

'Faith & Order'

This paper is an attempt to make a hopefully helpful theological distinction between the two presenting issues of major significance facing the Church of England at the moment. The two issues are (a) the consecration of practicing homosexuals, and (b) the consecration of women bishops.

While both could cause major division in the church, by and large Evangelicals have been more concerned about the former and Catholics more concerned about the latter. Both are presenting issues about the nature of Biblical authority in the Church, and how that authority is handled and obeyed, and it is true to say the some arguments used in favour of one are used by some in favour of the other.

But there is a very real and important distinction between the two issues. Let me explain. It is unthinkable that someone of traditional integrity on the 'women's issue' would require that someone convinced of the correctness of women being consecrated should repent before God for their folly! We may think one another mistaken, but we can agree to disagree about that issue. This does not mean that it is not viewed with great seriousness by both sides, but like the issue of baptism, equally convinced Bible believing Christians can agree to differ without spoiling communion and fellowship together.

However, when it comes to the other issue, the language of repentance seems appropriate, as Paul specifically lists homosexual practice as one of the things that need repenting of (see 1 Cor.6 v9, 10,11 TNIV). As I have argued elsewhere, this is a communion breaking issue (in my article recently for the CEN and 'Evangelicals Now', which has been on the Anglican Mainstream website).

What theological categories then can we use to distinguish these two issues? I have personally found two things helpful - one well known, the other less so -

1. The old distinction between first order and second order issues has mileage left in it. It helps us to see, and if necessary categorise, issues on which we cannot afford to 'agree to disagree'. These are issues on which the Bible is perfectly clear (faithfully interpreted), and which are really salvation related issues (i.e. they need repenting of if we are to believe the Apostolic Gospel).
2. If every issue is in theory a faith and order issue, then some issues are more towards the faith end of the spectrum and others more towards the order end. We can surely disagree about whether women are ordained or consecrated (a clearly church order issue, or second order issue with first order implications), provided both views have provision made for them in the Church. But we cannot agree to disagree on something that touches us all so deeply like sexual holiness about which the Bible speaks with a united voice from one end to the other. It says that the proper place for sexual intimacy is within heterosexual marriage. To say other than this is to go contrary to God's revealed will and to fail in our support for faithful Christians, whether homosexual or heterosexual, who are seeking to live by that standard.

So then, the distinction between church order issues, and those relating to the big issues of the Faith 'once for all delivered to the saints', may prove, I think, to be of some help in making sure that we do not divide unnecessarily and that we stand together faithfully when we should.