
The Ministry of Women

1995 BEC Study Conference

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From 27th to 29th March, over 50 delegates gathered at High Leigh to study and debate this important contemporary issue and its impact upon the life of our churches. One gratifying aspect of the Conference was the presence of a number of women, a third of all delegates. This was a first for BEC study conferences and their contribution was invaluable.

The six Conference papers had been circulated in advance, with delegates encouraged to come prepared to contribute to the debate. It was made quite clear in advance that no attempt would be made to produce a closing consensus statement.

This report will summarise the six papers and give a brief resume of the ensuing discussions. No personal assessment of the papers or the Conference will be given, except for a few concluding observations. All quotations are from the study papers, in loc; unattributed quotations are by the author of the relevant paper.

Paper 1: The Makings of the Issue

The first paper was given by Dr Gareth Crossley, of West Park Church, Wolverhampton. Dr Crossley's task was to set the scene for the Conference, illuminating the background to the debate and highlighting those factors which have impacted significantly upon it. We must recognise that as Christians we are not immune to the pressures of secular society but he noted that such pressure may helpfully lead to further reflection upon biblical teaching. Given the continuing secular emphasis upon the emancipation of women, "Our sisters in Christ deserve a thorough-going biblical response consistently held". Four areas that are crucial for an understanding of the makings of the issue were then addressed.

1. Social factors contributing to the influence and strength of the feminist movement.

Six key factors were identified: Advancements in technology; Contraception; Women and paid employment; Cohabitation, marriage and divorce; Violence between couples; Lesbianism and homosexuality. Major changes in attitudes and behaviour in these areas have occurred and "have a marked bearing upon the understanding of the roles and functions of a godly woman".

2. The theological convictions of leading feminists. Although clear-cut distinctions are difficult to make, three strands of feminism can be identified, **Radical, Liberal and Conservative.**

Radical feminism is the major secular feminist perspective to impact on the debate, "with its attack on patriarchy and the commitment to a woman-centred ideology". It is

“a retrograde step”, opposed to the one true God and is anti-Christian. Indeed, Mary Daly states quite openly that, “In its depth, because it contains a dynamic that drives beyond Christolatry, the women’s movement does point to, seek, and constitute the primordial, always present, and future Antichrist”. It is quite evident that “For radical feminists the Bible is irrelevant”.

Liberal feminism is so called because its proponents “reserve the right to select from or add to the Scripture”. McFague proposes a view of God as Mother, Lover and Friend, whilst Ruether uses feminist readings of Scripture to criticise the biblical texts themselves. Dr Crossley commented that “Historic Christianity is turned on its head; to these women heresy becomes orthodoxy”. Elizabeth Fiorenza and Mary Hayter were also criticised for their approach to Scripture.

Conservative feminism, however, is the category that causes most concern, as its supporters “are found within the ranks of evangelicalism”. The common strand in conservative feminist teaching is “the rejection of a unique leadership role for men in marriage and in the church”. The works of Ann Brown and Mary van Leeuwen came in for strong criticism, as did the teachings of Virginia Mollenkott, which highlight “the problem of determining just who is, or who is not, an evangelical”.

3. Myths of Sexuality Acknowledging that “Underlying considerations of the ministry of women are fundamental beliefs about human sexuality” Dr Crossley tackled his third main point. With terms defined, Dr Crossley commented on the biological distinctions between men and women and then explored the area of gender stereotypes.

The common assumption that “males and females differ not only biologically but psychologically and sociologically” has meant that “thinking processes, emotional experience and interactive behaviour have been classified as either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’”. Listing a number of commonly perceived masculine and feminine traits, Dr Crossley asserted that “Confusion of this kind has been perpetuated in psychology, sociology and theology”.

It was suggested that “The prevalence and power of these fictitious gender conventions are so widespread that it is to be wondered whether they can be redressed. Facts do not necessarily destroy myths.” These myths are being “reinforced in everyday language, the media, education, employment and family life”. However, there are discernible shifts in psychological thinking, with some now suggesting that “many characteristics which comprise masculinity and femininity are socially constructed stereotypes rather than features intrinsic to being male or female”.

