'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us'?

Some thoughts on decision-making in the church, and on Christian disagreement, in the light of the decision of the Church of England to ordain women to the presbyterate

A sermon preached in Wycliffe Hall chapel on 9 March 1994

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By the time the college as a whole next meets together at the Lord's Table, our church will have women presbyters. This is a development for which some have waited eagerly, while others regard it as a mistake. That division of opinion is reflected within our own community, as we are all well aware.

For some it is particularly hard to accept that a decision taken by a single Synod vote, however carefully prepared for and however patiently argued, can reflect the mind of God, particularly in view of the fact that other parts of the universal church have not yet been led to the same perception (though of course others arrived there long before us!). It is my purpose, therefore, in this sermon to explore the nature and basis of decision-making in the church, and in particular the question of how it can be that the same Scriptures can be understood by different people as requiring quite opposite conclusions.

It is, of course, easy to short-circuit such discussion by denying that those with whom we disagree are in fact taking the Scriptures seriously, whether in intention or in the interpretative methods used. That move has been made quite frequently in the present situation. I quote from a pamphlet opposing the ordination of women to the presbyterate which I fear is not untypical – 'Christians who go by the Bible are concerned. . . . We must raise the standard of Bible truth. . . . Liberal thinking rules the day in church and nation. . . . We call on all Christians to accept the plain teaching of the Bible on this matter'. The author of those words apparently

believes that only one conclusion can honestly be drawn from the application of Scripture to this modern situation, and that all who draw a different conclusion from his own do so on grounds other than the attempt faithfully to apply biblical teaching to the issue. Whatever their professed arguments, they must in fact be governed by 'liberal thinking'.

I submit that such a short-circuiting of the argument will not do. It simply is not true that there is such a thing as 'the plain teaching of the Bible' on this matter, with which all Christians of good will must concur. If the rediscovery of the importance of hermeneutics in recent years has taught us anything, it is to beware of such convenient simplicity, and to recognise that equally devout Christians, with an equal determination to be governed by the Bible, can and do come to opposite conclusions on many issues, of which the ordination of women is a prime example.

It is of course true that many of those who have argued most vociferously for the ordination of women have not been evangelicals, and have given scant attention to the teaching of Scripture. But the same is true of those who have argued against it! Evangelicals on both sides of the debate have found themselves in company with others who have come to the same conclusion as themselves, and have voted in the same lobby, for reasons which they do not share. In either case, their conclusions stand to be judged not by the company in which they find themselves but by the scriptural basis on which those conclusions have been reached.

So what lies behind that Synod vote, and particularly behind the voting of those evangelicals whose weight is generally understood to have swung the balance in the House of Laity to achieve the two-thirds vote required? For many of them, as for the church as a whole, it has been a gradual process of changing their mind. I want to suggest to you that that is not in itself cause for concern – the church has often, under God, been led to change its mind, and to see the scriptural revelation in a new perspective. The long-delayed recognition that slavery was not in accordance with the mind of God is often, and I believe rightly, cited as in some ways a parallel to the current debate. But I want to suggest another and much earlier case, within the New Testament itself. The title which I have given to this sermon is drawn from Acts 15:28, and is intended to remind us of one such momentous change of mind, which seems to me to offer interesting parallels to the present issue. I refer to the dawning recognition that Gentiles could after all be accepted as equal members in the church of Jesus Christ.

I refer to this as an interesting parallel because those who then supported the status quo could, and no doubt did, argue that Scripture was clearly on their side. The food-laws of Leviticus left no doubt that Gentiles, who did not observe these laws, must be regarded as unclean, and on that basis no respectable Jew could enjoy table-fellowship with Gentiles. Gentiles who came into the church must do so as proselytes, adopting the scriptural food-laws and particularly circumcision. I do not need to take you through the long debate in the New Testament church on

this issue, with the eventual triumph of the 'radical' Pauline gospel over against the Ebionite view which continued to insist on literal application of the Levitical law and therefore on a church in which Gentiles could have no more than a subsidiary place. The point I wish to make is that the issue was essentially one of how Scripture must be applied in the new situation which now confronted the church in the light of the success of the Gentile mission, an issue on which then, as now, opposite conclusions were drawn with equal sincerity.

