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The Reason Why

J. P. HICKINBOTHAM

*Why Not?** is a series of essays by some high-church and low-church Anglicans and three Continental Protestants against the ordination of women. They point to the increasing number of churches which ordain women (the Church of Scotland is a recent one) and the growing demand within almost all other churches, especially in the Church of England, for their ordination. They have a simple explanation for this phenomenon. It is the result of Christians' surrendering to the secular, and often anti-Christian, feminist movement of which 'Women's Lib.' is today's embodiment. But, they argue, the matter ought to be determined by appeal to the Bible and sound theology; and they believe the answer to that appeal is a resounding 'no'.

This conclusion is reached partly by worrying away at 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35 and 1 Timothy 2: 11-12 which they regard as decisive for New Testament practice (texts such as 1 Corinthians 11: 4-6 which might point in another direction being disallowed as irrelevant), and partly by adducing the biblical passages which they think inculcate a general subordination of women to men as evidence that the non-ordination of women was not only a primitive practice but is also an unchangeable theological principle (biblical teaching such as that in Galatians 3: 26-28 on the equality of all human beings in Christ and his church being disallowed as irrelevant). When it is asked more precisely what the theological impediment is, two answers are given. One is in terms of representation. God is Father—a male word. Christ was a man—a male human being. The priest represents God and Christ. He must therefore be (like God analogically and like Christ literally) a male. The other answer is in terms of authority. God, it is argued, has given the male sex a monopoly of authority. Females are simply to obey (except that in the absence of males they may exercise authority

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over each other). The priest is an authoritative figure. He must therefore be a male.

Such arguments provoke questions. A father is a male parent. If in order to represent the Father a priest must be male must he not by parity of reasoning be also a parent? On the other hand Christ was a male celibate. If in order to represent him the priest must be male must he not by parity of reasoning be also celibate? But is this emphasis on maleness valid? God's Fatherhood in the Bible has nothing to do with the husband-wife relationship, but only with the parent-child relationship. It speaks not of sexual differentiation and maleness but of the creative and protective love of parenthood. Cannot, then, all children of God equally represent him? Again, in the Creed we say Christ was made man—i.e. that he took upon himself human nature, the humanity in which all human beings, men and women alike, share, not that he was made male. Inevitably he had to be a particular human being, Jew or Greek, tall or short, male or female. But because he shares the human nature which belongs to the whole human race he can represent each of us, men and women alike, as our High Priest. Cannot, then, each of us who share his humanity likewise represent him?

And how about authority? Does the New Testament really imply that it is always wrong for women to exercise authority over men or boys? If so does it not follow that in a Christian country we ought to deprive women of the vote and exclude them from public life and from the professions, business, and industry except for a few all-female institutions and the bottom jobs? Was Hitler right in affirming 'church, children and kitchen' as the limit of woman's sphere? In the church, government is now synodical. Ought not women to be excluded from voting for or membership of parochial church councils and the national and other synods? Must we not refuse allegiance to the Queen as sovereign in the state and even more as supreme governor of the church? Even if this is the case, however, does it follow that women should be also excluded from the ordained ministry? The minister is emphatically not an authority-figure. He is a minister—a servant. He represents him who came not to be served but to serve and who exemplified his mission by washing the disciples' feet. If it be true that men typify authority and women subservience are not women for that reason more suitable as ministers than men? Ought not perhaps men to be excluded from ordination because our male superiority makes us lord it over the flock and thus pervert the very nature of the ministry? And if, as a practical necessity, a minister sometimes has to exercise authority is it not good that this should be done by a woman as a standing reminder that menial and even slavish service not superiority is the true meaning of our ministry as it was of his?

But underlying questions at this level there lie two more basic issues. One concerns the right and wrong approach to biblical exegesis and

exposition. Shall we settle any large issue by grubbing about with a verse here and a verse there? Do we not need rather to see the biblical revelation as a whole, and to see particular issues in the light of the great redemptive themes in which it is centred? And shall we expect to find cut and dried answers? Ought we not rather to look for insights and affirmations which point beyond what they explicitly state to conclusions which in the light of reflection and Christian experience can be seen to have been implicit from the first? Thus the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation were formulated in the early centuries, the doctrine of salvation at the Reformation, and the bearing of the gospel on ethical issues such as slavery and social reform in the 19th century. The other basic issue follows from this. How do the great gospel themes bear upon the question of women and the ministry? People of all sorts and conditions are equally justified through faith, made one in Christ and equally indwelt by his Spirit. They are equally called to witness to Christ and as a royal priesthood to show forth the excellencies of him who called us. The ordained ministry has, within the total ministry of the church, a uniquely important and vital function of witness to Christ through Word and Sacrament and pastoral care. Can any one group of believers be in principle excluded from a share in this ministry not on grounds of spiritual unsuitability but because of other factors such as nationality, race, social class, or sex, without denying that they have an equal standing in Christ's church and an equal share in the mission of that church? The essayists fail to wrestle with basic theological issues like this, perhaps because of their failure to recognise that the demand within the Churches for an end to the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry arises not from sociological fashions but from concern for the gospel and for biblical truth.