council as the highest governing organ. The choice of this structure typified him as Neo-Calvinist. He attempted to introduce further renewal when the women’s movement received a tremendous stimulation in 1898, thanks to the enthronement of Queen Wilhelmina and voices rose up in the Reformed Church to give women the suffrage in the church. In the Gereformeerde church paper *De Heraut*, he pointed out that feminism had a point in pointing to the fact that women were held back at many fronts, even in areas

---

<sup>2</sup> In this article “Reformed Church” refers to what was then the state church; “Gereformeerde” refers to the denomination started by Kuyper and his cohorts. The English translation of “Gereformeerde” is also “Reformed” so that its use would cause confusion. Hence the use of “Gereformeerde” in this article.

where the woman could express “her most natural right.” The Gereformeerde Churches were also guilty here, because of the rule that woman had no voice at all. On basis of Galatians 3:28, Kuyper thought that women definitely had the right to active suffrage and rejected the traditional Calvinistic interpretation of the “silence texts” in I Corinthians 14. He saw that the interpretation that the woman in the congregation was to keep silent as “a totally arbitrary exegesis..., that could not be justified by scholarship.” He distanced himself from this authoritative interpretation by theologian Gijsbertus Voethius (1589-1676). That was based on social opinions “that no longer held up in our time and never were from the Spirit of the Lord.

Feminism once again characterized Kuyper through his opinion of 1867 that women had been withheld rights on ecclesiastical terrain to which they were definitely entitled from a Gereformeerder perspective. With his new exegesis of I Corinthians he was too far ahead of his time: his Gereformeerde followers found that he adapted himself too much to the modern time with his plea for women suffrage in church. However, he opposed women holding office. According to the Bible, women had no right to governing authority.

### **From Stratified Class Society to Constitutional Rule of Law**

With their rejection of women suffrage the Gereformeerden were not alone. To the contrary, a huge majority of the population shared this opinion. Public speaking was reserved for men and not for women. This held not only in politics, but also in church. That was the proper way of things according to popular opinion.<sup>3</sup> Society comprised of classes, arranged by families and clans, an ordering in which everyone knew their place. Women ran the family and the (mostly extended) household and nurtured social relations on behalf of the family. Activities in the spheres of charity, care-giving and education were also reserved for them. The term “motherhood” thus extended far beyond the sphere of the private. Men would engage on behalf of the family in tasks associated with public order such as those of the state, province or church. This organic ordering had its origin in the pre-industrial era of the Republic. This all changed when Lodewyk Napoleon introduced the French Civil Code of 1804, which was followed in the nineteenth

---

<sup>3</sup> See the article in this series by Aart Deddens about Henriette Sophia as to how Kuyper personally applied this notion to his own daughters.

century by further need for regulations, among which the laws about suffrage and marriage.

### **The Suffrage Law**

The suffrage laws that were promulgated during the Napoleonic period and the reigns of Willem I and II till 1849, indicated that the family was regarded as a point of departure for political participation. The suffrage belonged to the heads of households almost like property. It was granted to widows in 1815 but without the right to practice it! They were expected to hand it over to the oldest son. The new suffrage law of Thorbecke in 1850, was once again based on the family and, again, based on the family's assets or wealth. But the widow was now excluded. On basis of the prevailing notion that husband and wife each had their own well-defined domains and that of politics belonged exclusively to the husband, the Second Chamber found it improper to grant women the suffrage. The practice of previous years was pushed aside as illogical. In a later review in 1887, the word "manly" was added as a further explanation that this right held only for men. The suffrage of the family head remained popular till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but gradually a preference grew for suffrage on an individual basis that began with the liberal parties. Because in society in general the desire and urgency arose for an expansion of the electorate, whether inclusive of women or not, the question arose about how to achieve this goal. This took thirty years of political discussion that resulted in the introduction of general suffrage for all in 1917.

### **Mutual Relationship**

In the meantime, under King Willem I, in addition to the suffrage issue, the relationship between men and women in marriage was re-codified. In the civil code of law (CCL) of 1838, the ancient "right and authority that the man receives over the woman and her goods after marriage" is fixed. The CCL determined that the man was the head in the marriage and controlled the power. This implicated that married women could not initiate any legal actions; that right belonged to the man. He also had the authority over the assets, the family possessions and their house without owing any accountability to his wife. The wife *could* ask the husband for authority to take legal action, but the husband could always retroactively declare it null and void.

## **Kuyper's Ideal Anchored in the Constitution**

This social ordering and codification during the nineteenth century make it understandable that Kuyper saw the position of the wife primarily from the perspective of family and household, not from her position as an individual. He saw the family as “the sphere of action that nature assigned to her, and that was fixed in nature by her God. He struggled fiercely that women should not enter the political arena, the man’s domain: “The continuation of this unnatural situation would encourage unnatural conditions and turn the wife increasingly into an unnatural being. We really cannot miss the real wife in our society.” Thus her place in the family was to be ensured. For his description of this divinely ordered natural habitat, Kuyper decisively and with full agreement reached for support back to the marriage liturgy that dates from the beginning of the Reformation. The way to a dynamic society was to be found in the practical application of that formula. This included mutual unity between the two, expressing mutual trust and accommodation, and a solidary sense of respect. It also implied having children, which Kuyper related especially to wives. Childlessness meant the wife had not reached her destination. She had the calling to be mother of God’s elect. It was the husband’s responsibility to see to it that God’s ordinances were adhered to in the family, like a priest in the church. By God’s providence, he was the head of the family. His wife needed to be subject to him.

## **Contrary Positions?**

I return to my original question: how could these apparently contradictory positions coexist? My hypothesis is that Kuyper adhered to the doctrine of the two kingdoms of Augustine. The church father taught that there are two kingdoms, the earthly and the heavenly; what pertained in heaven by definition did not hold on earth. With respect to the position of women, Kuyper adopted the same point of departure.

The ordinances that regulated life on earth, according to Kuyper, were to conform with the ordinances that God had embedded in life, the “creation ordinances.” Those ordinances were easily known from both history and daily practical life. He recognized the system that was based on the household as the right foundation for the suffrage. Just like in the old dispensation, here too the widow had the suffrage,

but women did not have the right to be elected for political functions. So also Kuyper regarded the marriage ordinance codified in 1838 as the just guarantee for the social position of women. “The Lord God has taught us in His Word very clearly what was already understandable from the language of nature that the head of the woman is the man as Christ is the head of every man (I Corinthians 11:3).

In follow up of Augustine, thanks to the coming of Christ, other ordinances pertained in heaven, among which the elimination of the differences between men and women. Like Augustine, Kuyper found support for this in Paul. According to the doctrine of the two kingdoms, the church belongs to the kingdom of heaven, which implies that the church has the right to set its own rules. He also drew a line from heaven to church as in his 1867 and 1898 statements, referring among others to Galatians 3:28. He applied this text exclusively to church life, but did not consider this text valid for earthly life, an opinion he defended till his death.

### **Deathbed**

Nevertheless, an outpouring took place on his deathbed. This was not so much a change of opinion as an acknowledgement that the suffrage issue developed differently from what he had struggled for. Already in 1906 and, later, in 1917, he had argued for decisiveness. If people wanted a general suffrage system, it should also apply to women as individual, as person, as human being, as member of the nation. It was not a matter of a sudden renunciation of principles just before his death. These were divine ordinances out of which a stream of blessing poured out for the blossoming of the nation. The “feminine” was not be missed. As the result of Christ’s gospel of salvation, in the church and in heaven other rules applied and all people, both men and women, were considered believers.