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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 29

THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN: AN EVANGELICAL VIEW

In so brief a statement on this contentious issue, it is not possible to argue every point, and certain assumptions have to be made. The assumptions made in this paper are the following:

(i) that the Church of England is right to ascribe chief authority in determining its faith and life to the Bible (Articles 6 and 20; Canon A5).

(ii) that, in interpreting biblical teaching, cultural changes since biblical times must be taken into consideration. The purpose of this must not be to evade the Bible's teaching, but to see how it should now be implemented. Veiling and silence in public were Jewish ways of expressing female submissiveness: if female submissiveness is the point of Paul's commands on these matters, the question is, what are the modern ways of expressing the same principle?

(iii) that, in applying any part of biblical teaching, we must ask to what class of people it was originally addressed (individuals, Christians in general or particular social groups, for example), and who is in that group today. On relations between the sexes, the groups addressed in the New Testament are Christian families and Christian congregations.

(iv) that, in practical matters like ordination, special importance attaches to the Bible's commands and prohibitions. Examples in the Bible are also 'written for our learning', but are not necessarily for direct imitation; doctrines illuminate the reasons for commands and prohibitions; but what are most relevant are the commands and prohibitions themselves. Thus, the all-male priesthood of the Old Testament and the 'all-male apostolate of the Twelve in the New are significant examples; equally significant is the Bible's doctrine of man and of the relationship between the sexes; but the commands and prohibitions which result from this doctrine and are illustrated by these examples are our actual guidelines.

(v) that exceptions do not abrogate rules. God is not bound by the rules he gives to us, but we are. If he chose to give the unpredictable gift of prophecy to women as well as men, Christians were right to hearken to their teaching, but would not have been right to ignore apostolic teaching on the institutional ministry in consequence. If women pioneer missionaries have sometimes had to act irregularly in spreading the gospel, the main thing was to spread it, and necessity has no laws. But to conclude that this was an example for everyone everywhere to follow, would be very faulty logic.

(vi) that the customs of society at large may be good or bad or a mixture of the two, but the church's role is not to imitate society's customs but to set an example to society by its own customs. If society sometimes gives a lead to the church in reforming its customs, that is to the shame of the church; but the church should still only follow such reforms in a discriminating way, since it has the Bible to guide it, and not simply the light of reason. For instance, female monarchs and prime ministers exist as a result of constitutional, not ecclesiastical, custom. As 'the powers that be', our Christian duty is not to discuss them but to obey them (as our Reformers said in similar circumstances). But the internal ordering of the church must be regulated not by the practice of society but by the word of God.

(vii) that, since the Church of England, in the preface to its (Prayer Book) Ordinal, expresses a determination to continue the institutional ministry of apostolic times, there are limits to the changes it can make in its institutional ministry, if it is not to frustrate this determination. Denominations which are not similarly

concerned to continue the ministry of apostolic times may be free to make greater changes (or may think themselves free to do so), but the Church of England is not.

We must now apply these seven principles to the matter in hand. We may state straight away that, according to the teaching of the Bible, women, no less than men, are created in the image of God, are objects of the saving work of Christ, and are eligible to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and to exercise them in the every-member ministry of the Christian church. God forbid that we should quench the Spirit, in women any more than in men, and God forgive us for the instances and ways in which we have done this. Nevertheless, there is a real difference between men and women, going back to the creation itself, and therefore a good difference not a bad one. The woman was created to be 'a help meet' for the man (Gen. 2:18), to complement the man and not to duplicate him; and if the woman's ordained role, in the family and the congregation, is complementary not identical, that should not be a cause for surprise.

In the teaching of the Bible on the family, children are commanded to honour and obey their parents, their mother as well as their father (the fifth commandment, quoted Mk. 7:10 and Eph. 6:2; also Eph. 6:1 and Col. 3:20), but wives are also commanded to honour and obey their husbands (Eph. 5:22-4, 33; Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:1,2,6). There are complementary duties of parents towards their children (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21) and of husbands towards their wives (Eph. 5:25-33; Col. 3:19; 1 Pet. 3:7). It is impossible to accept the complementary teaching without the obedience which it presupposes, and it is difficult to see how one can accept the duty of children to obey their parents, yet reject the duty of wives to obey their husbands. The teaching all hangs together: we either accept it as a whole or reject it as a whole. Yet if we reject it as a whole, we are rejecting all that the Bible has to teach us about family life. And we are doing even more than that: we are rejecting the submissive example of the child Jesus (Lk. 2:51) and the parabolic teaching which the Bible gives on our relationship to God, as obedient children (Eph. 5:1; 1 Pet. 1:14) and as members of the submissive bride of Christ (Eph.5 &c).

