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### **AS NIGHT FOLLOWS DAY?**

By David Phillips

My personal tutor at theological college was Michael Vasey. Michael was, I believe, opposed to the ordination of women as presbyters (priests). But when the General Synod voted in favour of this he is reported to have said that if the Church could do so despite the teaching of Scripture then it must follow that it could not object to homosexual practice. Accordingly in his book 'Strangers and Friends' published three years later he set out to argue from Scripture that the Church should change its mind.

In a similar vein in 2003 the then Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, argued in an article in the Daily Telegraph that "The Church has got it wrong in the past - there's no doubt about it. I think you can take the view that, just as the Church eventually abolished slavery, so they ended up in favour of votes for women, so they voted for the ordination of women, and this is just one more issue where the Church has got it wrong." His argument was that the Church had got it wrong on homosexual conduct.

There are many who sincerely believe that it is right for the Church to ordain women as presbyters, and wrong for it to endorse homosexual practice. Although some have argued this distinction forcefully I am convinced that the acceptance of one almost inevitably leads to the acceptance of the other. Some will find this conclusion offensive but I find it rather obvious.

#### **The same argument?**

First then, are the cases different? Some argue that the ordination of women is a 'second order' issue because it concerns church order whilst sexual conduct is a 'first order' issue because it concerns salvation. I am far from comfortable with this distinction because I believe that the ordination of women as presbyters is contrary to Scripture and I am not willing to suggest that it is therefore unimportant or less important. Nevertheless, I do think many see the two issues as differing in degree. The distinction of first and second order is also not shared by those in favour of both. They see both as fundamental matters of justice and of the openness of the gospel. They therefore consider both to be first order issues and they are not going to rest having achieved one without achieving the other.

Some do argue the case as to why the Bible supports one and not the other, but I find the arguments badly lacking. I simply cannot see that the passages to which they plead actually support what they claim. For example some use the long list of women who are engaged in the Lord's work in Scripture to claim that women should be involved in the Lord's work, but none of these roles are as presbyters. The jump to say that they should be presbyters, when the Bible itself confines it to men is unwarranted.

Others sadly seem to set up a straw man. They argue as if only Anglo-Catholics are against women priests and because Anglo-Catholics have a defective view of ministry then the opposition to women as presbyters must be wrong. This conveniently but disingenuously ignores the fact that evangelicals argue from Scripture that women should not be presbyters. It is also unfair to Anglo-Catholics many of whom do also argue from Scripture that women should not be presbyters (priests).

But is it fair to argue that the acceptance of one will lead to the acceptance of the other? What grounds are there for asserting this?

First, there are the facts of history. There are now too many cases to ignore – national denominations which have embraced the ordination of women which then went on to embrace homosexual practice. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the US is the most recent casualty which in August voted to permit sexual immorality amongst its clergy.

Secondly, the shift seems inevitable because unbiblical innovation necessarily leads to division. When pretty much all of Christendom has been united in saying that the Bible says one thing and then people start arguing that it says something different there are bound to be some who disagree. Some inevitably will feel unable to remain when a Church seeks to legitimise what they believe to be error. It is well known that more than 20 members of the General Synod left the Church of England after the 1992 decision to ordain women as priests. In total more than 500 clergy left although some later returned and a few may have used it as an excuse to get out with compensation. There were not a few members of Church Society among them. What was left was therefore weaker and more liberal. The same things happened years ago in the US Episcopal Church. Indeed most of the protestant, reformed, evangelicals left a generation or more ago often turning to Presbyterianism. Things are different in the Church of England because it is our national and established church so fewer people have left over recent decades but the general point is valid, the ordination of women in the Church of England has weakened the ‘conservative’ voice. Furthermore, the women so appointed are more likely to be liberal because a woman who accepts the classical evangelical or Anglo-Catholic position is not going to seek such a role.

