

Fellow Workers:

Women and men in gospel ministry



A discussion paper by Revd Alan Purser



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The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Rome, concludes by sending personal greetings to a fascinating list of people. In our modern Bibles this constitutes a closing chapter that repays careful reading, for it opens a window onto the church of the first century. After the commendation of Phoebe we read of a woman called Priscilla and a man called Aquila, whom Paul describes together as “my fellow workers” (Romans 16:3 ESV).

Today the vexed question of women and men in gospel ministry is hotly debated, with a seemingly widening gulf between so-called ‘Egalitarians’ and others who style themselves ‘Complementarians’. These terms were coined relatively recently (the 1980s), in the US, as convenient handles for the two sides of the debate, but there is some real difficulty with this vocabulary because it sets two thoroughly biblical ideas over against each other. Inevitably the words we opt to use influence the shape of any debate, and in this instance it may help if we were to choose an alternative way of speaking (see below) – but let me state at the outset that this paper is written from what is generally known as a complementarian standpoint. *Fellow Workers* will address the question: ‘What should complementarian ministry look like in the churches of early 21st Century Britain?’

I am grateful to Bishop Rod Thomas for his encouragement to write this contribution to the current debate, and to the following sisters and brothers for their advice, input and comments:

David Banting, Kirsten Birkett, Andrea Trevenna and Tom Woolford. Nevertheless what is written here is my responsibility, not theirs. It is the product of many years reflection and experience, not least in the company of Jill Northam and Jo Sayer, who served with me respectively at St Paul’s Church, Hadley Wood and BCMS Crosslinks, proving themselves to be fine fellow workers in Christ Jesus.

Why Complementarian?

The case for Complementarianism rests on two convictions.

The first is the Bible's clear declaration of equality between men and women. The opening chapter of Genesis establishes this by describing God's creation of humankind "in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27 ESV).

This essential equality of personhood, of dignity and of worth is fundamental to the biblical account. By asserting such equality the Scriptures stand against the widespread assumptions and practices not only of the Ancient Near East but also the Graeco-Roman world into which the church of Jesus Christ was launched.

The second conviction is the Bible's insistence that men and women are different and distinct, and that those differences are intended by God to be complementary to one another. This idea is seen most clearly in the biblical understanding of marriage. It is also, by analogy, foundational for the Church of God as the Bride of Christ, the new society being built by the grace and truth that came through Jesus.

Deliberate and definite differentiation between the roles of men and women is integral to the instructions we find in the New Testament (NT) concerning the leadership and oversight of churches. However this differentiation nowhere implies inequality, let alone any kind of ontological distinction. This is illustrated by the fact that the Apostles (as men) refer to certain women as their "fellow workers" in the gospel.

Although the idea of difference co-existing with equality often provokes scepticism amongst outsiders, the orthodox understanding of God as Trinity gives believers a profound insight into it. The marvellous truth of God as three Persons in one godhead means that there exists, in perfect harmony, divine persons who are at once fully equal and yet distinct. Some have seen, furthermore, that the way

Jesus speaks of having, “come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38) suggests that the Son voluntarily subordinates his will to that of the Father. Similarly, in Gethsemene he prays, “not my will, but yours, be done” Luke 22: 42). However that may be, in the Trinity we find true and full equality co-existing within a framework of complementary relationships without rivalry, friction or oppression, held together by mutual love.

In setting forward these twin convictions it should be noted that the Bible is as strongly Egalitarian as it is insistently Complementarian. Since both are presented repeatedly in Scripture we ought not to allow them to be set over against one another, as if they were alternatives between which we have to choose. For that reason the language of ‘Equal but Different’ has much to commend it, and will be the term adopted in this paper.

The challenge of working out what ‘Equal but Different’ should look like in today’s church is an important one. We have to begin with an investigation into the practice of the early church. However, it should be born in mind that best practice for us today won’t necessarily be identical to theirs then, because some aspects of first century practice were culturally driven and others were shaped by the mission imperatives of their day. Precisely what ‘Equal but Different’ should look like today cannot therefore simply be read from the pages of the NT. Instead, our practice must be tuned to the cultural norms and mission imperatives of our day, whilst always remaining consistent with the principles established in apostolic times. To this task we now turn.

