

Women bishops: Q and A

This July the General Synod of the Church of England will be asked to vote on women becoming bishops. On the face of it, opposition to such a development seems ludicrous. What on earth could make us consider a woman less suited to this than a man? We have had a woman prime minister; our Sovereign is a woman; women lead in many areas of national life. Moreover, does this not seem especially indefensible in the Christian church, in which our concern should surely be for justice and fairness? Are we in this respect not in danger of aligning ourselves with those chauvinists who, in the past, have denied women access to university education, membership of sporting and other clubs, equal pay and even the vote? Moreover, have we any idea how stupid this looks to the watching world?

This briefing is an attempt to answer those questions, and others. I believe that, in the particular case of the church, the church's historical view was, and remains, the correct one; that it encapsulates a beautiful and important truth; and that we ignore this at our peril. It is hard to argue *against* something without sounding horribly negative, so I want to say at the outset that there are great *positive* reasons why we should stick with, indeed contend for, the current arrangements in which the office of bishop is regarded as a man's job.

What must be the basis for our discussion?

¹ See Articles 6, 7, 8, 19, 20, 21 and 34.

² Canon A5 of the Canons of the C of E.

³ Genesis 1:27

⁴ It is worth noting that Christ himself understood this account to be the very words of God: see Matthew 19:4-5.

The Bible. We believe that the Bible, although an ancient book, does speak today, and that it speaks clearly; that in it, we can know the mind of God for us. We are to receive it, carefully read and studied, as the source of our doctrine and practice, today as ever. This is the classic Anglican view, asserted in the 39 Articles¹ and also in the Canon Law of the Church of England:

*The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular, such doctrine is to be found in the 39 Articles, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal.*² This should not need saying, but I mention it because many who advocate women bishops simply reject the relevant Bible passages as not authoritative for us today. At root, this is an issue about the place of Scripture in the life of our church.

What does the Bible say?

Although there is a good deal in the Bible about the relationship of men and women, it is actually surprisingly easy to sketch the bare outline of the Scriptural account. We can see this in three stages.

First, **the creation pattern.** In Genesis 1 we read that *God created man and woman in his image...male and female he created them.*³ Right from the beginning, it is emphasised that we are not created as androgynous beings, but as two different types of human. Genesis 2:18-25 famously sketches out the nature of our mutual relationship.⁴ God searches for a suitable helper for the man,

and then creates woman, from his side. God presents her to him, and the man responds, calling her *woman*. It is a picture of delight and openness.

There are clues in the account that there is an order in this relationship. The man is made first, then the woman; she is to be his *helper*; he names her *woman*; it is to the man that the commandments about the Garden are given, as if he is responsible. It seems as if God gives the man the lead role - and that is certainly how St Paul understands this passage when he alludes to it in 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2.

Now this does not, for a moment, imply that the woman has a status any lower than the man: the Hebrew word for *helper* is also used in the Old Testament to refer to God! Moreover, the very term *woman* sounds similar in the Hebrew to *man*. There is absolute equality of value; it is their roles that are different (in our power-obsessed society, some find it very hard to distinguish these). The important point to note is this: the ordering of man and woman is written into creation, before the Fall; it is not the result of the tragedy that follows.

Second, **the creation pattern spoilt**. Genesis 3 tells the wretched story of the entry of sin into the world, as the first man and woman rebel against God. Significantly, the man is held responsible, even though it is the woman who has made the first move.⁵ As God passes sentence on them, he addresses the woman: "*Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.*"⁶ The likeliest explanation of this verse is that it

refers to the 'battle of the sexes' between man and woman. Now, in a sinful world, headship is replaced by tyranny, and complementary roles by toxic competition.⁷ What we see - as in all the results of the Fall - is not the establishment of a completely new pattern, but the spoiling of an existing one. There is now so much hurt and pain in the relationship between man and woman that it is painful for us even to talk about it!

