

Evangelicals, Flying Bishops and the Future

Nigel Atkinson

When I was in ECUSA during the three years 1984-1987 I was studying at Westminster Theological Seminary and worshipping at St. John's, Huntingdon Valley (an Episcopal Parish in the Diocese of Pennsylvania). Both at Westminster and at St. John's I came across the late Rev. Dr. Philip Hughes, an Anglican clergyman who was, at the time, Associate Rector of St. John's and a Visiting Professor at Westminster Theological Seminary. In the many conversations I had with him at Church, in the lecture room or in his home, Dr. Hughes kept pointing out that the crisis engulfing the Episcopal Church and which is now overtaking the Church of England was a crisis brought about by the Church's abandonment of the authority of Holy Scripture and that this rejection could most vividly be seen in the way that ECUSA then (and the Church of England now) felt free to confer presbyteral ordination on women.

For Dr. Hughes, and for many evangelicals and Catholics today, this enshrines the heart of the church's life, a radically disobedient attitude to scriptural authority that should alarm all right thinking evangelicals. For many Christians, female presbyteral ordination is contrary to the whole teaching of Scripture because it attacks and impinges upon the doctrines of God, Christ, Man, and the Church. C.S. Lewis was hardly exaggerating when he wrote –

if all the proposals (to have female priests) were ever carried into effect we should have embarked upon a different religion.

In the way Lewis developed his argument it is clear that he had learned much from Richard Hooker who, writing in the 1590s, asked –

how shall men dispense with nature and make them ministers of holy things, seeing this unskillfulness is part of the Grecians impiety, which for the sake of women goddesses have women priests?

Hooker's suggestion that any Christian church which embraced female presbyters was well on the road to apostasy is being borne out before our very eyes as we contemplate Western Anglicanism.

ECUSA today and the Church of England tomorrow (unless she alters course) will bear very few recognisable marks of an authentic Christian body. In other words, what we are potentially facing is nothing less than the systematic and ruthless persecution of orthodox Anglican evangelical and Catholic parishes in the Church of England so that in the future an unquestionable evangelical ministry within the established Church will not only not be tolerated but will, in fact, have ceased to exist. It is already the case in England that anyone who opposes the unscriptural development of female presbyters will never be elevated to the house of bishops and it is only a matter of time before no presbyters of similar views will be ordained either. A timely paper has been written entitled 'Evangelicals, Flying Bishops and the Future',¹ for the only future that we as evangelicals in the Church of England have, lies in some form of alternative or extended oversight.

There is, however, one point that must be grasped immediately. It is true that, as evangelicals contemplate the doctrinal disarray and lawlessness within the Church of England, to be harping on about female presbyteral ministry may seem rather like tilting at windmills. Such sentiments are understandable, except when it is remembered that what female presbyteral ordination, homosexuality and multi-faith worship have in common is that they are all contrary to Scripture. This is the theological heart of the matter which evangelicals must face up to. It is no good arguing that female presbyteral ministry is only a second order issue.

For the sake of argument let us say that it is. An evangelical then finds himself in the invidious position, not only of having to create a canon within the canon of Scripture but also of having to argue that it is perfectly all right for a church to be a little bit disobedient to Scripture. As long as the church is willing to be only a little bit disobedient to the living and active Word of God that is sharper than any two edged sword, he as an evangelical is willing to tolerate this state of affairs and do absolutely nothing.

Such an attitude is unbecoming not only of an evangelical, but also of any Christian. Our calling as evangelicals and faithful Anglicans must lie in our commitment to the supreme authority of Scripture and the real Church of England is looking to us to provide this lead. Beckwith has pointed out that

1 Unpublished paper by Roger Beckwith, former Warden, Latimer House, Oxford.

Catholics have contended long and hard to protect their interests but evangelicals have done very little to protect the erosion of biblical authority in the church. We should be ashamed and remind ourselves that the church is grounded and rooted in Scripture. Article VI of the Church of England states:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby is not to be required of any man.