But the decision taken by 'Synod vote' in Acts 15 did not come out of the blue. Leading up to it was a long and sometimes bitter period during which many in the church found themselves obliged to change their mind. The issue comes to the surface in Acts 10 and 11. First Peter's instinctive prejudice against involvement with Gentiles had to be destroyed by the vision on the house-top in Joppa and by the subsequent experience that God had gone ahead of him to prepare the household of Cornelius for the gospel. Then it was the turn of the Jerusalem church to face the issue, as the 'circumcision party' attacked Peter's 'liberal' attitude. But Peter's testimony won them round, so that in the end 'They were silenced. And they praised God saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life"' (Acts 11:18). Then came the disturbing news of the large-scale evangelisation of Gentiles in Antioch, which Barnabas was sent to investigate; and 'when he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced' (Acts 11:19-24); and after that Paul and Barnabas set out into Cyprus and Asia Minor, and reports began to come back of an unstoppable influx of uncircumcised Gentiles into the church, leading eventually to the Council of Jerusalem. I doubt very much whether, if such a council had been held before Peter's visit to Joppa, it would have voted in favour of the Pauline position. But experience led them to re-examine their understanding of the scriptural data, and the church, or at least the leading part of it, changed its mind.

I am not suggesting, of course, that there is a direct parallel between the issue of Jew/Gentile fellowship and the issue of the ordination of women. What I want to illustrate is that for the church to change its mind in the light of a changing situation, even where there is a strong prima facie case that Scripture points in another direction, is not something new or regrettable. For them at least it did not seem like an abandonment of God's revealed purpose on the basis of a humanistic agenda, but rather 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us'.

I do not wish to argue that the changing situation alone is or should be the basis for changing our minds. But it can be, as it was for the New Testament church, the catalyst which enables us to rethink our understanding of God's revelation in Scripture, and sometimes to realise that what had previously seemed obvious may not be the only way to understand and apply its message. That is what has happened for many evangelicals in relation to the ordination of women, and I am one of them.

Had the Synod vote taken place twenty years ago, I guess that most evangelicals would have voted against the ordination of women to the presbyterate. I would have done so myself. The issue is complicated, of course, by the questions of how 'priesthood' is understood. For me, and I suspect for most evangelicals, the issue is not, as it is for many catholics, the supposed role of the priest in representing Christ at the eucharist; presidency at the eucharist is not what divides us (unless it be as a symbol for something deeper). The issue is whether a woman should have authority to teach and to have a role of leadership in the mission and ministry of the church. It is because in our Anglican system ordination to the presbyterate is the basis for most leadership roles that evangelicals have opposed the ordination of women. ('Teaching' as such seems not to have been the focus of the problem, since not many evangelicals have found difficulty with women deacons occupying the pulpit; the issue is 'who is in charge'.) Since there are texts in the New Testament which forbid women to hold a position of authority in the church, that has traditionally settled the issue for evangelicals.

So what has changed?

Society has changed. We have, at least in theory, equal opportunities in almost all areas of employment and of public life. We have seen women assuming leading roles in society, including a woman Prime Minister, a woman Speaker of the House of Commons and a woman head of MI5 (not to mention the Head of the Church of England herself!). Society is impatient with the few remaining bastions of male privilege. The church, and therefore also its gospel, is for many tarred with the brush of chauvinism and of injustice.

The church itself has changed too. The old days of one-man ministry are rapidly disappearing, and all the emphasis is on participation, collaboration, every-member ministry. As a result many have experienced the ministry of women in ways which were hitherto impossible, and some have appreciated what they have experienced. Even those who have no first-hand experience of life in churches where women are ordained to the same roles as men, are now in a position to envisage what it would mean for women to be ordained to the presbyterate, and at least some of them are enthusiastic for it.

All that I have just said will, of course, appear to confirm the worst fears of some, who are convinced that evangelicals have changed their mind in order to conform to the 'spirit of the age', and in so doing have abandoned their biblical moorings. But I mention these changes in society and in the church not as grounds in themselves for a change of mind, but as the elements in a changing situation which has driven us back to our study of the Bible, to see whether it really does compel the church to impose so strict a limit on the contribution which women can make to its ministry and mission.

