

Churchman

EDITORIAL

A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven

As the Anglican Communion lurches towards a decisive turning-point in its ongoing crisis over the autonomy of individual provinces, the Church of England pursues its own self-destructive path towards the consecration of women bishops. It is pointless to repeat that there is no scriptural justification for this move, since those who are in favour of it do not listen to that argument, either because they do not believe in the authority of the Bible for the life of the Church or because they think that what it says is 'culturally conditioned' and therefore no longer applicable. As far as they are concerned, it is all a matter of 'justice' and 'equality' and there is little more to be said. An agenda set by secular society has been introduced into the Church and it rules the roost, regardless of other considerations.

Opponents of women bishops now recognise that the best they can hope for is an arrangement in which their particular convictions will be tolerated, if not genuinely respected, by the Church as a whole. Various options for ensuring this are being canvassed at the moment, but whatever the final outcome is, it will have to involve the creation of fully autonomous episcopal jurisdictions which are not susceptible to manipulation or interference by that part of the Church which accepts the consecration of women to the episcopate. The only real question now is how many parishes will take advantage of whatever provision is made for this, and it is here that the Evangelical wing of the Church finds itself in the spotlight. There is little doubt that most Anglo-Catholic churches and clergy will opt for the new arrangements, whatever they are, because for them the alternative will clearly be worse. Evangelicals will be more divided though, and so both sides are likely to be wooing them for support in the months ahead.

It must be admitted that many evangelical clergy and parishes will be reluctant to break with the existing system for a variety of different reasons. At one end of the spectrum there will be a good deal of conservative inertia. Many people will persuade themselves that the matter is unlikely to affect them (at least in

the near future), that it is not central to the gospel and that any independent jurisdiction is likely to be dominated by Anglo-Catholic interests which will be even more uncongenial to Evangelicals than the current broad spectrum is. People who think along such lines will probably be unpersuadable unless (or until) they are directly affected by the innovation of women bishops, and so Evangelicals must reckon with the certainty that some of their number will be inside the new order and others will remain outside it. There may be strong feelings over this in some quarters, and so all of us need to work to ensure that this difference of opinion does not lead to a breach in fellowship or good relations between those who are fundamentally agreed on most other things.

Having said that, it is important for Evangelicals to realise that an opportunity may be arising which is unlikely to recur, and that we must be adequately represented in the new arrangements. One of the most disappointing things which has occurred since the priesting of women began in 1994 is that very few Evangelical parishes have stood out against this. No Evangelical 'flying bishop' has been appointed, and the general impression has been given that the issue is a purely Anglo-Catholic one. Fortunately, the presence of the Bishop of Lewes on the Rochester Commission has made it clear that conservative Evangelicals are also opposed to women bishops (as well as to women presbyters) and that their views cannot be ignored. For whatever reasons, the other Evangelical bishops do not (or will not) represent this constituency, and there is a real possibility that some of them will attempt to persuade the Church at large that they, and not the Bishop of Lewes, represent the mainstream of Evangelical opinion. In this situation, it is particularly important that the wider Church should understand that they do not, unless one defines the word 'Evangelical' so broadly as to include people who would not otherwise be known (or wish to identify) as such.

If Evangelicals in sufficient numbers can be persuaded to enter the new episcopal jurisdictions, the pressure on the Church to appoint conservative Evangelical bishops will be too great to resist, and we may end up with Evangelical bishops ministering to largely Evangelical parishes for the first time in the Church's history. On the other hand, if Evangelicals miss this opportunity, they will be shut out of the new arrangements and gradually picked off by bishops who will cease to appoint men who cannot accept women bishops. In other words, the openings available to conservative

Evangelical ordinands and clergy will start to close, and in a generation there will be few such people left in the ministry.

To those who think that such a scenario is alarmist, we need only say that the proposals now being put forward are for structural and permanent changes in the church, which will not be modified or undone for a very long time. Those who do not want women bishops will have a door open to them, and they will be expected to go through it—in the eyes of the wider Church, there will be no justification for such people to refuse the provisions made for them. But if Evangelicals are hesitant to take that route because the special jurisdictions are almost entirely Anglo-Catholic, they will be caught in an ecclesiastical no-man's-land and effectively excluded from the ministry altogether. Some will argue that women bishops are not the issue on which one would want to take a stand for traditional orthodoxy, and no doubt that is true, but whether we like it or not, things have unfolded in that way and in the process opened up a possibility for securing a long-term Evangelical presence in the Church.

Those who doubt the significance of the issue might ponder what the Apostle Paul had to say about it. Paul recognised that male and female were equal, since both have been created in the image and likeness of God, but he also specified that there is an order in such things which must be respected. The male was created in the image of God directly, but the woman was created indirectly—a pattern which is meant to be reflected in the worship and order of the Church (1 Cor. 11:2-16). More specifically, when he dealt with the question of ministry, Paul made it clear that women were not to exercise authority over men (1 Tim. 2:11-15). The reasons for this were not cultural, but theological. The male was created first, and it was the woman who was deceived by the serpent. For both those reasons, men were to exercise authority in the congregation, although women were also to be honoured and protected. Both the pattern of creation and the tragedy of the fall speak in favour of male headship; if that is compromised or ignored, we are given to understand, the equilibrium established by God in human affairs will be disrupted, and the consequences of that can only be imagined.

Not everyone will accept these arguments, but for Evangelicals they raise a question of fundamental importance. If we believe in a doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, and if we think that the teaching of the Bible is something which we

ought to obey, rather than question, then the guidance given to us by the Holy Spirit is perfectly clear. It is not for us to say that modern secular life has created a new situation and the Church must change in order to meet it. Arguments of that kind could equally well be deployed to justify the appointment of homosexual bishops, as indeed many of the supporters of women would be prepared to argue. A woman exercising an episcopal role might satisfy the Equal Opportunities Commission, but that is not the judgement seat of God, which for us must remain the final court of appeal. Belief in the divine institution of an all-male Church leadership is an unpopular and unfashionable view to hold nowadays, but the evidence of Scripture and the practice of the Church over two millennia is clear. The reformers challenged many things in the Church's ministry, which they regarded as corrupt and unbiblical, but the absence of females in holy orders was not one of them. If they were prepared to be guided by Scripture in this matter, as in others, should we not concur with them in this? The truth is that, although the issue of women bishops may not appear to be fundamental in itself, it touches on matters which reach to the very heart of our faith—the authority of Scripture, the nature of creation and the effect of the fall. Any argument to the effect that salvation in Christ has reversed or transcended these things is contradicted by the fact that the restrictions were not mentioned in the Old Testament, but in the New, and apply specifically to the new life we have in Christ's church. For those wishing to be faithful and obedient to the Word of God, there is no choice in the matter, since that Word speaks clearly to all who believe in its authority. Those in tune with the spirit of the age will not like this, but to us who listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Bible, there can be no doubt. As the Preacher said so long ago, there is a time for every purpose under heaven. The opportunity to affirm our faith has been given to us from an unexpected (and certainly uninvited) quarter. It is up to us to seize it and to bear witness to the Word of God given for our protection and for our salvation.

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