

WOMEN BISHOPS?

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The Rochester Commission on Women in the Episcopate is to be congratulated for a thorough and fair attempt to work through the theological and practical issues relating to the possible consecration of women as Bishops. The Commission was established following a resolution at General Synod in 2000 and over the intervening years has taken a large number of written and verbal submissions and produced a substantial report. With some members of the Commission opposed to the development they opted not to make recommendations themselves, which would have led to minority reports, but to set out as carefully as possible the different views that now exist in the Church and the possible courses of action which lie ahead. The report begins with an attempt to set out a theology of episcopacy.

The report tries to be scrupulously fair in representing the different views and contains substantial quotations of submissions they received in order to avoid misrepresentation. However, in the end this merely serves to highlight the problems now facing us. How can we arrive at a way forward when the Church of England now encompasses such widely different views about the nature of ministry, of authority in the Church and about how to handle and interpret Scripture? The Commission has sought to deal with this by setting out the differences as clearly as possible. Its great value, therefore, is that it ensures that the differences are properly understood rather than caricatures. This will help honest debate, but it is unlikely to do more.

General Synod will debate the report in February, and the debate appears to be scheduled to last a whole day. Four of the more liberal Dioceses have already passed resolutions calling for action. It is likely that the report will be passed to all the Dioceses and Deaneries for discussion and if there is to be change it will probably take two years as a minimum.

In contrast to the impartial objectivity of the report I propose to give an entirely partisan assessment of the issue of women Bishops and how it demonstrates the divided nature of the Church of England. There are a wide variety of different factions within the Church and this assessment is necessarily brief.

Most of those opposed to the consecration of women Bishops are Anglo-Catholics, many of whom are members of Forward in Faith. They have been very much on the ball and established their own Commission to shadow the official Rochester Commission and this produced the substantial report *Consecrated Women* shortly before the official report. Some have been very upbeat and despite some losses they have held together and used the provisions of the Act of Synod regarding women priests to safeguard their position. They have opposed women priests and Bishops on the grounds of Scripture but also because of their view of priesthood, which is incompatible with the 39 Articles, and because such a change should, in their opinion be taken by the universal Church not just a few bits of it. In theory if Rome accepted women priests most Anglo-Catholics would appear to be willing to do so. Whilst we are aware that Anglo-Catholics are co-belligerents against liberalism we are still convinced that they have perverted the Church of England and that they would be happier in Rome.

There are some who oppose the ordination of women who appear to evangelicals to be very similar to Anglo-Catholics, but are actually just traditionalist Anglicans. They ought really to be thoroughgoing reformed protestant evangelicals, since that is the position of the formularies of the

Church! However, they are generally not pro-Rome and give the appearance of being a dwindling band.

I will make no attempt to distinguish between Liberal Catholics and Liberals, I am sure there are differences but it all looks the same to me. They believe that they are being consistent with what they see as the great themes of Scripture but they certainly do not accept all Scripture. They are convinced for various reasons that the ordination of women is right. Their position is cogent but in the end those on the outside feel that understanding what they believe is like pinning jelly to a wall. Whilst they can talk about scholarly consensus or being led by the Spirit their theological basis is akin to shifting sand, and whilst they may revel in this very fact it has the practical consequence that there are no limits, no boundaries and no restraints other than individual desires and prejudices. This makes doctrinal and moral degradation inevitable as has been long evident. As J Gresham Machen argued a century ago, liberalism and Christianity are, in reality, two different religions.

Various labels can be used to distinguish the differences that now exist between evangelicals. For the purposes of this article I will call those opposed to the ordination of women by the title 'classical evangelicals'. We believe that the Bible sets out a pattern of human relationships between men and women, which, whilst meaning that they are equal before God, also means that they have different roles. It seems plain to us therefore that the pattern found in Scripture is that men were to take the duties and responsibilities of leadership within the home and within the Church family. Not only are we convinced that this is what Scripture teaches we also note that almost all previous generations of Christians have understood Scripture to teach this as well. Since early Christians spoke Greek and lived in the same cultural milieu as the New Testament we see it as confirming testimony that we are right and would need to be absolutely convinced from Scripture before overturning such long tradition. Furthermore, we are convinced that despite all the fine words what is driving the desire for change today is not Scripture but culture. We remember that culture is very fickle and there are already signs that some of the gender driven issues that dominated the last quarter of the 20th century may prove to be passing fads.

There are, of course, many evangelicals who are in favour of the consecration of women Bishops. When it comes down to it some who wear the label evangelical believe little that might equate with any meaningful historical definition of evangelical theology. Nevertheless, many in favour are sincere in their evangelical convictions and honestly believe that the Bible does not preclude the possibility of women being presbyters. Moreover, they do not wish to relegate Biblical teaching to the category of historical curiosity but genuinely wish to live by it today. Many of the arguments put forward are well summarised within the Rochester Report and they must be taken seriously. The problem is that none of them seem to present a convincing case. Whilst there clearly are difficulties in understanding the precise application of Biblical passages the evangelical arguments in favour of women presbyters seem to rely on possible readings, on speculation about the original context of the New Testament passages and on treating certain themes as overriding straightforward practice.

There is a fundamental theological incompatibility between some of these views and it stretches far beyond the issue of gender and ministry. This is why we now have so many problems. The Anglo-Catholics have gradually eaten away at the doctrinal standard of the Church of England by distorting it and refusing to live by it. Whereas previous generations of liberals kept their liberalism reasonably well hidden for fear of the consequences, we now face a situation where most of the leadership of the Church uphold, and actively promote, teaching that is incompatible with the doctrines of the Church.

A connectional church, which is what the Church of England should be, requires by definition the acceptability of ministry across the Church. The creation of women priests caused widespread

collapse of this principle and women Bishops will exacerbate it. This is not simply that the ministry of such priests and Bishops is not acceptable in some parishes but also that those opposed to it are now in effect barred from certain offices. For example, it has been stated openly by some that an evangelical opposed to the ordination of women cannot be a Bishop to the whole church. Therefore this change has dealt a deadly blow to the concept of the Church of England.

The report does not suggest a solution to all this but attempts to outline the various courses of action that might be taken. Church Society has stated publicly that the only viable option is not to go ahead. The Society argued previously that the ordination of women as presbyters is contrary to Scripture and therefore in permitting it the Church went beyond its legal powers. Even if the vast majority of the Church is in favour this will not make them right, it will still be contrary to God's Word.

All the options that will allow for the consecration of women Bishops will destroy the Church of England in the long run. Although the interpretation is disputed we have noted that in the decade following the introduction of women priests the rate of decline in Church attendance doubled as compared to the decade before. Furthermore the number of men attending has dropped by nearly 30% and the number of men entering full-time ordained ministry has more than halved.

If the consecration of women Bishops goes ahead the idea of having one Bishop in each Diocese who is opposed may salve the consciences of some but will raise many other problems. The idea of Third Province will certainly have some advantages in allowing people to get on with gospel work without being as compromised by liberalism but this is not sufficient justification. All the options proposed will be destructive, therefore, since we desire to see the Church of England as a reformed and national Church we will hope and pray that it will pull back from the brink.