

1 Introduction: The 'slippery slope' challenge from 'left' and 'right'

- 1.1 The issue of the relationship between views on two currently divisive issues – homosexuality and the role of women - is one that is often raised. In particular those, such as myself, who hold a conservative/traditional view on sexual ethics but do not believe the church should place restrictions on women's ministry are often viewed as at best inconsistent and at worst incoherent in refusing to take a consistently 'conservative/traditional' or 'liberal/revisionist' stance. It is viewed by some as inherently unstable position on a 'slippery slope'.
- 1.2 The challenge, it should be noted, comes from two opposed fronts which may be called the 'left' (who argue for an 'inclusive church' and believe that restrictions on gay people in terms of celibacy and exclusion from leadership if non-celibate are as wrong as restrictions on women in leadership) and the 'right' (who argue that support for women in leadership in some sense weakens (or worse) the case for traditional sexual ethics; so in November 2009, David Phillips argued on Anglican Mainstream that 'the acceptance of women ministers inevitably leads to acceptance of homosexual practice in the church'; [As Night Follows Day](#)). The former wish us to slide down the slope further, the latter to get ourselves off it by climbing back up to their higher and firmer ground.
- 1.3 What follows cannot explore these arguments in great detail and will, for obvious reasons, focus on the claim from 'the right'. It should be noted that the claim has been examined in some detail by Dick France in his excellent Grove booklet from 2000, [A Slippery Slope? The Ordination of Women and Homosexual Practice – a Case Study in Biblical Interpretation](#) and various writings of William Webb including his *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (from 2001) and his article "Gender Equality and Homosexuality" in Pierce & Groothuis, *Discovering Biblical Equality* (IVP, 2005). I also responded to David Phillips in [Does supporting same-sex relationships really follow on from supporting women's ordination? A response to David Phillips](#)
- 1.4 What follows examines what is being claimed by those who challenge evangelical supporters of women's leadership from the right (section 2) and concludes the main critique relates to methodology. The potential validity of such concerns is then noted in relation to five arguments for women in leadership (section 3) but the evangelical case for women's leadership is distinctive and rooted in Scripture (section 4). It might, however, be thought still in danger and so seven significant weaknesses are briefly noted and responded to (section 5). Section 6 then questions whether there really is a necessary connection between these two subjects and offers eight differences which make it hard, almost impossible, to treat the two issues as equivalent and to argue that affirmation of women in authority in some sense undermines a traditional sexual ethic. Finally, section 7 raises four questions for more conservative evangelicals about the connections between sexuality and women's leadership.

2 What is being claimed?

- 2.1 As became obvious in David Phillips' argument, the exact claim being made by conservative critics is not totally clear. There are at least three different forms of argument advanced: sociological, logical, and methodological
- 2.2 *Sociological*: This view is that accepting one leads to another because that is what has happened in a number of individual cases and on a larger scale in places like the US and Canada. This not only fails to recognise the much wider acceptance of women's leadership than in Western liberal contexts – most notably in the leading GAFCON province of Uganda – but makes an argument that is as poor in terms of reasoned argument as one of the mirror critiques from the left. It does not follow that because some bodies support A and later support B that B must follow if someone supports A. This is as much a *non sequitur* as the view that because someone thought the church was wrong on X and changed their mind on X, therefore the church is also wrong on Y and so the person must change their mind on Y.
- 2.3 *Logical*: There could be a strictly logical argument that a change of position in relation to women in leadership logically destroys a conservative position in relation to homosexuality. So, for example, it may be held that same-sex practices are wrong simply because men in God's creation purposes are to be initiators and active while women are to be passive and receptive and same-sex sexual activity therefore involves rejection of this divine ordering by 'feminising men' and making women take male roles. Were one to say 'I used to believe women should not lead because they are to be passive and receptive under the headship of a leading male but I no longer accept that passive/active distinction' but then to maintain opposition to homosexuality based on there being such a distinction which is violated in same-sex activity would appear illogical. In reality, however, few if any people now argue against homosexuality on such grounds and a strictly logical inconsistency is therefore unlikely.
- 2.4 *Methodological*: Here the argument is one that needs much more serious consideration. It takes the broad form that the arguments that are advanced in order to justify women in leadership and reject 'male headship' are the same forms of argument that are advanced in order to justify same-sex relationships and reject a traditional sexual ethic. This is therefore not 'look, when people changed on A they also changed on B' nor is it 'a change on A removes the basis for holding B and so you must also change on B to be logical'. It is, rather, 'the rationale and method used in order to change on A, if applied to B, also apparently leads to a change on B so consistency of method will lead to change on B'.

