

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT? THE PRESENT STATE OF DEBATE ON WOMEN BISHOPS

By Mike Ovey

Just what are we arguing about? I don't mean that question flippantly. In one sense the official state of the debate about women bishops runs like this: the debate has been made to consecrate women bishops and the outstanding question is how to make provision for those who do not accept this. However, while this may be the official state of the debate, I do not think it represents what the debate is now really about. This, on the whole, is my impression after participating as a delegate in the consultation held by the working group on women bishops.

The problem has always been that there are at least four different strands of argument involved in this question.

1. Anglican evangelicals who think that a traditional understanding of 1 Timothy 2 that precludes the consecration of women bishops is correct.
2. Anglo-Catholics who think the traditional understanding of Episcopal succession precludes the consecration of women bishops.
3. Those who think that 1 Timothy 2 does *not* preclude the consecration of women bishops, but that their consecration is both expedient and desirable, but who do think that views 1 and 2 can be conscientiously held by Anglican Christians.
4. Those who think that not only is the consecration of women bishops expedient and desirable, but that views 1 and 2 cannot be held conscientiously by Anglican Christians.

As it happens I think that each of these views could be broken down into further types. Now the original introduction of the consecration of women bishops was done on the basis of view 3. Unfortunately I think view 3 is in the process of eroding, and that while many did not accept view 4, more and more of the discussion is now proceeding on the basis that view 4 *must* be catered for. This is surprising. After all, clearly the original Rochester Report, on which the current debate stands, not only *accepted* views 1 and 2, but also *did not accept* view 4.

Now if you do hold view 4, I don't think it is possible to envisage the long-term presence of views 1 and 2 in the Church of England. You might just about be able to stomach the continued presence of an older generation, but it would be intolerable to have a new generation of presbyters coming through with either view 1 or view 2 and equally it would be intolerable to continue with the idea that views 1 or 2 could be held with integrity within the Church of England.

The argument here is not just that the existence of these views necessarily undermines the authority of a woman presbyter or Bishop, but it also undermines that authority on the basis of demeaning her humanity in the image of God. This argument is held with considerable passion, because there is a strong sense that the post-1992 settlement, which envisaged different views on women's ordination being held with integrity, has in fact been oppressive to women presbyters. We must understand this. The existing framework is criticised as too generous by those holding view 4.

Now the post-1992 settlement which envisaged different views being held with integrity was not

strictly speaking a legislative solution. It involved an Act of Synod not a Measure. In the opinion of many, it has not prevented systemic discrimination against conservative Anglican evangelicals.

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