Men, Women and the Presbyterate: Does Scripture Speak Clearly?[1]

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I begin this paper by strenuously affirming both that Scripture teaches women's ministry and my own appreciation of it. My desire is that, as with men's ministry, we should give the most Biblical expression to it, for that is the way to honour God and the way of the Church knowing his blessing; and it is very easy for patterns of *both* men's and women's ministry to depart from what Scripture says.

Introduction

I come to the subject with these convictions: that Scripture is God's Word written, and where we discover the mind and heart of God; that it is self-consistent and not contradictory; and that the main threads of Scripture teaching are perspicuous. Thus I believe a rich variety of women's ministry is clearly taught in Scripture, that it is also clearly taught that men's and women's ministry are not to be identical; and that in God's divine ordering he does not plan that women should have the authoritative teaching and therefore leadership position because of his basic ordering in creation. Although there are some knotty problems of detailed exegesis, this is the clear overall thrust of several passages (which I believe remains a problem to those who think along different lines). In application today, of course, there may be difficult 'grey areas': I believe that God allows this to be both because our apprehension even of his revealed truth will always be partial and because we need to be kept thoroughly dependent on him.

The Office of Presbyter

Let me say what the debate is and is not about: the debate ought not to be about *superiority and inferiority*: Gen. 1.26–27, 1 Pet. 3.7, Gal. 3.28 clearly teach the equality of men and women by creation and in Christ. The debate ought not to be about *who presides at the Lord's Table*: there are *no* Scripture references to this, so why do we allow this question to assume such enormous proportions? It may well be generally appropriate in the interests of order to link ministry of the visual word with those who regularly minister the spoken word: we cannot say more. I cannot see why it is the keep of the castle that some women are intent on storming above all else nor why some men

are equally intent on repulsing them. The privilege at Communion is *sharing* in the bread and wine by faith; who presides is almost incidental – indeed 'preside' is not a happy word, for finally it is Christ who presides. To my mind there should be a trained team (open to men and women) in each local church able to officiate at the Lord's Table, rather than wheeling in every ordained geriatric in the holiday season; but this presupposes other restructuring of ministry. The debate ought not to be about *whether women are eligible for some kind of sacerdotal or representative priesthood*: the New Testament will not allow this: *all* Christians are the laity, (*laos*) of God. The sixteenth century Reformers kept the word priest now to be understood as shorthand for presbyter (elder) 'though', says Philip Hughes, 'it was not retained without much hesitancy'[2] but presbyter is the far better, clearer and more Biblical word – now allowed as an official alternative in the *Alternative Service Book*.

The debate *is* about *who may be rightly admitted to the office of presbyter* (elder) in the light of Scripture: although the New Testament does not give a fully detailed blueprint for ministerial office and structure in every century the presence of presbyters, generally synonymous with bishops (*episcopoi*) is clear for all to see. The debate takes place *in the light of almost two thousand years of church tradition*: I do not mean of traditional structures of ministry, which could probably be bettered, but of exegesis of the Scriptures (and *that* is the tradition which mostly matters); and that exegesis has concluded more or less uniformly until very recent times that Scripture teaches that the presbyterate is God's calling for certain men. We therefore need to think long and hard before rejecting this, but at the same time there is a vast amount of traditional and unscriptural male chauvinism of which men in the church need to repent. The rise of secular feminism enables us to see this more clearly: we must confess our sin in this area, for God sometimes has to teach the church through the world; but he does not mean us to jump on a secular bandwagon.

