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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Evangelicals and the Ordination of Women

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THE GENERAL SYNOD is asking all dioceses to answer two questions on the ordination of women to the priesthood; one as to a decision in principle about it, the other as to its present expediency, given an affirmative answer to the first. The argument in this booklet* is confined mainly to the first, and to women in the presbyterate; only one of the three contributors, Dr. J. I. Packer, asks the second question and faces the episcopal implications of the decision. After a short Preface, the editor succinctly and adequately presents the historical context of the debate. Then follows a section devoted to the thesis that the whole issue of ordaining women to the priesthood must be seen in terms of a reformed presbyterate, in which the beneficed incumbent gives way to a team with probably one 'full-time' member of the ordained ministry. 'Few, if any of the advocates of women priests want to see them admitted to the pattern of ordained ministry as it now is' (p. 7). It is of course a fact that many parishes are organised already on a team of lay leaders who share in all the decisions and in the pastoral care that has conventionally been thought to be the responsibility of the incumbent. In principle much may be said for this point, but the trend of the argument in this section could be described as over-played. Unless some fairly speedy revolution affecting the whole church takes place for an acceptable structure to be provided, it will be necessary either to reply in the negative to the General Synod's second question, or else be content to fit in women clergy in such present structures as are here in view.

There is in this section a highly urbanised slant on modern ministry and the problems of urbanised parishes; truly they are enormous, but even so, this is a deployment of the argument that seems to ignore the rural areas. Two quotations from Philip Crowe's booklet on *Ministry in the Local Church* involve the editor in what first of all seems an inconsistency with a later thesis, and secondly with an assessment of

* *Evangelicals and the Ordination of Women*, edited by Colin Craston, Grove Books, 1973, 30 pp., £0.20.

our modern conditions of ministry in the sharpest comparison with the past, that raise further questions which he only glimpses. In the first place to say that the English parochial system has come from different origins than those suggested by the admittedly plastic data of the New Testament is surely not a criticism but another evidence of the need for development within changing social conditions that Christian judgment discerns as necessary, based on scriptural insights, which is what is urged at the end of the book. Secondly, the description of modern social conditions especially amongst the urbanised, raises serious questions not just about changing ministerial structures but about the whole life of the church, as Charles Davis in his booklet *The Temptations of Religion* has expounded. This will of course involve the episcopate. But for the present issue, is this rather over-playing one's hand?

A third chapter takes up most of the opposing arguments to the ordination of women, and deals with them fairly and competently. It might have strengthened the argument if, instead of asking 'Does Scripture debar them (women) completely from pastoral oversight' etc., it had been turned to pose the issue, 'If some ministries (such as he lists) are acceptable from women, what are the compelling reasons for excluding them from the rest?' The terms of the arguments in this section are theological and not the psychological ones that emerge in a full discussion of all that is involved. The Biblical discussion is taken up by Miss Joyce Baldwin, Dean of Women at Trinity College, Bristol. A good half of her section debates what is hardly in question, that women played a full part in society as the Bible speaks of it, and that the Old Testament does not show husbands domineering over their wives; while the New Testament places men and women on an equal footing before God. Her argument only comes to terms with the question over St. Paul's well-known remarks, and here Miss Baldwin often presses her case rather further than the texts warrant. Thus in 1 Corinthians 14: 34, 35, it is urged that the restriction on women addressing the meeting was because of the Corinthian situation, ignoring the generalised reference in verse 34 'As in all the churches' (or 'congregations' NEB). The admonition in 1 Timothy 2: 11-15 is limited here to the 'younger wives' because of the Genesis reference that follows, while the general reference in the three preceding verses is ignored. The reference to 'head' in 1 Corinthians 11: 3 is too easily construed as 'source, origin' with reference to Genesis 2. But, apart from the fact that in Greek *kephalē* is used with that significance mainly in the plural, the use of 'head' in Ephesians 5: 22, 23, in close accord with the body in 4: 15, 16, suggests that the same linked ideas are here in the earlier epistle, with the same idea of levels of subjection.

In fact, while Miss Baldwin overstates her case in this respect it would have served her better if she had deployed Selwyn's argument in his Commentary on 1 Peter (p. 105f.) in similar terms to those of Dr. Packer in the following chapter. Here, the Pauline regulations are

placed within the context of an analysis of the creation terms in Genesis (strangely missing in the Biblical chapter) and lead to a general conclusion of support for ordained women's ministry, as support for men's ministry in the exercise of charisma, in the terms of co-operative relationships arising from the continuing creation pattern. But here an answer is given to the second General Synod question, that in the present conditions of ordained ministry in the Church of England, as incumbent or as bishop, this is not the right time to make a decision to go ahead with ordaining women, but rather to link a decision in principle for it to a change in ministerial conditions that would then provide the right conditions. No reference is here made to those present opportunities for the ministry of women presbyters; and while the need to recognise the further issue of women bishops is raised, nothing is said about their form of ministry.

The editor's concluding section raises two questions that emerge; whether 'headship' is a creation ordinance, that must obtain generally, and not as some would urge, simply as between husband and wife: whether it is a result of the Fall, and modified by redemption. On this it might be said that few commentators holding the restriction of 'headship' only to the marriage context, seem to ask themselves how things would be in a New Testament church with the married women keeping quiet and the rest joining in freely! Or whether in New Testament social thinking the married state for a woman was regarded as her normal one. On the relationship of the creation-fall order and that of redemption, it might be urged that Paul was conscious of the church being partly in each; it exists in the 'now, but not yet' eschatological situation. The New Testament offers various examples (e.g. in Thessalonians) of Christians anticipating the conditions of the fulness of the Kingdom, and 1 Corinthians 15 suggests that the same outlook was prevalent there. This might well bring into harmony 1 Corinthians 11: 3, 5 and 14: 34. Paul would not quench the Spirit's inspiration for that is the power of the coming age, but he was concerned to prevent what would be unedifying and offensive in present circumstances. This is the context in which to read the marriage regulations of the *Haustafeln* (e.g. Eph. 5: 21-33; 1 Pet. 3: 1-7).

The other question posed is 'development in revelation', instancing as a parallel the growth in recognising slavery as evil. It could be better stated as progress in understanding and applying revelation, the implications of Biblical truth, and the clearer perception as to hermeneutic procedure. The Christian church today has to face the implication of the social effects of its witness, beyond its own life, so that while the eschatological question of 'now but not yet' is still with it, the practical choices that it has to make are not posed in the same terms as they were in New Testament times. The booklet recognises the need for ongoing debate; the length of this review might suggest that it provides a good stimulus for it.