

## Women overseers: Q and A

by Alasdair Paine

In 2016 the Parochial Church Council (PCC) at St Andrew the Great passed a resolution, requesting that “arrangements be made for it in accordance with the House of Bishops’ Declaration on the ministry of bishops and priests”. This has meant that although we remain in Ely Diocese, we have additional oversight from the Bishop of Maidstone, Rod Thomas, who also looks after over a hundred other churches which have passed such a resolution.

The background is that in years past our PCC decided that we would only wish to have a man as Vicar. When the Church of England introduced women bishops, the arrangements for such resolutions were changed, which meant that we needed to make this new arrangement to maintain our historic position. Our decision also reflects our view that it is biblically inappropriate for women to be bishops.

But why would anyone be against women bishops in the Church of England? Why be the intransigent, awkward squad? For one thing, reservations about women becoming bishops seem ludicrous. We have a woman prime minister; our Sovereign is a woman; women lead in many areas of national life. Moreover, don’t these concerns seem especially indefensible in the Christian church, concerned for justice and fairness? Doesn’t this view denigrate many outstanding women in our Church? And, of course, the debate has dragged on: don’t we want it over and done with?

This short briefing seeks to answer such questions from the point of view of

those of us who have reservations. It starts with an explanation of our understanding of scripture, to show it is NOT chauvinism or just a pathological desire to be old-fashioned. Our belief is that the church’s historical view was, and remains, the correct one, and that it encapsulates a beautiful and important truth. It is hard to argue *against* something without sounding horribly negative, so I want to say at the outset that there are great *positive* reasons why we think as we do.

### What does the Bible say?

It’s sometimes said that there is no clear answer; it’s all a matter of interpretation. In fact, confusion comes only when we rip verses out of context and ignore the basic structure of the Bible’s account. This follows the order creation - sin - redemption.

First, **the creation pattern**. In Genesis 1 we read that *God created man and woman in his image...male and female he created them*. Right from the beginning, it is emphasised that we are not created as androgynous beings, but as two different types of human. Genesis 2:18-25 famously sketches out the nature of our mutual relationship. God searches for a suitable helper for the man, and then creates woman, from his side. God presents her to him, and the man responds, calling her *woman*. It is a picture of delight and openness.

There are clues in the account that there is an order in this relationship. The man is made first, then the woman; she is to be his *helper*; he names her *woman*; it is to the man that the commandments about the Garden are given, as if he is

responsible. It seems as if God gives the man the lead role - and that is certainly how the Apostle Paul understands this passage when he alludes to it in 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2.

Now this does not, for a moment, imply that the woman has a status any lower than the man: the Hebrew word for *helper* is also used in the Old Testament to refer to God! There is absolute equality of value; it is their roles that are different (in our power-obsessed society, we find it hard to distinguish these). The ordering of man and woman is written into creation, before the Fall; it is not the result of the tragedy that follows.

Second, **the creation pattern spoilt.** Genesis 3 tells the wretched story of the entry of sin into the world, as the first man and woman rebel against God. Significantly, the man is held responsible, even though it is the woman who has made the first move. As God passes sentence on them, he addresses the woman: *"Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."* The likeliest explanation of this verse is that it refers to the 'battle of the sexes' between man and woman. Now, in a sinful world, headship is replaced by tyranny, and complementary roles by toxic competition. What we see - as in all the results of the Fall - is not the establishment of a completely new pattern, but the spoiling of an existing one. There is now so much hurt and pain in the relationship between man and woman that it is painful for us even to talk about it!

Thirdly, in Christ we see **the creation pattern restored.** The whole central message of the Bible is, of course, the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ. Sins are forgiven; God calls out for himself a people; they are called to walk in newness of life. What does that

look like in the relationship between man and woman? The answer is that it is to look back to the Creation order. Order is there - but it is of a Genesis two kind, not Genesis three. So in Ephesians 5, we read of God's pattern for Christian marriage. The husband is the head of the wife; she is called to submit to him; but he is commanded to love her sacrificially. The model for this turns out to be the sacred relationship between Christ and his church, of which marriage is to be an earthly picture.

In his teaching on the ordering of the church, Paul takes a similar "headship" view. The connection is that the church is also a family - indeed, Paul calls it *God's household*. It is in this context that he says in 1 Timothy 2 that *I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man*. He is referring to a local church, using the language of a family, and wants to see it witness to God's creation pattern.

Because this is a practical issue, we have to face up to how we will put this into practice. Exactly how to do so has been debated. Where do we draw lines? There is a spectrum of different situations. One thing is clear, however: being an vicar / rector or bishop is clearly at the leadership end of that spectrum. Hence pastor and Bible scholar John Stott, after a thorough survey of the evidence, said *I still do not think it biblically appropriate for a woman to become a Rector or a Bishop*.