This Article refers to the Bible as the record or embodiment of a divine revelation which, as such, is meant to be authoritative for life. Revelation is the unfolding of the character of God, the supernatural communication from God to man of truth which the human mind could not discover for itself. Hence points of doctrine are constantly based on passages of Scripture (Articles IX, XIV, XV, XVII, XVIII) and the doctrine of the church is also tested and made subject to the Word of God (Articles XIX, XX, XXI). Article XX reads –

The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God’s Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another.

The Church’s insistence upon the authoritative nature of Scripture is further highlighted in the Service of the Ordination of Priests:

Are you persuaded that the Holy Scriptures contain sufficiently all Doctrine required of necessity for eternal salvation, through faith in Jesus Christ? And are you determined, out of the said Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge, and to teach nothing, as required of necessity to eternal salvation, but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by the Scriptures?

I am so persuaded, and have so determined by God’s grace.

Moreover presbyters are asked to be ready ‘with all faithful diligence to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God’s Word’. This is serious. Often it is evangelicals who say that they will stay in

the Church of England as long as they are free to preach the gospel. But what is meant by the gospel? By the way some evangelicals are talking one receives the impression that by the gospel they mean John 3:16. But is this really the case? I have recently completed a sermon series on Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. Here Paul makes a most startling statement. He declares, 'I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to declare unto you the whole council of God'. If we also want to be innocent of the blood of all men we are also to declare the 'whole council of God'. And surely declaration means not only standing up in our pulpits declaring the whole council of God but also living it out in our lives. In other words by distancing ourselves from bishops (and others) who are flouting the authority of Scripture by overturning God's order in creation and God's order in the Church by investing women with presbyteral power and authority.

Of course by arguing that female presbyteral ministry is contrary to Scripture and by arguing that as Christians we have to contend for the authority of Scripture, I am arguing that female presbyteral ordination is an issue that we must face and can no longer avoid. In saying this I am merely agreeing with others in the Church of England who have long been contending for female presbyteral ordination and are now contending for female episcopal consecration. We must remember that, for them, this is a first order issue. For some the issue is a matter of justice, similar to the abolition of slavery, and for those who persist in advocating slavery there is no other recourse apart from sending in the gunboats once and for all. In case you do not believe me I want to demonstrate that because this is the case our position, which is none other than the belief and practice of the historic Christian Church, has to be extinguished.

Legislation was first referred to the Diocesan Synods in 1990 in the form of a document known as GS Misc 336. In this legislation General Synod proposed to make provision by Canon enabling a woman to be ordained to the office of priest but it specified that nothing in the Measure would make it lawful for a woman to be consecrated to the office of bishop; and in England this is still the case. That was the first part of the legislation. In dealing with this it is important to note that many have been offended by the glass ceiling that has so self-consciously been put in to constrict the ordination of women to the priesthood to say nothing about the division that this creates between the presbyterate and episcopate as well as specifically barring one class of presbyters (the women)

from high office. It may be argued that this is a gross injustice and there are certainly many who would take this line. There have already been calls on the floor of the General Synod for this obstacle to be removed.

The second part of the legislation deals with the main body of the Canon and this is related to the safeguards for those who in conscience could not accept either women as priests or as the head of a parish or a local Christian community. In essence this devolved upon bishops, parishes, cathedrals and individual parish priests. A bishop in office at the time of promulgation of canon C4B could make all or some of a range of declarations. He could declare –

that a woman is not to be ordained within his diocese as a priest;

that a woman is not to be instituted or licensed to the office of incumbent or priest-in-charge of a benefice, or of team vicar for a benefice;

that a woman is not to be given a licence or permission to officiate as a priest within the diocese.

Parishes were allowed to make up to two declarations known as Resolution A and Resolution B. Resolution A declared that ‘this parochial Church Council would not accept a woman as the minister who presides at or celebrates the Holy Communion or pronounces the Absolution in the parish’ and Resolution B declared ‘this parochial church council would not accept a woman as the incumbent or priest-in-charge of the benefice or as a team vicar for the benefice’. *Cathedrals* were allowed to pass two Resolutions of their own, also called Resolutions A and B which basically were the same as Resolutions A and B for the parishes only with the proviso that these would be, in effect, at any service other than a service held on the direction of the diocesan bishop.

