

Male and Female he created them...

Many disciples of Jesus, perhaps most, deal with the issue of women's ministry in pragmatic terms. When considering whether a woman should preach or be a vicar they assess the issue in terms of whether that appears to work or not.

However, with the question of whether women should be appointed bishops in the Church of England a more dogmatic element among the advocates for this step has emerged. In this brief leaflet I want to highlight a potentially drastic consequence of this step for our understanding of the nature of God as Trinity.

Made in the image of God

The Bible asserts that human beings are made in the image of God. Therefore if we do not take our view of human

beings in our maleness and femaleness from the Scriptures then it is inevitable that we will end up modifying our view of God to some extent.

Let me give an example: in the 1984 edition of the NIV, Genesis 1:27 reads: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them'. This is an accurate rendering of the original Hebrew pronouns. However the New Revised Standard Version reads: 'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them'.

The original Hebrew speaks of the way in which the unity, diversity and order in the Triune God is also seen in human beings (male and female) made in the image of God. Versions such as the NRSV obscure the fundamental asymmetry that the Hebrew words assert,

an asymmetry which has its origin in the Triune God. Now we need to take great care here in our use of words. I have chosen 'asymmetry' simply to alert us to the fact that Genesis 1:27 does not teach the sameness of men and women. In fact the asymmetry of the words used points to the differentiation in the Triune God which in turn lies at the basis of the differentiation between men and women.

But if our society views men and women as having no significant differences and this is then pursued as an axiomatic principle within the Christian community, it is inevitable that our view of the nature of God will change.

Equal but different

The problem is that many today cannot accept the fact that absolute equality of being is entirely compatible with order in human relationships. For

some it seems inconceivable that there can be an order in human society, and especially one in which husbands are the head of their wives, while at the same time asserting an absolute equality of all people.

However, the traditional formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, on the basis of the Bible's teaching, has always asserted precisely this. The persons of the Trinity are equally God, yet the functions of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are different, and indeed the very fact that the persons have such distinctive names tells us precisely that. It is the order within the Trinity which lies at the root of the different functions of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Relationally Subordinate

With the details of the life of the Trinity one has to tread carefully. It is impossible in a brief article like this to

do any more than make the fundamental point about the asymmetry of the Trinity which is reflected in the asymmetry of human beings created in the image of God. Some, for example, will accuse anyone who makes this point of the heresy of subordinationism. This is not true. Subordinationism is the heresy espoused by Arius, for example, in which it is said that the Son and the Spirit are subordinate in nature or being to the Father. That is not at all the same as asserting that the Son and the Spirit are relationally subordinate. Being relationally subordinate means that Jesus the Son, while being equally God, nevertheless seeks to do the Father's will (as expressed, for example, in Jesus saying in John 14:28 that 'the Father is greater than I').

If in the name of equality and justice we choose then to overlook the biblical principle (taught, for example, in 1 Cor

11:1-12) that fundamental equality of being can exist alongside a subordination in our human relationships, we will get into all sorts of trouble, because then we are choosing to overlook the very nature of God himself.

Human Value

Moreover, whether we like it or not, virtually everybody in human society is subordinate in authority to someone else. If we are not careful we will end up saying that a person's value lies in their power over other human beings, or else we will destroy the proper basis for authority in human society. The only sound basis for maintaining a real equality of human beings within the experience of social order is to be found in the biblical insistence that we are all made in the image of the Triune God. The most important areas for this basic scriptural

teaching are the family (because that reflects the creation account in Genesis) and the church family (because the church is destined to be the bride of Christ).

If we care about human wellbeing we cannot afford to ignore this profound element in orthodox Christian teaching. Pragmatists need to think about where current ideas or assumptions are heading. Dogmatists for these ideas must be resisted because they will undermine our understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Mark Burkill, *Vicar of Christ Church, Leyton and member of Reform Council*

Further Reading

- *Men and Women in the Image of God* by John Frame in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* - J Piper and W Grudem (Crossway Books) pp225-232
- *God is Love* by Gerald Bray (due out in March 2012 - Crossway Books) - sections on The Mystery of the Trinity, Human Relationships
- Review by Peter Schemm of Kevin Giles '*The Trinity and Subordinationism*' in CBMW Vol 7 no2 (available online at www.cbmw.org)
- Mike Ovey - *Equality but not symmetry* - Cambridge Papers June 1992 (available online at www.jubilee-centre.org)
- John Rodgers - *AMIA Ordination of Women Study* August 2003 Part 2 pp21-36 (available online at www.theamia.org)