

CONSECRATION OF WOMEN BISHOPS SPEECH IN THE GENERAL SYNOD DEBATE

By the editor, David Phillips. (The speech is as recorded by the stenographer with a few explanatory comments).

Mr Chairman, I confess to being slightly unsure as to the nature of this debate, and the opening exchange did not help me. Nevertheless, I want to address the theological issues. Whether that is what we are supposed to be doing, I am not sure. (*There was the suggestion at the beginning that the debate was not about theology but about procedure, the theological debate having taken place, apparently, in February*).

I find it slightly surprising that in the New Testament we find that there is a need for leadership. In the old Covenant there were the prophets, the priests, the kings, but in the new Covenant we have Christ as our prophet, Christ as our high priest, Christ as our king. It would not have surprised me if we had therefore found that in the new Covenant there is no need for leadership. Yet Our Lord himself chose those who would become leaders within his people, for among the broader group of men and women he chose twelve to a special rôle.

Jesus was counter-cultural in so many respects, but in the matter before us today, in terms of leadership, he was not. Those whom he chose were men. The women among the disciples were especially close to him. We are told that they ministered to him; literally, they *deaconed* to him. Jesus chose leaders and leadership thus has a particular place in the life of the people of God. It reflects the fact that God is a God of order. Just as we are to honour and respect the ordering of the society at large in terms of government and so on, so are we to respect order within the family, within the relationship of child and parent, husband and wife, and within the relationships in our Church.

Such ordering does not imply that some are worth more than others. Indeed, it seems to me that we could argue from Scripture precisely the opposite – that those who might seem to be the least are in fact more important and valued in God's sight. Nevertheless, order is part of God's purpose for the world, for human society, for the family, for the people of God.

In the New Testament we see, therefore, the dynamic unfolding of how leaders were to be chosen as the Church passed from one generation to another. Most vividly, this is to be found in the pastoral epistles, where there is an expectation of the continuance of ministry. Moreover, we can see from it the expectation on those who are to be called into ministry. Consistent with the principle of God's order and the practice of Christ himself, the expectation is clearly that men would be appointed to these particular positions.

In other parts of the New Testament, that fact is worked out in the lives of the early churches and in particular issues that arose – issues to do with who should teach, issues about how the order should be reflected in the gathering of the community of believers, and so on. Those are some of the more cultural things, but the fundamental principle had to do with the ordering of God's people. I therefore say to the Bishop of Southwark, in contradiction of what he says, that the principle is of the ordering that is a creational thing, not a cultural thing. (*The Bishop had argued that gender distinctions were simply cultural to the New Testament period, whereas*

gender distinctions in Scripture are part of the created order..)

Leadership is part of the covenant community, but it is leadership that is to be distinctive and to be modeled on Christ. The leader is not to lord it over others but to be the servant willing to give his life for the flock, but leaders must also teach, govern and discipline, not following the models of the world but the model of our Lord.

In all this, I say again that there is no suggestion that men and women are not equal before God. However, I believe that we have bought into a cultural model that essentially men and women are the same, and I think that that has an impact on the lives of those who seek to minister. Some women are forced into a rôle of ministry that is not suited to them – in a sense, a rôle designed for men – and it can lead to stress and difficulty. Others see the wisdom and the rightness of therefore challenging the rôle and saying that they will exercise their ministry in a different way. *(That is, not ministering in a male role, but in a female one.)* That is right, but it means that, in doing so, we leave undone and neglected other aspects of leadership that are expected in God's ordering of society and the ordering of His covenant people. *(That is the role of presbyter, which is a male role, is actually not performed in such churches to the detriment of the Church.)*

Now our culture is shifting again. There is a greater focus than there was 20 or 30 years ago on the differentiated rôles of men and women. You see it in books, magazines and television programmes. However, I do not believe that the Church should be dictated to by our culture. Our calling is to reflect God's intention for His people. Our leadership – presbyter, priest, bishop, elder or whatever – should be exercised by men, without losing and while developing the complementary, distinctive and God-given qualities and abilities of women.

Mr Chairman, I will vote against this motion because I do not believe that it will help us to be what God intended us to be as His people.