Parliament’s Ecclesiastical Committee

Such was the legislation. To many members of the church it seems generous to a fault and gave far too many concessions to opponents. Of course the legislation had to give concessions simply because the opposition was so large and so determined but, be that as it may, it has to be asked as to why parliament’s Ecclesiastical Committee were initially so reluctant to declare the legislation ‘expedient’.

A clue can be found in the legislation that deals with the safeguards that surround the bishops. As we have noted, the bishops could make certain declarations regarding the presbyteral ministry of women within their dioceses but there was a sting in the tail. Paragraph 5 Section 2 of the Measure reads –

Where the bishop of a diocese who has made a declaration...ceases to hold office, the declaration shall continue to be in force until the expiry of a period of six months beginning with the date on which another person becomes the bishop of that diocese.

In other words, since *only* the bishops in office at the relevant date were the ones allowed to make any declarations at all and since these declarations would lapse after six months from the time another bishop filled the See, it became obvious that the legislation was making no provision for the continuance of a succession of bishops who did consent to the ordination of women as presbyters.

This, of course, is serious. It only allowed the bishops to dissent temporarily after which time the legislation looked forward to its full acceptance; and what must be remembered at this point is that it was never the intention of the General Synod ever to allow a continuation of bishops who hold to the biblical line to ever be created. For the framers of the legislation realised that to have a continuation of bishops would also mean a continuation of priests and to have a continuation of priests would also mean to have a continuation of parishes. As we shall see in a moment, the Synod's intention never to have a continuation of orthodox bishops contradicted the doctrine of 'theological reception' – the very notion on which the legislation itself was predicated. As was said in the Ecclesiastical Committee on 19 April 1993 –

No doctrine can [be said to be] received if the contrary view is outlawed. If you say those who hold your views cannot become bishops [and make the same declarations] you are actually saying that there is no place in the Church for those [who dissent].

This line of argument was a powerful one and found sympathy in the Ecclesiastical Committee. It is the duty of parliament to ensure that none of Her Majesty's subjects become the victims of oppressive legislation and, as

time wore on, it began to appear as if the legislation was set to stifle dissent. Accordingly some who voted against the *Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure* did so, not because they were necessarily opposed to female presbyters, but because they felt the legislation was coercive. This was powerfully stated on the floor of Synod when a leading bishop pointed out the intention of the legislation. He reasoned that although it claimed that the provisions being offered were generous he was not convinced. He pointed to the Revisions Committee's report GS 830 Y which concluded –

the necessary majority in [the legislation's] favour would indicate that a common mind on the issue had in fact been achieved within the Church of England.

This being the case, it continued

women priests must be accepted with theological and ecclesiological integrity and that their acceptance must become the new theological understanding of the Church of England.

According to this document all that the safeguards intended to achieve was to 'give opponents an opportunity to plan their future'. A member of that committee, in presenting the legislation in 1989 underscored this point. He said, 'We must never lose sight of the basic fact that the various safeguards are unusual and exceptional. They are exceptional provisions given by the majority to the minority with very strong views'. And why are these exceptional provisions made? The answer: 'so that the minority may have space to assess the reality of the ordination of women as it takes place in our provinces. However, because the provisions are exceptional they must in the end be seen as temporary.'

The Act of Synod

It is important to realise that the Ecclesiastical Committee (rightly) did concern itself with theological issues. It was no part of that Committee's remit to discuss the theological niceties of the various arguments for and against. That was neither its role nor would it lie within its competence. All that the Ecclesiastical Committee had to do was to decide whether the legislation before it could be presented to parliament as 'expedient'; in other words that

it did not trample roughshod over the deeply held conscientious convictions of Her Majesty's loyal subjects. As time wore on the House of Bishops began to grow anxious for it was becoming clear that serious and sustained objections were being levelled, not against the principle of female presbyteral ordination, but against the legislative instrument by which that principle was to be executed. The House of Bishops had met in January 1993 predating the meetings of the Ecclesiastical Committee and they fleshed out what came to be known as the *Manchester Statement*. This document formed the basis of the *Act of Synod* and it was there in the wings when the Ecclesiastical Committee began their proceedings.

