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Ordained Married Couples : a Theological Reflection

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Introductory

The following paper is largely the substance of an address delivered to a Conference entitled 'Double Vision' held in February 1992, a national gathering of married couples where both partners are ordained Anglican ministers. Such couples are a growing phenomenon in the Church of England. Beyond the common factor of ordination, they display a wide diversity in the way they exercise ministry. So, for example, some minister in the same parish, either on a double stipend or a job-share basis, or (more usually) with one partner operating as a non-stipendiary. Some work in separate parishes (again with a variety of stipend arrangements). Others work with various combinations of parochial and non-parochial appointments.

The response of the institutional Church to the emergence of ordained couples has been very much 'ad hoc'. There has been little consistency amongst dioceses except, perhaps, in the reaction that clergy couples are predominantly 'a problem'. They are a problem in relation to practicalities such as placements, moves and stipends. For some, they are also a problem of a more theological nature. They are seen as a potentially unhealthy development — not good for marriage or for ministry.

Thus far in the Church of England there has been very little attempt at theological reflection, yet such reflection is surely crucial if we seriously want to discern what the Spirit might be saying to the Church through increasing numbers of ordained couples. This paper is therefore by way of a discussion starter — not just for the couples themselves but, I hope, also for all those in the Church who are prepared to work through problems until they are transformed into God's rich and challenging opportunities. For the sake of immediacy and authenticity, I have retained the paper's direct form of address.

Biblical reflections

As one 'tiresome problem' talking to a roomful of 'problems', it is encouraging to recall that God is no respecter of established patterns and tidy schemes. Again and again, God has taken the community of faith by surprise. Again and again, that community has struggled to cope with God's propensity to do a new thing. In that sense, we stand in an honourable tradition!

The biblical record is full of examples of God's tendency to challenge and breach familiar securities. Whether such divine actions bring blessing or

judgement often depends on the nature of the response they evoke. We see this supremely, of course, in the incarnation. God comes in human form, to reveal the truth, to bring liberation, to share the divine life with a needy world. Yet Jesus, the Word made flesh, was far from being universally welcomed. For many among the people of God, especially their leaders, he was a 'problem' — a problem of serious proportions; a dangerous trouble-maker who, in undermining the status quo, threatened the stability and character of the faith handed down by the fathers. There is no more tragic statement in the NT than that bald assertion found in the Johannine prologue: 'He came to his own, and his own received him not'. Things come to a head at Calvary. At that climactic point, the accursed pretender, scorned and rejected by those who should have known better, becomes the profoundest source of blessing for the whole of creation. Blessing and curse meet each other and bear rich fruit. Such is the paradoxical mystery of God. The crucified disturber is the one through whom God gives most

We are not, hopefully, as despised and rejected as Jesus! But the experience of Jesus does bring into very sharp focus the way God works and the way (religious) humanity tends to react. And our particular situation needs to be tested against that. God, it seems, is quite prepared to overturn expectations and deep-seated traditions. God is quite prepared to engage in risky enterprises, to try out new possibilities. The Scriptures cry out this truth. The people of God, on the other hand, are much more wary and cautious — frequently reluctant and often rebellious. They 'murmur'; they want to go back to things as they were. It is hard for us humans to sit light to security, to live with uncertainty and loose ends. What *has* been is tried and tested. It is safe. We can cope with it, both in psychological and practical terms. But God will not let us rest. The cause of the kingdom is too important for that.

The first Jewish Christians can perhaps speak to us very powerfully on this question. Their joy in conversion was soon unsettled on a number of points, not least that involving outsider Gentiles. God seemed to be admitting Gentiles to the rights and privileges of the new covenant without first giving the traditional covenant people time to consider the matter: very remiss of the Almighty! Divine *faits accomplis* are difficult to argue against, though one can have a jolly good go — as many did in the NT period. The conflict over the issue was decidedly acid. Christian charity seems often to have been in short supply. Rather than having it out with God (the real instigator), it became a question of who was right to claim God's support. Fraternal insults abounded. At best, as in Acts 15, attempts were made at damage limitation. At worst, as indicated in Galatians, for example, the whole thing became a slanging match clothed in theological language. (You may at this point be observing that such a situation is not entirely unrelated to the current dispute about the ordination of women to the priesthood! It is an observation worth pursuing, both for itself and because it has intimate associations with the matter in hand. But I believe that the Jewish/Gentile controversy does give us much food for thought as couples in ministry in today's Church.)

