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THE REFORM OF THE CHURCH AND WOMEN'S MINISTRY

Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda is a tag not often quoted by Evangelicals. With an economy that English cannot match it affirms that the church 'reformed', *i.e.* that has been reformed, is 'yet to be reformed', *i.e.* still stands in need of, and must ever be open to, further reformation. Evangelicals are too familiar with its citation in the interests of disengagement from some aspect or other of the sixteenth-century Reformation. It has come perhaps to exemplify the attitude of those who have too little time for 'having-been-reformed' and too much for 'ever-open-to-reform'.

This is regrettable, for the two words are linked by a profound logic of reform theology. *Reformata* must never be qualified by *eph'hapax*, 'once for all', for at least two reasons (quite apart from the linguistic mix!). In the first place, the Reformation does not belong to salvation-history (any more than, say, the Council of Nicaea does); it does not enjoy the ultimate and decisive significance of the exodus or the incarnation. Secondly, the church reformed, *i.e.* the church as renewed by the Reformation, is neither irreversibly reformed – immune from relapsing into its pre-Reformation condition – nor perfectly reformed, as though never needing fresh reform.

There emerges to view here a fundamental difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism (and probably Orthodoxy too). While Catholics may confess the church to be *reformanda* – under the divine imperative to be reformed – their confession will always lack the credibility provided for Protestantism by the preceding *reformata*. For what is entailed in confessing *ecclesia reformata* is the full-blooded recognition that the church was and is vulnerable to such extensive corruption as to need root-and-branch reformation of the dimensions the sixteenth-century Reformers meted out to late medieval Catholicism. To declare the church to be *reformata* is to declare it to be an institution in need of reform – *reformanda* – in principle as much in every age as it was then, prior to the Reformation. The Protestant theology of the church's history has no place for the irreformability of any of the church's forms or acts, whether the Nicene Creed (*Filioque* can be added or removed) or

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the polity of the best Reformed Kirk. Lovers of the Reformation who gladly own the church *reformata* dare not therefore glory triumphally in being a Reformed Church, but should rather tremble that the church of Christ could become – and hence can ever become – so gravely deformed. By the same token the very fact that the Reformation took place should not lead to the church's being trapped in its status as once-for-all *reformata* (the Reformation captivity of the church?), but on the contrary should give Protestants both a marvellous sense of freedom in relation to what the church has become (it once needed drastic reformation – and got it! Why not again?) and an ever alert sensitivity to the continuing need for reform. The sons and daughters of the Reformation are the very people who should be most comfortable with *semper reformanda*. For if it is *reformata* that alone gives one confidence about *reformanda*, most assuredly we cannot claim to be *reformata* without being ready to be *reformanda*.

Women's Ministry

Perspectives like these are nowhere more needed than in reflecting on the persistently vexed question of women's ministry, on which publications continue to flow. Barbara E. Smith's privately published *Women, Saints and Servants* (Edinburgh, 1990; 48pp., n.p.; ISBN 0 9516218 0 7) is an eirenic rambling discussion, based on wide, almost indiscriminate reading, dotted with fascinating bits of information and apparently in favour of women's ordained ministry. *Women Elders in the Kirk?* edited by A. T. B. McGowan (Christian Focus, Fearn, Ross-shire, n. d.; 111pp., n.p.; ISBN 1 871676 304), is quite different. Its title is somewhat unfortunate – as though the Church of Scotland has not had women elders for a quarter of a century, with new women elders outnumbering men in recent years. Its implied challenge to the very existence of women elders in the Kirk will surely distract attention from the aim of the book, which is to secure respect and recognition for conscientious objection to women's eldership.

We do not intend to engage in a review of the book's biblical and theological arguments, which are by now well-trodden ground. Ecclesiastically, it has, as Augustine might have said, received its reward, in the 1991 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. But one comment is called for: why the writers' preoccupation with ordination? Ordination is not the easiest thing to find in the New Testament. And if women ought not to be elders, what matters is not simply how to avoid being responsible for making them so but how to avoid all contact with them once made. To seize the force of this demur it has only to be applied to the parallel, but presumably more serious, issue of women as ministers of Word and sacraments.

One can perhaps keep one's distance from other congregations' women elders, but to have nothing to do with women ministers in a corporate church like the Church of Scotland....

Reform and Women's Ministry

How stands the question in the light of *reformata reformanda*? First we must note that this principle does not sanction the widespread unspoken assumption that all change in the church is for the better, *i.e.* that all change is reform. Such a notion could not be more unreformed. The pre-Reformation church was scarcely static! It had accommodated itself only too flexibly to developments in society. Change is often deformation, and the church is, alas, not evolving smoothly towards an ever closer approximation to perfection. To be dignified as reform change requires biblical justification, as Andrew McGowan and his fellow-writers forcefully argue – although we should not be suspicious of a rethink of scriptural teaching just because it was provoked by social movement. The outcome of such a review, not its occasion, is what must be tested at the bar of Scripture.

On the other hand, *reformata reformanda* must be allowed to question us on our openness to continuing reform. There is nothing discreditable in concluding that the church got something wrong for most of its history; there were certainly some things it did not begin to get right before the sixteenth century. Since the Reformation women have in practice enjoyed ever wider scope for Christian ministry, in ways the Reformers could never have countenanced. If the verdict remains firm that such extensive reform in no sense justifies the additional change of letting women serve as elders or ministers of Word and sacraments, let us be crystal clear on the grounds for that judgement, lest we be found the victims of an unreformed, because unreforming, allegiance to the church's tradition.

Perhaps, as Peter White hints in *Women Elders in the Kirk?*, we shall not be in a position to settle satisfactorily the place of women's ministry until we have further reformed our inherited patterns of church order. Which is to affirm that in the question, 'Should women be ordained as elders or ministers?', 'women' is not the only problematic term.