

## Article reprinted from *CrossWay* Issue Autumn 2001 No. 82

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

### **Revisiting the arguments.**

#### **Women as Priests.**

David Phillips

In the run up to the General Synod debate in November 1992 the arguments on the ordination of women were well rehearsed. However, some felt that evangelical objections were badly represented and in the debate itself hardly heard. The discussions seemed to be conducted in terms which were alien to evangelicals. As the prospect of women Bishops draws nearer it is tempting to think that all the arguments have been aired, but even if this were so they still need to be heard again. If it was contrary to scripture in 1992, it is still contrary to scripture in 2001.

By 1992 the issue had already been decided. In 1975, albeit by a simple majority, the Synod had decided that there were no theological objections to the ordination of women. Moreover, the earlier introduction of women as preachers through lay-readers and deacons and the acceptance of this by many evangelicals had created confusion as to what exactly evangelicals were against.

It needs to be stated here that there is no fundamental distinction between the orders of Bishop and Presbyterian (priests to use the Ordinal's word). Bishops are simply Presbyters with a different sphere of ministry (see Leadership above).

#### **Scripture**

The arguments of evangelicals hinge on the assumption that scripture is normative not just descriptive. Liberals will generally not accept this but we assume that scripture sets out fully and completely the way of salvation through Christ and reveals both the nature of God and his desires for his people. Evangelicals have historically differed on whether all we do must be derived directly from scripture (the regulative principle) or whether we have freedom so long as we are consistent with scripture. This distinction is not relevant to the present issue since the argument is that scripture does not permit women to take primary leadership roles in the church.

Men and women are different. During the last half century there have been numerous fads and fashions, some of which have sought to minimise our differences. At present the fashion seems to be to emphasise differences. Indeed it can be argued that women priests bring new styles of leadership and ministry. For our purpose the important fact is that men and women are different and that the distinctions are part of the original created order (Gen 2). Although things have been corrupted by the fall, distinctions are part of the original created order and were good in God's sight.

Jesus appointed leaders. He chose men. He does not appear to have been bound by social conventions of the day. There were a number of women amongst Jesus' disciples including some who were very close to Him and they are a great example to us. It could be argued that they were more faithful to Christ than the men. Nevertheless, Jesus did not appoint the women as leaders. This pattern was continued in the post-pentecost church and indeed has continued from then on until the last few decades. There was no shortage of priestesses, goddesses and families run by matriarchs in the ancient world. Neither Jesus nor the early Christians were bound by what the world thought, nor did they take it as their lead. The bible reflects God given differences and the assumption is that in mixed congregations the teaching ministry will rest with men (1 Ti 2.12). Clearly there were women prophets in the Christian community (1 Cor 11.5), if they prophesied in the public congregation, which is not actually stated, neither Paul nor others considered this

inconsistent with the principle that only men should lead and teach in the public gatherings of the church. The prophetess was neither a leader nor a teacher.

In the Christian household the man was to take the lead, he is in fact the head (cf. Eph 5.23). The word head properly refers to the lump above your shoulders (*cephalus* in Greek). For most people this is the place from which the body is governed, hence the meaning of the word head as chief, ruler etc, as in 'head teacher'. It has been argued that 'head' in Greek can mean 'source' but here the concept has more to do with the head being at the top of the body (e.g. a head on a pint!) than the head being the origin of the body. Moreover, this meaning is rare and mostly of later use than the New Testament. The role of 'headship' is not one of privilege but of duty, as in all of Christian life it is to be modelled on Christ. What is true of the Christian household is in some degree true in the household of faith (1 Cor 11.3). Therefore, presbyters, part of whose function is governance and discipline, are to be men (cf. 1 Ti 3.2f, Tit 1.5f).

One of the problems for evangelicals since the reformation has been the use made of the doctrine of private judgement. We are right to believe in the supremacy of scripture and that one is always a majority with God. But, we have also been prone to assume that our bright ideas are always right. Our reformers were at pains always to show how what they taught was consistent with the teaching of Christians in earlier generations (see for example the frequency with which the Fathers are quoted in *The Homilies*). Wisdom dictates that we test our interpretation of scripture against others, in particular against the wisdom of the ages. It is possible that we are right and all they were wrong, but the likelihood is the opposite. If Christians for two millennia have been clear that leadership in the church should be male (as they have) then we must be absolutely clear that we are right and they are wrong lest we end up building a new church today on shifting sand. This is not to canonise tradition, it is merely to try and be humble before the sweep of history and the wisdom of the past.

### **Criticisms.**

There are, of course many criticisms made against the view put forward above.

The evangelical view on gender roles is often likened to that on slavery. In scripture slavery is no big deal, the concern is with duties rather than rights and in all things our attitude should be 'as to the Lord' which rules out the abuse which has often characterised slavery. The principle applies to all our hierarchical relationships today including such things as employee and employer. Order is part of God's will. The slave trade was evil and was rightly opposed, yet today there are more slaves in the world than there were at the height of the slave trade and countless more who are far worse off than some of se lives are little better than slavery. Our designer label good are often made by people who are no better than slaves.

It has often been said that the ordination of women is a matter of justice. Therefore, the early Christians were, knowingly or unknowingly perpetrating an injustice. Moreover, if we believe that scripture is God breathed, given through the Holy Spirit, then we must call God unjust. Of course, the alternative is that we have misunderstood the nature of true justice.

Many women have argued that God is calling them to ministry, and who is to deny that they may feel this. But the Church of God has never relied on calling alone. Scripture gives to us other tests, for example that a person be self-controlled, able to govern their own household, apt to teach. Calling must be tested against these principles, and against the fact that presbyteral ministry in the church should be exercised by men.

This short article cannot do justice to all the arguments but most of the criticisms of the classical evangelical boil down to one or both of two arguments. First, it is argued that the bible opens the

door in some way to women's ministry (Junias the apostle - women prophets - 'neither male nor female' etc). But if this is so the early Christians clearly did not see it and it is an argument that pits scripture against scripture. Secondly, it is argued that the world has changed. This reflects rather a low view of life in the past and too rosy a view about how much better things are now (like the slavery argument). In addition it requires us to say that there are things in the New Testament that are no longer relevant because times have changed but who is to judge this and where does it stop? The counter view is that the world has not fundamentally changed since the first coming of Christ and scripture shows us all we need to know to find salvation and live in the world as God's people until Christ returns.

For classical evangelicals these arguments are non-tenable. We assert instead that God knows best for the Church and has revealed in scripture sufficient for the well ordering of the church. Women should not be in primary leadership roles in the Church. This is not to downgrade women or their ministry but does free both men and women to serve, as to Christ, in ways that are fulfilling and appropriate to the way in which God has made us.

### **Change and die**

In the 1992 debate the Archbishop of Canterbury said in effect that unless the church has women ministers the world would not take it seriously. If we once entertain this argument then what is to stop us following the line of Bishop Spong in his book 'Change or Die'? The falsity of the argument can be found in any book of statistics on church attendance. Whilst the Church has embarked on large-scale changes its influence and numbers have continued to decline. The Church has always been strongest when it was faithful to the will of God, not the ways of the world. Indeed the more the church seeks to shape itself by what the world considers relevant the more irrelevant it will become.

There is no shortage of work to be done by the Church of Christ, no shortage of need or opportunities to minister by both men and women. However, if we would be faithful to scripture then we must continue to assert that the roles of presbyteral leadership in the church are roles which in God's good purposes are to be exercised by men.