As Peter put it when he defended his action in baptizing the Gentile

Cornelius and his companions, 'If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us... who was I that I could hinder God?' (Acts 11:17) You will remember that not only was Cornelius sent a divine vision, but God also poured out the Spirit upon him before any ecclesiastical policy had been formulated.

God produced the challenge, the 'problem'. It was up to the Church to respond, even if that meant heart-searching struggle. And here we are, called by God as unique individuals to share in the ministerial leadership of the Church, called by God to join in marriage with another ordained person. Presumably then, God has brought this about in accordance with the divine will and purpose. And presumably that purpose has something to do with the furtherance of the kingdom, with the pouring out of reconciling love to a broken world. We are no eccentric phenomenon. Like the Gentiles, though in our own way, we are God's gifts to the Church. That is not an arrogant claim. Like all expressions of Christian ministry, it has little to do with our own inherent worthiness or 'star-quality'. It has everything to do with the choice and the grace of God, with God's perfect knowledge of the needs of the Church. And how is the Church receiving these gifts? At the moment, it seems, (and especially in relation to the hierarchy) with varying degrees of appreciation. Perhaps a serious meditation on Acts 11:17, and its implications, should permeate and inform the attitudes and planning of the diocesan policy-makers: 'If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us...', said Peter, 'who was I that I could hinder God?' This God gets on with things and takes adventurous risks, even at an apparently inauspicious time. Surely it would have been more sensible to let the infant Church find its feet a bit before exposing it to such new-fangled and destabilising notions? But our God does not always take the sensible option!

New Testament 'models'

It may also be worthwhile recalling that couples in ministry are not, actually, an entirely new phenomenon. The NT itself furnishes us with at least one example — and a heartening one at that: enter Priscilla and Aquila! This ministerial pair receive more than incidental mention in the NT record. It may help to remind ourselves of their attestation. Acts 18 discloses something of their personal history.

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together — by trade they were tentmakers. (vv 1-3) After staying there for a considerable time, Paul said farewell to the believers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. (v 18a)

Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the

synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus. (vv 24-28)

From all this we may glean some very interesting information. Priscilla and Aquila were basically what today we might call MSEs (ministers in secular employment). They were presumably Christians before Paul met them and, having forged an evidently positive relationship with him, they were prepared, as it were, to pull up their tent-pegs and join him in his missionary enterprise. As a result they were involved in church-planting at Ephesus. And it was at Ephesus that they gave Christian tuition to Apollos. That must have been no mean task. Remember how Apollos is described: 'an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures... he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus'. To be credible and effective, Priscilla and Aquila must have been at least as impressive in their credentials; and I cannot help noticing that, as Priscilla (unusually for the custom of the time) was mentioned first, she probably took a leading role in the teaching of Apollos, and was therefore quite some lady! Indeed, it is striking that in the majority of the NT references to the couple, Priscilla comes first, even in Pauline writings. In terms of church work, she does seem to have been the dominant partner. At any rate, work with Apollos turned out to be very fruitful. In effect, the couple trained him for ministry.

Already it is clear that Priscilla and Aquila had a significant ministry of leadership — in missionary work, in planting new churches, in teaching potential church leaders. References in the Pauline and deutero-Pauline literature reinforce and expand this picture. In 1 Cor. 16:19, Paul, writing from Ephesus, passes on warm greetings in the Lord from 'Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house'. So they not only helped to plant churches, they also hosted and, no doubt, led them. This is further underlined by Paul's very appreciative mention of the couple in Rom. 16:3-5a. In all likelihood (though see the arguments of the scholars!) by this stage the couple are back in Rome:—

Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house.

Prisca and Aquila are also sent greetings in 2 Tim. 4:19.

Here, then, is a couple whose ministerial leadership and commitment is clearly deeply valued, not only by Paul, who can call them his 'fellow-workers' and who is personally indebted to them, but also by 'all the churches of the Gentiles'. Priscilla and Aquila had obviously made a significant impact on a good number of Christian communities. And one of the most striking features of this whole situation is that there is no hint that their joint ministry was a 'problem', no hint that it was regarded as 'theologically unsound'. It was, rather, widely and gratefully affirmed — even by Paul (he of the undeservedly bad reputation in matters of female ministry

and marriage!). I have to say, however, that the cynic in me wonders whether this positive scenario might have been ever so slightly clouded if the couple had expected to be paid!