Thirdly, the pressure from outside the Church increases. My experience, and I think that of others too, is that it is often outsiders who spot the flaws in our cherished ideas. Media interviewers are particularly good at this. Some in the church have elaborate arguments as to why Scripture does not say what it appears, but interviewers cannot see how this differs from arguments about sexual conduct, they are quick to see the gaps and pounce. In contrast when we stick doggedly with what the Bible actually teaches they may think we are mad (though they don’t usually say so on air) but they also see that we are being consistent. Moreover, they can see that whatever else might be said Christians through history have held both issues to be wrong.

Fourthly, as Michael Vasey demonstrates, evangelicals are not immune to misreading Scripture in order to conform to their own desires or to the spirit of the age. There are increasing numbers of people claiming to be evangelical who are arguing publicly that the Bible has been misunderstood and it really supports homosexual conduct. Whatever the details we have seen an apparent instance of this over the summer. A Vicar of a church in Chelmsford Diocese who after only a few months left his apparently evangelical parish after the uproar when he preached that homosexual practice is wrong. Likewise when Jeffrey John was appointed as Dean of St. Albans we found that some who claimed to be evangelical were not only unconcerned but apparently welcoming of the fact that he teaches that homosexual practice is acceptable. For myself I think the matter is so clear that anyone who can read the Bible as permitting such sin is not an evangelical because they have a distorted way of approaching Scripture.

Fifthly, the nature of the arguments used in favour of both are disturbingly similar. I have already mentioned the trumpeting of justice and equality. It ought to be sufficient to say that it cannot be just to encourage people to disobey the Word of the Lord, but apparently our ideas of justice trump His. Others argued that the ordination of women is a ‘gospel imperative’ and in the last few weeks this has been articulated again amongst the largest of the break-away Anglican churches in the US which now wants to ordain women and so follow the same disastrous route as the body they left. The argument is that without this change the gospel we preach will not be taken seriously. Not only is this nonsense, it suggests that the gospel is not the power of God unto salvation and it is exactly

the same argument some use in favour of accepting homosexual practice.

Then there are spurious arguments about words. The interpretation of the word 'head' is the most celebrated. People became convinced that 'head' did not mean what Christians had previously thought it meant. Indeed I have heard it said that those of us who read it as such are 'uneducated'. The 'educated' view is apparently that there are a couple of readings in ancient Greek where it means something different and therefore these must be the meaning in the Bible. I find it hard to credit that people can take such an argument seriously yet it seemed to sweep all before it. Now we are seeing the same thing with arguments about words in Romans or Leviticus concerning sexual immorality. Many seem convinced that the real sin of Sodom was anything but Sodomy. The arguments can sound clever, even bamboozle people, but they are feeble and so devoid of any real evidence that unless people were obsessed with proving their argument it is hard to see why they would give them any credence, but alas they do.

I believe the same can be said of other arguments. For example it is argued that Mary Magdalene was sent by Jesus to tell the disciples of the resurrection. She was thus sent and so can be called an Apostle (which means one sent). Therefore women can be presbyters. This is a string of *non sequiturs*; they do not follow logically from one another. Moreover, it ought to be obvious that the argument is wrong because it reaches a conclusion that is contrary to what Scripture actually teaches. If this sort of argument can be allowed it is hardly surprising to find others saying that David and Jonathan were homosexual lovers and therefore homosexual practice is acceptable. The premise is wrong, the logic is wrong and the conclusion is wrong, but who cares so long as we can make the Bible say what we want it to say? The damage has been done because people have been encouraged to mishandle the Word of Truth.

Therefore, recognising that many will be far from pleased with the conclusion, I am forced to say that the acceptance of the presbyteral ministry of women within a Church more or less inevitably leads to the acceptance of homosexual practice. I hope this is not so, but I fear it will be. Nevertheless there is still hope, hope that some will see the mistakes and that enough remain to argue the case. But, if other churches are anything to go by, without the Lord's intervention the outlook is bleak.

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