3 Beware of slippery slopes!: Where the methodological claim has some validity

- 3.1 The third, methodological claim is worthy of much more serious consideration because it does, I think, have validity in a number of cases. Five in particular stand out as lines of argument which have been advanced for women's ordination and which if applied in relation to gay and lesbian partnerships would, to varying degrees, give weight to (and

perhaps even entail) a change of stance over sexuality.

- 3.2 *Arguing from inclusion/justice*: This is the heart of the 'Inclusive Church' position but has been advocated more widely – women should be ordained because not to do so is exclusionary and unjust. Many conclude from this that exclusion from ordination in relation to sexuality is also unjust and a denial of the gospel of inclusion. This is, in fact, probably the weakest argument by extension unless exclusion is based simply on experience of sexual attraction rather than sexual conduct. Women are excluded on grounds which have no relation to their conduct, same-sex partnered people are excluded on grounds related to their conduct. The weakness in the argument is shown by the fact that, on its own, it is liable to see any exclusion as inherently unjust (the apparent conclusion of certain claims that all the baptised are potential ordinands) and so to be challenged in pursuit of an inclusive church.
- 3.3 *Arguing from claimed vocation and gifting*: If women are to be ordained because there are Christian women who have a strong sense of call and have the necessary gifts then, it might be argued, the same criteria should apply to ordination requirements in relation to sexuality. Again the problem here is that noted above – it is the conduct of certain gay and lesbian Christians that makes them unsuitable for ordination whatever their own sense of call and their gifts whereas from a conservative viewpoint, women, even if their conduct is exemplary, are excluded simply because of their genes. A stronger argument by extension may be made in relation to developing a new sexual ethic – if a Christian discerns God calling them to a same-sex partnership and they find they have the *charisma* for that but not for celibacy or marriage (cf 1 Cor 7) then the church should recognise that calling and gifting.
- 3.4 *Arguing from fruit*: If ordained women are held to be acceptable because their ministries bear fruit then it could be argued that fruitful ministries by same-sex partnered clergy offers validation of such ministries. Similarly, some argue that same-sex partnerships exist where the individuals and the couple together display much of the fruit of the Spirit and so we must be more affirming of such relationships.
- 3.5 *Arguing from missiological pragmatism*: If women are to be ordained because not to ordain them is scandalous in our egalitarian society and undermines the mission of the church then it can be argued that our society's attitudes have now changed sufficiently in relation to homosexuality that a strict traditional sexual ethic and ordination policy must likewise be abandoned.
- 3.6 *Arguing from Scripture's flaws and the leading of the Spirit into new truth*: If women are to be ordained despite biblical teaching being to the contrary because the Spirit has revealed this to us (perhaps through some of the means noted above) then such a method of defending this change can also be applied in relation to same-sex relationships.
- 3.7 Although not inevitably leading to a revision of the church's sexual ethic and policy in relation to same-sex partnered people seeking ordination, if the case for women's

ordination is based primarily on any of the above then one can see why there might be a 'slippery slope'. The methods being used are forms of argument which are easily transferrable to the sexuality debate in ways that undermine traditional sexual ethics.

- 3.8 It cannot be denied that evangelicals appeal at times to arguments such as these in support of the ordination of women. Does that mean that the conservative critique is valid and there is a fundamental methodological flaw in the position of those who support women in leadership but uphold traditional sexual ethics?

