

# Women Bishops ... the Way Ahead

In June I set out my thinking on the significant and difficult issue of women bishops. It is important that we establish from the start the fundamental basis on how we are to deal with any issues that arise within the life of the church. The classical evangelical position is that Scripture is normative for Christians. By this we mean that it does not simply describe what the early Christians did, but rather it gives us positive patterns for our own faith and behaviour.

Men and women are equal before God in status, dignity and humanity, but have different roles in the life of the family and church. God has given men the commission of leading the church as a whole and given women the responsibility of working under the leadership of men. God has made the distinction. The church cannot care and work efficiently without men and women working together. God has given gifts to his people for the good of his church. The Bible teaches how these gifts are to be used.

Within the connection of the Trinity (Father, Son & Holy Spirit) we can observe an arrangement of how it is possible for equality of person and diversity of function to operate together. We would not say that the role of God the Son is inferior to the role of God the Father. Additionally, we would not say that the Holy Spirit's role is inferior, although He submits to both the Father and the Son. In their relationship we see the full ministry of God at work.

The Biblical teaching of male headship and female obedience should be upheld as a way of ordering relationships within the church and marriage. I believe that Jesus Himself serves as an example. This is shown to us firstly in his obedience to His Father's will in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26.42). We see it in his sacrificial headship of the church as he gave up his life for the church at the cross. This pattern of sacrifice and submission needs to be copied within marriage and the church and across the Christian life. The agenda behind women bishops is that equality means the removal of all gender differences and insists on identical roles for men and women within God's Church. I believe the Bible, God's Word, stresses a complementary role that has its roots in the relationship at the heart of God himself.

## What is the role of a bishop?

We cannot begin to address the issue of women bishops in the Church of England unless we have an idea of what a bishop is and what a bishop does.

As many of you will know, there are different opinions in the Church of England about the nature of the episcopate. However it is accepted that a bishop will undertake the following:

- ✚ A Church of England bishop is the principal minister of word and sacrament of the local church and has overall pastoral responsibility for his clergy and laity. Like a bishop in the Early Church, he exercises his ministry with the assistance of his priests and deacons.
- ✚ A Church of England bishop is an instrument of unity for his diocese and for the wider Church. As the 1990 Church of England report *Episcopal Ministry* puts it:

In the local church the bishop focuses and nurtures the unity of the people; in their sharing in the collegiality of bishops the local church is bound together with other local churches; and, through the succession of bishops the local community is related to the Church through the ages. Thus the bishop in his own person in the diocese; and in his collegial relations in the wider church; and through his place in the succession of bishops in their communities in faithfulness to the Gospel, is a sign and focus of the unity of the Church.

- ✚ A Church of England bishop is called to declare and uphold the apostolic faith which is revealed in Scripture and to which the Tradition of the Church bears witness.
- ✚ As in the Early Church it is bishops who have the sole right to ordain other bishops and priests and deacons.
- ✚ Like a bishop in the Early Church a Church of England bishop is called to be a leader in mission.

What the debate about women in the episcopate involved was a focus on this exercise of the fivefold ministry. This consideration involves theological questions, such as whether it would be right for a woman to exercise episcopal authority over men, and the practical question of whether a

woman could effectively exercise an episcopal ministry in circumstances where there would be clergy and congregations who would be unable to accept her ministry.

## **Male leadership**

The principle of male headship was not established by the Apostle Paul in an attempt to restrict women according to the cultural norms and expectations of the first century. He was not a misogynist-- in fact; his inclusion of women as gospel partners alongside him suggests he was a strong proponent of women's ministry! The question is whether 1 Timothy 2:12 prohibits preaching a sermon in a local church under the authority of the elders. For three reasons I don't believe this is the case. First preaching a sermon in a local church is not the same thing as "teaching". Second, "teaching" has to do with the preservation and transmission of the authentic apostolic witness to Jesus in the early church era. Third Paul talks about "teaching" without restricting it to men and/or accredited leaders, and in fact encourages the whole church to do it. (Col 3:16) Therefore, Paul is not necessarily prohibiting women from preaching in the weekly gathering of the local church, under the authority of the elders.

This is underlined when we see that Adam was created first as leader/provider (he gave the animals their names), and Eve was created second as the only suitable helper for him (she accepted both her generic name from him, as well as her specific name-- see Genesis 2:23 and 3:20). Neither one was superior to the other, both were made in God's image and both were necessary to fulfil the creation mandate to fill the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:28).

## **Modelled**

This establishes the Biblical principle of male headship which is to be modelled in the church (see 1 Corinthians 11 & 14, Titus 2 and 1 Timothy 2). Men are to take the position of overall leadership and will demonstrate their authority through teaching the whole congregation, while women are to support them in that role. In particular women are to teach and train other women as well. (I would argue therefore that all-male church teams are as inappropriate as teams headed up by women and the ideal is always to have both men and women working alongside each other, with men being in overall leadership.)

## **A Resolution**

I am therefore asking that the PCC to consider passing the following resolution that will help me in my ministry. I believe it also reflects in large measure the wish of PCC to grapple with this difficult topic sensitively while accepting that we cannot be totally united on this matter at this time.

The resolution for the PCC is as follows:

***"This PCC resolves to seek formal written agreement from the Diocesan Bishop (Nicholas) that Peter Breckwoldt for the tenure of his post as Vicar of St. Johns Wimborne will report to a male Bishop, on the grounds of respect for his theological conviction. In all other respects, Peter and St. Johns desire to remain in full communion with the rest of the diocese in its mission to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the community.***

***So on grounds of theological conviction, we ask that arrangements be made for it in accordance with the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests."***

A PCC which has passed a resolution then sends a copy of it to the diocesan bishop, archdeacon, diocesan registrar and registered patron. Parishes which have passed a resolution may in the future rescind it at any time. It is also important that parishes which have passed a resolution should review it from time to time, especially when a vacancy in a benefice arises. Where a resolution has been passed, and before clergy are appointed to the parish or a bishop chosen by the diocesan bishop to provide oversight, there will, therefore, need to be consultation between bishop and parish to ascertain the nature of that conviction so that the resolution can be implemented effectively.

**Peter Breckwoldt**