The implications of such conclusions for the debate on the ministry of women are highly significant. “No legitimate arguments can be brought to show that a woman, simply because she is a woman, lacks either ability or suitability: psychologically, intellectually, emotionally, socially, spiritually, or physically. For evangelicals the argument is solely based upon the criterion: what does the Scripture say? Any other basis of discussion is unfounded and will prove offensive to our sisters in Christ.” Failure in this area will only heighten the damaging effects of widespread gender anxiety.

4. Evangelical confusion The study concluded with the picture of a scene of confusion, observable throughout evangelicalism and in differences over both teaching and practice. A final exhortation was given not to lose sight, in the midst of debate, of “the ‘hidden’ contribution made by thousands of godly women” in a variety of ways.

Discussion

A number of Dr Crossley's points were taken up in discussion, but it was perhaps his contention that the only meaningful differences between men and women are biological that received the most attention. Pressed on this point and the results of other studies, Dr Crossley responded that he knew of no study that had shown otherwise. He reiterated the importance of his point, stressing that it showed that the issue was properly a theological one. Some delegates disagreed with the assessment of Ann Brown's work and, although he stood by that assessment, Dr Crossley did agree to some modification of his statements.

Paper 2: A Biblical-Theological Overview

Rev James Maciver of East Kilbride Free Church gave a biblical-theological overview of the ministry of women, with the emphasis on exegesis in order to construct a biblical-theological framework for the whole debate. Three main concepts were dealt with, taking all the evidence together for each concept and not drawing conclusions from isolated texts.

The Image Of God

Genesis 1:26-27, 5:3 The image of God in man was not entirely lost in the fall, as seen in 5:3. 'Image' in Gen 1:27 does not consist in the difference between male and female: individuals are made in the image of God (see Jas 3:9 and Col 3:10), and Gen 1:27c is exegetical of 1:27a,b. These conclusions refute the argument that positions of authority require both male and female to fully reflect the image of God.

1 Corinthians 11:7 Here, the image of God is restricted to man but the woman is not the image of the man for "the controlling word here is *glory* not *image*, the latter being used incidentally and in a way that leads to the idea of *glory*". *Glory* here is seen as "bringing honour to" and implies "suitable helper" from Gen 2:18,20. Woman is subservient to man, but "*subservience*, when understood as established by a divinely ordained arrangement, is not the same as *inferiority* or *derogation*".

The Created Order Principle - In Genesis

Genesis 1:26-28 Although these verses deal primarily with male/female equality, v.27 nevertheless shows the beginning of headship in that God deliberately calls the human race 'man' and not 'woman'. This is neither discriminatory nor sexist, for headship does not mean superiority and inferiority but exists "within the area of relationship and role, not ontological status".

Genesis 2:18-25 The account of the creation of woman shows that she "is not a rival, but a complementary partner". Yet, there are differences and they are brought out in the phrase 'helper suitable for him' (*EZER KENEGDO*), where the concept of 'headship' is made clearer. "As 'helper' she is not his equal, but neither does this make her his *inferior*." Their status as head and helper is pre-marriage and is the reason they can proceed to be joined together. Quite evidently, "it is the *creation* order that is foundational, not the *redemptive*".

Genesis 3:16-17 Was headship imposed after the Fall and removed in Christ? Paul

appeals at least twice (1 Cor 11, 1 Tim 2) to the creation narrative for the principle and that is supported by a study of Gen 3:16,17. These verses do not impose headship but seek to regulate the created order that has been distorted by sin. Redemption in Christ does not negate this situation but rather gives an ability to engage in it more perfectly.

The Created Order Principle - In The New Testament

(a) Authority and equality within the church

1 Corinthians 11:3-16 A very difficult passage but the controlling verse is v.3, with its important use of 'head'. 'Head' here does not mean 'source', the emphasis on God and Christ precluding such an understanding. Nor is it referring to an ontological relation but rather to "the relation of God appointed authority in leadership". This is reinforced by Paul by reference to Genesis 1&2.

1 Timothy 2:8-15 "There is no evidence that Ephesus in the time of Paul and Timothy was having to resist a feminist movement". But even if that was so, it would not stop "the prohibitions laid down here by apostolic authority being binding for the church in every generation".