4 The evangelical claim in support of the full ministry of women

- 4.1 If any of the arguments above is accepted as decisive in relation to women in leadership then the method being used is at best sub-evangelical or, in relation to the last approach (3.6), anti-evangelical. This does not, however, mean that any and every appeal to the arguments falls into these categories. What matters is the role and weight of such arguments and, in particular, how they are related to the appeal to Scripture.
- 4.2 As our conversations have shown, evangelicals who believe in the full ministry of women do so because they hold it to be at least consonant with Scripture (ie not contrary to Scripture) and, for many, required by the teaching of Scripture taken as a whole in relation to God's purposes for men and women in creation and redemption of the fallen world.
- 4.3 It is therefore vitally important that those evangelicals who maintain a conservative view on women acknowledge that evangelicals who disagree with them do so not because of the sort of arguments outlined above (3.2-6) but because of their reading of the Scriptures. But, the challenge still remains as to whether that different reading of Scripture in relation to women's leadership does undermine the traditional reading of Scripture in relation to sexuality. The following section explores some of the ways in which this might be the case while section 6 outlines some of the differences that exist between the two issues.

5 Is there still a slippery slope for evangelicals?

- 5.1 The question that needs to be addressed now is whether even when those who reject male headship and affirm women exercising authority in the church do so as evangelicals because of their re-reading and interpretation of the Scripture they undermine, by their stance and method of arguing, the church's stance on homosexuality. The following factors (in no particular order) may give some weight to this claim although, as sketched, there are responses showing why the weight claimed is often exaggerated.
- 5.2 *Recognition of mis-reading Scripture:* Many evangelicals supportive of women's leadership have personally moved from a more restrictive conservative position (a number of testimonies are provided in the recent book edited by Alan F. Johnson – *How I Changed My Mind About Women in Leadership: Compelling Stories From Prominent Evangelicals*) and others who never held that view personally recognise that the evangelical movement as a

whole has made such a move over recent decades. That simple recognition that as a tradition and perhaps personally there has been a mis-reading of the Scripture may lead to a greater openness to re-consider thinking in other areas. The fact that the change is in relation to matters related to sex/gender may make it easier to shift one's position in sexual ethics.

Response: The difficulty here is that it seems to imply anyone who changes their understanding of Scripture is on a slippery-slope to liberalism. The Reformation commitment to *semper reformanda* and the belief that God has yet more light to shine from his Word means a true evangelical position is open to even evangelical traditions being recognised as mis-readings of Scripture in need of reform.

5.3 *Influence of personal experience and social change:* Although an evangelical method will not allow personal experience or social change to be decisive it must be recognised that these are factors that sometimes lead evangelicals to go back and re-read biblical texts relating to women's ministry in new ways. This pattern of being willing to evaluate and critique established conclusions about what the Bible says establishes a method which – without determining the outcome – may lead to a less dogmatic approach to issues of sexuality, especially when some of the claims being made by gay and lesbian Christians are heard as echoing the claims made by women in the past.

Response: Again the question has to be what is on offer as an alternative – a view that nothing we experience, no critique from outside the church should ever lead us to go back to the Bible and ask if we've got it wrong?

5.4 *Response to cultural pressure:* However much it is the Bible that ultimately leads evangelicals to support women's ordination, it is clear that coming to such a conclusion is not as counter-cultural as the more conservative stance. Even if not determined by cultural pressure (as in 3.5 and perhaps other points above), it may be that those affirming women's leadership will find it hard to resist cultural change in relation to sexuality and be more likely to adapt under social and more liberal theological pressure.

Response: Although the Christian gospel is counter-cultural this does not mean that everything that is counter-cultural is faithful to the gospel. The alternative is to privilege – and potentially absolutise - cultural conservatism out of fear that any change in the church that mirrors those in society is a sign of Scripture being abandoned (see 7.2 below).