I. The outworking of ‘Equal but Different’ in the early church

The New Testament material pertinent to this is extensive and complex. The problem of integrating the teaching of the Apostles with the many examples of practice within the ministry of Jesus and the expanding church has spawned a vast literature. There is no simplistic solution if all the strands are to be held together, and this immediately alerts us to the need to weigh carefully the conclusions we draw, lest we fall foul of the Apostle Paul’s maxim not to “go beyond what is written” (1 Corinthians 4:6).

The Gospels

The Gospels record an astonishingly positive treatment of women on the part of Jesus, quite contrary to the usual practices of the day. In addition to Mary’s honoured role as the mother of the Christ child, they record that a large number of women were to be found amongst Jesus’ followers, and that he counted some within his closest circle of friends (see e.g. Luke 8:1-3). Jesus took time to speak to women from widely contrasting backgrounds, including foreigners and prostitutes, and never exhibited the slightest hint of misogyny. He dealt gently with Mary and Martha in their grief and showed touching concern for the plight of the pregnant, and of nursing mothers, in times of danger. He defended an unnamed woman against his disciples’ criticism when she anointed him with costly oil on the eve of his betrayal. He sought to make provision for his mother as he hung dying upon the cross. And yet, despite all of this, Jesus selected only men to belong to the twelve, and designated them Apostles (see e.g. Mark 3:13-19).

The Acts and Epistles

Jesus' resurrection – witnessed first by women, let it be observed – and subsequent ascension were followed by the giving of the promised Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Luke records this great event as the fulfilment of the prophet Joel's vision, and indicates that through the enabling of the Spirit women as well as men were to be reckoned equipped to 'prophesy' (see Acts 2:17-18) – that is, to speak with divine authority of a future coming judgement and to announce the present day invitation to "call on the name of the Lord" in order to be saved. This great message was to be proclaimed to every people and nation.

Through the regenerating work of the Spirit the Apostle Paul declared that there is "neither Jew nor Greek ... neither male nor female" because, without differentiation, believers are "all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This is the glorious nature of the church that Jesus is building, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail. However, alongside this repeated emphasis, we find an insistence that men and women who belong to His church relate to one another in marriage not merely as equal partners (although that is truly what they are in terms of spiritual life – see e.g. 1 Peter 3:7) but as 'head' and 'helper' (see 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 and 1 Peter 3:1-6). This requires the husband to model his attitude and behaviour on the self-sacrificial giving of Christ for the church, whilst the wife is to model hers on the submissiveness of the church to Christ. (see Ephesians 5:22-33). Indeed, Paul goes so far as to say that marriage is about more than a man and a woman becoming one flesh, it is actually about Christ and the church (see Ephesians 5:32).

In the Pastoral Epistles Paul draws on the analogy of the church as the family of God and spells out the implications of this, both for local church leadership and for supra-local church oversight. We find an insistence that men take responsibility for authoritative teaching in the churches (1 Tim 2: 8-15). Consequently, appointments to such positions of leadership and oversight are to be restricted to men. This appears to fit with the instruction by the Apostle that solely men

adjudicate the authenticity and reliability of prophecy in the gathering of the church (see 1 Corinthians 14:26-35). This gender specific differentiation in role carries through into the emerging leadership of the church as we find it in the early second century – expressed, for instance, in the exclusively male occupation of the office of bishop.

In contrast to this we find elsewhere in the Corinthian correspondence the Apostle referring (without any hint of censure) to women praying and prophesying in church (see 1 Corinthians 11:5) and, in the letter to the Colossians, encouraging believers, without distinction of gender, to “teach and admonish one another” (Colossians 3:15-16). This agrees with what we read in Acts where Priscilla, as well as Aquila, instructs the enthusiastic but inadequately taught Apollos in “the way of God” (see Acts 18:24-26). It is also the implication of the variety of people and ministry included in Romans 16.

The overall picture

In the light of the NT material a number of questions arise: How do we give due weight to each of these examples of teaching and of practice? Can they be integrated into a coherent understanding of women and men in gospel ministry? Regarding the material attributed to Paul, can a synthesis be achieved without resorting to the expedient of denying Pauline authorship of the Pastorals? Or do we simply give up on the idea of Pauline consistency? And how does all this accord with the example and practice of Jesus?

