

THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

# A command of the Lord

*NORMAN HOOK*

THE CHURCH LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

# ***A command of the Lord***

The theological implications of  
women in the priesthood

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First published, May 1974  
Second edition, re-set, July 1977

ISBN 0 85191 113 7

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## *Synodical Terms of Reference*

**I**T IS important that members of Synods, both diocesan and national, should appreciate that this issue of the ordination of women must be strictly settled in accordance with the formularies of the Church of England, and not by any personal view of what the ministry is, or ought to be, which is held by individuals. There are two views of the ministry which, for the sake of convenience, may be described as the catholic and protestant views. The former is that which is held by the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, and Anglicans. The latter is that which is held by the churches which owe their origin to the Reformation. Between these two views there are important differences which involve differing conceptions of the ministry. The General Synod will not be called upon to determine which is the true view — a matter which concerns a judgment on the Spiritual evidence as to the functions of the Apostolate, and the subsequent ministry of presbyter/bishops — but solely to determine whether the issue at stake is reconcilable with Anglican formularies.

The relevant question, therefore, is — Are there any theological impediments in the catholic view which makes the issue doubtful? It is widely assumed that no such impediments exist, and the purpose of this book is to suggest that there are reasons why this assumption should be challenged.

### *An Accident of History?*

SOCIETY, at any given period in history, is largely motivated by traditions which have come down from the past, and clearly this was the case in the lifetime of our Lord. One of these traditions of the past was the all-male tradition of priests and levites under the Old Law. This tradition existed in a period when the status of women was low, and the male was regarded as superior to the female. It appears that Christ respected the all-male tradition of the ministry of the Old Law, but condemned the prevailing view that women were inferior to men. He recalled his contemporaries to the teaching of Scripture, which he contrasted with the 'tradition of men'. In the beginning, he reminded them, God made them male and female, each complementary to the other, with no question of inferiority or superiority arising. Each was complementary to the other, and for that reason different. It is a fact of history, that the effect of our Lord's teaching was to elevate the status of womanhood to a point which had never before obtained. The early Church could exult that 'in Christ there is neither male nor female'. These words, penned by S. Paul, a typical Hebrew of his day, but faithfully recording the feelings of the whole Apostolate, indicate the deep impression which Jesus had made, and in view of them, it is at least possible to conceive that Jesus might have included a female element in his Twelve, who were to be the spearhead of his Apostolate. But he did not do so, and it is suggested that, in view of the climate of his day about women, it would have been impossible for him to imagine, still less include, any female element in the Twelve. It would have been a startling innovation, full of the risk even of scandal, so his action is to be regarded as 'an accident of history'. This argument is prominent in the contemporary debate, and should be challenged on theological grounds. It involves, for example, a look at the attitude of Jesus to establish traditions, which suggests that, when necessary, he was impervious to criticism and was quite capable of innovation whenever or wherever he saw it to be needful. He refused to be bound by very strongly entrenched traditions about fasting. His deliberate association with publicans and sinners was criticised as scandalous, but he was heedless of them. Nothing was more sacred or binding than the current traditions about the keeping of the Sabbath. These he openly flouted as inimical to the interests of the Kingdom. He was equally critical of burial ceremonies which were

held to take precedence of other religious duties. His general attitude is expressed in the saying 'It was said to you of old time, you shall not . . . but I say unto you . . .' There were many occasions when he deliberately and openly put his own judgement above that of the Old Law, and that, to his enemies, was one very good reason why he should be put to death. On this evidence, he was quite capable of breaking with the ancient tradition of the all-male ministry of the Old Law. If he refrained from doing so, it cannot have been because it never occurred to him to do so, or because he gave no thoughts to the matter. Such suggested reasons are out of character, and the notion of 'an accident of history' is contrary to the general evidence. He must have had his own reasons for endorsing this one particular tradition of the Old Law about the constitution of the ministry.

We are not told what these reasons were, and can only speculate. What we are told is that 'he knew what was in man', which means that he saw deeply into human nature in both its aspects of male and female. What he saw certainly contained no disparagement of women, and no question of the superiority of one sex over the other, but solely a question of what was fitting and right in respect to a different sex. Some have suggested that he may have recognised that the duties of motherhood, which involve the majority of women, posed a serious practical obstacle to the duties of the ministry. Others have suggested that the role of a woman minister would fail to represent his headship of the Church. But such reasons are speculative, and it is sufficient to note that, for reasons of his own, he did not include a female element in his Apostolate.