5.5 *The weakening of gender differentiation:* Although evangelical egalitarians do not deny differences between men and women and still talk of complementarity, their account of these differences is not as substantial and extensive as those who advocate for male headship. A clear distinction between the roles of men and women (especially in marriage) is likely to strengthen objections to the treatment of homosexuality as equivalent to heterosexuality even if the argument is not as decisively logical as in 2.3 above and it is rather crude to hold – as I was once told – 'if men and women are interchangeable at the altar why not in bed?'(!).

Response: As noted in earlier papers, contemporary conservatives have significantly 'weakened' their understanding of the difference between men and women compared to

most of Christian tradition (for example, all now insist on fundamental equality and most now tend to limit strongly defined gender roles to marriage and the church and not make them universal). The question of sexual behaviour in terms of bodily union and procreation is much more clearly related to physical gender differentiation than claims relating to male headship and authority.

5.6 *The limiting of creation order*: The conservative defence of gender differentiation is, as our discussions have shown, highly dependent on a particular view of creation order. Appeal to creation order is also part of the defence of heterosexual marriage and it may be thought that the undermining of this by those rejecting male headship will also undermine creation order in debates on sexuality.

Response: This argument is weaker once it is acknowledged that evangelicals do not reject creation order but only the particular form of it found in accounts of 'male headship'. There is still a strong appeal to creation – but to a non-hierarchical, egalitarian ordering – as the basis for one's conclusions about gender. That is fully compatible with upholding the institution of marriage between a man and a woman as part of God's created order.

5.7 *The attention to translation of key words*: David Philips' article claimed that "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...Now we are seeing the same thing with arguments about words in Romans or Leviticus concerning sexual immorality".

Response: If we are serious about biblical authority then we surely need to argue about the meaning of words. This applies not just to 'head' but the key term *authentain* found in 1 Timothy 2 but nowhere else in the New Testament and words such as *arsenekoitai* and *malakoi* in relation to sexuality. If we have misunderstood these terms then we need to rethink our theology if we wish it to be faithful to the written word of God.

5.8 *The contextualisation and localisation of texts*: Although the primary basis for evangelical support for women's leadership is the positive vision of Scripture, it usually addresses the restrictive texts (eg 1 Tim 2 and 1 Cor 14) by viewing them as specific to their context. A similar method is used in relation to the prohibitions on homosexual practice (Sodom refers to gang rape, Leviticus to idolatrous cultic practice, Paul to pagan cults or pederasty) and so the method applied in relation to women will lead to a liberal position when applied to homosexuality.

Response: Again, if we are serious about biblical authority, we need to set Scripture in context. As noted in earlier discussion, most conservatives even if they appeal to 1 Cor 11 for a doctrine of 'headship' do not apply that doctrine in the way Paul does there in relation to head covering. Unless one is to take all biblical prohibitions as universally binding, some criteria is needed to distinguish what is and what is not in force today and the difference among evangelicals over women is not about this method but about whether there is some clear biblical basis for making the Pauline restrictions timeless.

5.9 Those of us who welcome and encourage women's leadership need to be careful that we do so on the basis of Scripture. That argument can of course be further supplemented and perhaps strengthened by appeal to the non-Scriptural grounds discussed above (3.2-5) but these cannot be decisive. It also needs to be recognised that even when the argument is made using a biblical methodology there are factors which give some credibility to the conservative concerns about a potential 'slippery slope'. However, those factors are not as strong as is often claimed and there are also good reasons why the two issues are different (6.2-9) and questions for those who attempt to connect these two issues in order to use a commitment to a traditional sexual ethic to bolster support for a conservative stance in relation to women (7.2-5).

6 Is there even a slope?: Why the two issues are significantly different

6.1 Despite the fact that some arguments for women's ordination are used by those seeking to change the church's sexual ethic and that even an evangelical method of supporting women in leadership may be thought to weaken a conservative stance on homosexuality there are at least eight good reasons why it is wrong to connect the two issues. What follows is not an attempt to argue that my view on women is correct because of the differences noted but rather that the differences make it hard, almost impossible, to treat the two issues as equivalent and to argue that affirmation of women in authority in some sense undermines a traditional sexual ethic.

