WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

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For the last ten days or so, the media in the UK have given a huge amount of attention to the decision of the Church of England not to legislate in favour of allowing women to become bishops and I thought that it was probably time for me to say a few words, too.

My interest isn't to discuss the whys and wherefores of the Synod discussion, lots of people have done that already (google it if you are really interested) nor do I plan to justify my personal stance on the issue (I don't really believe in bishops in the first place; but if you are going to have them, I don't see why they can't be women). What I'd like to do is to think about how this question relates to cross-cultural mission.

Don't Just Copy Culture

As a cross-cultural missionary I have often argued that Christianity needs to be presented accurately and appropriately within every culture. However, this does not mean that Christians should change their core beliefs in order to fit in with a culture. The problem is that this is exactly what many apologists for women bishops have argued. We've been told that it isÂ unacceptableÂ in this day and age for women to be excluded from any role. Even David Cameron said that the Anglican Church had to "get with the programme". I'm sorry, but this is completely faulty reasoning. It is not the job of the Church to fit in with whatever society, with its changing whims, finds acceptable. It is the Church's job to witness to Christ. Tom Wright, in an article first published in the Times captures this:

> *What is more, the Churchâ€™s foundation documents (to say nothing of its Founder himself) were notoriously on the wrong side of history. The Gospel was foolishness to the Greeks, said St Paul, and a scandal to Jews. The early Christians got a reputation for believing in all sorts of ridiculous things such as humility, chastity and resurrection, standing up for the poor and giving slaves equal status with the free. And for valuing women more highly than anyone else had ever done. People thought them crazy, but they stuck to their counter-cultural Gospel. If the Church had allowed prime ministers to tell them what the â€œprogrammeâ€ was it would have sunk without trace in fifty years. If Jesus had allowed Caiaphas or Pontius Pilate to dictate their â€œprogrammeâ€ to him there wouldnâ€™t have been a Church in the first place.*

We Have to Listen to the Whole of Scripture

Over the last few weeks, I've heard numerous people justifying their support for women bishops by quoting Galatians 3:28

> *There is no longer Jew or Gentile,Â slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ*

The problem is, that this verse has nothing to do with church government, it is talking about whether Jews and Gentiles can be Christians together. Jon Marlow captures the sense of this very well:

> *So we cannot use this phrase as a proof-text to justify the rejection of all gender distinctions, or any other distinctions for that matter. It is not the trump card that destroys all other arguments or silences all other voices.* ***We need to engage with the whole council of scripture.Â*** *(Emphasis mine.)*

This is a hugely important point. We can't simply pick and choose verses out of context to support our views or our practices. We have to engage with Scripture as a whole and in context. I've scratched the surface on this issue in a series of blog posts on 'The Great Commission', if you want to read them offline, you can find links to my ebook on the subject at the right hand side of this page.

Tell the Whole Story

A good deal has been made about the fact that in the same week that the Church of England didn't move ahead with women bishops, the Anglican Church in Swaziland actually appointed a woman as bishop. If Swaziland, why not England?Â The problem is that there are many provinces of the Anglican Church in Africa and elsewhere that don't have female clergy, much less women bishops. You can't make a universal story from one isolated example.

The reason I've raised these issues isn't because I'm opposed to the idea of woman bishops, but to illustrate that as Christians we need to think through issues in detail; fervent belief or enthusiasm for a cause is not enough in and of itself.

There is a lesson here for cross-cultural mission. Missionaries are dedicated to their cause, enthusiastic and self-sacrificing; but in and of itself this is not enough. It is easy to slip into the trap of pragmatism; doing something because it seems to fit the situation or seems to work, rather than thinking through how the whole Bible applies to our context. Far too many mission strategists are expert at taking verses out of context and justifying activity on flimsy theological grounds. It's also very easy to build upon one success story and assume that what happened in one place can be reproduced everywhere.

However, I believe that the most important conclusion that can be drawn from this whole story is that when Christians, or the church become the story, then the Gospel loses out. The saddest thing about the last few weeks is that the Anglican Church itself has been the centre of a huge amount of attention. Whatever the importance of the arguments for and against women bishops, the role of the Church (of whatever denomination) is to be a witness to Jesus in a dark world. When we argue amongst ourselves, people start to look at us and not to Jesus.

> *Jesus came and told his disciples,Â â€œI have been given all authority in heaven and on*

> *earth.Â Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations,Â baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.Â Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.â€*

This is our calling!