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Bishops, Women and the Bible – A Response

N. T. Wright

I was surprised to be given pride of place in the recent Churchman editorial. I don't normally respond to printed criticism, partly because of time, and partly because I think the best refutation is to carry on doing the work to which I believe God has called me. But on this occasion the editorial made three or four charges which I must rebut head on.

I am grateful for the fact that my position is described as 'perfectly understandable' and that the editor expresses 'great sympathy for the awkward situation in which [I] have found [my]self'. But I entirely reject the idea that my conception of debate is 'entirely one-sided'. I have changed my mind on many things in the past and may well do so again; it's a liberating experience, and one I recommend. If I find myself confronted with arguments from Scripture, tradition and reason (in their proper relation, of course) which convince me that a position I have taken is wrong or inadequate, I hope and pray I shall have the grace and humility to do the right thing. The purpose of debate, and the reason why I urged more of it, is not simply to bring other people to my point of view (though all debaters must try to do that otherwise it wouldn't be a debate) but (a) so that we can learn from each other and perhaps advance together to a new position which neither of us held in the first place and on which we can agree, and (b) so that, if our differences turn out to be irreconcilable, we will at least know why we each hold the views we do, and be able to respect one another rather than accusing one another of knee-jerk liberalism or conservatism.

It simply isn't true that most people have made up their minds about women bishops. Many in Synod are genuinely confused, not surprisingly given the nature of the non-debate so far. Nor is it true that the two sides start from different principles; many on both sides undoubtedly do, but by no means all. Of course, there are many of 'those who favour the consecration of women bishops' who live in a liberationist mental universe and see this as its logical outcome, but that certainly isn't true of me, and I know plenty of others who are in my position.

In particular, the charge that I do not believe the Bible to be authoritative for today's church, or not in the same way that 'traditionalists' do, is bizarre. I have

recently published a book on the authority of Scripture (*Scripture and the Authority of God*), and I am currently under heavy fire from ‘radicals’ and ‘liberationists’ for being such a conservative and traditionalist! The charge that I have distorted the plain meaning of 1 Timothy 2 because it doesn’t fit with my beliefs is slanderous. When faced with a text bristling with exegetical problems (not least with words that don’t occur elsewhere in early Christian literature) my primary duty, as a good conservative evangelical who believes in the God-giveness of Scripture, is to proceed with caution and to obey that great Reformation principle of not expounding one passage of Scripture in such a way as to set it against others. The implication that I agree with those who regard 1 Timothy as a second-generation Christian narrowing down Paul’s teaching is utterly unwarranted, as anyone who reads my little book on the Pastorals knows. (Not, of course, that it’s a thorough academic study; that’s the nature of the series in which it comes.) The implication that I am operating with a different set of hermeneutical principles to my fellow conservative evangelicals, and that I am part of ‘the brave new world of the politically correct’, is a cheap shot without justification. (There are plenty of people who live in that brave new world and operate bizarre and non-evangelical hermeneutical strategies, but the editorial clearly implies that I am part of all that.)

What I do find difficult to swallow is the regular pseudo-exegesis which confuses 1 Timothy 2 (which is about ministry) with Ephesians 5 (which is about marriage), and which imports the idea of ‘headship’ from the latter into the former. The one time ‘headship’ is used in relation to women is in that interesting passage in 1 Corinthians 11 where the women are clearly taking part in leading worship. I have yet to see anyone from Dr. Bray’s position engage with what seems to me the central point: that Mary Magdalene and the other women on Easter morning were commissioned to be the ‘apostles to the apostles’, being entrusted ‘entirely against the grain of the culture of the day’ with the very first proclamation of Jesus’ bodily resurrection. This was massively significant in the first century and I believe remains so today.

The article then turns a corner and asks for parallel structures and evangelical bishops, citing the present Bishop of Lewes as the only one who can be called ‘a genuinely conservative Evangelical’. Let me first register an objection, already implicit in what I’ve said, to the hijacking of the latter phrase. When Dr. Bray and I were young the phrase ‘conservative evangelical’ was defined in

terms of certain key beliefs, particularly the inspiration and authority of Scripture and a certain view of the atonement. Since I haven't changed my views on either of those topics, why should I now find the phrase used in such a way as to exclude me?

But I leave that aside in favour of a greater irony. Not so long ago, the Church of England was led by people like Robert Runcie, John Habgood and David Jenkins. All kinds of credal statements were questioned. Evangelicals didn't then suppose for a moment that they needed evangelical bishops in order to get on with the job of evangelizing the nation; they just went ahead and did it. They weren't afraid of being 'tripped up by an unsympathetic hierarchy'. I've never met an evangelical incumbent who felt it necessary to receive a particular kind of ministration from a bishop before being free to 'get on with the work of evangelizing the nation', or to put their mouths (which in my experience are quite active already as it is) where their money is. Actually, there are probably more bishops today who come from, and are basically supportive of, an orthodox Christian background, whether evangelical or catholic, than at any time in living memory including the five current so-called senior bishops. Why, now, do we need non-territorial jurisdictions (a pretty radical innovation on any normal episcopal ecclesiology) in order to support a style of churchmanship which is in any case *de facto* congregational?

Of course I know perfectly well 'believe me!' that there are politically correct campaigns currently under way which, if successful, would lead the church away from the truth we know in Christ. I do not think an appropriate campaign for women in the episcopate belongs in that category. We evangelicals need to make common cause if we are to fight the real battles that lie ahead. Squabbling amongst ourselves, or campaigning to have our cake (membership in the Anglican church) while eating it (eschewing territorial episcopacy), will only distract us and divert our attention from the real campaign to which we must soon give ourselves with all the prayer and mutual support we can muster.

TOM WRIGHT
Bishop of Durham
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