

ALDHAM Sunday 13 July 2007 9.15 am

Women Bishops?

We've heard a lot about women bishops this week. We've also heard a lot about some Anglican clergy who are **uncomfortable** about accepting the authority of a woman Bishop.

I wonder what you think about all this talk this week?

- Do you think women **should** be ordained as Bishops?
- Do you think women **should NOT** be ordained as Bishops?
- Do you think **it doesn't matter** whether they are or are not? Do you think there are much more important things the church should be putting its energies into, such as proclaiming the Gospel, helping the desperately needy, calling for justice? Do you suspect that Jesus is none too pleased with his Body?

I am often tempted to take this **third position**, for let's face it, we don't actually have much to do with bishops **here in Aldham**. But there are **two** exceptions:

1. A bishop comes to the **induction of a new priest to admit him to the benefice**; and to require him to be **obedient** to the Lord Bishop of Chelmsford, and the Area Bishop of Colchester. (But it is the **Archdeacon** who legally transfers actual possession of the church and benefice to the Parish Priest.)

2. Secondly, a bishop Confirms.

Even if you think these are relatively **rare occasions** and therefore **don't matter much** to us, we should try to understand what it is that, in the words of the press, is **tearing the Church of England apart**.

The Case for Women Bishops.

1. Women Priests

History. Between 1987 and 1994, women could become **Ministers** and wear dog-collars. They were called **deacons**. They trained alongside men, and after ordination women and men deacons served a **12-month "probation"**. During this year they could **not** celebrate Communion or take a wedding. After the year's "probation" the men were then made **priests** but not the women. (For the present, I will use the words *deacon* and *priest* as they are used by the Church of England.) After serving their probation, the men can celebrate Communion and take weddings. But the 1,500 women who had gone through the same training and probation could not.

You may well ask why.

Then in 1994, the CoE admitted women to be priests, and almost all the 1,500 women deacons proceeded to be ordained as priests. Since then a further 600 women have been ordained priests. Like Jo Dudley.

Today, **one in four** of the priests in the Church of England is female. Our own Archdeacon, Annette, is a woman. But that is as far as she can get, for the time being.

So pressure inevitably has come from this large cohort of women priests, that they should be allowed to be made bishops. Though not all women priests would agree!

2. The Equal Opportunity Culture

Today women are rightly asserting their rights in **management** in the **secular workplace**.

1966 Indira Ghandi, was Indian Prime Minister for 4 terms before she was assassinated,

1979 Margaret Thatcher, was UP PM for 11 years

2005 Angela Merkel is the German Chancellor,

1998 - 2005 Carley Fiorina was head of **Hewlett Packard**

The **head of E-bay** is a woman (Meg Whitman) as is the head of **Xerox Corporation** (Anne Mulcahy)

Women serve in **combat zones** in the armed forces.

So why not as Bishops?

Many male clergy, especially those who would call themselves *liberals*, promote this view. What is called **Liberal theology**

- **welcomes new ideas,**
- **is free from traditional restraints,** and
- **regards the Bible as a fallible record of religious thought and experience.**

So there is pressure from **women priests** and pressure from

liberal clergy.

We'll come to what the Bible might say or not say on the question in a moment.

The Case Against Women Bishops.

You may have read or heard that it is *Traditionalists* who are concerned about women bishops. This is a **convenient term for the press**. It is not an otherwise accepted group within the Anglican Church. Traditionalists come from the **two theological “wings”** of the Anglican Church.

1. Anglo-Catholics.

In 1833 in the Church of England there was a revival, known as the *Oxford Movement*. Three Oxford dons, John Henry **Newman**, E.B. **Pusey** and John **Keeble** reasserted the Catholic origins of the pre-reformation Church in England. The movement **adopted many practices** from the Roman Catholic Church - often referred to as bells and smells - and called Communion “mass”. The most celebrated leader of the Oxford Movement, **John Newman, left the Church of England** and joined the Roman Catholic Church, which, of course, **has an all male celibate ministry**. Many Anglo-Catholic priests are celibate.

Anglo-Catholics regard **historic tradition** as the ultimate authority. The traditional role of women in the pre-Reformation church was to

- Bring up children.
- Run a Christian home.

- Submit to their husbands - though husbands were also instructed to love their wives
- Take no part in Church leadership.

These traditionalists also take the all-male make-up of Jesus' disciples as an indication that leadership in the church must also be all-male.

In 1994, when women were first ordained as priests, **about 400 clergy** felt so strongly that they **transferred to the Roman Catholic Church** at considerable cost to the Church of England and to themselves, for those who were married had to support themselves financially.

Other Anglo-Catholics who remained in the Church of England, were very uncomfortable about submitting to the authority of a Bishop who ordained women. [I find this particularly difficult.] They have been provided with **an alternative Bishop** - retired - who did not ordain women. These have become known as "Flying Bishops".

2. Conservative Evangelicals

The other wing of the CoE is the Evangelical wing. (Church of England like a plank that sags in the middle!) Some evangelicals object to women bishops for reasons of **Headship**. They base their objection on 3 passages of scripture.