To conclude, since God has established this pattern, we must seek to live it out. And so, gently, we do, in many churches up and down the country.

### **Doesn't this denigrate women's ministry?**

No. the Bible affirms the ministry of women (see Paul's list in Romans 16, for

instance.) - as do we, as reflected on our staff team. Those of us who have concerns about women bishops are often caricatured as 'being against women'. This can only be alleged by those who lack subtlety of thought. I might add: it is most certainly not our desire to 'get at' anyone by mentioning these things!

### **Why is this issue so painful and difficult to discuss?**

Because of sin. The "battle of the sexes" we have already seen in Genesis 3:16 means that we inevitably discuss this issue against a background of the subjugation of women and horrific injustice. It is understandable that with this in mind, many should be suspicious of those who advocate male leadership. Some of those who pressed for women bishops see this as part of a crusade to overcome this subjugation, and feelings run deep. At the same time, some women (as some men) have a deep desire for power, witnessed in this particular issue by talk of "career" and an unseemly desire to get the jobs with perceived clout. *It is vital for us to recognise how sin has clouded the issue, for the answer is not to abolish the male-female distinction but to return to one rightly ordered.*

### **Isn't all New Testament leadership servant leadership, without 'headship' ?**

Of course, all Christian leadership must be to serve others. But that does not mean it is not leadership. We must not confuse the *aim* of leadership with the *fact* of leadership.

### **Isn't Paul just trotting out the cultural values of his day?**

It is true that the letters of the New Testament were written to particular situations. But the Apostles deal with those local situations using universal

principles. It's the 7th August and you are on Blackpool beach: the sun is hot. A friend says, "You need suncream or you'll be burnt". They are addressing a local, specific situation with a universal principle. That's how the New Testament letters speak to us today. Moreover, in Ephesians, Paul's teaching about marriage is part of a section prefaced by the command *not to live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking*. He is scarcely affirming the surrounding culture!

### **Paul also tells women to wear hats when they pray in public. We don't do that, so why bother with this?**

The Bible passage is 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. It is, in fact, not clear whether hats or hair are in view when Paul talks about a "head covering". But either way, in that culture the practice Paul is speaking against seems to have symbolised womanly headship. This is why Paul is against it. Head coverings or hair don't have that significance in our culture, but the universal principle remains, and we must think how we can honour it.

### **Doesn't the New Testament say gender distinctions are abolished in Christ?**

The verse sometimes quoted is Galatians 3:28: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*. Paul is speaking about our equal status in God's eyes, as his children. But he does not mean that Gentiles should pretend to be Jews, nor men women. Given equal worth in God's eyes, we are free to be who we are!

### **What about women as Prime Minister, etc?**

This issue has nothing to do with that. The New Testament teaching is about family life, and the church is seen as a family. To

see the office of bishop as part of a “career structure”, as some do, is to misunderstand the church.

### **But can we trust our Bible translations on this?**

One benefit of the gender controversy that has raged in recent years has been that the relevant Bible passages have been intensively re-examined (for instance, tracing in secular literature the meaning of the Greek word *kephale*, translated “head”). A clear outcome of this has been to show that our mainstream translations are correct.

### **How can we possibly explain all this to our non-Christian friends?**

God has given a beautiful pattern for family life, which is also to be true of the church. This pattern, following the Maker’s instructions, is part of God’s showing us how to thrive in a world that is so confused. The Biblical pattern is a balance, avoiding both extremes: male tyranny on the one hand, and, on the other, the pretence that men and women have exactly the same roles in God’s plans. We hope our friends will see how this works in our families and churches (which we also want to reflect the population, in being a 50/50 mixture of women and men).

### **Now that we have women as bishops, what is the way forward?**

In our churches we will continue, God willing, to read the Bible! So we will continue to find there the Biblical theology of men and women outlined above, particularly as we seek to help people in family life. People may ask those of us in the Church of England why our denomination thinks differently from what is there on the page. As long as the Bible is

in there in pews, house groups and youth groups, this question will remain.

In all this, we do understand that many in the Church of England think differently from us. In 1992, at the time of the vote on the ordination of women, the “Act of Synod” included a legal way of accommodating those differences. At the time this was agreed, the assurance was given that there would be “a permanent and honoured place” for those who hold on to the church’s classic position (indeed, it has been argued that the legislation only passed on the strength of such assurances).

We are thankful that such provision has been made – covering both who our vicars are and who our bishops are. Many who are not in agreement with us on women bishops nevertheless agree that, as a matter of honour and integrity, it is right that the word given then should be kept. Such an arrangement helps towards unity and shared witness for the cause of the Lord Jesus Christ in our nation.