Even so, there was some reluctance by the Synod's Representatives to bring the *Manchester Statement* forward hoping that the Committee would approve the legislation without recourse to its use. At this Baroness Seear, a doughty champion of female priesthood, grew exasperated. Turning to the Bishop of Guildford she exclaimed, 'Bishop, most of us like myself...are desperately anxious to get this through. Do not make it difficult for us to do what we earnestly want to do. You are making it very difficult'. Likewise, Patrick Cormack bluntly told the representatives 'either assume the legislation is going back to Synod or pass a parallel piece of legislation'. On the promise that the Bishops would introduce into the Synod an Act creating three Provincial Episcopal Visitors and so enshrine a continuance of Bishops opposed to female presbyteral ministry, the Ecclesiastical Committee declared the *Priests (Ordination of Women's) Measure* expedient. It seemed as if two integrities were on the way to being created at last and those who wished to come under the care of a flying bishop were now free to do so.

I have outlined what the legislation allowed and Parliament's reaction to it because I wanted to demonstrate that dissent on this issue will not be tolerated in the long run. This is inevitably the case because what the Act of Synod effectively does is to undermine one of the cardinal theological and legal sinews of the Church of England. Canon A4 to which all clergy must assent reads –

the Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining, and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests and Deacons...is not repugnant to the Word of God; and those so made, ordained or consecrated Bishops, Priests, or Deacons, according to the said Ordinal, are lawfully made, ordained or consecrated,

and ought to be accounted, both by themselves and others, to be truly Bishops, Priests or Deacons.

However, because of the legislation and the Act of Synod the priesthood of women is deemed in some sense to be exploratory and experimental. This, of course, is intolerable not only for the female priests themselves but also for the Church. As it was graphically put by one diocesan bishop – the Church cannot function with some clergy doubting the orders of other fellow clergy; the only way forward is for those who dissent to leave the Church. Lest we are tempted to think that this is simply some Catholic jargon for which we have no time, allow me to quote Calvin. Writing in Book 4 of *The Institutes* Calvin asserts that –

the ministry of men, which God employs in governing the Church, is a principal bond by which believers are kept together in one body... [therefore] whoever studies to abolish this order or disparages it as of minor importance, plots the devastation, or rather the ruin and destruction of the Church.

This is merely what the House of Bishops in their *Second Report on the Ordination of Women* asserted when they wrote – it is an article of faith that the Church is a communion of saints. The ordained ministry is a principal instrument given by God for the maintenance of true communion. In this way questions of Church order touch upon matters of faith.

It is little wonder, then, that since 11th November, 1992 no new bishops have been consecrated who hold to the biblical line on this issue apart from the three Flying Bishops and Bishop Wallace Benn, the Suffragan Bishop of Lewes in the orthodox Diocese of Chichester. We should be humble and wise enough to learn from the experience of those churches overseas who have experimented with female presbyteral ordination and, after a short period of grace extended to the opponents, have very quickly moved to abolish all conscience clauses and to demand full compliance. As the English House of Bishops wrote in their *First Report* –

once a province has expressed its mind in favour of women to the priesthood and proceeded so to ordain women it would be anomalous to appoint a bishop who was actively opposed to the mind of the province,

and in particular opposed to the common mind of the college of bishops. A common mind on the understanding of the ministry, the bond of communion, *is* essential within the college of bishops if the unity of the ministry and thus of the Church is to be maintained.