David Peterson, when Principal of Oak Hill College, presented this challenge by means of a diagram, sometimes referred to as the Peterson Quadrilateral. Imagine setting out a playing field for a ball game: the boundaries of play consist of four straight lines forming a quadrilateral. Since this is a theological ball game, the lines consist of four sets of biblical texts: on the left hand extremity we place strongly egalitarian texts, such as Genesis 1:26-27; Luke 8:1-3; Acts 2:16-21; Romans 16:1-16; Galatians 3:28. On the opposite side we place the

key complementarian texts of 1 Timothy 2:8-15; Titus 1:5-9 and 2:1-8. The upper and lower boundaries are formed by two sets from the Corinthian correspondence, the inclusive 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and the exclusive 1 Corinthians 14:33-36. The point is this: if we are to do justice to the teaching of the Scriptures and the practice of the early church we must play, as it were, within the boundaries of this pitch.

We can be sure that Priscilla and Aquila were doing that when they ministered to Apollos, resulting in the benefits recorded by Luke (see Acts 18:27-28). Likewise this must accord with the Apostle's exhortation to the Colossian believers (men and women, old and young, slave and free) to "teach and admonish one another" (Colossians 3: 16). Unless we have something like the Peterson Quadrilateral in mind it would be possible to suppose that such examples of women exercising ministry fly in the face of a so-called 'plain reading' of 1 Timothy 2. In other words, we must be careful to ensure that a comprehensive grasp of the NT material informs our application of each component part.

It is an interesting exercise to imagine what a modern day committed Egalitarian and convinced Complementarian would find if they were to jump into a time machine and travel back to the church around, say, the turn of the first century. Is it possible that the Complementarian would be as surprised at the scale and scope of gospel ministry that women were involved in as the Egalitarian would be taken aback to observe that the leadership of the churches, and the supra-local oversight by bishops, was entirely in male hands? If so, we might hope that neither would return to the 21st century unchanged in their opinions.

Before we move on to explore what 'Equal but Different' should look like today, two other considerations present in the NT need to be recognised, namely Contextualisation and Missiology. Rightly used these are not means for avoiding the plain sense of apostolic teaching and practice. Rather, they assist in gaining a right understanding of apostolic imperatives and enabling a proper

application of them today. As Dean Fleming explains, “Although the term ‘Contextualisation’ was quite recently minted, the activity of expressing and embodying the gospel in context-sensitive ways has characterised the Christian mission from the very beginning” (*Contextualisation in the New Testament*, p15, Apollos, 2005). Likewise, Eckhard Schnabel demonstrates (see his two volume *Early Christian Mission*, Apollos, 2004 and shorter *Paul the Missionary*, Apollos, 2008) that Paul’s dictum “all things to all people” (1 Corinthians 9:22) has far-reaching implications for the church adapting to its surrounding culture for the sake of mission.

The biblical texts we are dealing with demand that we take into account both their cultural context, and the underlying missiological imperative, if we are to understand and apply them rightly.

Contextualisation

Very often the specifics of behaviour commanded by Paul turn out to be the culturally appropriate expression of a core principle. A well known example of this is the repeated command to “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12 – repeated in 1 Peter 5:14). This instruction conveys, as its core truth, the obligation of warm, mutual, godly greeting between believers without favouritism. But the mode of conveying that greeting is prescribed by the Apostle for his first century readers in a culturally appropriate way (JB Phillips famously translated Paul’s command to kiss as “a good handshake all round” – a deliberate adaptation for his mid-20th century English audience (*New Testament in Modern English*, George Bles, 1958))! It would be a gross mistake to suppose that obedience to the Apostle’s instruction required, for example, Inuit believers to refrain from rubbing noses, any more than it demanded that Brits behave in a culturally inappropriate way. Similarly, it would be a mistake to teach, in expounding 1 Timothy 2:8-15, that the braiding of hair was everywhere forbidden to women today, any more than the raising of hands in prayer is always

required of men. The point the Apostle is driving at in each of these examples is the core truth of which of these specific behaviours were the appropriate first century cultural expression. The relevance of all this to the discussion in hand is that, in the same way, it would be a mistake to suppose that obedience to Paul required silence on the part of women, because what he actually wants is an attitude of godly submissiveness, in contrast to the foolish independence of Eve in the Garden – an attitude that may (or may not, of course!) be conveyed by keeping quiet.

