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Letters to the Editor

At a recent meeting of the Editorial Board, it was agreed that important correspondence might be published in a Letters Column, subject to final editorial decision. An opportunity for such publication has occurred with the receipt of the following letter from Rev Canon R T France. The letter is published verbatim.

The Editor
Churchman

4 April 1995

Dear Gerald

I was surprised that you felt it appropriate to commission a 'reply' to my brief Wycliffe Hall sermon published in Churchman 108/3, and I am sorry that you did not mention this to me, as some misunderstandings might have been avoided had I been able to see it before publication. The sermon was not meant to be an academic argument of a case (I have done that elsewhere), and its aim was to plead for mutual understanding between equally convinced evangelicals who have reached different conclusions, rather than to argue for my own view. So I am sorry that Melvin Tinker apparently saw it as polemical. But perhaps it is too much to hope that a council member of Reform could accept that other evangelicals may also have a right to their different interpretation of Scripture!

I shall not reply to all Melvin's points, since by the time this 'reply to a reply' is printed my 1995 Didsbury Lectures will have been published under the title *Women in the Church's Ministry: a Test-Case for Biblical Hermeneutics* (Paternoster Press 1995). In those lectures I have set out my exegetical and hermeneutical thinking on the issue in a way I could not attempt to do in a chapel sermon, and I hope that Melvin will feel that I have not ducked the sort of arguments he offers. In particular, he will find that I certainly do not accept that 'the texts' (presumably he means the two or three texts regularly quoted to oppose women's ministry) are free of ambiguity, either in themselves or in their relation to the rest of Scripture. That is precisely my point, that it is the attempt to be fair to Scripture that has led me and other evangelicals to change our minds. But I must leave the interested reader to look at my book to see why I have reached this conclusion.

There are just two points in his reply which I would like to take up here. First, I am intrigued to find that in attempting to apply Scripture to the practical issues of modern church life I have 'ventured out of my particular field of expertise' (as one who has written on matters of New

Testament criticism and exegesis). What does this say about Melvin's view of the purpose of biblical scholarship? Are we to be safely confined within the area of antiquarian research, and not allowed to suggest that a proper understanding of Scripture may have practical implications for Christian life today? Those of us who as evangelicals have engaged in biblical studies have become sadly accustomed to the patronising put-down administered by our academic colleagues when our evangelical convictions lead us to question the accepted views of the 'main stream'. But it is disappointing to meet with the same treatment from fellow-evangelicals when our exegetical studies lead us to question the beliefs of traditional evangelical 'doctrinal and systematic theology and, to a lesser degree, philosophical theology'. Are these disciplines, even in the hands of careful evangelicals, really exempt from the need to listen to what fellow-evangelicals are saying as a result of their study of the Bible?

My second comment is on Melvin's attempted analogy, from a hermeneutical point of view, between the issues of the ordination of women and of homosexuality (an analogy which, as you rightly recognise in your editorial, I and others would regard as 'outrageous'). It is simply not true that 'formally the arguments and methodology are exactly the same'. For the record, I do not regard an actively homosexual lifestyle as compatible with biblical teaching or as acceptable in the ministry of the Church of England, and I do not see any hermeneutical inconsistency between this position and my support for the ordination of women to the priesthood. The most obvious difference between the two issues is that whereas, as far as I can see, Scripture offers no encouragement to a homosexual lifestyle, still less an example of its being practised with approval, what is so difficult about the 'prohibitive' passages with regard to women's ministry is precisely that they are so hard to square with the evidence of the New Testament that women in the apostolic churches (including those with which Paul was associated) did in fact exercise authoritative ministry, and were not condemned for it. In other words, whereas on homosexuality Scripture seems to me to speak with a consistent voice, on women's ministry there are different currents in Scripture which lead equally convinced evangelicals to opposite conclusions. The problem with which we must all wrestle is how to decide which of these currents should be the primary basis for our application of scriptural principles to current church life. On this no doubt Melvin and I will continue to disagree. What I was hoping to convey through my Wycliffe sermon is that, as evangelicals, we have a right to do so.

Yours sincerely

DICK FRANCE

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