Thirdly, in Christ we see **the creation pattern restored**. The whole central message of the Bible is, of course, the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ. Sins are forgiven; God calls out for himself a people; they are called to walk in newness of life. What does that look like in the context of the order of the relationship between man and woman? The answer is that it is to look back to the Creation order. Order is there - but it is of a Genesis two kind, not Genesis three. So in Ephesians 5, we read of God's pattern for Christian marriage. The husband is the head of the wife; she is called to submit to him; but he is commanded to love her. The model for this turns out to be the sacred relationship between Christ and his church, of which

⁵ Genesis 3:17

⁶ Genesis 3:16b

⁷ The evidence for this is the way the writer uses a very similar expression a few verses later, in Genesis 4:7: *Sin desires to have you...* where clearly its desire is to dominate. Hence the woman's desire in 3:16b is to "have" her husband in this same way.

marriage turns out to be a beautiful picture.⁸

In his teaching on the ordering of the church, Paul takes a similar “headship” view. The connection is that the church is also a family - indeed, Paul calls it *God’s household*.⁹ It is in this context that he says *I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man - she must be silent*.¹⁰ He is referring to a local church, using the language of a family, and wants to see in it the same ordering that is written into creation. The church is called, in its arrangements, to witness to God’s fabulous creation pattern.

Exactly how to put this into practice has been a matter of discussion. How much “headship” is implied by different roles in a church? Where do we draw lines? There is a spectrum of different situations. One thing is clear, however: being a bishop is clearly at the leadership end of that spectrum. Hence John Stott, after a thorough survey of the evidence, said *I still do not think it biblically appropriate for a woman to become a Rector or a Bishop*.¹¹

To conclude, since God has clearly established this pattern, we must seek to live it out. And so, gently, we do, in many churches up and down the country.

Doesn’t this denigrate women’s ministry?

No. the Bible affirms the ministry of women (see Paul’s list in Romans 16, for instance.) Those of us who have concerns about women bishops are often caricatured as ‘being against women’. This can only be alleged by those who lack

subtlety of thought.

Why is this issue so painful and difficult to discuss?

Because of sin. The “battle of the sexes” we have already seen in Genesis 3:16 means that we inevitably discuss this issue against a background of the wrong subjugation of women and horrific injustice. It is to some extent perfectly understandable that with this in mind, many should be suspicious of those who advocate male headship. Those who press for women bishops see this as part of a crusade to overcome this subjugation, and feelings run deep. At the same time, some women (as some men) have a deep desire for power, witnessed in this particular issue by talk of “career” and an unseemly desire to get the jobs with perceived clout. It is vital for us to recognise how sin has clouded the issue, for the answer is not to abolish the male-female distinction but to return to one rightly ordered.

Isn’t all New Testament leadership servant leadership, without ‘headship’ ?

It is absolutely right that all leadership which follows the example of Christ must be servant leadership. But that does not mean it is not leadership. Leaders are needed; it is just that the leader leads to serve others, not to feather his own nest. We must not confuse the *aim* of leadership with the *fact* of leadership. The *style*, too, must not be overbearing; but it is still leadership.

Isn’t Paul just trotting out the cultural

⁸ Ephesians 5:21-33; see also 1 Corinthians 11:3, Colossians 5:18-19, 1 Peter 3:1-7.

⁹ 1 Timothy 3:15; see also 3:5, 5:1, 2.

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 2:12. That this does not imply an absolute silence in church is suggested by women praying or prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11:5. See also 1 Cor 14:33-35; Titus 1.

¹¹ *Issues Facing Christians Today* (London: Marshalls, 1984, p254). In the fully revised *New Issues Facing Christians Today* (1999), he says he has still not changed his mind about the ideal arrangement (p316).

values of his day?

It is true that the letters of the New Testament were written to particular situations. But the Apostles deal with those local situations using universal principles. It's the 7th August and you are on Bournemouth beach: the sky is hot and blue. A friend says, "You need suncream or you'll be burnt". Your friend is addressing a local, specific situation with a universal principle. That's how the New Testament letters speak to us today. Moreover, in Ephesians, Paul's teaching about gender roles in marriage is part of a section prefaced by the command *not to live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking*.¹² He is scarcely affirming the surrounding culture!

Paul also tells women to wear hats when they pray in public. We don't do that, so why bother with this?

The Bible passage is 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. It is, in fact, not clear whether hats or hair are in view when Paul talks about a "head covering". But either way, in that culture the practice Paul is speaking against seems to have symbolised womanly headship. Paul addresses the particular, local matter with a universal principle of husbandly headship. Head coverings or hair don't have that significance in our culture, but the universal principle remains, and we must think how we can honour it.