In v.9ff, Paul is indicating the kind of behaviour he expects of women in the church. *hesuchia* in v.11 is understood in the light of *hupotage* and *didaskein* and means 'silence'. "Submission is the appropriate relation to 'authority'".

There are a number of exegetical matters to deal with in v.12 but a careful study of them shows that Paul's counsel prohibits women from engaging in "authoritative instruction" and exercising authority over a man. The silence he enjoins is to be understood in this context and concerns men and women in general rather than husbands and wives.

Paul is not dealing with a purely local, temporary problem, for he "grounds it in the created order principle in vv.13-15." This conclusion is based on substantial arguments. The whole passage shows that "Within the church and within the home, the created order principle applies".

1 Corinthians 14:34-36 Although this passage makes no explicit reference to the creation narrative, "it does use the term 'the law' as a basis for what is set out". With his appeal to 'the law', Paul is referring to either Gen 2 or 3:16, probably the latter. However, the submission enjoined here originates in creation, not in the post-Fall situation. Hence, "whichever of these two Genesis passages we take ... Paul's injunction here is again grounded in the created order principle".

Galatians 3:28 The context here is all-important. Paul is dealing with "how we come to be accepted with God" and teaches that "universal possession of sonship and the heirship that is along with it...belongs to all who are in Christ without distinction". The main issue is not male/female role distinctions. Racial and social distinctions "are invalid as far as *spiritual position in Christ is concerned*". The same is true for male/female distinctions but the parallel is incomplete for these distinctions "arise out of God's creation". Any use of this verse to support or remove gender distinctions "is an exegetical intrusion".

(b) Authority and equality in the context of the family

Ephesians 5:22-33 The general principle of mutual submission for church relationships in v.21 is applied more specifically in the succeeding verses.

Wives are to submit to their husbands, a "voluntary yielding in love", which, because it is 'as to the Lord', "actually exemplifies and commends the created order". The husband, correspondingly, expresses his headship by sacrificial love, leading to increased

unity in the relationship. It is clear from this passage that “submission and love, in headship and helpship...belong to the essence of marriage and are rooted in God’s creation order”.

Conclusion “God has given his people a unique equality one with another in the possession of spiritual status and privileges as his adopted family. But within that God has also set various distinctions of gender and role, both within his church and in the family”. These distinctions are “in terms of headship, authority, submission, love and respect”. It should be recognised that “the reversal or denial of such distinctions has not arisen from the Bible itself” but from worldly soil and “To devalue the distinctions is to devalue our personhood, and it is to devalue the goodness and wisdom of God”.

Discussion

There was some discussion over the meaning of *EZER KENEGDO* (‘suitable helper’) and the notions of headship and helpship present in Gen 2. As other points were raised and discussed, Mr Maciver consistently stressed the necessity and value of the biblical-theological approach, with its recognition of progressive revelation within the canon and its treatment of each part of the revelation on its own merits and also as part of the larger whole.

Paper 3 - Women And The Eldership

Rev Reg Burrows, formerly an Anglican minister in Newcastle, dealt primarily with the question ‘May women teach in the church?’ and considered, mainly, the supporting arguments put forward by Anglican and Presbyterian evangelicals.

Mr Burrows began by surveying **Women’s ministry in the denominations**, giving an up-to-date assessment of the situation. Virtually all the mainline denominations now have, or allow for, women elders and ministers.

But **why is the question of women’s ministry a burning issue?** Because of the pressures of feminism, both secular and Christian. Many evangelicals have repented of past chauvinism and are making attempts to redress the balance. Account must also be taken of “the denominational mindset”, whereby there is pressure, perhaps for pragmatic reasons, to remain in the denomination but “staying in means some degree of accommodation to what is going on”. Such pressure can remove objectivity in studying the biblical material.

Having provided **An outline of the debate**, utilising a tabular presentation from the work of Peter White, Mr Burrows then went on to consider in more detail **The arguments used by evangelicals in favour of women teaching in church**, offering a brief exegesis of each passage.

