

Women Bishops

The Church of England is currently carrying out a consultation on the issue of women bishops. We are to discuss it at PCC on 6th September, Deanery Synod on 14th September and Diocesan Synod on 15th October. General Synod will then debate the matter again and hopes to come to a decision next year in the light of this consultation. I expect to be at the first three of these meetings. I don't intend to speak. Arguing has come to seem to me to be both futile and destructive. I do intend to vote against the proposal to ordain or consecrate women as bishops – unless something happens to make me change my mind. I have been led to believe, however, that at least some of you would appreciate a bit of an explanation as to what is going on.

The Bible teaches that men and women equally are made in the image of God (Genesis 1²⁷). It also teaches that we are equally redeemed in Christ (Galatians 3²⁸). There are examples of capable women taking leadership roles in the Old Testament (e.g. Judges 4) and the New Testament (e.g. Acts 18²⁶). There are also examples of powerful women in church history such as St Hilda of Whitby. Some Christians regard it then as a matter of fairness that whatever opportunities are open to men ought also to be open to women. Women ministers ought to have the same possibilities for promotion as male ministers and there should be no *stained glass ceiling*. Some of us are uncomfortable about referring to becoming a bishop as promotion. Christian ministry is not a career; it is a vocation. However, if there are no essential differences between men and women in God's sight, it seems unreasonable that we mere human beings should behave as if there were and deny women the opportunity to minister in roles to which God is perhaps calling them. To be fair to us Christians, despite feminist accusations of misogyny on the part of the Christian Church, women have been treated with far more respect in countries with a Christian culture than they have been in other parts of the world. We don't expose girl babies to die, as has been the practice in China; burn widows on their husband's funeral pyres, as they used to in India; or wrap up our women in burkas, as so many Moslem cultures do.

On the other hand, despite the fact that the Bible teaches that men and women are equal in creation and redemption, by and large, it continues to make a distinction between them in regard to their respective roles. Jesus gave women much more respect than many of His contemporaries. They were among the most faithful of His disciples and the first witnesses of His Resurrection, but He did not choose any woman to be an apostle. Despite the fact that St Paul taught *there is neither male nor female: because ye are all one in Christ Jesus* and that he valued the work of a number of prominent women in the early Church, he insisted more than once that women ought not to carry out the functions of a Christian leader and put this all into a theological context when he compared Christian marriage to the relationship between Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5²¹⁻³³. On this view, we ought not to have women priests, let alone women bishops. The Church has mainly interpreted the Bible this way and has not usually had women ministers for most of the 2,000 years of its existence and most of the world's Christians today belong to branches of the Church which still do not have women ministers. Is the Church, in making a distinction between what men and women are called to do, faithful to Scripture and guided by God, or is she misinterpreting the Bible and turning a misogynistic deaf ear to the prompting of the Holy Spirit?

Some Christians would say that it does not matter what the Bible says on the issue of women's ministry or what the Church has (mainly) always taught. They would say that the place of women in society today is so very different from what it was in biblical times, or in the Middle Ages or even half a century ago, that what the Bible teaches and what the Church believed in the past is no longer relevant and women ought to be allowed to become priests and bishops just as they can now become doctors or cabinet ministers. This seems dangerous to me. It makes me think of that advertisement for insurance where the man is sawing off the branch he is sitting on. If the teaching of the Bible and the Church is outmoded and irrelevant on things like gender roles and family life, might it not be out of date on other issues like money, ethics, prayer, forgiveness, eternal life, etc.? If I can't trust St Paul when he tells me that women shouldn't lead churches, why should I trust him when he tells me that I shall one day see again my loved ones who have died in the Lord? I can't understand the logic of people who tell me that they can see nothing wrong with having women priests and bishops, but that homosexual practices are an abomination because the Bible says so. If we prefer C21 western values to biblical values on women, why not on sexual ethics, or indeed any aspect of

ethics? This is why I say that in practice only two out of the Ten Commandments are still respected*. You may well think that the Bible and 2,000 years of Christian teaching are out of date, but, if that is the case, why do we need a Church at all and why would we want priests or bishops?