The Future

So what are we to do? Doing nothing may well appeal to some people, but it is hardly a serious option in the present circumstances. For evangelicals, female presbyteral ordination strikes at the heart of biblical authority and if the Church of England is prepared, through specious exegesis, to overturn the authority of Scripture on this issue she will also be prepared to overturn the authority of Scripture on other issues as well. We have been reminded that unless the whole question of female presbyteral ministry is challenged ‘the number and witness of conservative evangelicals is heading for precipitate decline’² with disastrous implications for the Church of England. It has also been argued that we should seek to extend the ministry of the Flying Bishops³ so that appeal may be made to them over contentious issues as well; with this I am in total agreement. But I fear that the response to this suggestion would be simply to point out how illogical it would be to extend the use of the Flying Bishops for evangelicals who have not even availed themselves of their ministrations in the first place.

The way forward then is clear. By all means let us argue for an extension of the ministry of the Flying Bishops but let us also as evangelicals begin *to start using them*. I and my four parishes in Devon all appealed to the Bishop of Exeter to come under the superb and orthodox Episcopal care of the Bishop of Ebbsfleet. And it was just as well we did. For when I left Exeter Diocese, if it had not been for the Bishop of Ebbsfleet, I doubt very much if a Reform-type of evangelical would have ever replaced me. I dare say the same is true of others. Should others be brought to glory tonight or in the near future what will happen to their parishes? Again I doubt very much whether the powers that be would welcome Reform evangelicals. In short we need the Flying Bishops in order to protect our parishes.

But there is another point. Not only do we need them in order to secure our

2 D.A. Carson, Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, speaking at a Reform Conference.

3 R. Beckwith.

future in the Church of England the most amazing thing is that the Establishment is willing to provide them for us. This is the beauty of this scheme that has been discussed little and yet it seems to provide the best way forward. To go down any other road is to turn our backs on the Church of England and not to live up to our calling to reform it. For example, if we were to fly in two or three bishops from overseas in order to ordain reform evangelicals one thing is certain: those men so ordained would have to be issued with their letters of orders. As soon as they tried to obtain a parish within the Church of England they would be turned down flat as their letters of orders would betray their irregular ordinations. To go down this route is, in effect, to abandon the Church of England and it is a counsel of despair.

Let me close by quoting from a paper called ‘Planning for the Future’.⁴ It reads –

the belief and practice of the Church of England hitherto has been that it is not a proper part of the ministry of women that they should be ordained as presbyters. What we need to secure is that this belief and practice of ours remains a permitted and respected option within the Church of England until such time as the Church of England comes to a common, and wise mind on the matter...once more. If this is to be achieved, it will be essential that the rights given to parishes by the Measure [and now by the Act of Synod] be used to the full. We must not plan negatively, just for breathing space till we die or leave the Church of England, but for a permanent future within the Church of England, and indeed for a campaign to bring the whole Church of England, in time, back to its right mind, on this and many other matters. We must plan for nothing less than to rebuild the established Church on its true basis, the catholic and reformed basis of the Elizabethan Settlement. In the interest of biblical and historic Christianity in England and the Anglican world, this is what we must plan to do.

I believe that we who are clergy in Reform must go back to our parishes. We must explain to them that the crisis overtaking the Church is as deep and as momentous as anything since the Reformation and that we are fighting to uphold nothing less and nothing more than the authority of Scripture and the

4 R. Beckwith in ‘Planning for the Future’, a paper written about the end of 1992 or early in 1993.

whole counsel of God. We must all plan to come under the Flying Bishops by passing Resolution C. Let us give ourselves two years. Let us all work towards securing Flying Bishops for three hundred, four hundred, five hundred Reform parishes by October, 2002. Let us pass the resolutions on the same day so that we are seen not only to be working together but also to a coherent strategy. This will make it difficult for the Bishops to pick us off one by one. What will we have then achieved? We will have formed ourselves into a coherent ecclesial body. We will have our bishops, our clergy, our parishes, our people and our money welded together. From this position we will be on an almost unassailable footing to press for further reform or, should we need to, to press Parliament for a third, non-geographical, province. But we must act quickly. We have a window of opportunity before us now, but it will soon be gone. For in order to create female bishops, which is inevitable, all concessions that have been granted us so far will need to be withdrawn.

NIGEL ATKINSON is Vicar of Knutsford, Cheshire.