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Women Bishops

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It has been asserted in another article in this edition that bishops are presbyters with a wider area of ministry. Therefore, for those convinced that women should not exercise a presbyteral ministry the theological arguments are the same as women priests. However, because of the nature of the role of bishops the consecration of women bishops will create particular issues.

In the run-up to the 1992 debate on the ordination of women priests some evangelicals argued that the real problem would come with women bishops. I understand that there were two shades to this view. First, there were those who argued that because priests are under the authority of a bishop a woman priest under the authority of a male bishop was therefore acceptable. Secondly, there are those who recognised that in the church as it is women priests were inevitable and they could accept this so long as there was not a woman presbyter in their own church. The prospect of women bishops brings the issue closer to home.

Before we consider the particular roles of bishops I believe it is worth recognising that there is a degree of hypocrisy amongst those who hold out against women bishops. Why are we prepared to accept as bishops men who deny the gospel or fundamental biblical truths but refuse to accept the authority of women who affirm the gospel? I accept this criticism. However, I believe we uphold the principle that bishops affirm the gospel and uphold biblical truth. This is still the requirement for those to be bishops in the Church of England. In the recent past those who deviated from this position were usually seen as the exception and even when bishops may have denied aspects of biblical truth privately they were often prepared to affirm historic Anglican teaching publicly. What we have witnessed increasingly in the England, Scotland, the USA and elsewhere is an increasing number of bishops who teach heresy or gross error and are crusading in their eagerness to do so - a sort of fundamentalist liberalism. The appointment of such bishops is schismatic and divides the church. In responding to these things however, we are faced with the need for judgement in an assessment of the degree of error involved. This will vary from person to person.

However, whether we like it or not, when it comes to women bishops the matter is far simpler. In general it is abundantly plain whether a bishop is male or female. Therefore, on this fact we cannot hide behind either our own ideals or unwillingness to reach a decision. If women should not be bishops there is no grey area.

The role of Bishops

Bishops are presbyters with a wider ministry. Therefore, the major practical issue surrounding the ministry of bishops is simply that it affects more people. Whether it be teaching, pastoring or disciplining they minister to far more people than most parish clergy. Therefore, the creation of women bishops simply increases the scale of the issue, but to such an extent that it threatens the current nature of the Church of England. At present an individual who believes women should not be

presbyters, when faced with such a ministry can in charity accept it whilst disagreeing with it, or they can up sticks and leave. Some will worship in other Anglican churches, others have left the Church of England and some have in effect become unchurched. These steps have not been taken lightly but out of the conviction that the scripture is God's word and its teaching authoritative for today. But what will happen where a woman is created as a Bishop. Again some will accept it in charity whilst objecting to the development. Some churches will continue to plough their own furrow, disagreeing with it but for almost all practical purposes ignoring the structures of the Church of England seeing themselves in a much bigger picture. Others, both individuals and parishes will dissent and believe it necessary to reject such unbiblical authority. What will these latter folk do?

Before considering the options for dissenters it is important to consider two particular aspects of the role of Bishops today. In our Anglican practice as it has developed Bishops have a particular role in ordinations and appointments. The roots of this practice can be seen in scripture in the ministry of Timothy and Titus. Therefore, whilst there is no doubt room for revision and improvements the present practice is not inconsistent with scripture. However, it also creates particular problems if women are consecrated as Bishop.

There will be present clergy and potential ordinands who will in conscience feel unable either to accept a new appointment or put themselves forward for ordination if this step necessarily requires accepting the authority of a woman bishop. This will inevitably lead in the short term to areas where such people can minister or be ordained and areas where they cannot.

Are there options.

What then are the options which might ease the way for the consecration of women bishops for those who object to it.

First, is the possibility of ensuring that wherever there is a woman bishop there is in the same diocese the ministry of a male bishop which is open to any in diocese who wish it. This is perhaps the least destructive option but it will create further divisions, and hurt, within dioceses. Moreover, in the case of Diocesan Bishops it is no real solution since authority ultimately lies with the Diocesan.

Second, it would be possible to allow churches to opt out of the authority and oversight of one Diocese and come under another. There is precedent for this in all the many 'peculiarities' there have been in the past (some of which still exist today I believe). There have historically been a good number of parishes, colleges or chapels which were considered part of a diocese other than that in which they were geographically situated. Such a proposal would have many merits but also many practical problems. In particular how would it work if minister and congregation were in disagreement?

Third, it would be possible to create a Third Province. This is an option being pursued independently by Forward in Faith and by the Third Province. It creates a particular problem therefore for many evangelicals. If the whole Church of England is on the point of breaking apart what is the point of being tied together with Anglo Catholics or a broad church coalition. If change and disruption is going to be forced upon us would it not be better to work towards some sort of working alliance with professing evangelicals outside the Church of England.

What will be important with both the second and third proposals is that congregations and churches be allowed to keep their land and buildings. Already there are many court cases going ahead in the United

States disputing who owns buildings. In England the situation is legally complicated and it is hard to know how things would turn out if the matter came to law. Hopefully the courts would rule as they did in Scotland and South Africa that those who hold to the historic faith of the Church of England also hold title to their land and buildings.

In all these options listed above what is clear is that all will lead to great upheaval, legal battles, deep divisions and the pauperising of the church. These are the consequences of following teaching which is inconsistent with scripture. Many have and will argue that unless the Church changes by giving equality of opportunity to men and women then it will be seen as antiquated and will lose support. However, this argument has been used repeatedly over the last generation and more with regards to many changes that have been forced upon the church and is used repeatedly by those who wish the church to depart from the fundamental truths of the gospel. They are pragmatic arguments, but as such one would hope that they are at least backed up in some way by clear evidence that the argument is true. In reality the Church has continued to decline in attendance and influence. At best it could be said that decline would have been worse without change. More likely it is the changes that are killing the Church. Whenever we put human wisdom in the place of God's word then we are depriving ourselves of the air we need to breathe and grow.

I am convinced, and I am aware how much this infuriates many, that accepting women as priests and bishops opens the floodgates. We have allowed a method of interpreting the bible which allows us to draw different conclusions on matters of ministry to that drawn by the first Christians and indeed by the church through the ages. This same biblical hermeneutic (interpretive method) will allow in all manner of destructive teaching without restraint.