

Yet although Jesus called women as disciples, he did not appoint any as apostles. His practice is made prescriptive by Paul: 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.' (1 Timothy 2.12) Such authoritative teaching is integral to the ministry of the *episkopos* ('bishop' or 'overseer') whose role Paul goes on to describe in the letter.

Moreover, the apostle roots the prohibition in the order of God's creation and mankind's fall into sin rather than any unreformed personal prejudice or specific local problem, underlying its continuing validity today.

In essence, the New Testament affirms women as Christian disciples, deacons and gospel workers, but denies them the role of priest or bishop.

In terms of the three-fold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, the 1920 Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops put it accurately, if negatively:

'The order of deaconesses is for women the one and only order of the ministry which has the stamp of apostolic approval, and is for women the only order of the ministry which we can recommend that our branch of the Catholic Church should recognise and use.' (Res. 48)

Is this a 'primary' issue?

This question raises an important distinction. Two current issues threatening to divide the Church are the acceptability of first, homosexual practice and second, women bishops.

In the Bible, the unrepentant homosexual offender is excluded from the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6.9-10). Thus to remain in fellowship with a group that *accepted* the practice as consistent with Christian discipleship would be impossible: the gospel itself is subverted. It is a 'primary' issue.

Some evangelicals argue that disagreements over the ministry of women are of a different, 'secondary', order. Scripture addresses the issue, but never explicitly concludes that those who think differently endanger their souls. Thus, it is argued, it is legitimate to agree to disagree.

However, others observe that the distinction should not be pressed since *all* Scripture is God-breathed. The plea for liberty of opinion can only apply to issues where Scripture is silent. On this issue - until the last few decades - the Scriptures have been considered by every believing generation to speak unequivocally.

What happens next?

In July 2005, the General Synod of the Church of England resolved to 'set in train ... the process for removing the legal obstacles to the ordination of women to the episcopate'. Barring an extraordinary change of synodical mind, women will soon be eligible to be ordained as bishops, possibly as early as 2012.

A key issue for those who remain opposed is whether provision will be made that enables ongoing membership and ministry with integrity. Our synodical representatives need to know that such provision must be statutory and permanent, permitting ministers and parishes who do not accept that women may be priests or bishops to continue their mission without compromise.

The closure of the Order of Deaconesses and the pressure upon women deacons to be further ordained as priests mean - ironically - that fewer options are now open to gifted and godly women who share these convictions. Positively and locally, evangelicals must seize the initiative in promoting women's gospel ministry.

Rev. Mike Smith, Vicar of Hartford and on behalf of the North West Partnership.



Eleven episcopal women at the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops in 1998

Is it time for

women
bishops

in the Church of England?

Is it time for **women bishops** in the Church of England?

For many, reason and experience say yes!

Today, women may be professionals, police officers, prime ministers and, since 1992, priests in the Church of England. The question is natural: why should they not be eligible for consideration as bishops?

On one level, the reasoning is unassailable: if it is right that women may be priests, then it must be right to open the door to women bishops. In the New Testament, the church office of 'presbyter' (meaning 'elder' and often contracted to 'priest') is equivalent to the office of 'overseer' or 'bishop' (translating the Greek word *episkopos*). Only later was the title 'bishop' reserved for the senior presbyter.

For example, the apostle Paul writes to Titus, '... appoint elders [that is, *priests*] in every town ... Since an overseer [that is, a *bishop*] is entrusted with God's work ...' (Titus 1.5, 7). The apostle would be bemused that someone may be qualified for one office but not the other.

To reason, many would add the argument of experience. In the years since they were ordained, many have valued the ministry they have received from female clergy. Why should the most gifted of them face a "glass ceiling" which their male colleagues do not?

Does tradition matter?

A major objection to women's ordination as priests and bishops has come from the sheer novelty of the practice against 2000 years of church history. Despite the best efforts of some

recent scholars, the strongest evidence suggests that although women had many recognised ministries within the early church, the offices of priest and bishop were always restricted to men within orthodox Christianity. There is evidence of women fulfilling those roles, but only within heretical groups.

However, the tradition in the Eastern Orthodox churches included, until the 12th century, ordained deaconesses. In 1862, the order of deaconesses was revived in Anglicanism, although stress was placed by the bishops on the lay nature of the order.

Experience, reason, tradition ... and Scripture

In the gospels, Jesus warns his followers not to base ultimate spiritual judgement on either their own experience, reason or church tradition.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18.9-14), the Pharisee's confidence proves to be presumption. His *experience* was an unreliable guide to God's approval. Elsewhere, as his disciples jockey for greatness, Jesus, 'knowing the *reasoning* of their hearts' (Luke 9.47, *ESV*), corrects them.

During one of his many confrontations with the Pharisees, Jesus says, 'You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the *traditions* of men.' (Mark 7.8) Here, the Lord contrasts human tradition and God's word in the Scriptures - and clarifies which must rule us. Our experience, reason and traditions are precious gifts - but only God's word can authentically reveal God's will to his church.

The doctrine of the Church of England is equally clear. Canon A5 states, 'The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the holy Scriptures ... In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion ...'.

Article Twenty of the Thirty-nine says:

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

When Anglican Christians are caught up in controversy, our decisions should be in line with God's written word.

What does the Bible teach?

The New Testament is remarkably counter-cultural in its view of a Christian woman's status and ministry. Jesus welcomed women and men to be his disciples: Mary 'sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word' (Luke 10.39, *AV*). Contrast the chauvinistic sentiment of the rabbis: 'It is better that the words of the Law should be burned than that they should be given to a woman'.

The apostle Paul was just as radical. In Galatians 3.28, he says of those who belong to Christ, 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' The gospel brings equality in God's sight.

In Romans 16, Paul commends eight women by name who have been among his 'fellow workers in Christ Jesus'. The first of these, Phoebe, is introduced as a 'servant' or 'deacon(ess)'. It is possible that he refers in 1 Timothy 3.11 to female deacons, not simply deacon's wives.