The Key Texts

Now we must go on a rapid run through of Scripture following the relevant paths and pausing finally at certain Pauline texts. Genesis 1 has been mentioned with its clear teaching on the equality of the sexes; the complementary account in Gen. 2.18–25 is also significant. 'First,' says Kidner, 'man is prior to woman. Secondly, the sexes are complementary: the true partnership is expounded by the terms that are used . . . literally, "a help as opposite him" i.e. corresponding to him'.[3] Within the partnership, nevertheless, it is she who is actually stated to be his helper, and not *vice versa* – although 'helper' does not have the slightly condescending overtones of our English word. Further, the man asserts his leadership of authority and care by

naming the woman, and as Daphne Key says 'Genesis 2 indicates that this order in man/woman relationships existed even before the man and woman cleaved to each other and became one flesh'.[4] The fall, however, disrupted this delicately balanced relationship (Gen. 3.16). Stott writes

> The sexes would experience a measure of alienation . . . In place of the equality and complementarity . . . there would come the rule of one over the other. Sexual complementarity was intended from the beginning to include masculine headship, as Paul argued, but by reason of the Fall 'headship' degenerated into 'domination'.[5]

It is this degeneration which has so often been expressed in society, and all too often reflected in the church.

Within the Old Testament in general women are sometimes used to bring the immediate word of the Lord as prophetesses (Miriam, Deborah, Huldah) and Deborah occupied a position of civil leadership as a judge[6] while in the social realm, says Hurley, 'they could enter into trade with men as peers and direct them as servants. They could function as commercial peers of men with respect' and 'a woman without a husband acted as a peer of her male commercial peers and acted without male review of her decisions'.[7] Yet, overall in civil life it was kings (Saul, then David) whom God appointed, not queens; in marriage it was the husband who was the patriarch. Peter cites as an example Sarah who 'obeyed Abraham, calling him Lord' (1 Pet. 3.6). In religious life, Hurley emphasizes the equality of men and women in private worship but continues

> Only in the levitical service in the tabernacle/temple and in the priesthood was there a differentiation. Certain men were called out to serve as leaders and representatives of the people in cultic affairs. All women and all other men were holy, members of God's people, but not called to be priests or levites.[8]

By the time our Lord was born into this world the influence of Rome and other cultures meant women had assumed that all-too-familiar downtrodden position in society. In this situation, Jesus was nothing less than revolutionary: the disciples were staggered at Jesus' courtesy towards and conversation with the woman of Samaria (John 4.27). Equally staggering was his acceptance of the gratitude of a prostitute for her forgiveness (Luke 7.36–50), and his reckoning of women as disciples alongside men (Matt. 12.49–50). And, while we are bound to note that no women were chosen amongst the twelve Apostles, the newly rediscovered dignity and ministry of women which flows from Jesus' ministry is carried forward into the early church. Women both pray and prophesy in public, and this is accepted by Paul (1 Cor. 11.4, Acts 21.9); women are involved in a

number of ministeries with dignity and with recognition: Acts 9.36–43 (Dorcas), Priscilla (named before Aquila her husband in Acts 18.26), Lydia (Acts 17.14–15). The commendations and greetings of Romans 16 include an impressive percentage of feminine names, including 'our sister Phoebe' (v.1), almost certainly a deacon in the church at Cenchreae, and again Prisca (Priscilla) described by Paul with Aquila as 'my fellow workers'. Through our Lord's own example the early church is recovering the dignity accorded to women in Gen. 1 and 2 and remarkably, although of course imperfectly, maintained for much of the canonical Old Testament period.

The Consistency of Paul's Teaching

We should not therefore be surprised that we also encounter the restatement in more detail of the *distinctive* rôles of men and women also encountered in Gen. 2. From the way some of Paul's statements are phrased it seems clear that in the heady rediscovery in Christ of the true dignity, worth and liberty of women, churches were tempted to overstep God's creation pattern, as they are today: hence turns of phrase like 'I want you to understand that . . .' (1 Cor. 11.3). It is, I believe, crucial that we now come to certain key passages in the Epistles *this way round*, to see them within the whole thrust and flow of Scripture.