And here is another factor which has changed, particularly for evangelical Anglicans: a new appreciation of hermeneutics. The change is often traced to the second National Evangelical Anglican Congress at

Nottingham in 1977, but that was only the most public exposure of a growing recognition that, in John Stott's words at that congress, 'We are much better at asserting its [the Bible's] authority than we are at wrestling with its interpretation. We are sometimes slovenly, sometimes simplistic, sometimes highly selective and sometimes downright dishonest'. We have now learned to recognise the distance between the 'two horizons' of the biblical author's world and our own, and to ask difficult questions about how what is said in the one horizon can be applied in the other. We have learned, I hope, to be more aware of the whole scriptural context within which a given text comes to us, and to be suspicious of interpretations which fail to set a text in its wider context, both in its historical situation and in its place within the canon of Scripture. And in the process we have come to realise that it is possible on some issues to argue in quite opposite directions from Scripture, depending on what text(s) you take as your starting-point, and what relative weight you give to different aspects of the whole scriptural revelation.

It is this change, more than the changing experience of life in society and in the church, which I believe accounts for the way many evangelicals, myself included, have changed their minds on the ordination of women.

I cannot in a single sermon go over all the detailed arguments. I hope that here in college you have all had some opportunity to think through the hermeneutical issues on the basis of a fair awareness of the different views espoused by evangelicals. Some of the exegetical issues are quite complicated; some admit of varying interpretations. All I want to do now is to offer a broad overview of how and why we come to differing conclusions on the basis of the same Bible, and to explore what this situation means for our continued ministry together in the one Church of England.

There are two opposite approaches which may be taken in evaluating the biblical material relating to the ministry of women in the church. The one which has been traditional among evangelicals has been to focus primarily on the two or three New Testament passages which focus on church ministry or worship and appear to offer an unequivocally negative verdict with regard to women's contribution. Most important has been Paul's instruction to Timothy that in Ephesus women must 'learn in silence with full submission' since Paul 'permits no woman to teach or to have authority over a man' (1 Tim. 2:11-12). Linked with this are two passages in 1 Corinthians which stand in some tension with one another: in 1 Cor. 14:34-35 women are to be silent in church, submitting under the law, and to ask questions of their husbands at home, while in 1 Cor. 11:3-16 the same principle of male priority is presented, but there is apparently no problem about the women praying and prophesying in church. (This latter passage contains the famous metaphor of the husband as 'head' of the wife, which occurs also in Ephesians 5, but there it is clearly used to explain the marriage relationship and is not applied to the context of worship or ministry.) On the basis of these passages, while there has been considerable variation of practice over

just what part women have been allowed to play in public worship (and still more over what they should wear, which is the point at issue in 1 Cor. 11:3-16), evangelicals have generally concluded that any role which gives women 'authority' over men is ruled out.

In response, reference has often been made to the principle of Gal. 3:28 that in Christ 'there is no longer male and female'. But it can be replied quite fairly that in this passage the focus is not on church ministry, but on the basis of salvation. And with that dismissal, the issue has too easily been dropped, and the Pauline restriction maintained as the truly biblical pattern of church ministry.

But there is another line of approach which puts matters in a very different light. This is to attempt a much broader overview of the scriptural data, which will begin with the Old Testament, where from time to time women take a leading role in a predominantly patriarchal society, and will go on to notice the revolutionary way in which Jesus related to women: he even included some women in his itinerant group (though not within the twelve) and generally challenged conservative Jewish attitudes on the status of women in society. It is this perception, of course, which lies behind Paul's pronouncement 'no longer male and female' in Gal. 3:28, and while that passage makes no direct reference to church ministry, one does not have to look too far to see that in the Pauline churches things did not apparently always go according to the pattern of submission and silence.

I am particularly impressed from this point of view by Romans chapter 16, where Paul's greetings to and comments on his friends and associates provide fascinating insights into the reality of Pauline church life. Of the 27 people greeted, ten are women, and several of those women clearly had a significant role in the church's life and mission. Four of them (Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis) are all described by the same verb, κοπιάω (to work hard). Prisca is described as Paul's fellow-worker, and here and elsewhere seems to take precedence over her husband Aquila (not to mention her role in instructing the great Apollos in the faith, Acts 18:26). Phoebe is a deacon of the church at Cenchreae (apparently an official appointment), and is intriguingly described as the προστάτις of many people and of Paul himself – and the most common meaning of προστάτης is a protector or patron, even a 'boss'; certainly more than just a pew-filler! And then there is the enigmatic Junia, who together with Andronicus is described not only as Paul's relative and fellow-soldier, but also as 'prominent among the apostles'. The phrase *could* perhaps be taken to mean that she and Andronicus were highly-regarded *by* the apostles, but it is more normally understood to describe them both as apostles – not of course as members of the twelve, but in the wider sense of a travelling missionary leader in which the term is applied also to Barnabas and a few others. It was presumably this understanding which led Western Christians in the late middle ages to try to turn her into a man by changing her name to Junias (a name for which there is absolutely no ancient evidence,

whereas the female name Junia was common).