Genesis 1 & 2 Craston’s “rejection of any idea of male headship in these chapters” is serious. Although Gen 1 stresses equality, Gen 2 does emphasise headship through priority in creation and the devolving of responsibilities.

Genesis 3 Dowsett and Craston both see male headship as a direct result of the Fall. Yet to do so is to neglect the quite evident caring headship of Gen 2 and Eph 5.

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 The meaning of ‘head’ in this passage is hotly debated. Higton

and Craston both go for 'source, origin' rather than 'authority' but on the most slender of evidence. It really is a case of special pleading; "'Headship' definitely implies some kind of 'authority', to which submission is necessary". Above all, the passage "*is about the authority structure, the pattern of headship*" and shows how the pattern should be expressed and gives the reasons why it should be expressed. The upshot of this teaching is that "*Authority is symbolised by the head being uncovered. To act as the head, the head is uncovered. To have the head covered is a sign of being under authority*". The importance and application of this for today is that "in the gatherings of the church women should express their submission to man's headship".

1 Corinthians 14:29-35 There are two interpretations of this passage: either it refers to orderly conduct in worship and has no direct bearing on the teaching issue. Alternatively, the passage allows women to pray and prophesy in the assembly but prohibits them from "deciding from Scripture what the truth is for God's people to obey" as this is an exercise of authority.

1 Timothy 2:11-15 The Kroegers interpret this passage in the light of ancient religions as applying to women heretics, not orthodox female teachers. This denies the perspicuity and sufficiency of Scripture; Paul is clearly dealing with a general prohibition. The context offers nothing to support Highton's assertion that Paul was dealing with a purely local problem. Stott and Baker both argue that the prohibition only applied during the apostolic era and that women can teach men today, provided they do so under male headship as part of a team. But this is to rob the teaching of God's Word of its inherent authority. The reasons for women not teaching, or having authority over, men is grounded in the creation order. But women do have a high calling, motherhood, and do not need to aspire to teaching in the congregation for a worthwhile God-given role.

Galatians 3:28 Jewett argues that this verse removes gender distinctions. However, Paul is dealing with spiritual status in salvation. Believers still have to live within the social structures of their day but, although there may be changes to those structures, male headship which is patterned on Christ will not be lost.

The examples of women throughout Scripture John Stott argues that, because women exercised charismatic and informal ministries in the Scripture, they can also be appointed to exercise institutional teaching roles and the burden of proof lies with those against. "There is an unwarranted jump here... To justify the appointment of women preachers on an equal footing with men you must establish that there were such women in Scripture. But there were not".

Not only is there a biblical case to make against those who advocate women teachers, we must also face **Some problems underlying this debate about women's ministry**. The debate is often characterised by weak arguments that arise from the answer that is desired and there is a sense of going round in circles. Scripture is regarded as contradictory or uncertain, destroying any confidence in its perspicuity. In the debate, too much importance is given to academics, leaving the ordinary believer stranded. Great changes in practice are being made on the basis of tentative conclusions from Scripture and there is a failure to understand how general biblical principles operate. It has also been assumed that because an individual has gifts, they must always be used.

How can we **Cut the exegetical knot and get back to basics**? By remembering what the Bible is and what God's purpose is in giving us his written Word. We must remember that the Bible determines "what we believe and what we do" and that it is clear, consistent

and sufficient. We must focus on what Scripture says rather than on what it may mean; we deal with what is written, not conjecture concerning background and so on.

Applying the basic principles to the question of women teaching in church, a number of points need making. The whole of Scripture gives the impression of male leadership; there is a consistent norm of male leaders and teachers in Scripture and the qualifications and regulations for office require men. The exceptions prove the rule; they do not negate it. The issue is not at heart about an old view versus a new one; the lynch-pin for the entire debate is how the Bible is viewed.

Conclusions

Women cannot be part of the authoritative teaching team, nor be ministers or elders. They can, however, pray and make a spiritual contribution to worship but they must not preach to men, not even in a Bible class or Bible study. On the mission field, many women have been used in church planting work yet most have held to the principle of male headship. There is a world of difference between those who have been impelled by the gospel and those who desire what Scripture reserves for men.

