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### SHOULD WOMEN BE ORDAINED?

By John Cheeseman

In spite of dogged male resistance, the suffragettes in England won their campaign to gain for women the right to vote. The agitation for the principle of 'equal pay for equal work' has now been accepted in many fields. Women are now prominent in professional, business and political life. To some it seems that the churches remain the last stronghold of male privilege. Hence the vigorous campaign waged in recent years that women should be accorded in church life an equal status with men, and that the ordained ministry should no longer be confined to one sex. Some of those who advocate this new departure would insist that they are not merely arguing from the situation in the world at large. They claim rather to have theological grounds for their contention. Thus, when General Synod debated this issue it decided that there were no intrinsic *theological* objections to the ordination of women. It is therefore necessary that we should assess the whole position in the light of biblical principles.

In the matter of salvation there is no difference at all between men and women. '*There is neither male nor female*', writes the apostle, '*for you are all one in Christ Jesus*' (Gal. 3:28). Both begin on the same level as guilty sinners. They are alike justified by grace through faith in Christ. As far as redemption is concerned, the difference between the sexes is irrelevant.

It is also obvious in the New Testament that women play an important part, and have an honoured place in the life of the church. At the outset, we meet Elizabeth and Mary, both of them specially chosen by God for a vital task in the plan of salvation. In the Lord's earthly ministry there is the group of women who ministered to him and were with him right up to Calvary, and the ready hospitality of Martha and Mary which clearly must have meant much to him. On the day of Pentecost, women are united with men in prayer and in subsequent enjoyment of the visitation of the Spirit. Paul proved the value of the hospitality he received from Lydia, and from Priscilla, who with her husband welcomed him into their home. He commends Phoebe, '*a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea*' (Rom. 16:1), and Mary, '*who has worked hard among you*' (Rom. 16:6). He speaks with appreciation of those women who '*have laboured side by side with me in the gospel*' (Phil. 4:3). He recalls the vital part played by Eunice and Lois (2 Tim. 1:5) in the spiritual upbringing of Timothy. And yet in spite of all this, and more in the same vein, there are serious reservations which the church neglects at her peril.

Paul particularly has been misrepresented as if he was only concerned to be negative and to erect barriers against women participating fully in church life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paul, taught in this as in other matters by the Holy Spirit, is concerned that the life of the church should reflect in every detail the mind of God. Thus, his instructions as to how worship should be conducted, or elders appointed, are intended to lead to an orderly church life which is not merely satisfying to the members but, more important, is acceptable to God. Thus, when he deals with women's place and function in church life, he is simply applying in this particular realm the pattern which appears throughout Scripture and which has already been seen in the biblical teaching on women's place in creation. That pattern was basically in terms of a family in which the man is the divinely appointed head of the home, and in which the woman responds to his love and care with ready submission (see Eph. 5:21-33). This order of things is written by God into our very constitution, so that instinctively the average man—or woman for that matter—has little time for the woman who 'wears the trousers' or for the weak 'hen-pecked' husband. The very expressions used suggest the reactions in their minds.

These are the principles which lie behind the injunctions of Paul in 1 Timothy 2:11-15. The thought is of the divinely constituted order. The woman is not to take over the authority and headship which God has given to the man, and the apostle maintains that teaching is essentially an exercise of authority. We cannot minimise his prohibition by saying that it is some passing situation that is in view. On the contrary, Paul roots his objection in facts which are the same in every generation. On the one side there is the fact of creation, and on the other that of the fall. Adam was created first, and then Eve—here is the constant emphasis on the divine order in creation. An unwarranted intrusion into the teaching ministry rejects that order and so flouts God's ordinance. But in the fall that very thing was done. Eve, instead of being the follower, became the leader, with disastrous consequences for both.

Someone will doubtless object that we must not take 1 Timothy 2 out of the general context of Scripture, but must consider other passages which seem to speak in different tones. For example, did not women both in the Old and New Testaments exercise a prophetic ministry? Are we to ignore Deborah and Huldah, or the daughters of Philip, or indeed the women in Corinth whose heads Paul was anxious to see covered when they were engaged in such prophetic activity, and whose exercise of the prophetic gift is therefore validated by him?

By way of reply it is important to emphasise the special character of prophecy. The prophet in the Bible is one who comes with a direct word from God. His message has been directly revealed to him, so that he is the oracle or mouthpiece of the Lord. There is a clear distinction between such immediate inspiration and the teaching ministry of one who, while called by God and authorised by the church, has the task of explaining and expounding and applying the Scriptures which have already been given. We talk about prophetic preaching, but of course we are using the term fairly loosely just as we are when we speak of apostolic preaching. For, just as the preacher is not really an apostle, so he is not of necessity a prophet. Prophecy is thus an unusual and extraordinary gift, and it is quite understandable that, in the days of the Acts of the Apostles and the Corinthian epistles when the canon of the New Testament was not yet a fact, prophetic inspiration should be prominent as God revealed himself in this direct manner in contrast with the indirect way of preaching. In this unusual ministry women undoubtedly played a part, but we must not make what is extraordinary the norm for regular use. Calvin's comment on 1 Timothy 2:11-13 is appropriate:

'If anyone challenges this ruling by citing the case of Deborah and other women of whom we are told that God at one time appointed them to govern the people, the obvious answer is that God's extraordinary acts do not annul the ordinary rules by which He wishes us to be bound.'

In the light of all this, the conclusions that must be drawn are inescapable. No woman should be allowed to exercise a regular, authoritative teaching ministry in the Church of England. Since the presbyterate is a ruling teaching office, under no circumstances should women be admitted to the ordained ministry. The General Synod was therefore totally misguided in its decision on this issue.

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