The effect of this chapter is so striking that one wonders how it could derive from the same Paul who is responsible for 1 Tim. 2:11-12. If it does, as I believe, then the question must surely be raised whether Paul meant in that passage quite what he is generally understood to have meant, or whether there was something specific to the situation in Ephesus at the time which caused him to make a more restrictive ruling than would apply to the first century churches at large. As you will be aware, both those possibilities have been extensively explored, the latter most interestingly by Kenneth Bailey in a lecture here in college a year ago, when he discussed the nature of the cult of Artemis at Ephesus and the effect it is likely to have had on the role of women in religious life in the city.[1]

We cannot pursue the detailed argument. My point is that the biblical data leave us with a dilemma, even at the level of exegesis of the texts in their first-century context, quite apart from the hermeneutical problem of how we get from there to here. Either we take our stand on 1 Timothy 2 and related passages, and somehow make the prominent role of women in first-century Christianity fit in with them, or we start with the more general picture as it is summed up in Galatians 3:28, and ask how the more restrictive passages can be explained in that context. Whichever route we take, it is not appropriate for us to claim that our chosen option is the only or 'plain' teaching of the New Testament on the subject.

And when we have done our exegesis, we still have to face the more demanding hermeneutical question. Even if Paul really did intend women to have no teaching role, and insisted on functional subordination to men in church life as well as in marriage, how does this teaching apply to the very different circumstances in which we find ourselves today? Paul clearly required women to have their heads covered in church, but most modern Western Christians seem to have had little difficulty in concluding that what was literally appropriate then does not apply in the same way now. Do similar considerations apply to the role of women in the church at Ephesus. If so, why? If not, why not?

We shall go on debating these matters for a long time to come, I am sure. And it is good that we should, for few things can be more important for those who call themselves evangelicals than to wrestle with the meaning and the application of Scripture in relation to the life and mission of our church. And no doubt we shall continue, as we have already, to come to different conclusions, since a responsible study of hermeneutics can leave us in no doubt that genuine and far-reaching disagreements over the application of scriptural teaching are a fact of life, that what to one is the 'plain' meaning and implication of the biblical material may to another be equally plainly open to question.

In such a situation it is to be expected that some of us will from time to time change our minds on certain issues. That is what has happened among evangelical Anglicans in relation to the ordination of women, and

the result has been that the Church of England, which twenty years ago would have taken a different view, has now approved the ordination of women to the presbyterate. The basis of the change was not only, or even mainly, I believe, the pressure of an increasingly egalitarian society, but a careful re-examination of the meaning and application of Scripture in the light not only of changed circumstances but also of a newly developing awareness of the nature of the hermeneutical task.

If we are divided on the issue, then it is incumbent on us all to treat each other's convictions with respect, to listen to one another, to try to understand how someone no less determined than ourselves to be true to Scripture can nonetheless come to a different conclusion from the same Bible. We can do this without compromising our own convictions, but always willing, I trust, for them to be reexamined in the light of Scripture.

The bishops of the Church of England have declared their firm intention to do all in their power to enable those who sincerely hold opposing views on the issue to continue to minister in the same church. They have made detailed arrangements to make this practically possible as far as can be done in a church where women will now be recognised as validly ordained to the same ministry as men. Of course the result is a compromise, and one which will prove uncomfortable for many of us. No-one will have exactly the sort of church they would have preferred. It would have been much easier to adopt the policy which has so often been followed in the history of the church, for the 'victorious' side to lose no time in making it clear to the others that they are no longer welcome. Much easier, but much less Christian. We are entering a period, and it may well prove to be a long one, during which Christian love and forbearance will be tested as seldom before. Let us determine that in our Church of England, and here in this college, that love will prevail, and our real disagreements will not be allowed to hinder our even more real unity in Christ.

Let me commend to you, as I have before, Paul's charge to the Philippian church when its witness was threatened by division:

> If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus ... (Phil. 2:1-5).

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NOTES

1 Kenneth Bailey, *Anvil*, Vol. 11 No. 1 (1994) pp. 7–24.