The teaching of the Bible on relationships in the congregation is similar: the woman is required to be submissive, not to take command, since woman was created to be the helper of the man (1 Cor. 11:3-10; 14:34-6; 1 Tim. 2:8-15). Adam and Eve are the archetypal man and woman, not just the archetypal husband and wife, and therefore we find Paul applying the fact that 'Adam was first created, then Eve' (1 Tim. 2:13) and that the woman was created 'from the man' and 'for the man', i.e. from his side to be his helper (1 Cor. 11:8-9), to the congregation as well as to the family. A congregation is a mixture of the married and the unmarried, and we must therefore resist pressure to translate 'man' and 'woman' in these three passages as 'husband' and 'wife', which would in other contexts be possible. The passage from 1 Cor. 11 turns upon the word kephale, head, and any lexicon will show that the normal (and possibly the only) metaphorical sense of this word is not 'source', as modern writers sometimes allege, but 'one who ranks above another'. So this passage too is concerned with submissiveness.

Submissiveness, of course, is a very difficult concept to commend in an anti-authoritarian period like our own. It may be helpful, therefore, to remember that our Lord emphasised the honourable character of service, and set an example of it himself (Mk. 10:42-5; Jn. 13:12-17). This means, for instance, that to assist a presbyter or bishop, as a deacon, is to assist one who serves the congregation. Certainly, he also exercises authority, but his assistant exercises the same authority in a delegated way. Whether we are men or women, we surely do not have to be the kingpin in order to find a fulfilling ministry? The revival of the perpetual diaconate for men, now being attempted in the Portsmouth diocese and elsewhere, might make this point easier to recognise and accept. The perpetual diaconate for men has always existed in the Eastern Church.

It is also worth remembering that submissiveness does not say anything about the gifts of a woman, but simply about the due ordering of the congregation. St. Paul has a great concern for 'order' in the congregation, as 1 Cor. 14 in particular shows. The words that are chiefly used in this connection, hupakouo and hupotassomai, are both compounds of hupo, below. To 'hear from below', and therefore to obey, and to 'place oneself below', and therefore to be submissive, are matters of order. They are hard on pride, but leave gifts unaffected.

Two of the ways in which the woman is required to express submissiveness in the congregation seem to be purely cultural: she is to veil her head and to keep silent. What is purely cultural has no permanence. Nevertheless, the underlying principle of submissiveness still remains, as it has since creation, to be expressed today in ways suitable to our own culture, and once again it is actually commanded. With the cultural aspects of the command, one may compare the repeated command to Christians to greet one another with a holy kiss, or a kiss of love (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thes. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14). Kissing is not the customary mode of greeting in England, as it was in Israel, but we do not therefore reject the command but reinterpret it in accordance with our own culture: we greet one another in a loving but holy way (though not normally by an actual kiss).

In the last of the passages we cited about female submissiveness, 1 Tim. 2:8-15, the epistle goes straight on to speak about the choice of suitable persons for the institutional ministry, as presbyter-bishops and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1-13), and originally there was not even a chapter-division in between, for our present chapter-divisions date from the fourth century. We find here a direct transference of principles from the family to the congregation and its ministry. One who has ruled well his own household has proved that he has the qualities for the pastoral oversight of the congregation (ch.3, verses 4-5, 12). Women are apparently eligible for the assistant office of deacon (verse 11, cp. Rom. 16:1) and for the qualified authority exercised by a deacon, as implied in verse 12; but there is no mention here or elsewhere in the New Testament, or in early church literature either, of female presbyter-bishops. The presbyter-bishop held an authoritative office (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-3; cp. 1 Thes. 5:12, Heb. 13:17, 24), as his very titles of 'presbyter' (senior man) and 'bishop' (overseer) indicated, whereas, we have just been told that submissiveness is required of women. The presbyter-bishop is to be 'apt to teach'¹ and to be one who 'rules well' (ch.3, verses 2, 4-5), the very activities which have been prohibited or limited in the case of women (ch.2, verse 12).

By the end of the apostolic period, as the preface to the Ordinal hints, the presbyter-bishop had evolved into two offices, the presbyter (or priest) and the bishop. As the church expanded, the bishop remained in the city, while presbyters were put in charge of outlying congregations. As customs changed, it was no longer thought unfitting that women should speak in public, and this made it possible for them to assist in teaching also, not just among children and other women but in mixed congregations. The female diaconate disappeared, but when it was revived the scope of its duties was enlarged to include assisting in teaching. But the priesthood remained male, because the presbyter was the main authorised teacher and held the pastoral charge, and except in irregular or temporary circumstances he still is and does. And what is true of the presbyter is even more true of the bishop. It is for this reason, above all, that the bishop and presbyter must remain male offices. In an age which thinks submissive and assistant roles degrading, this is bound to be a problem, but the remedy may be to change our ideas rather than our practice.

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