

The Current Legislation to Ordain Women

MARK BURKILL

Wherever legislation has been introduced to ordain women to a position of leadership within the local congregation, there has been much anguish and deep division. The Church of England is therefore no exception as it considers such a measure in General Synod. Yet at first sight it is puzzling that this is so when there already exists within the ordained ministry those who do not believe such fundamental doctrines as the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. While this situation causes deep dismay and shame to many, it has not yet led to the schism and disintegration of the Church of England which is threatened by the movement to ordain women.

The reason for this state of affairs appears to be that ordaining women is a very practical matter which will have profound consequences for ordinary parish life and the exercise of Christian ministry. It seems that when the importance of sound doctrine for the health of the church has been ignored for so long, the Lord has forced the question of authority and the source of truth onto the agenda through this supremely practical issue. Those matters lie behind all the arguments and discussions which have taken place and it does not yet seem to have been fully appreciated that because of them grave difficulties will be faced in applying this legislation even if it is passed.

The legislation makes some provision for those clergy who will resign if the measure to ordain women goes through. However there appears to have been little thought as to what happens to those who believe the position of women at the head of congregations is unbiblical, and who nevertheless wish to continue their ministry within the Church of England. That would surely be the position of many conservative evangelicals. Most Anglicans may believe that the General Synod will be voting on a fairly straightforward measure to ordain women. The reality, however, is that behind this legislation lies the troublesome question of whether it can be applied in practice without making it a test of modern orthodoxy. Will the ordination of women end up by excluding certain men from the ordained ministry? This will be a vital examination of whether the Church of England is as tolerant and comprehensive as it claims to be.

If ordination is refused to those who oppose the headship of women in

local congregations and if severe obstacles are placed in the way of such clergy as are already ordained and share that opposition, then it is hard to see how there is any long term future for the biblical ministry of conservative evangelicals within the Church of England. It would be deeply ironic if the only serious test of belief which a prospective ordinand faced was not whether he believed the Scriptures and major doctrines such as the resurrection, but simply whether he accepted the principle of female headship.

It is perhaps not too late for some to reflect upon the wisdom of the Thirty-nine Articles where they touch upon this matter. The most pertinent is Article 6 on the Bible's sufficiency:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

Although this Article is mainly concerned with the sufficiency of the Scriptures for salvation, it does warn against making belief in something which cannot be proved from the Scriptures an article of the Faith. In any case the state of being saved is not an experience which can be isolated from church life and the practical outworking of the faith.

If there is a real concern for the unity of God's people, then it is this principle which must be practised for the maintenance of that unity. It could be argued from church history that it is not the over-scrupulous consciences of some Christians which have generally caused schism and division, but rather those who have wished to enforce measures on the Church which cannot be proved from God's Word. Whatever else proponents of the ordination of women may say, they would surely find it very difficult to acknowledge that the principle emerges from the plain reading of the Scriptures and can be proved thereby. If careful attention is not paid to the way in which the current legislation is applied within the Church of England then there is every possibility that the wisdom of the Thirty-nine Articles will be ignored and yet another 'Ejection' will take place. This ejection would not be as sudden and dramatic as in 1662 but the effect would be the same.

The Authority of the Church is described in Article 20 as follows:

The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Words written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and keeper of holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree anything against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of salvation.

Again there is an emphasis on the folly of making something which cannot be proved from Scripture a necessity in belief. The Church which does not heed these words is treading on very dangerous ground.

The principle which Articles 6 and 20 are expressing is to be found, of course, within God's Word. In the Acts of the Apostles, ch. 15, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem met with Paul and Barnabas to discuss the question of circumcision, a matter that was as divisive in the early church as the ordination of women is today. Ch. 15 v. 1 tells us that some men from Judea were teaching 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'. That of course is Luke's summary of the impact of what these men from Judea were teaching. However in ch. 15 v. 5 when the meeting is being held in Jerusalem, the Christian believers who were of Pharisaic background said 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses'. Presumably they did not think that they were denying the Gentile believers their salvation through what they were teaching, yet they wanted to insist on the importance of circumcision.

The conflict came through them making a necessity of something which could not be said to be a requirement of the New Covenant. Once the principle had been established that circumcision could not be forced on the Gentiles and that Paul would not be required to circumcise his converts, the Jerusalem meeting was able to recommend certain measures which would assist fellowship between Jews and Gentiles (vv. 24-29). Indeed Paul was then happy to circumcise Timothy in ch. 16 v. 3.

We do not even face the difficult transition period between the Old and New Covenants with which the early church had to wrestle. So to make acceptance of the principle of female headship a necessity for exercising the pastoral ministry within the Church of England would be a very great folly.

The experience of other denominations which have ordained women does not lead one to hope that the legislation facing the Church of England would be applied in such a way as to protect the ministry of those who conscientiously object to female headship on biblical grounds. While such clergy can be tolerated for quite a while, in the long term severe problems arise. I believe that this would be a fair description of the situation in the Church of Scotland, the Episcopal Church in the United States, the Anglican Church in New Zealand, as well as amongst the Lutheran Churches of Scandinavia.

The issue of the sufficiency of Scripture has returned to dominate ecclesiastical life. This practical question of whether acceptance of the principle of ordaining women will be made a necessity of belief within the Church of England ensures that this is the case. It will not go away until the biblical wisdom of the Thirty-nine Articles in this matter is recognized. In a context which is startlingly appropriate to the current discussions, the Lord declared in Jeremiah ch. 23 v. 29 that His Word is like a hammer which

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breaks a rock in pieces. No Church that hopes to stay alive can ever ignore the teaching of the Scriptures in the long term.

MARK BURKILL is vicar of Christ Church, Leyton.