1 Cor 11: 3-9;

1CO 11:3 Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. 4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. 5 And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered

dishonors her head--it is just as though her head were shaved. 6 If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. 7 A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. 8 For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; 9 neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10 For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.

1 Cor. 14:34-35;

As in all the congregations of the saints, 34 women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

1 Tim 2:12

12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.

I want to return to the arguments from scripture in a moment. But note that just as with the case for women bishops, **the case against women bishops is also supported by two quite different kinds of argument, two different groups.**

What does Scripture say about Ministry?

It may come as a bit of a shock to some of you that the New Testament says **very very little** about how the Church should be organised. The repeated use of the “shepherding” metaphor implies that leaders were **pastors**, not **priests**. They had a duty to **care and protect**, not **mediate and sacrifice**.

The word **priest** is used in the NT in only two senses:

- the Old Testament **mediating and sacrificing** priests, including those who wanted Jesus put to death;
- **and of you and me!** Peter tells us we who believe are a *Royal Priesthood, a holy priesthood*. Sometimes we call this principle the “Priesthood of All Believers”. [1 Pe. 2:9]

The C of E uses the word “priest” to describe a minister who may take communion. But we don’t sacrifice any more in the CoE. And the people in the pews can’t take communion! Embarrassing?

On the other hand, **the Bible has much to say** on the qualities of **leadership** of the pastors.

The only appointments to leadership in the New Testament Church seem to be **Deacons, Elders and Overseers**.

Deacons (wine waiters) were appointed in Acts 6 in order to look after the vulnerable believers (widows). (Luke uses the quaint term “wait on tables”.) However, deacons were to be **full of the Spirit** and wisdom.

Timothy was given instructions on the appointment of deacons which also implies that they may have had a **spiritual** ministry

as well.

*1TI 3:8 Deacons, ... are to be ... worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. **They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.** They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.*

A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well.

Elders: Other pastors are called, from the Greek **presbuteros** an old man, and

Overseers: Greek **episcopos** from which we get the word *bishop*.

It is **tempting** to assume that an overseer looks after several elders. It’s a nice clean distinction, but it’s not how the words are used in the NT. The words *Elder* and *Overseer* are used **interchangeably** in the NT. [Acts 20:17, 28] The idea of a Bishop taking responsibility for a wide area consisting of several churches led by Elders came in the **second century**.

So we have to conclude that the NT has nothing much to say about women bishops as such!

So **what does the Bible say?**

Headship

I quoted at the beginning from the Induction Service: that **an incumbent was required to be obedient to the Area and Diocesan Bishops**. The present crisis is effectively over whether a minister who is **male** should be **obedient** to a Bishop who is **female**.

I referred earlier to three passages of Paul which suggest there may be difficulty with women bishops:

1TI 2:11 A woman should learn in quietness and full **submission**. **I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man**; she must be silent.

1 Cor 14:33 As in all the congregations of the saints, **women should remain silent** in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in **submission**, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

And a similar passage in 1 Co. 11

They also appeal to Genesis, where the

Genesis 3:16 Your desire will be for your husband, **and he will rule over you.**" (Rule here is used in the same sense as where God tells Adam and Eve to subdue the earth. It carries the sense of responsibility, good stewardship, not autocracy!)

It is clearly **absurd** to maintain that women may not teach in the church. **Paul explicitly told Titus** to teach the older women to be reverent in the way they lived, ...and to teach the younger women to love their husbands and children.

But what about those words *authority* and *submission*? These words are **also used by Paul when he writes about the husband and wife relationships**. Is that what these passages are about?

There is also the matter of the **high status** accorded to women in the New Testament (compared to **contemporary culture**). This is of great importance when try to get to the meaning of these passages.

Acts 2:17 - 18

" `In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit **on all people**. Your **sons and daughters** will prophesy ... Even on my servants, **both men and women**, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

Gal 3:28

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, **male nor female**, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Romans Chapter 16

We cannot ignore the fact that in the last chapter of Romans, Paul send greetings to 9 women out of 28 church leaders! Several of whom host the local church. Likewise Lydia (first recorded European Christian) hosted the church in Philippi.

The position of women in the first cent. Roman Empire:

Was not good! I quote from a secular source.

*“Women were **defined by the men in their lives**, women in ancient Rome were valued mainly as wives and mothers.*

*Not much information exists about Roman women in the first century. **Women were not allowed to be active in politics**, so nobody wrote about them. Neither were they taught how to write, so they could not tell their own stories.”*

Is Paul merely asking women in the local church situation to **behave according to the culture of the day**? Rather than challenge it? Is it like his attitude to **slavery**? He went along with the local culture. But is this all?

You see, the New Testament *as a whole* takes a much more elevated view of women than the local culture.

- **Jesus befriended many women**; woman at the well, Mary of Bethany, Martha. Mary Magdalene was first to witness the most important event in the life of Jesus.
- **Paul insists that husbands love their wives as Christ loved his church (agape).**

So is Paul really saying that women are not as capable of leadership in the church as are men?

Summary

Three traditions, Catholic, Liberal and Evangelical bring four different arguments to bear on this problem.

The arguments in the Bible need to be dug out with great

honesty and humility, and not in order to support our own prejudices!

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