But there are still deeper reasons why those who believe in the Incarnation should be suspicious of this notion of 'an accident of history'. There is a revealing passage in the Gospel of S. Matthew (Ch. 22) where Jesus invites the Pharisees to answer the question, What think ye of Christ? They reply The Son of David, witnessing to the fact that Jesus was a genuine man. But Jesus points out that the Christ was more than this. He was also 'Lord', and here we confront the mystery of the Incarnation. Whatever the difficulties might be, the fact remains that there could be no such thing as the Christian religion, if we did not believe that Jesus is 'Lord'. He was truly a genuine man, but he was also more, and this 'more' is what we indicate when we confess belief in the Incarnation. One of the difficulties is the answer we might give to the question, Might Jesus have been mistaken? Discussing this question in his *Essays in Construction*, Dr W. R. Matthews writes: 'We may agree that Jesus was a Jew of the

first century, but we can agree that he shared the illusions of his time on religious and moral subjects? There is plainly a distinction to be drawn between ignorance which is irrelevant to his mission, and ignorance or positive error which has a direct bearing upon it. If it could be shown that he was under the influence of illusion which must have affected his conception of God and righteousness, the position would indeed be critical, for it would no longer be possible to regard him as an infallible teacher on faith and morals, nor indeed could we be secure in our reverence for him even as a guide.<sup>1</sup> Some such distinctions as Matthews suggests is inevitable. It means that, whilst we can regard the diagnosis of mental illness which Jesus ascribed to demons as 'an accident of history', we cannot do this in regard to the ministry. We are assuming that he intended to found his Church, and this must obviously belong to the category of his mission. This means that we must take seriously his action in constituting the Apostolate as the nucleus of the ministry which would serve him for the future. We cannot say that he acted thoughtlessly, or carelessly, or that he was mistaken. In a word, we cannot use the phrase 'an accident of history' in regard to such a matter as this, belonging, as it does, to his mission. There is a sense in which the fact of the Incarnation is here involved, and if this is true, then it is a theological impediment to the issue under consideration which is of great import.

### *A Matter of Loyalty*

IT IS reasonable to presume that the followers of Jesus took note of his action. Indeed, we have the evidence of S. Paul who made a firm distinction between matters about which the Lord had spoken, and matters where 'there was no word from the Lord.' The constitution of the ministry was a matter on which there was a word from the Lord, or rather, an action which spoke louder than words. So when the Eleven, owing to the defection of Judas, had to complete their number, they chose a man, though there were notable women whom they might have considered, and who were qualified as witnesses of the resurrection. But presumably they felt constrained by a sense of loyalty to the Lord, and there is no example through out the New Testament period of a deacon, or a presbyter/bishop, who was a woman. Indeed, this practice has remained unchallenged until comparatively recent years. What is involved for us, therefore, on the catholic view of the ministry, is a question of loyalty, and if this is so, we are not free to accede to the ordination of women in the

Church of England. This does not mean that our Free Church brethren, who ordain women, are guilty of disloyalty to the Lord, and, to make this plain, some brief account must be given of the differing ways in which the evidence is interpreted. The catholic view sees the Apostolate as consisting of the Twelve as nucleus, and others too, whom the Lord appointed as Apostles. These men were to represent the Lord's own messianic ministry of prophet, priest, and king. At an early stage they appointed and set apart deacons, who exercised a limited ministry and assisted them in 'the service of tables.' With an eye to the future when they would no longer be here, the Apostles appointed presbyters, alternatively called bishops, who would assume, as they had done, the Lord's full messianic ministry. The New Testament presbyter, therefore, is a man who discharges on the Lord's behalf, his messianic ministry of prophet, priest, and king. We designate this ministry as the priesthood, but actually the order of priests is the order of the presbyterate, which includes the exercise of prophet and king as well as of priest. The protestant view sees the original Apostolate of the Twelve as personal and inalienable, and therefore as something which cannot be succeeded. It came to an end with the death of the last of the Apostles, and what replaced it was the whole body of believers as the Body of Christ, which we call the Church. So it is the Church which is Apostolic, and not the ministry. A Free Church clergyman does not speak of himself as a priest, but as a minister. He does not claim to be a priest, because he sees the exercise of priesthood as belonging to the crown rights of the Redeemer alone, and as exercised by every member of the Lord's Body. The role of a minister is primarily that of the prophet; he is to proclaim the Word, exercise a cure of souls, and celebrate the sacraments. But the celebration of the sacraments requires no priestly powers, for it is seen as part of the ministry of the Word. The sermon is the spoken word, and the sacraments the acted Word. Thus, there is no continuity between the action of the Lord in appointing all-male Apostles, and the subsequent ministry which the Free Churches claim to represent. And, because there is no such continuity, no question of loyalty to the Lord is involved.