That such a godly demeanour does not preclude prophesying and praying in the church meeting, teaching and admonishing one another, proclaiming the gospel to outsiders, and being Paul's active "fellow worker" is plain from the other texts we have noted. A failure to recognise this would permit an interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 that renders it impossible for the author of Romans 16 to have written it. As The 39 Articles of the Church of England puts it in Article 20, "no text of Scripture should be so expounded that it be repugnant to another".

Rightly used, contextualisation frees us from a wooden literalism to understand the text as it was intended to be understood, and thereby to be in a position to consider what would be the culturally appropriate expression of the core principles in our society today. Contextualisation is as indispensable for calibrating the outworking of 'Equal but Different' in our churches as is the imperative of mission.

Missiology

This is the second important consideration. For the Apostle Paul, no price was too great to pay to get the gospel heard, and he was willing to incur any cost, and go to any length, in order to gain a hearing. That is the thrust of the missiological imperative set out in 1 Corinthians 9 where, having asserted his freedom in Christ, Paul declares that he has devoted his freedom to the service of the cause of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19).

Moreover, Paul understands that to serve in a Christ-like way it is necessary to adapt both language and behaviour to the maximum possible extent to the surrounding culture. This does not imply that he was some kind of unprincipled chameleon, seeking to merge into the background or be culturally assimilated. Rather, so passionate was he to place no barrier or obstacle in the way of outsiders hearing his message, he was prepared to “become all things to all people so that by all means” (1 Corinthians 9:22) he might save some. It is clear from the Corinthian correspondence that such flexibility does not involve moral or theological compromise. It was Paul’s overwhelming desire for people to hear the (by its very nature) offensive message of the gospel that led him to resolve to do all in his power to minimise whatever else might offend. Therefore, rather than pick every fight he possibly could with the society in which he operated, the Apostle was ready to sit loose from his own traditions in the interests of mission. When this exposed him to painful criticism he nonetheless pressed on, resolving to do so “for the sake of the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:23).

Therefore, in addition to contextualisation, the priority of mission needs to be clearly in our thinking as we work out how to give contemporary expression to the biblical principle of ‘Equal but Different’. This will enable us to recognise not only the importance of Christian distinctiveness (invariably concerning matters of truth and morality in the NT) but, alongside it, the necessity of adapting to the prevailing culture if we are to imitate the example of Paul in our day and context.

2. The outworking of ‘Equal but Different’ in the church of 21st century Britain

We have noted that while core commands do not change, obeying those commands can look different in various cultures – the Inuits rub noses to greet one another, the Brits shake hands, yet both, despite sitting loose from the specific instruction of the Apostle (“a holy kiss”), actually obey the core intended principle (“greet on another”) in a culturally appropriate (i.e. contextualised) way.

In addition, we observed that Paul was always ready to sacrifice his traditions in order to avoid causing unnecessary difficulty for the gospel to be heard and believed. “Though I am free I use my freedom to serve ... becoming all things to all people...” (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). This is the missiological imperative at the heart of his ministry, and an example that his readers are urged to imitate (see 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1).

The question we must now ask is this: how then can we best give expression to ‘Equal but Different’ in our churches in 21st century Britain? This is a vital matter, both for the health of the churches and for the proclamation of the gospel. It will require us to think carefully about both context and mission.

Context

To state the obvious, 21st century Britain is a very different place and time from the Graeco-Roman world inhabited by the sub-apostolic church. Christian ministry is also different. In the first century, the New Testament was not yet formed and collated, so that preaching and teaching relied on oral tradition rather than a received text that could be read and expounded. The Creeds had not yet been formulated, and the great theological debates around Christology and the Trinity were in no more than embryonic form. The authority of the Apostles was paramount, and those they appointed (such as

Timothy and Titus) were charged with the responsibility to speak and teach with a delegated authority.

This has major implications. For example, consider J I Packer's assessment, on record from a conference on biblical interpretation in 1988, that "Teaching ... is a different exercise today from what it was in Paul's day". He goes on to conclude, "I think it is an open question whether in our day Paul would have forbidden a woman to teach from the Bible ... When you teach from the Bible, in any situation at all, what you are saying to people is, 'Look, I am trying to tell you what it says. I speak as to wise men and women. You have your Bibles. You follow along. You judge what I say.' No claim to personal authority with regard to the substance of the message is being made at all. It seems to me that this significant difference between teaching then and teaching now does, in fact, mean that the prohibition on women preaching and teaching need not apply".