We take first 1 Cor. 11.2–16 where the discussion is about headship in the church and that it should be exemplified in women having (as respectable women did) a good covering of hair 'put up', coiffured, after the fashion of the day, which was a mark of feminine submissiveness. These Christian ladies were not to be so carried away with their freedom of Christ that they started wearing their hair loose – as did those suspected of adultery: convicted adulteresses had their heads shaved – hence v.5b. We should follow the translation of the *New International Version* margin: it is unlikely that this passage has anything to do with veils, let alone modern hats, a confusion which led absurdly to churches becoming for several generations a sort of ecclesiastical milliners. Paul argues the headship back to God himself (v.2). Contemporary efforts to read 'head' here as meaning only 'source' and therefore not involving any notion of leadership or authority seem to be unsuccessful. It would render most of v.3 meaningless and the latter part ('the source of Christ is God') heretical. Even if we give 'head' the exclusive meaning 'source', 'it cannot,' says Stott,

> be used to contradict the notion of leadership. 'Headship' definitely implies some kind of 'authority', to which submission is necessary, as when 'God placed all things under Christ's feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church' (Eph. 1.22).[9]

Of course, as Stott rightly goes on to say in marriage

> the husband's headship of his wife . . . is a headship more of care than of control, more of responsibility than authority . . . His concern is not to crush her but to liberate her.[10]

These words could rightly be taken to describe the aims of a great part of leadership within the church, as well as of a husband within marriage. But the basic point for us is that it is hard to evacuate 'head' of any notion of leadership and authority. Further, from v.7 of 1 Cor. 11, Paul is arguing from Gen. 2 (things as they were before the Fall) and not Gen. 3. Hurley[11] should be studied for a detailed exegesis of these verses which would set many troubled minds at rest – note, for example, Paul does *not* say woman is made in the image of man; note, too, the *New International Version* is surely right in v.10 – a woman's hair, while a visible sign of a right authority relationship with men, is also a sign to the rest of creation of her *authority* over it, an authority she shares with man.

We take secondly 1 Cor. 14.26–40. This passage need not detain us too long. Either Paul is forgetting or contradicting in 14.33–35 what he has just said about women being free to pray and prophesy, and presumably to share in the ministry of 14.26, or we look for another explanation. Forgetting the new paragraph which English translations unhelpfully insert in v.33, it seems clear that what women are prohibited from is the detailed evaluation of a prophetic utterance:

> His point is that the women are not to participate in this exercise of ecclesiastical authority . . . This analysis provides an orderly structure for the whole passage.[12]

Nor is it surprising that Paul should say this in the light of what he has already argued about headship from God's creation pattern.

We take thirdly 1 Timothy 2.8–15. Written later in Paul's lifetime, the verses follow naturally from the teaching in the first letter to the Corinthians. There is no indication on the one hand that the teaching about women exercising authority is simply culturally or situationally conditioned and may therefore not be applicable to us; nor on the other hand that this teaching contradicts Paul's earlier more generous view of women's ministry. (Howard Marshall[13] appears to think it is culturally conditioned and does contradict the first letter to the Corinthians). Listen again to James Hurley:

> Paul wants women to *learn* quietly and submissively and will not permit them to *teach authoritatively*. The situation in view appears to be formal teaching in the assembly . . . Christian women were present at worship and learnt from teaching. They were, however, to do so 'quietly'. Paul's actual words do not mean 'with buttoned lips' but have the connotation of learning with a quiet receptive spirit. Paul will not permit the opposite to take place: he will not allow women to teach or

> to exercise authority over men. The teaching in view is formal teaching, teaching which comes with disciplinary authority and ought to be quietly received by those under authority. It is easy to see that the opposite of learning quietly and submissively is teaching verbally and with authority.[14]

Paul then gives his reasons for this: v.13: 'For Adam was formed first, then Eve'. The Old Testament makes clear in its law that the first-born had both the privilege and responsibility of being 'head of the household and leader of its worship'[15]. It is a position of authority – hence Christ is the 'firstborn' over all creation (Col. 1.15–18); so with Adam – he was the first to be formed and (although both man and woman share in authority over creation) he exercises his prior authority in his naming of the animals, and then of Eve. v.14: 'Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor': Paul cannot be saying 'all women are gullible and untrustworthy as teachers'[16] (a view Hurley himself certainly does not subscribe to): remember his appreciation of Prisca and of the teaching Timothy received from his mother and grandmother. He is saying that Adam, though the deliberate rebel, was not himself deceived by Satan – as the one prepared for leadership, he saw through it, though he still chose to sin, when he should have been caring for his wife and keeping her, as well as himself, from sin. Had he not been commanded to 'keep' the garden (Gen. 2.15) and surely that included guarding it as well as taking good care of his wife? But man is still the one through creation order to give the authoritative lead, and this he is to exercise in the church by the Word, seeking through the second Adam to reverse that disastrous lapse of leadership in Eden. Nor does this in any way contradict his leading in the serving spirit of Christ (1 Pet. 5.1–3), who himself uniquely combined the rôle of the servant with the authority of God.

