

Celebrating a great day!

It was a privilege and a pleasure for me to attend the consecration of Right Revd. Libby Lane at York Minster. As one of the Presidents of Churches Together in Cheshire, I look forward to celebrating and supporting Libby's ministry in the Diocese of Chester. I was delighted not only to represent the local Christian community, but also to be there as a representative of our Baptist Union.

As is the habit of the media, news reports seem dominated by the actions of one lone individual, who chose to interrupt the service, claiming that Libby's consecration was "not in the Bible". As an unashamed evangelical, I must confess to being increasingly irritated by those who claim that the Church of England's historic decision contradicts the teachings of our Scriptures. In reality it takes a vital step forward in realigning the practices of the Church with them.

There are of course those traditionalists who find it impossible to shake off their cultural and ecclesial attachments to male only leadership. It is an act of grace, and indeed mature witness, that the Church seeks to accommodate and include them. But to argue that the appointment of women to episcopal or indeed any other church office, contradicts the teachings of Scripture requires some serious intellectual gymnastics. The overarching teachings and principles of the rest of the Bible require a complete re-interpretation in the light of 4 isolated sentences. These were written to individuals in quite specific circumstances, and even then require interpreting in a particular way if their "anti-women" stance is to be exclusively claimed. This is an approach which the famous preacher C.H. Spurgeon is reputed to have described as "using the Bible in the way a drunk uses a lamp-post – more for support than illumination."

The book of Genesis makes clear that the subjection of women to the authority of men is a consequence of the fall – a condition which the New Testament depicts as being restored through Christ. As God's "New Creation," his Church is called to model that original relationship between women and men, made together in the image of God; a Triune God in which each person is equal. The prophet Amos anticipates this new community coming to life as God's Spirit is "poured out on all flesh . . . both men and women". The fulfilment of this is announced by Peter on the day of Pentecost, prompting the Apostle Paul to later declare that "In Christ . . . there is no male or female." Writing to a mixed-gender audience, both Peter and Paul make the counter-cultural statement "we are all heirs of Christ" – using a metaphor, drawn from that fallen world of male succession, to re-define the place of women in God's new Kingdom.

If we are to maintain that this equality is "anti-Biblical" we are also required to ignore the several references to women in leadership within the New Testament, and indeed construct a model of "headship" that contradicts the words of Jesus from the Gospels, that no-one within his Church should "lord it over" others.

It also requires us to abandon the belief, particularly close to the hearts of Baptists, that the Mind of Christ is revealed through the discernment of his people. As the Archbishop went to some length in pointing out; this was a decision that was made and overwhelmingly supported through the deliberations and prayers of the Church of England's councils and Synods. The coming together of God's people, under the authority of Christ and his Word, to discern his will.

Our Scriptures explain to us that every aspect of our being is touched by the fall, so it is hardly surprising that human societies have conformed to this perception of male ascendancy throughout history. And we must admit that, for many centuries, Christians allowed themselves to conform to the thinking of that world; it is less than 100 years since women were even allowed to vote. I would acknowledge that it is trends within wider society that have caused some of these prejudices to be re-examined,

but when we have done so, those who are truly open to its message, have found the Bible to be overtly and predominantly supportive of a Church community in which women and men are equal in every way.

My hope and prayer is that Libby Lane will be, first and foremost, the person God has called and created her to be; that her place in relation to this historic milestone will always be secondary to that. But this is a moment for those who are serious about living under the authority of God's Word to speak in support, and not allow ourselves to be represented by those who are using it as a peg on which to hang their own prejudices.

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