Before leaving personalities, it might be interesting to glance at what, in all probability, was another NT ministerial couple, Andronicus and Junia, mentioned in Rom. 16:7. (Even John Chrysostom assumes that Junia was a woman, so I think we can make the same assumption! For the arguments, see the commentaries.)

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsfolk who were in prison with me; they are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.

As Cranfield puts it in his commentary, 'That Paul should not only include a woman... among the apostles but actually describe her, together with Andronicus, as outstanding among them is highly significant evidence... of the falsity of the widespread and stubbornly persistent notion that Paul had a low view of women and something to which the Church as a whole has not yet paid sufficient attention'.¹ We may add Chrysostom's comment:

To be apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among them — just think what a wonderful encomium that is! How great this woman's devotion to learning must have been that she was deemed worthy of the title 'apostle'.²

The word 'apostle' is used in varying senses in the NT. Here in Rom. 16:7, it probably means itinerant missionary, the implication being that Andronicus and Junia were involved in a prominent way in evangelism and church planting.

Note that neither Priscilla nor Junia is cast in the role of 'supporting wife' — far from it. They took a full, perhaps even predominant part in the ministerial partnership. (We might perhaps contrast 1 Cor. 9:5, where Paul points with some feeling to the practice followed by other apostles of having their wives accompany them, rather as politicians do nowadays!) However, as far as we are aware, both Priscilla and Junia worked in Christian ministry *with* their husbands. That is not the case with all of us here. Beyond the common feature of ordained person married to ordained person, we display a fascinating variety of histories and working situations, and in that variety and its potential to further the kingdom, the Church should rejoice. Again, the NT can give us a fruitful source of theological reflection.

New Testament principles

What the NT does *not* give us is a detailed blueprint for Church order generally and the structuring of the Church's ministry in particular. The first Christian communities were searching for ways of expressing the radical nature of the reality of their experience. In so doing, they experimented with all kinds of ideas and possibilities. In the generally accepted Pauline litera-

1 C. E. B. Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary: Romans*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1979, vol. 2, p 789.

2 *Hom. in Rom.*, ad loc.

ture alone, we encounter a rich variety of 'working models' of the Church. It was a time of rapid and exciting growth, a time of challenge, a time of risk. Theology was emerging out of a life-changing spiritual experience and its practical consequences. Rather inconsiderately, one might think, Jesus had not left his followers clear instructions for the setting up of a Church. Beyond implying through his choice of twelve disciples that he had in mind a new Israel, a new covenant community, he passed on only strangely disturbing principles. And principles can find their external expression in many different ways. Indeed, when they seem to be irritatingly unrealistic, they can be conveniently forgotten.

Among the most challenging of the 'Jesus principles' are those relating to leadership. Emphatically, in all strands of the Gospel tradition, there is a call to what might be termed 'reverse hierarchy' — the greatest must be the least, the master must be the servant. Domination is out; willing service is in. Such leadership does not come naturally. It is modelled to perfection in Jesus, and for any movement in its direction, the grace of the Holy Spirit is essential. It does not involve the false humility of grovelling before the devices and desires of all and sundry. It does involve working to draw out God's best in people, whatever the cost. True Christian leadership means letting God be God — in the personal lives of the leaders and in the life of the Church and the world they are called by Christ to serve.

What structural form that leadership takes is a matter for the Spirit's prompting. It may well be that the Church needs to rediscover its roots in this respect; to re-affirm the effective primacy of principle and to be willing to live with a bit more creative provisionality and untidiness in the search for ways of putting principle into practice. The only truth that is eternally fixed is God. Church order should be God's servant in any particular context and that might well mean change and experiment. In the context of this, *our* society, Christianity needs to be reborn. Perhaps we have an important part to play in the struggle of birthing — if only the Church will acknowledge that birth is a messy, painful and risky business.

Before leaving our base in the NT material, we might also note that amidst the kaleidoscopic variety displayed there in relation to the forms of church order, there is one fundamentally persistent common feature — leadership is invariably plural rather than singular. That is possibly not without its relevance for our theological ponderings.