More recently John Dickson comments, 'Packer's openness to women preaching ... is based on the historic shift in authority (from the Teacher to the Bible) that occurred when the apostolic teaching was finally codified in the canon of Scripture'. *In Hearing her Voice* (Zondervan 2012) he suggests that what goes on in preaching today, including didactic preaching, is closer to what Paul would have called 'exhortation' or 'prophesying'. As we have already noted, this was not an activity the Apostle restricted to men.

Mission

In terms of mission, the church of the first century found itself making its way as a persecuted minority within the polytheistic culture of the Roman Empire. In contrast, we find ourselves living in a Western liberal democracy that has abandoned monotheism for a generally assumed atheism, and is rapidly discarding its residual Christian morality. The Digital Revolution (every bit as significant as the 19th century Industrial Revolution), has rendered every individual his or her own master, with a widespread suspicion of authority,

patriarchy and hierarchy, held with an enhanced appreciation of the importance of equality. The so-called #MeToo movement has drawn attention to sexual abuse on the part of some high profile celebrities who have been in a position to exercise power. But tragically this sort of behaviour has not been restricted to secular society – some in public church leadership have been implicated in similar activities, with disastrous implications for the reputation of those engaged in Christian ministry. Meanwhile the LGBTQ lobby has been highly effective in campaigning for equality, securing radical changes under the law and blazing the trail for similar provision for the transgender constituency – despite strong resistance on the part of some committed feminists.

If, as disciples of Christ, we wish to affirm and maintain what the Bible teaches about men and women in our society today, emphasising difference as well as equality, we must recognise both the cultural conflict, and the missiological challenge, this will involve. As we endeavour to express apostolic truth we must learn to do so in ways that are comprehensible and appropriate within our contemporary culture.

The difficulty of doing this is further compounded by the lamentable record of the Christian church in Britain in teaching and promoting equality between those made in the image of God. Although William Wilberforce conducted an heroic campaign against slavery, the Christian church failed to build upon that example by speaking against the oppression and exploitation of women. It did not, for example, conspicuously campaign alongside the Suffragette movement for the right of women to vote. Consequently, when we attempt to teach ‘Equal but Different’ in the public square we are, in tennis parlance, effectively serving at 0-40 down, because we are so hobbled by our history. As we speak what we earnestly believe to be the truth, we are widely heard merely to be advocating traditional male dominance and patriarchy. Unless we take the trouble to set out unambiguously a thoroughgoing affirmation of equality prior

to venturing to argue for a biblical complementarianism we cannot expect to gain much of a hearing. In similar vein, within the churches, where we have neglected to speak clearly of the nature of God as Trinity, we will not only have deprived people of a vital aspect of revealed truth, we will also have denied ourselves a profound example of 'Equal but Different'. Again we must not be surprised if our case lacks traction. This is to say, it may be time to examine ourselves – and specifically our failures historically – rather than simply blame our hearers for their inability to grasp the wisdom of what we are saying.

Love for the lost demands that rather than seek to maximise differences with the society in which we live (sometimes argued for on the grounds that we should follow the trajectory of the NT to its supposed logical conclusion) we should rather go as far as possible to accommodate ourselves to those around. Only by doing so will we avoid putting additional stumbling blocks in the way of hearing the gospel of salvation. This will mean, for instance, that where a society has consciously rejected patriarchy there is no virtue in the church appearing to perpetuate it. Put positively, since the NT encourages women to prophesy, to pray and to admonish we should determine to maximise the opportunity for such, especially in the regular public activities of church

Taking stock

In making judgments about the breadth and scope of the respective ministry of men and women today we must beware two dangers. Thinking in terms of the playing field analogy: firstly, under pressure from society, the danger of being pushed into transgressing the boundaries; and secondly, out of neglect of missiology or contextualisation, the danger of adopting a selective, and even distorted, understanding of the NT material that produces too restrictive a playing area. We may not all decide to occupy precisely the same part of the pitch but let us be careful that the choices we

make are informed by a mature reflection on the principles and practice set before us.