Discussion

In discussion, a number of Mr Burrows' points were taken up but the item that received most attention was our approach to the interpretation of Scripture. Mr Burrows reiterated what was clear from his paper, that he favours a plain reading of the biblical text. For others, the issue isn't that simple; other valid questions had to be addressed in studying the Scriptures. It was clear that the hermeneutical issue is at the heart of the debate, even amongst evangelicals who have a high view of Scripture and its perspicuity. Certainly the issue is not easily solved and will not go away.

Paper 4 - A Diaconal Role For Women?

Rev Keith Walker, UCCF Team Leader in Wales, works "in an environment which has been unusually penetrated by feminism". That environment exposes certain problems and tensions with respect to women's ministry, yet his paper was "not simply a reflection of work in a particular context".

In the wider world of the BEC constituency, there is a lack of coherence with respect to women's roles. Too often, the question is only answered negatively and there is real work to do on the positives. Indeed, in the light of changes in secular society, "we may well find that being all things to all people demands that we review church policies to see whether Scripture does indeed require them".

Basic issues The matter is complex, for often those engaged in debate equally hold to a high view of Scripture. There are many problems but two main areas can be highlighted. Firstly, "the NT passages which are relevant are not easy"; secondly, "application to today's church structures" is difficult and "is perhaps more serious". The texts have to be dealt with in their cultural context and responsible application has to be made, without falling into cultural relativism. The way forward is to establish some basic principles.

We need to establish a **biblical definition of ministry** and use the term “in its biblical sense as including all true believers”. This is a concept that many churches urgently need to recover. It is clear that women can and must minister; the only question is “in what ways they may and in what ways they may not”.

Additionally, the concept of ‘**team**’ in ministry needs to be worked out. Some constituencies have been more successful in this and have often included women in their teams without compromising male headship. However, “one of the greatest problems in our constituency is ministerial domination which leads to frustrations amongst both men and women”.

Turning to **basic biblical teaching about gender issues**, some general doctrinal principles can be established. Firstly, “both OT and NT teach that men and women are equal”. Despite the possibility of implicit differences between male and female, there is a basic equality between the sexes in God’s sight. This equality must be asserted “happily and without reserve”. Secondly, “Both OT and NT teach male headship”. ‘Headship’ entails bearing authority and applies equally to home and church.

In applying these general principles, three categories of ministry in the NT are observable: “things which both men or women can do without any danger to male headship; things which both men and women can do, but in which women must take care to acknowledge the principle of male headship; things which women cannot do without offending the principle of male headship”. Much work has to, and can, be done in allocating tasks to categories and “it may be possible to take account of Bible principles and use the gifts of all, including all women, by careful definition of roles and relationships within the church”.

But what of the **possibility of women ‘teaching’**? Clearly, there is much teaching done by women in our churches: in Sunday schools and YP work, by example and through informal conversation. In some social situations, only women can teach; does this mean they should be trained as evangelists?

Considering functions in the church throws into focus the **office/function debate**. “In any organised structure *functions* are attached to *offices*” and offices often carry some degree of authority; however, that authority may not be inherent in the function and therein lies the difficulty. Fung has shown that in the NT function is primary and comparatively little attention is given to office. You do not need to hold office to exercise a gift. The NT “*suggests...that our approach to needs and opportunities need not be trammelled by church structures*”. There is freedom to change these structures “to make space for things to happen”. We must not become fossilised in our structures.

In discussing **Diaconal roles in the NT**, the difficulty is one of terminology. Our traditional use of the word ‘diaconal’ for the meeting of the material, social and physical needs of people as opposed to their spiritual needs is difficult to sustain from the NT. The word is often used in a much more general way.

However, “it is possible...to recognise some expressions of Christian concern in the NT as being diaconal in nature in the historic sense” and women were most definitely engaged in this work. Examples abound: those who met Jesus’ temporal needs, the work of Dorcas, Lydia, Priscilla, Phoebe and Rufus’ mother. Clearly, “women did and should engage in diaconal service”.