I do think that if you believe that women should be ordained as priests and bishops you must come to that conclusion in the light of biblical teaching, not in opposition to it. If you discount the Bible, what are these women preachers going to preach about?

Leaving aside the Bible and traditional Christian teaching, are men and women in fact the same and ought they to be entrusted with the same roles in society? Traditional feminism was apt to assert that men and women are the same (apart from the plumbing) and that boys and girls would grow up with the same approach to life if they were only treated in the same way from babyhood, and that therefore men and women ought to have equal opportunities as a matter of fairness to them. I think it is now, however, coming to be recognised, by feminists as well as traditionalists, that men and women are different and that boys and girls would act differently even if they were treated in exactly the same way from earliest infancy. This seems reasonable to me because, after all, most, if not all, human cultures all over the world and throughout history assign different roles to men and women. Harriet Harman suggested that Lehman Brothers (the American firm whose recklessness precipitated the present worldwide financial crisis) might have behaved differently if it had been Lehman Sisters. If it is conceded that men and women are different it could be that women are more suitable for some jobs (e.g. nurse, infant teacher) and men for others (e.g. footballer, policeman). If that is so, it could be that women are not meant to be priests or bishops and that it actually unfair to them and to their congregations to ordain them.

On the other hand, some people argue that men and women are indeed different but complement one another. So, such people would argue, we need both men and women in, say, parliament, the judiciary and the police force – and in the ministry of the Church. We need, they would argue, men and women to represent the whole human experience across the genders. I'm a bit nervous about talking about Christian clergy as representatives of God to the world or as representatives of God's people to God. That was the role of Old Testament priests. Jesus fulfils the role of representative (*our only mediator and advocate* {BCP}) in the New Testament. Christian ministers are leaders, not representatives. God is not male or female. He is *without body, parts or passions* (First Article of Religion) and Jesus is a man, but He represents all human beings – all men and all women – to God. On the other hand, I can see that pastoral and evangelistic ministry requires both typically female and typically male attributes and you could argue that we therefore need both male and female clergy, but then I would argue back that all baptised people – male and female – are pastors and evangelists. All baptised people are led in Christian ministry by the clergy (who on St Paul's teaching ought to be male) but the clergy do not carry out Christian ministry in place of or on behalf of everybody else.

One last issue is Christian unity. Would having women bishops help or hinder the quest for reunion with other parts of God's Church? The answer is that it would make it harder to reunite with the Roman Catholics or the Orthodox if we ordain women bishops, whereas it will make it very difficult to reunite with the Methodists and the URC if we don't. The RCs and the Orthodox are very much more numerous, but reunion with the Methodists and the URC is much less unlikely. So the ecumenical argument cuts both ways.

Finally what many people in the Church of England are seeking is a solution which allows women to be consecrated bishop – which seems to be what the majority wants – while respecting the consciences of those

* You can't say there is only one God Whom we should worship if you accept C21 western views on multiculturalism. Neither can you object to graven images for the same reason. Nobody sees anything wrong in using the Lord's Name as a swear word or in a trivial and possibly false oath. Keeping the Sabbath is a joke with very few people coming to church and most people treating Sunday as a day to work, shop and so forth just like any other day. If we really honoured our parents, there would be no crisis in the care of the elderly. Adultery is scarcely taken seriously. You get into more trouble for breaking an injunction by gossiping about a celebrity's infidelities than the celebrity gets into for perpetrating them. Everybody lies to get out of trouble from the highest levels of government to the lowest criminal on the street. Our whole economy depends on people spending money on what they don't need just because they covet material possessions. And that only leaves murder and theft!

who, like me, believe this to be unscriptural and illegitimate in terms of the tradition of the Church and therefore wrong. This too is fraught with difficulty. If parishes or individuals are given an opt out from the ministry of a woman bishop, she is not truly bishop of the whole diocese. So many senior women in the Church are very reluctant to legislate for the sort of opt out we were granted over women priests. On the other hand, it hardly seems right to exclude from the Church those whose consciences tell them to continue to believe what the Church always has believed up until now.

I hope these notes are helpful! Whatever our thoughts about this, we all need to pray. Roger.