

Women Bishops at last! - Week 84

An event occurred a week or so ago - the General Synod of the Church of England finally approving the consecration of women as bishops - which went little noticed in view of horrific events in the news elsewhere in the world.

This vote by the Synod completes the process started in November 1992, when Synod allowed the ordination of women for the first time. The first woman bishop in the Church of England is now likely to be in post before the end of this year.

But a fair few people remain very concerned over this step. Anglicans have all signed up to being, when all is said and done, a scriptural church. In Article XX of the "Thirty Nine Articles", to which all Anglicans give their assent, we read - "And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written".

Now like it or not, women's ordination IS contrary to God's Word written! - not because it is about ordination as such, but rather about what is broadly termed "spiritual headship".

There is not space to go through all the arguments in this matter, which are well-known anyway, but let us look for a moment at one key passage of Scripture - I Timothy 2. 11-15. We read there that in a mixed Christian gathering women are to learn in silence and submission, and that Paul does not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man.

Now passages such as this have to be "got round" by supporters of women's ordination - and clearly they have been. So for example we have been told that Jesus would have placed women in positions of spiritual leadership, but in those times it was a step too far for Him; that Paul does not like women so no wonder he writes like this; that culturally things are now much more enlightened; that there are thousands of gifted women queueing up to serve the Lord and His Church in ordained ministry; that secular society is puzzled, even contemptuous, as to why the Church should make such a fuss over this issue in these days of equality and non-discrimination; and that if the Church did not allow women bishops Parliament might step in to force the Synod's hand.

Arguments such as these have carried the day. But let us see on what grounds Paul, inspired as we believe by the Holy Spirit, bases this teaching about silence, submission, and the particular place of spiritual authority. He appeals to Genesis Chapter 3, to Adam and Eve and the Fall.

Sadly this appeal produces howls of laughter in some quarters, for the authority of early Genesis has been set aside for a long time by now, with far-reaching consequences.

But there it is: God, from the time of Creation and the Fall, has given Man and Woman different roles, within their status of total spiritual equality in His sight.

The most fundamental difference of role is that Man is father, and Woman is mother. Much else flows from that central, unavoidable distinction, including a difference of spiritual accountability before God between Man and Woman.

"Spiritual headship" is a term widely misunderstood within the Church, and never clearly explained by the Church in wider society. Yet Paul's appeal to early Genesis shows us that spiritual headship has the full status of a "creation ordinance" - that is, a basic, crucial principle at the heart of human existence, placed there by Almighty God the Creator. In short, it is not to be lightly brushed aside.

The irony is, far from "trampling women underfoot", etc, etc, these God-implanted differences of role are for our mutual blessing and enrichment, allowing the retention of the proper balance in the delicate relationship between Man and Woman. God shows us how we are to let a woman be a woman, and a man to be a man, with each side recognising the God-given roles of the other, and hence not "treading on each others' toes".

This has nothing to do with the competence or abilities of women - which misses the point entirely. In the Bible, and in society down the ages, we have wonderful examples of women in leadership roles. Our Queen has reigned faithfully for over sixty years for example; she is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England - this causing no-one any theological problems at all - but she remains a lay person who does not preach or preside at the Lord's table.

In the Church therefore, the ministry of women is to be totally valued: that has simply never been an issue in all this. But when it comes to such tasks as preaching or presiding at Holy Communion, the scriptural norm is that it should be a man rather than a woman in such positions of spiritual authority.

This runs of course blatantly against the mood of the age, both within the Church and beyond it. But God's Word remains just that, and no majority vote in any Synod, on whatever subject, can overturn God's Word. So amidst the heartfelt cries of joy of the many over Synod's recent decision, there remains also the heartfelt misgivings of the few, for, after a twenty-year journey, a "creation ordinance", no less, has now been fully and finally overruled.

But meanwhile let us thank God wholeheartedly for the exercise of all the rich gifts He has entrusted to His people through the Holy Spirit, be they to men or women. For - I Corinthians 12 - we are indeed all members of the body of Christ, each entrusted with our particular, God-given roles to play.

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