But should there be **Women deacons**? This is more controverted than women functioning diaconally. The relevant passages are 1 Tim 3 and Rom 16:1. With respect to 1 Tim 3, the context, location, use of 'likewise' and parallel requirements with male deacons all point to women officers. Paul does not call them deaconesses because there is no such word in Greek, hence his reference to 'women'. In Rom 16:1 is Phoebe a deacon or a servant of the church? The grammar supports the former, and "unless one is of the view that a woman deacon is inconceivable or other theological reasons the weight of the case seems to favour the view that Phoebe was one". With major changes taking place in society and in the state welfare system, "we may need a full-scale review of what we conceive deacons to be" and "were diaconates to be reformed in a NT direction we might more readily see the need for women on them".

What of **The distinct needs and contributions of women in our churches**? Our approach to needs must not begin with the differences between the sexes, that only exacerbates the problem and is not biblical. Consideration of biblical examples, such as Deborah, Hannah, Rahab, helps us to see that some needs are gender specific and some are not. But felt needs change as gender location in society changes. We may disapprove of such changes but we must still deal pastorally with them.

History teaches that women have made "significant contributions to some areas of the church's mission and ministry, and to society". This must be built upon and "we need to ensure that women are well equipped and motivated to be able to minister to each other". In wider terms, elderships need the contribution of senior women to help them in understanding the needs which our women folk present.

A diaconal role for women then? Definitely, and women deacons, and women on ministry teams. We must avoid stereotyping which cramps both men and women. There is much hard work to do, for "we are far too constricted by traditions which are hard to justify from Scripture".

Discussion

In introducing his paper at the Conference, Mr Walker expressed his hope that some of the more practical matters might be picked up and usefully discussed. By and large this was done and the contribution made by the women present was invaluable here. It was also clear that there are churches seeking to think through some of the issues and to effect necessary changes. Mr Walker's support for women deacons was not debated.

Paper 5 - The High Calling Of Womanhood

Mrs Margaret Siddans, a former Bible college tutor, began her paper by acknowledging that all women have a high calling as women but the high calling of the godly woman consists in obedience to all God commands of her. Although women are different from men, the Bible does not speak of inferiority. This high calling can be examined from a number of perspectives.

The woman's relationship to her husband and her personal character (Eph 5, Col 3, 1 Tim 2 & 3, Titus 2 and 1 Peter 3) Within the context of a Spirit-filled life and as an aspect of the mutual submission of all believers, wives are to submit to their husbands.

This derives from obedience to the Lord and is to be with right respect and reverence, being balanced by the self-giving love of her husband. They are to dress and act modestly and adorn themselves with good works. They are to be godly in thought, word and deed, which behaviour may be instrumental in the conversion of an unbelieving partner.

The Bible's high view of marriage presents a clear contrast to secular society. Scripture is replete with teaching on marriage, by precept and example. Everywhere the sanctity of marriage and the faithfulness and godly conduct of the marriage partners are stressed. Marriage is a holy metaphor for the relationship of Christ to his church. Both marriage and singleness are gifts from God; yet each must be seen in the light of the fact that this world is passing away. The marriage relationship can either further or hinder God's purposes of grace in this world - a very high calling. In marriage, the order and purpose of creation is to be reflected in male headship.

The Bible also teaches **The high calling of the mother** and gives many examples of those who fulfilled this calling, for example Eve, Rebekah, Sarah, Elisabeth, Mary and many others. The importance accorded to this calling is quite evident, from the commandment for mothers to be honoured (as well as fathers), to the use of maternal motifs with respect to God himself and to the work of the Apostle Paul. It is a high calling that is in direct opposition to Eve's part in the Fall (1 Tim 2:13-15).

The high calling of the widow is seen in that she "has a high place in the mind of God". He defends them, provides for them and bids them to trust in him. That pattern of care is to be replicated by men as evidence of a religion that is pure and undefiled. The church also must recognise its responsibilities towards widows and honour them through its material support of those without dependants.

The high calling of the single woman is also a distinct emphasis of the scriptural teaching. Injunctions about good works and modest dress are equally applicable to the single lady as to the married. She trusts and submits herself to the Sovereign Lord, whilst being able to pray for a husband if that is her desire. There are numerous ways in which she may use her gifts and abilities to serve the Lord. The high calling of the single woman is given direct support in Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 7:32-35.

