

Churchman

EDITORIAL

No Taxation Without Representation

A day before it was dissolved, the seventh General Synod of the Church of England gave its approval to a process which would initiate legislation making it possible for the church to consecrate women as bishops. Given that even stalwart opponents of women in holy orders have been predicting this move since the ordination of women presbyters (priests) was approved back in 1992, and that some in “Forward in Faith” have even encouraged it, we should not be surprised by the result. The only unexpected feature was the abstention of Bishop Wright of Durham, following a letter which he and sixteen other bishops had written, urging the Synod not to proceed until there had been time for full theological debate on the issue. Bishop Wright is a known supporter of women bishops, and his presence among so many orthodox traditionalists came as an unwelcome surprise to many of the campaigners, at least one of whom went on record as claiming that it was an insult to women!

Bishop Wright's position is perfectly understandable, and we must feel great sympathy for the awkward situation in which he has found himself. As an academic, he wants discussion and debate, but has discovered to his chagrin that the politicians of the Synod have little time for, or interest in, anything as tedious as that. Their attitude is well summed up in the so-called Rochester Report, *Women Bishops in the Church of England?*, where the game is given away in section 5.1.3: “Those who are in favour of the ordination of women as bishops may find it frustrating to have to work through the arguments of those on the other side of the debate before reaching the arguments for their own side.” So much for reasoned discussion!

Of course, as Bishop Wright made clear in a letter to *The Times* (14 July, 2005) defending his abstention on the Synod vote, his conception of debate is entirely one-sided. There is no question that he or others like him might change their minds; the only purpose of ongoing dialogue is to allow time for as many opponents of women bishops as possible to change their minds! Those who do not share Bishop Wright's views might be forgiven for failing to be attracted by

this suggestion, which sounds very much as if the imaginary dialogue partners will be confined to a room for as long as it takes to get them to surrender their beliefs—a long drawn-out process, but one which the generosity of fair-minded people like Bishop Wright is willing to concede for the sake of ‘unity’.

The truth of the matter is that most people have already made up their minds and are not going to change at this stage. The two sides start from different principles and come to different conclusions, because from where they start no other option seems possible. Those who favour the consecration of women bishops live in a mental universe where it is possible to claim that this development is the logical outcome of a movement of liberation which goes back to the campaign to abolish slavery in the early nineteenth century. They are convinced, no doubt rightly, that even the tolerant Church of England would not make special provision for the consciences of slaveholders, and since that is the case, their sense of logic forces them to conclude that such provision for those who refuse to accept ordained women is equally scandalous. Bishop Wright probably believes that he can reach out from that thought world and bridge the abyss which divides it from the traditionalists because, like the latter, he takes the Bible seriously.

This is true, but the problem is that traditionalists also believe that the Bible is authoritative for today’s church in a way that Bishop Wright does not. The effects of this for the women question can be clearly seen in the Bishop’s commentary on 1 Timothy 2, which he has published as part of a complete series on the New Testament designed to reach the ordinary person in the pew. Like so many others who share his commitment to women’s ordination, he wiggles around the plain meaning of the text, which he ends up having to reject because it does not fit his beliefs. It is at that point that, consciously or not, he parts company with the very conservatives he is trying to reach. This is because they read the text as prescriptive for our behaviour today, and not as the reaction of a second-generation Christian in the first century who was supposedly narrowing down what the Apostle Paul (not, of course, the author of 1 Timothy, in spite of what the book claims) had originally envisaged for the church.

Arguments like this have gone on for a long time and will doubtless continue, but there will never be a genuine consensus because there are two different sets of hermeneutical principles at work. The only thing to do in the end is to recognize this and to agree to differ—in this case, by setting up parallel

structures in which orthodox Christianity can continue to thrive in the Church of England alongside the brave new world of the modern politically correct.

From this perspective, the great achievement of the Rochester commission is that it finally gave a voice to conservative Evangelicals, as well as to traditionalist Anglo-Catholics. Credit for this goes not to Bishop Wright, but to Dr. Eric Kemp, Bishop of Chichester from 1976 to 2000, who had the courage to appoint a genuinely conservative Evangelical as one of his suffragans. It was thus the bishop of Lewes who bore the standard of biblical orthodoxy in the commission, ably supported by the Anglo-Catholic Bishop of Europe. Back in 1992 there were 'Evangelical' bishops, to be sure, but not one of them opposed the ordination of women presbyters and, in the fallout which resulted from that, they all strove as hard as possible to insist that the whole issue was irrelevant to Evangelical concerns. In other words, the very existence of a conservative Evangelical constituency was effectively denied, and repeated requests for an Evangelical flying bishop were denied—on the grounds that there was no need for one!

That this line cannot now be taken is thanks to the outstanding work done by the Bishop of Lewes, which forced the commission to accept that there is indeed a case to answer from the Evangelical, as well as from the Anglo-Catholic side. In practice this means that Evangelicals are now well-placed to benefit from whatever arrangements are made to accommodate the dissenters when women bishops are finally consecrated. It is an opportunity which will not recur, and we must make sure that we take full advantage of it.

What Evangelicals need and want are their own bishops, who will minister to them in a context in which Evangelical beliefs will be honoured and promoted, so that they can get on with the work of evangelizing the nation. We must not be preoccupied with women's ordination any more than with homosexuality or whatever other issue emerges over the next few years. These things have to be dealt with in their place, and we know that in the providence of God they have become the catalysts propelling the Church of England towards a new institutional dispensation, but they are not the heart of the gospel.

Evangelicals are neither misogynists nor homophobes—they are orthodox Christian believers who take the whole of Scripture and the classical theological tradition of hermeneutics which has developed over the centuries

as their benchmarks. They are willing to devote their time and their resources to promoting the gospel of salvation by the atoning work of Christ on the cross—a message which is seldom heard in the corridors of General Synod. What they want is to be set free to get on with their calling, without being constantly distracted by politically correct campaigns which take us further and further away from the truth which we have found in Christ.

At this point we must be brutally honest and say that the main reason why we have not been given the freedom to develop in our own way is financial. Without Evangelical support, the Church of England would be in desperate straits, a point which was made most effectively when the issue of homosexual bishops came to the fore a couple of years ago. Evangelicals were criticized for what some saw as blackmailing the wider church, but there is no need to apologize for this. If the liberals have the courage of their convictions, let them dip into their pockets and prove it! Why should Evangelicals be asked to prop up ministers and ministries which they do not accept? At the same time, the recent reappearance of the conservative Evangelical voice in church circles underscores the unfairness of the system as it now operates. How is it that a large and wealthy part of the Church is so seriously under-represented at the highest levels? Why is there not a single diocesan bishop who can be relied on to defend the conservative Evangelical position? How can it be that we are asked to make room for homosexuals and feminists, but nobody is prepared to move over for orthodox Christians?

There can be no taxation without representation, and Evangelicals are fully justified in withholding their cash from the Church until this imbalance is recognized and corrected. If members of WATCH, Affirming Catholicism, Fulcrum or the Modern Churchpeople's Union are afraid that a diocese or two may become a no-go area for people of their persuasion, then take the logical way out—create permanent non-territorial bishoprics where Evangelicals can be left to their own devices. That way we shall be able to see over time which side is right. It is our belief that an Evangelical movement set free in this way will grow and expand, bringing light to the dark corners of our land without fear of being tripped up by an unsympathetic hierarchy.

Let the others go their own way, but give us our freedom—and allow us at long last to put our mouth where our money is.

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