6.2 *Different issues:* The first and most simple and obvious point to make is that these are two different issues and each needs to be treated in its own right. The burden of proof must lie with anyone who claims that a stance taken on X is closely connected with a stance taken on Y and that proof must go beyond simply saying that those who believe A in relation to X often also believe B in relation to Y. At its most basic it needs to be shown why lifting restrictions on women's roles in the church should in turn mean lifting restrictions on sexual conduct outside marriage and no such case has been made as far as I am aware.

6.3 *The role of Scripture in raising questions:* The question of whether and in what form it is right to restrict women's ministry is one which is generated not ultimately by our contemporary culture but by the Bible itself. Although there are passages which place limits of some form on women there are also, as we have discussed, passages which testify to women in a wide range of ministries. Even if no women today were asking to exercise oversight or presbyteral ministry, reading the Bible raises the question whether prohibiting them from doing so is right. In contrast, nothing in Scripture would lead people to develop the identity of gay or lesbian or to question whether sexual relationships between people of the same sex are permissible. These are issues which arise from our context and not from Scripture.

6.4 *The uniformity of Scripture on homosexuality:* A closely related point is that, when issues are raised by our context, we find that, in contrast to a range of other areas (women in leadership, remarriage after divorce, bearing arms etc), the witness of Scripture is consistent and uniform across Old and New Testaments in relation to same-sex sexual behaviour.

There are no positive statements and the very best that can be done is to contextualise and localise the prohibitions (see 5.8 above), not (as is possible in relation to the full equality of men and women) point to positive biblical examples or develop a positive biblical theology of homosexuality.

- 6.5 *The appeal to reason and nature*: While any appeal to reason or nature has to be cautious given both the supreme authority of Scripture and the tentativeness of our knowledge, it is noteworthy that conservatives no longer appeal to some inherent and discernible characteristic of women – such as their greater gullibility or weaker rationality - which makes them unsuitable for leadership (in contrast to much of the tradition). There remain, however, a number of arguments from nature/science/reason against claims of a fixed gay identity and against certain forms of homosexual practice. In short, the conservative case for restrictions on women is now almost wholly dependent on biblical exegesis and an appeal to divine command or creation order whereas a case for traditional sexual ethics and claims in relation to homosexual identity and practice can appeal to sources outside Scripture to support them.
- 6.6 *The discernment of the church*: Again caution is needed here but the fact the two issues are different is supported by the reality that women are now accepted in church leadership across a wide range of cultures and traditions. Furthermore, although unusual, throughout Christian history women have been recognised and played key roles including in positions of what might be considered 'headship'. In contrast, although there have undoubtedly been Christians and Christian leaders who engaged in homosexual relationships, the church has consistently and strongly rejected homosexual practices and overwhelmingly continues to do so.
- 6.7 *The difference between sex and sexual orientation*: The debate about women in leadership is based on the recognition that humanity is divided into men and women and the Christian belief that both men and women are part of God's good creation and made in his image. In contrast, the debate about sexuality works with categories of sexual orientation and LGBT identity which are much more contested both as to their ontological reality and to how they relate to God's creation and the significance of the distinction for a Christian sexual ethic.
- 6.8 *Who we are vs what we do*: Related to the previous point, the restrictions placed on those who are homosexual are restrictions because of what they do – engage in what the church views as sexual immorality. In contrast, the restrictions placed on women are restrictions because of who they are – women.
- 6.9 *Sin and human flourishing vs role differentiation*: Although this may be a matter of dispute among conservatives, most of those opposing women exercising certain functions express their views in terms of a distortion of roles for men and women rather than in terms of sin which destroys human flourishing. This is sometimes put in terms of a distinction between matters of order and matters of morals. (see further 7.3-5). In contrast, the debates about homosexuality do relate to whether certain actions are sinful and corrosive of true humanity

in Christ. They are in other words about sanctification and forms of holiness in a way that questions concerning women in leadership are not. Related to this, it seems clear that revising the church's attitude on homosexuality will have wider repercussions in relation to sexual ethics more generally and these impact on society as well as the church. In contrast, it is not clear that opening up all the offices of the church to women will have the same extensive consequences.