Jesus' high view of women is a striking example of the Scripture's affirmation of their high calling. His treatment of them included talking to them, teaching and healing them, allowing them to minister to him and treating them as moral beings. All this was significantly different from the standards of the day.

The woman who professes godliness is to be characterised by **good works**. But what are these good works? Numerous examples can be given, from the Gospels, the Acts and the Epistles but the classic passage is an OT one, Proverbs 31:10-31. The passage teaches that "we fulfil our high calling of womanhood as we fear the LORD and use to the full the gifts he has given us for the good of others and for His glory in the home and the community".

It is helpful to study **some biblical role models**, both as examples and warnings. The faith of both Rahab and Ruth in Israel's God, Esther's willingness to be used of God, Elisabeth's blameless life, Abigail's initiative and wisdom, the courage of the Hebrew midwives, all are timely reminders of the high calling that is to be exercised by godly women. Those to learn from but not to imitate would include the wives of Lot, Esau,

Potiphar and Job, as well as Orpah and Sapphira.

It is also necessary to affirm **the high calling of the woman in the public assembly**. In essence, “The godly woman fulfils her high calling by obeying God’s word on the subject”. In particular, that will mean not teaching and not having authority over a man; it will also entail not speaking or “participating actively in the worship service of the church”. Can a woman pray in a mixed meeting? Perhaps Paul did not have a public meeting in mind in 1 Cor 11 when he referred to women praying and prophesying but rather was stating a general principle that was qualified in chapter 14.

None of this teaching regarding a woman’s participation (or otherwise) in the public assembly implies she is inferior to men; rather, it stresses a difference in function, as in the home. Additionally, “If women would relinquish their self-assumed roles in Christian service, God would honour their obedience to His word by raising up more men in leadership positions”. [Mrs Siddans explained that her convictions in these matters had been forged while she was teaching in a mixed Bible College.]

In **Conclusion**, it can be stated that the high calling of women “consists in believing the Lord in His commandments and promises”. By way of an **Appendix**, it was noted that a great tribute is paid to womanhood when the “Scripture speaks of salvation in terms of marriage and child-bearing.” Believers are the Lord’s ‘wife’, and as such can be guilty of spiritual adultery, and “both the Lord and Israel are portrayed as ‘mother’”. Additionally, the Lord’s people are depicted again and again by a ‘woman figure’ i.e. daughter of Zion.

Discussion

During the period for discussion, there was a lengthy debate which centred around the interpretation of 1 Cor 11, particularly the meaning of verse 10. No consensus of opinion was reached on this. Other points were discussed briefly but at least one delegate felt that Conference had missed the opportunity to pick up the meat of Mrs Siddans’ paper and to explore the practical consequences of it.

Paper 6 - Trying To Tie The Threads Together

No-one envied **Rev Mark Johnston** his task of chairing the Conference. Nevertheless he proved an able Chairman and we were most grateful for his efforts over the three days. It fell to Mr Johnston not only to chair each session but also to provide the final paper. His task was to try to tie the threads of the Conference together and in so doing to “affect discussion and comment, not only at the end, but also at the beginning and indeed **throughout** the Conference”. We will give here first a summary of Mr Johnston’s paper and follow this with a summary of his Concluding Comments on the Conference as a whole.

The context of the debate. We are coming “from an evangelical perspective ... controlled by and subject to the *Evangel*, the Word of God”. However, we recognise that there are genuine questions as to how we understand and use the Bible. The debate must be focused; there are at least three levels: the secular, Liberal Christian and Evangelical. Attention must be given to all three but primarily to the last. The debate

itself is often higher than is conceded - it is not just about the nature and role of women but the nature and role of Scripture. We must recognise that “The problem of pluralism is no longer ‘out there’ in the broad ecclesiastical realm, it is very much ‘in here’ in the confines of the evangelical community”. The result of this is that long established principles of hermeneutics and exegesis are being challenged by evangelicals.

In terms of **handling the issues**, much wisdom, caution and sensitivity are needed. The debate calls for real listening, not making blind assumptions. There is no room here for smugness, for “the conservative and traditional ethos of many of our churches may simply be restraining and concealing a problem that *is* there at the grass roots”. There is a need to “develop the Biblically positive role for our womenfolk” and a degree of repentance and humility over wrong and unbiblical attitudes towards women would not go amiss.