In commenting on this, Rod Thomas points out, some incumbents will choose not to allow women to preach in the mixed congregation whilst others will be happy to do so; some incumbents will encourage women to lead mixed home groups, others will insist on joint leadership alongside men. Likewise some congregations will have no difficulty welcoming a female curate, others will decide not to do so; some ordinands and clergy will be object to Ordinations that include both men and women, others will be content to take part.

As we consider where we stand on these and other such issues let us take care to respect the judgment of others who may choose differently, but who are operating within the same boundaries, sharing the same core convictions and holding in common with us the conviction that only men should be in overall leadership of congregations.

At this point a further word of caution may not be out of place. Self-awareness is never easy, and especially over such issues as this because the view we adopt can inadvertently flow out of our own prejudices and pander to our worst base instincts. Egalitarians are often accused of this but, painful as it is to acknowledge, in reality it cuts both ways.

It is frequently asserted that Egalitarians are guilty of pandering to the contemporary desire to assert individual rights and prerogatives. In extreme cases almost every authority – including that of God through his word – is apparently to be rejected in favour of individual choice and personal judgment. The rise of Feminism has prompted many women to assert their economic and social independence. At the same time many men, mindful of accusations of past acquiescence with injustice, have effectively retreated from leadership responsibility

lest further damage be done. Driven by continual media pressure both women and men capitulate to the prevailing culture.

It must also be said that a presumption of superiority on the part of men, often reinforced by so-called locker room humour, finds an extreme Complementarianism instinctively agreeable. Male chauvinism is not unknown in our churches and needs to be humbled in the light of God's word, just as much as strident feminism. Otherwise this can lead to dire consequences. For example, instances of domestic abuse, bullying and coercion of women are on the increase, yet attempts to justify such behaviour are sometimes heard based on a supposed application of 'male headship'. Again, there are instances of men who have not been slow to insist on a rigid Complementarianism yet who simultaneously indulge in same-sex bullying, abuse and even explicit homo-erotic activity, sometimes justified as exercises in spiritual discipline.

Equally it can be the case that some women, through a perception of inferiority (perhaps as a result of inadequate teaching about biblical equality) can themselves find comfort in a rigorous Complementarianism. Where this is fed by unease over sexuality, attractiveness or self-worth – and even reinforced by social media, envy or jealousy – it can gain a potent grip on the mind and result in exaggerated teaching or practice.

Not all Complementarians are motivated in these disturbing ways any more than are all Egalitarians, but it can hardly be claimed that none are. In other words, motives can be mixed on both sides of this debate. The hard truth is that this is a dark and difficult area in which, recognising our fallen state, we will be wise to examine our own motives carefully, and not be quick to disparage those of others. In particular we must not be naive about the potential influence of background and prejudice in shaping our personal convictions. *Semper reformanda* (ongoing reformation) is as urgent in this area as any other, but perhaps especially difficult to attain.

3. The way ahead – launch a review

In practical terms such ongoing reformation will require a deliberate review of our language, our attitudes and our teaching and, within Church of England parishes, careful consideration of the outworking of the commitment to ‘mutual flourishing’.

Mutual flourishing

In commenting on this, Rod Thomas has said: Within the Church of England, the Five Guiding Principles (contained in the House of Bishops’ Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests) refer to mutual flourishing. Although the context makes clear that provision is being made in order for the ‘minority’ to flourish in the same way as the ‘majority’, the idea of ‘mutual flourishing’ has taken hold as something which all should seek in relation to the ministry of men and women. As a result, Complementarians are often pressed to articulate how they will seek the flourishing of those with whom they disagree.

This is particularly the case in two areas:

- ▶ When female members of our congregations enquire about the possibility of ordination;
- ▶ When schemes of pastoral reorganization, or new arrangements for coordinating mission, involve close collaboration with parishes which have female incumbents.

In the case of the former, it is always a matter for rejoicing when people are keen to play an active part in ministry and it will be helpful to have conversations which are encouraging for the enquirer. Setting out a context for such ministry within a complementarian understanding needs to be undertaken carefully, requiring clergy to be particularly conscious of the power dynamics in the conversation. This may well involve a suggestion that the enquirer also sees a female member of the clergy in another church, in order to gain a different perspective.