A man becomes a minister through his call from the Lord. His claim to have received such a call must be suitably tested, and if verified, he must be suitably trained. Ordination is the seal of the Church concerned of his suitability for the ministry, and his com-

mission to exercise it. But this is not regarded as a sacramental act. Ordination does not make a man a minister as the catholic view holds. Moreover, any member of the laos, or People of God, male or female, may receive a call; so, on this view, there is no impediments to the ministry of women. Further, a minister may perform no function which any layman may not perform, if authorised by his Church to do so.

This brief sketch is sufficient to show how and why there is a difference between the catholic and protestant views of the ministry. The point is worth making, if only to show that, on the protestant view, there is no question involved of loyalty to the Lord, and equally to show that, on the catholic view, there is. Once more, the General Synod is not called upon to adjudicate between these two views. But, if this point about loyalty is well-founded, it must be recognised that here is a theological impediment to the ordination of women in the Church of England.

### *The Guidance of the Spirit*

SIDE BY side with the idea of 'an accident of history', is the claim that the demand for the ordination of women in the Church of England is the guidance of the Spirit. The Archbishop of York has pointed out that it would vastly enrich the life of the Church, and has asked the question, What is our doctrine of the Spirit in relation to tradition and the ministry? This is a very proper question to ask, and the implication of it, in the context of the Archbishop's speech in the General Synod, is that the ordination of women should come within any true and vital concept of the gift of the Spirit to the Church. It happens, however, that there is an answer to the question in one branch of the Church's tradition, which the Archbishop would deeply regret, namely, in the tradition of the Scriptures. This is not the place for a theological dissertation on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, but a remarkably accurate summary of it is provided by the American theologian, George S. Hendry, Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of Princetown, in his notable book *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology*. He writes; 'The presence of the Spirit is always secondary to, and consequent upon, the presence of the incarnate Christ. It is Christ, and not the Spirit, who became incarnate, and wrought in history the work of God for the salvation of men. The function of the Spirit is essentially subservient and instrumental in the work of the incarnate Christ. This distinction is a prominent feature in the teaching of the Fourth Gospel, notably

in the Paraclete sayings. The Spirit does not come into operation until Christ is glorified, i.e. until he has completed the work of his ministry and returned to the Father. This is because the work of the Spirit is essentially of a reproductive nature. It has always to do with the work of the incarnate Christ. The Paraclete sayings lay marked stress on the unoriginality of the Spirit's work. This work, if we may so express it, is simply to hold the spotlight on Christ to glorify him by taking what is his and showing it to his disciples."<sup>1</sup>

No one could dispute that this is a remarkably concise and accurate account of the Johannine teaching about the Spirit, and it provides valuable guide-lines as to what we may claim as the guidance of the Spirit, and what may not be so claimed. The spirit is enlightener and revealer of what Christ has said and done, but not innovator. The ordination of women in the Church of England would certainly be an innovation, in which case we would not be entitled to claim the guidance and inspiration of the Spirit for it. This, of course, does not mean that the Spirit may not guide and inspire us about the many matters for which there is no 'word from the Lord', Nor can we doubt that such guidance and inspiration will aid the cause of a living and vital Christian witness. But if we are asked, as we are, What is our doctrine of the Spirit in regard to tradition and the ministry? then we can do no more than pay heed to what is taught us in the revelation of the Scriptures.

It may be a negative argument to say that in this matter we are not entitled to claim the guidance of the Spirit, but it is also one which should make us hesitate before we decide upon the innovation under consideration.

### *Summary of Argument*

We asked the question, Are there, on the catholic view of the ministry, any theological impediments to the ordination of women in the Church of England?

The Answer given is that for us a matter of loyalty to the Lord is involved, on the ground that:

- (i) In this matter there is a 'word from the Lord', or rather, an action which amounts to the same thing.
- (ii) Nothing which Christ said or did in respect of his mission can be

an 'accident of history'. Such an ascription is detrimental to belief in the Incarnation.

(iii) If we take the revelation of Scriptural tradition seriously, we are not entitled in this matter to claim the guidance and inspiration of the Spirit. This negative factor should at least counsel hesitation before we embark on a step which would be an innovation.

There are two matters which we have taken pains to emphasise:

1. Our Lord's own view of womankind, to which we are committed, implies no disparagement and no question of inferiority.
2. The argument that on the catholic view loyalty to the Lord is implied, does not apply to the Free Church view for reasons we have given.

### ***Bibliography***

In reference to the catholic view: *The Apostolic Ministry*. edited by Bishop Kirk, may be consulted.

For the protestant view, *The Church's Ministry* by Professor T. W. Manson which is a reply to Bishop Kirk's book, may be consulted.

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