6.10 None of the above is an argument that my view on women's leadership (or indeed homosexuality) is correct. It is, rather, an argument that although there are some connections and parallels (as noted in 3.2-6) the discussion about women in leadership is significantly different from that relating to homosexuality and the two should be treated separately and not confused. As a result, despite the fact that many in wider society and increasingly the church connect the two areas – you are 'pro women and pro gay' if you are liberal/progressive or 'anti women and anti gay' if you are conservative/traditionalist – there is no necessary correlation between them logically, biblically or theologically.

7 Conclusion: some questions in response

7.1 Having examined and rejected the claim that there is some unavoidable connection between the issues of women's ministry and homosexuality such that there exists a 'slippery slope' from accepting women clergy to accepting homosexuality, I want to end by raising some questions that I think more conservative evangelicals need to address in relation to how they view these two issues.

7.2 *Social conservatism or Scripture?*: As noted above the claim (sometimes explicit, often implicit) is that evangelicals who have rejected 'headship theology' are simply flowing with the tide of society and embracing some form of 'feminism' rather than adhering to Scripture. I hope that our conversations and similar conversations will make that accusation less common. The mirror-image of it is, of course, that those opposed to women's ministry are simply social conservatives who, having lost the battle in society, are concerned to uphold patriarchy within the church and the home. I hope that our conversations and similar conversations will also make that accusation less common although the packaging together of this issue with homosexuality risks confirming that prejudiced view of conservatives. However, just as those who hold my position need to be alert to the danger of cultural conformity over-turning biblical authority or driving biblical interpretation so those opposed to women's ordination and women bishops need to be alert to the danger of social conservatism being dominant. How – given the paucity and cultural context of the biblical restrictions – does one make sure that the restrictions placed on women in church or roles expected of wives are genuinely biblically based and not simply the projection of traditional social (including ecclesial) patterns? The fact that this has – since 1992 if not before – become a distinguishing feature of faithfulness for certain evangelicals has I fear increased the danger of more conservative evangelicals preventing women from exercising certain ministries lest they be viewed as 'going liberal' by so doing.

7.3 *First and second order issues?*: Conservative evangelicals often draw a distinction between the two issues in terms of women's ministry being second order and homosexuality being first order. I think that dichotomy itself is rather problematic but it may be helpful for some evangelicals who disagree on women's leadership. Although the distinction was articulated and supported by Wallace Benn and others on [Anglican Mainstream](#) back in 2005, it was clearly questioned if not totally rejected by David Phillips of Church Society when he wrote, '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'. Are conservative evangelicals willing to recognise these two issues are not to be viewed as of equivalent significance?

7.4 *Is it sin?* In part to develop the first order/second order issue further but with some trepidation I think those opposed to women's ordination need to be clearer as to how they view women – particularly women who identify as evangelicals – who teach, exercise authority and are ordained as presbyters (and perhaps in the near future bishops). It is clear that they view people engaging in homosexual activity as acting contrary to Scripture and behaving sinfully. Are women who exercise 'headship' over men in the church also acting contrary to Scripture and behaving sinfully? Are those who support and authorise such action therefore also sinning?

7.5 *What's the difference?*: These last two questions are both getting at what I still think is a central question where I am unclear as to the view of more conservative evangelicals: how and why is this issue to be treated differently from that of homosexuality if both are viewed as contrary to Scripture? This has some bearing on the question of provision for those opposed to women bishops – how will evangelical opponents view and relate to a woman bishop given their views? How is that different from their response to a woman presbyter and how is it different from their response to (a) a bishop who advocates same-sex relationships, (b) a bishop who is unorthodox on central credal doctrine or (c) a bishop in a same-sex relationship?