So far as organizational issues are concerned, an openness to diocesan objectives and an appreciation of the position of the clergy in other parishes will be helpful, because creative possibilities might emerge. The main issue will be the continuing ability of, and freedom for, complementarian clergy and congregations both to act and receive ministry according to their theological convictions.

The idea of a review

If a review of our current practice is to be serious and effective the following dimensions need to be focussed on:

Our language: Being careful to avoid gender exclusive language when the NT is not gender specific is an obvious place to begin. Taking care to observe the distinct Persons of the Trinity, and to glory in our Trinitarian understanding of God, will be beneficial in itself and help to lay a platform for teaching about marriage and other inter-gender relationships. Unambiguously affirming Jesus as the head of the church, we will refrain from speaking of ‘male headship’ when what we mean is the restriction of authoritative leadership and oversight to suitably qualified men. Perhaps it would be a good discipline to speak of ‘sisters and brothers’ (note the order!), rather than “brothers and sisters”, and to agree to suspend the use of the term “brethren” altogether because our language conveys more than merely information – it communicates intention.

Our attitudes: Instead of focussing on what women may not do, let us consider how to promote an ethos that rejoices in all that women can do in gospel ministry. In our humour we should eschew reinforcing gender specific notions of superiority/inferiority; in our pastoral care we will exercise no partiality; in our conversation we will speak the truth in love. Christian men must be willing to be admonished and taught by godly sisters. Christian women must not be hesitant to speak of the application of Scripture into the reality of

everyday life for their brothers in 21st century Britain. Outsiders must be able to see that we mean what we say about 'Equal but Different' by ensuring that women play a prominent and visible role in the Sunday congregation (leading, praying, reading, speaking) and in the leadership structures of our churches (PCC, church warden etc), rather than solely in children's ministry, hospitality or the crèche. We need to think 'Equal but Different' and act accordingly.

Our teaching: Whether or not we are persuaded that women should preach in the mixed congregation, let us maximise the opportunities for suitably qualified women to contribute to the sum of word ministry – in home groups, in topical lectures, in writing, in youth and student ministry, and with individuals. This will require fresh initiatives in developing training opportunities for women, as much as men. In our preaching and teaching let us be careful not to reinforce patriarchal stereotypes in the illustrations we use or the allusions we make. Let us also inculcate a greater humility when we pronounce on the detail of apostolic injunctions where there is a measure of uncertainty, lest we breed an atmosphere of intolerance or allow the adoption of a particular position on the playing field to be regarded as a test of reliability or a requirement for fellowship.

A case study

The parish church of St Nicholas, Sevenoaks conducted a review of women's ministry in 2016. In the context of taking a decision at the PCC affirming a complementarian position in order to receive the episcopal ministry of the Bishop of Maidstone, the PCC set up a group led by Andrea Trevenna, the Associate for Women's Ministry, to conduct a comprehensive review of the involvement of women in the church. The aim was to identify any areas where changes should be encouraged and to identify suitable training initiatives. A report was presented to the PCC, an action plan agreed and progress in implementing the recommendations monitored in the following months.

This appears to be a pattern well worth emulating – further details can be obtained by contacting the church office (office@stnicholas-sevenoaks.org).

Summary

We have surveyed the NT material regarding the ministry of men and women and noted its complexity. We have also reminded ourselves of the significance of contextualisation and missiology for transposing the practice of the early church into our contemporary situation. This paper is intended to provoke reflection and discussion on an issue that has the potential to be acutely divisive in our constituency, yet which provides a great opportunity for us to show that we mean what we say when we affirm a biblical Complementarianism.

The current generation of young men and women who are offering themselves for gospel ministry urgently need encouragement and opportunities to function as fellow workers – yet the opportunities for women to join some church staff teams remains meagre and the

scope for training, and funding in ministry, woefully small. The reputation of the gospel is affected by our language, our attitudes and our teaching as well as our practice in the eyes of outsiders. We live in a society intolerant of alternative views and hostile to biblical norms. As we hold out the light of the gospel in love, and seek to be faithful to the truth once and for all delivered to the saints, let us resolve afresh not to allow this issue to be an unnecessary stumbling block to outsiders, nor a divisive blight on our fellowship.

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” Ephesians 3:20-21

The Bishop of Maidstone's website contains further information about his work together with advice and guidance: www.bishopofmaidstone.org

If you have any queries, please contact the Bishop of Maidstone's office
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