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THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

By D.B. Knox

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When we examine the work and ministry of deacons, priests and bishops as we know it in the Church of England in Australia and as it is in actual fact discharged today there seems no reason why women should not be ordained to discharge any or all of these three ministries.

A minister's life is very variegated. His most conspicuous activity is the conducting of services. Before electronics had reached their present perfection it might have been argued that by nature women had not been given the equipment of the larynx to make them suitable leaders of public services or readers of the lessons or public speakers in any large gathering; but this is no longer the case through the perfection of amplifying systems. Many women are excellent counsellors, much better than some men. A woman is as able to preside at a parish council or a synod, as is a man, and so one could go on. There is no objection to a woman consecrating a bishop, ordaining clergy, confirming young people, baptizing infants or reading the service of Holy Communion when these actions are considered in themselves, that is, religious acts apart from the context of the congregation. Women already are very active in visiting from house to house as district visitors, in visiting in hospital, in teaching in schools and in Sunday schools. What else remains of clerical or episcopal functions as we know them in practice, which is such that women are excluded by nature from being commissioned to undertake it?

However, the question is not finally settled by observing what bishops, priests and deacons do these days. For it may well be that these ministers are not doing what they ought to be doing. The question is to be decided, not by observing what goes on today, but exclusively by biblical

principles, because these three offices are exclusively spiritual offices and take their character entirely from the Word of God, although they may have had added to them over the centuries all sorts of other activities which are good in themselves but not the essential activities of these ministries. These ministries are ministries "in the church"; that is, in the congregation. It is there that God has placed them (I Cor. 12:28; Titus 1:5) and they take their character from the character of the congregation, and the congregation in turn takes its character from the principle on which it is formed. As the Report of the Canberra Conference on Mission and Ministry states: "The role of the priest can only be understood in relation to the role of the congregation" P.34 b.

The New Testament congregation was formed of people who were living by the hope of Christ. Their whole lives were oriented to this hope. Very largely, they came from homes where the whole household had accepted Jesus as Lord and were looking for His Kingdom. Not only would they as individuals be engaged in Christian fellowship daily (Acts 2:45). When they came together for wider fellowship in the local congregation they came as households. And the heads of the households would naturally take positions of pre-eminence. It is from this group of household heads that the Christian ministers are to be drawn, according to the New Testament. Deacons and presbyters are both required to be heads of Christian homes who conduct their homes so that they reflect a Christian character. "Appoint elders in every city having children that believe who are not accused of riot or unruly" (Titus 1:6). "The bishop must be one that ruleth well his own house having his children in subjection with all gravity; if a man knoweth not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" "Let

deacons be husbands of one wife ruling their children and their own houses well" (I Tim. 1:1-12).

The head of a Christian home has authority which of course implies responsibility, and his responsibility is to bring up his children in the fear and nurture of the Lord. This is no new responsibility in the Christian dispensation, for the Godly parent in the Old Testament times was commanded "to make the things of God known unto thy children and thy children's children" (Deut. 4:9). Every opportunity was to be taken: "thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down and when thou risest up" (Deut. 6:7); or as we would say 'in the evening, or on holiday, and when driving the car and at bed time, and at breakfast'. Godly instruction, formal and informal, is the obligation of parents.

The local congregation takes its character from the family congregation, the "church in the house" (Acts 2:46; Rom. 16:5, etc.). The local congregation must not conduct its affairs in a way that overturns the structures of the homes which go to make up that congregation and on which the congregation is based. St. Paul enjoins that Christian ministers are to be fathers. Is this a basic principle or merely a cultural pattern? There is no doubt that the bible is clear that it is a basic principle that the headship of the home rests in the father. In Genesis 3:16 the wife is told that her husband shall rule over her. It is true that this is part of the consequence of sin; nevertheless, even in the redeemed community it remains a true principle, in the same way as obedience to the state (another consequence of the fall) is binding on the redeemed. Christian wives are frequently enjoined (and not only by St. Paul) to

be in subjection to their own husbands. Just as husbands are told to love and honour their wives, so wives are told to obey and to reverence and fear (Eph. 5:33, I Peter 3:2) their husbands. Of course, there is no servility in this hierarchical order. Lording it, is as vile an attitude as status seeking is on the part of the other.

Scripture is clear that there is a hierarchy in Christ. God, Christ, husband, wife, in that order (I Cor. 11:3). It is impossible to discount this passage as merely reflecting first century culture, though the consequence of this principle will vary in different cultures. In St. Paul's time the consequence was that woman was veiled in public. In our own culture this is not the consequence that we would draw. St. Paul reinforces this principle of hierarchy in the home, and as a consequence in the congregation, by recalling the sequence in creation. The husband is the image and glory of God; the wife the glory of her husband. The man is created independently but the woman not only from the man but also for the man (I Cor. 11:7-11). These statements remain true in every culture since they are derived simply from the biblical narratives. Everyone is equal in God's sight; this is the meaning of Galatians 3:28; but everyone has not the same function. In the home there is a headship and the headship is that of the father and this should be reflected in the Christian congregation. (The great weakness of our congregations today is that we ride rough-shod over this principle so that naturally the father sends the missus and the kids while himself abstains from membership of a group which despises his natural leadership of his family in the things of God).

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in teaching in the church, in the presence of their husbands, presumably. It is true that the functions of the ministry in the Church of England in Australia as we now know it could be almost entirely discharged by women, but this is no reason for ordaining them. We are challenged by the present situation to return to a more biblical organisation of our congregations, and if we were to do this we would find that ordained women would be a problem. If women have no authority in the home in the presence of their husbands (this is a definite ordinance, very clear in scripture) as a consequence of this principle they ought not to have authority in the church in the presence of their husbands (This is an equally clear principle in scripture). Those who lead in the church are those who lead in the home; this again is a clear principle in scripture. We have got rather far away from this principle but we should be moving to return to it, rather than modifying scripture as a result of the spirit of the age. To be better than the bible is fatal. This was Adam's sin in the Garden. It is still with us, both within the Christian home as well as outside it. We must be on our guard; there is no future for the Christian gospel amongst those who are better than the Bible. The clear principle of the bible must guide all our activities and in particular our activities of Christian association. Consequently, it is not possible to commission women as leaders and governors (Rom. 12:8; I Cor. 12:28, etc.) in the congregation for such have the duty to lay the word of God authoritatively on the consciences of those who are present. This would mean, if they were women, ruling their own husbands, in direct contradiction of the Will of God (cf. I Peter 3:1). We must recognise the hierarchy which God has ordained, though we must ensure that this is not in any way a hierarchy of lording it on the one hand and servility on the other. And we should endeavour to bring our congregations round to the place where they are in fact the meetings of Christian families, meeting as families.