Doesn't the New Testament teach that gender distinctions are abolished in Christ?

The verse sometimes quoted is Galatians 3:28: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*. Paul is speaking about our equal status in God's eyes, as those adopted as his children. But he does not mean that Gentiles should pretend to be Jews, nor men women, etc. Given equal worth in God's eyes, we are free to be who

we are!

What about women as Prime Minister, etc?

This issue has nothing to do with that. The New Testament teaching is about family life, and the church is seen as a family. To see the office of bishop as part of a "career structure", as some do, is to misunderstand the church.

But can we trust our Bible translations on this?

One benefit of the gender controversy that has raged in recent years has been that the relevant Bible passages have been intensively re-examined (for instance, tracing in secular literature the meaning of the Greek word *kephale*, translated "head"). A clear outcome of this has been to show that our mainstream translations (NIV, ESV, NRSV, REB) are correct, and should be taken as they stand.

Does this issue really matter?

Well might you ask! We have so much else to be thinking about as we witness to Christ in the world about us: isn't this a bit of a distraction? Our answer must be that this does matter, for two reasons:

(1) We are called to be salt and light in the world - and salt that has not lost its distinctiveness. In a world deeply confused about gender roles, riven by the battle of the sexes, we are called to witness to the right use of the beautiful pattern that God has created (and re-created). In our marriage preparation and parenting courses, we will want, for the families' sakes, to teach the biblical model. This will lack credibility if we fail to order the life of our churches to reflect this. It is family life that we want to help!

(2) We are called to be doers of the word, and not just hearers - to take the Bible seriously, and put it into practice. If we do have women bishops, then as long as the passages about male headship remain in the Bible,

¹² Ephesians 4:17

then every time people read them at house group or at a young people's meeting or in Sunday services or on their own, they will be asking, "If the Bible says this, why do we do that?". How will we respond, without weakening a sense of the Bible's clarity and relevance?

How can we possibly explain all this to our non-Christian friends?

God has given a beautiful pattern for family life, which is also to be true of the church. This pattern, following the Maker's Instructions, is part of God's showing us how to thrive in a world that's so confused. Rightly understood, the Biblical, creation pattern is a beautiful balance, avoiding the extremes of male tyranny on the one hand, and, on the other, the pretence that men and women are the same. We hope you will see how this really works in our families and church...

We have put up with some bishops with strange views for years. Why make a fuss about women bishops?

It is very damaging when bishops teach untruth or wrong practice; there is no denying that. However, this is not written into the system as something we must all sign up to; the words used in a bishop's consecration (= ordination) make it very clear that this is not *supposed* to happen.

We've had women vicars in the C of E since 1992. What's the big deal about women bishops?

In one sense, it is true that women bishops are just a logical extension of the above. However, there is a practical difference. The vicar down the road does not have authority in your church.

What are we asking Synod for?

1. For these reasons, our main hope in this matter is that Synod does not alter current policy and does not make women bishops at all.

2. In 1992, the vote for women to be ordained to the priesthood was won by also voting for legal provision for those who wanted only a man to be vicar of their church.¹³ If Synod insists on women bishops, it is only honourable that similar legal exemptions be adopted that would allow such churches to seek and have the oversight of a male bishop. This could be done in various ways, such as through having a "flying bishop" or other arrangement. At the moment, all that is proposed is a "code of practice" which would be maintained only at the discretion of the diocesan bishop - the very person who might most want it changed! Therefore, we should ask our Synod reps and bishops to ensure that, if women bishops are introduced, then churches which do not consider it appropriate to have the oversight of a woman bishop be given full legal rights to seek alternative oversight, and that provision for such oversight is made.

What can we do?

Pray: we should do so on the grounds that our God, in his mercy, keep his people true to his word. **Make the case:** if you have found this article helpful, please pass it on. The debate is due to take place in General Synod the 9th to the 13th July.

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¹³ The so-called Resolution B may be passed by a PCC facing a vacancy of incumbent. It allows churches to insist that their new vicar be male, without falling foul of sex discrimination legislation.