Genuine concerns that women may have must be listened to and evaluated and the extent to which “Christianity has been a factor in creating the current state of affairs” ascertained. It may well be that the feminist movement has been significantly influenced by existentialist philosophy, as suggested by Werner Neuer. Attention also has to be given to the interplay of “practical and theological concerns that have fuelled the female outcry in certain parts of the wider Church” and to which of these factors came first.

The question of **Hermeneutics** brings us to the heart of the debate and to the differences that exist between evangelicals. In moving from God’s Word to God’s World, there are no short cuts. There must be exegesis of particular texts, controlled by Biblical Theology, framed into Systematic and Practical theologies. The role of Biblical Theology in this process is crucial, allowing us “to gauge the weight given to particular truths at different points in the history of revelation” and thus to avoid “the pitfalls of cultural relativism”.

Authority, rule and teaching have been reappraised in many places, with ministry being understood more in terms of ‘Servant’ than ‘Authority’. This impacts on the whole question of women in ministry. A key term here is *kephale*. Conclusions drawn on this issue have wider implications, particularly in terms of secession from, or co-operation with, churches that have women exercising authority.

Diaconal theology in theory and practice is somewhat confused. In theory, there is substantial support for women deacons; in practice, not many churches have them. “Perhaps we need to re-evaluate what we understand by ‘ordination’. Perhaps we need to talk about courage and convictions”.

Multi-skilled and multi-functional are terms that have been applied to women. Certainly, “We are obliged before God to recognise, appreciate and utilise such giftedness within the Covenant Community”. To begin to utilise what amounts to over 50% of the church’s human resources, we may have to ask “how far formal ecclesiastical jurisdiction extends”.

In conclusion, the debate begun must become the debate continued. We need to be seen to be pro-active on such issues, not simply reactive. Male/female relationships are out of step because of the Fall. That makes this issue a part of the outworking of redemption.

It can be said, with both humility and confidence, that “God’s people have the answer to the problem!”.

Concluding Comments

Having noted in his paper that a failure to reach definite conclusions at a similar conference was “perhaps indicative of an evangelical inability to be consistently evangelical”, Mr Johnston bravely stated that this Conference had not produced a definitive set of conclusions. Nevertheless, there were vital principles to take away.

There is a great need to continue the debate; it is far too important to do otherwise, especially as it affects our understanding of God’s Word. We need to recognise that the debate may partly have come to the fore in our churches because of male inconsistency and failure. There is a need for repentance. A Reformation principle is that the church is to be ‘always reforming itself’. We need to be reminded that our basis for understanding man and woman is theological. Only in Scripture do we find unequivocally how we are differentiated.

In terms of theological method, our presuppositions about the Bible are vital, because where you start from determines where you end up. We must assert that the Bible is harmonious and, despite the difficulties we encounter, it is clear on issues of faith and life. It is sufficient for framing norms for life. The tools of biblical interpretation must always be subservient to the Bible’s own self-understanding. There must be a balance between the pietistic and scholastic approaches to Scripture. Biblical theology must have a prominent place in our thinking.

In terms of instruction and rule, both in the church and in the home, we must learn to distinguish between the formal and the informal, between the church as organised and as a living organism. We must also reaffirm our recognition of God-given structures of authority in the church. The authority and submission inherent in *kephale* must be reasserted, along with the emphasis on sacrificial love on the part of men.

There may well be a diaconal office, as well as a diaconal role for women. Whatever may be thought on this, the church must identify legitimate areas of service and encourage women to pursue them. The church must prize the valuable role of women in marriage, family, singleness and widowhood. We must seek a biblical balance in the roles of men and women.

A Personal View...

What were the lessons to take home from the Conference? That the issue is more complex and more important than we previously realised; that we as evangelicals have a lot of work to do in the whole area of hermeneutics and biblical interpretation; that it is possible to debate an emotive issue with grace and sympathy; that we as churches and families have ground to gain and an example to set in male/female roles and relationships.

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