The Distinctive Ministry of Women

We are therefore essentially ending where we began – in the early chapters of Genesis; for Scripture is consistent. God's rôles for men and women are complementary, the ministries of both are rich and varied, but the presbyterate cannot in the light of Scripture be his will for women, nor for all men, but for some men; and the calling and enabling are by grace alone.

Certainly our existing Anglican presbyterate must not be open to women while ordination has in view the eventual oversight of a congregation. If this were changed, and women were ordained to presbyteral teams where a male presbyter was team leader and responsible for the teaching programme, would this change the position? Possibly, but it seems to me women are more honoured and their distinctive ministry more respected if there is a distinctive order of women deacons who are part of a ministry team (cf. Rom. 16.1

and maybe 1 Tim. 3.11) It is true that the male presbyterate in the Church of England has often behaved like an exclusive male club – with the women now in the foyer! But what we want to do is to demolish the clerical club, not extend it! I look to the day when in local churches we have ministry teams which draw together all the Anglican bits and bobs which we never fully think through – Wardens and Readers and Accredited Lay Workers and Pastoral Assistants, Deaconesses, Female Deacons, Male Deacons, and Male Presbyters – all come together in a team of elders and deacons which reflects a variety of types of training, a variety of gifts and experience and a variety of ordinations to a variety of tasks, but where the final authority in teaching and discipline lies with the male presbyter or presbyters.

> Preaching and teaching gifts (of women) may be properly used to the full in situations where male ministers are in charge and the women's ministry of the Word is felt as supporting and supplementing their own preaching and teaching . . . What we need to do is to devise patterns of team ministry in congregations in which the masculinity of ministering men and the femininity of ministering women will both be fully realised[17]

From this team I hope the increasingly empty baubles of clericalism (titles, collars and robes) would gradually fade away, rather than being more widely used.

Conclusion

Let our final focus be on Christ Himself: for within the God-head, where there is eternal and essential equality, there is a variety of function. The Christ who said that if we had seen him we had seen the Father, also said it is his delight to do his Father's will – even that the Father is greater than he. No doubt the complementary ministries of men and women in the Church are meant to reflect something of the unity yet diversity of the Trinity, as is the relationship of husband and wife in marriage.

In the light of Scripture, I reaffirm women's ministry as I reaffirm men's ministry, both according to what I believe are the clear principles and sensitive balance of the Word of God. As Paul said to Archippus so we say to one another 'See that you fulfil the ministry which you have received in the Lord' (Col. 4.17).

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NOTES

1 A paper read at the Rochester Diocesan Evangelical Fellowship, 7 October 1989.
2 Philip Hughes, *Theology of the English Reformers*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1965, p. 168.

3 Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Press, London 1967, p. 65.
4 Lees ed., *The Role of Women*, I.V.P. Leicester, 1984, p. 148.
5 John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Marshalls, Basingstoke 1984 p. 239.
6 James Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, p. 48.
7 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
8 James Hurley, in *The Role of Women*, p. 124.
9 *Op. cit.*, p. 246.
10 *Op. cit.*, p. 247.
11 *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, pp. 162–184.
12 *Ibid.*, p. 190.
13 Howard Marshall, in *The Role of Women*, pp. 191–197.
14 James Hurley, in *The Role of Women*, p. 131.
15 *Ibid.*, p. 134.
16 *Ibid.*, p. 135.
17 James Packer, edd. Bruce & Duffield, *Why Not*, Second Edition Marcham Manor Press, Abingdon, 1976, pp. 172–3.