God as Trinity

And to ponder on *that* theme takes us right into the heart of God. In some mysterious way God is plurality in unity. To be authentic, all Christian life and all Christian ministry, including our peculiar version, must flow from the life of God. So it is worth spending time and effort meditating on the divine being (as far as we can perceive it!). As the jingle goes, 'One is one and all alone, and evermore shall be so'. Such cannot be said of the Christian God. For this God, relationship is of the essence. The doctrine of the Trinity, provoked into articulation by revelatory experience, is vitally important for our life and behaviour as Christians and as Christian ministers. Here is a God characterised by the perfect integration of individuality and mutuality, of

distinctiveness and union. The three Persons of the Godhead are *co-equal* as well as *co-eternal* — there is no hierarchy or subordination in God; there is but mutual love and respect. The Persons are bound together in a unique intimacy, yet they do not keep their love to themselves. Theirs is no exclusive relationship. Its rich fruitfulness overflows into creation and ever seeks to draw creation back into its joyous and liberating embrace. The loving relationship within God is open-handed, not stiflingly possessive. It sets free. It awakens folk to an awareness that unselfish, fulfilling love is indeed the many-splendoured meaning of all things. It is the ideal definition of both marriage and ministry. Both are expressions of love; when both come together and are avowedly committed to the pattern of God's life, then the potential for reaching out in ministerial love is rich indeed.

We discern in the triune God a commitment to corporate and noncompetitive leadership. As all share fully in each other's life, so all are fully involved in the great enterprises of creation and redemption. The Persons work together in mutual recognition and submission. There seems to be no trace of a domineering spirit, either within the life of God or in God's relating to the world. God lets be. And if the Cross is truly to be accepted as the most reliable sign of the nature of God, then God's love is also to be found in costly and painful letting go. Again, although the divine Persons are in the spiritual equivalent of a 'one flesh' relationship (*homouosios*, *consubstantial*), their individual 'identities' are in no way subsumed. Within that relationship, they express *themselves*, as appropriate. Dynamic integration does not mean assimilation, absorption or annihilation. As Jack Dominian puts it, 'The model of loving is the Trinity, in which persons remain in relationship without losing their separate identity, and yet are one in absolute love.'³ So also, of course, with marriage and shared ministry at their best. Where marriage releases a non-competitive relationship of letting be and letting go, a relationship that brings out the best in each partner, then shared ministry is greatly enriched and the Church is powerfully reminded of the kind of corporate life God desires of her.

As Christians, we believe that, somehow, we are made in the image of God. For us, too, then, relationship must be of the essence; the kind of relationship imaged by God; the kind of relationship where loving and sacrificial concern for the good of others takes precedence over rules and regulations and abstract definitions; the kind of relationship that has 'built-in' flexibility as well as absolute commitment; the kind of relationship that thrives on dynamic interaction. If we exercise leadership, it must be in that context and after that pattern. Could it be that as married couples in ministry we have a particular calling to help God remind the Church of this essential truth and its consequences? Perhaps we are also called, by the very particularity of our relationship, to affirm and emphasize that God and sexuality are not inimical to each other. For too long the Church has been bedevilled by an attitude that has regarded holiness and sexuality as fundamentally incompatible: the holy life is sullied by sex. Married couples in ministry can help to break through this thoroughly unbiblical perception, not least when they minister together in the 'sanctuary'. For it may reasonably be assumed that

3 Jack Dominian, *The Capacity to Love*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1985, p 52.

the couple at the front, going about 'holy business' have at some stage been to bed together! And it may also come to be realised that their physical relationship is an integral and positive element in their understanding and worship of a holy God, that sexuality is a sacred, awesome and delightful divine gift — even a divine self-disclosure.

In this respect, as in the others mentioned in this paper, ordained married couples help to point towards a 'wholesome' theology of ministry and of the Church. It has to be said, however, that their potential as 'indicators' will only fully be released when the female of the partnership is allowed true co-equality and co-inherence in ministry as well as in marriage. As things stand at the moment in the Church of England, hierarchy and subordination are built into the ministerial system. Their effect goes far beyond words and conscious awareness.

Conclusion

So does this attempt at theological pondering suggest any reasons why God might be adding to our number? And how does all this challenge us in our dual vocation to marriage and ministry? How can we more effectively allow both to flow from the life of God particularly amidst the various stresses and strains that many of us experience? If God got us into all this, where and what are God's resources for the task? Knowing God, are those resources necessarily 'religious'?

This conference gives us a precious opportunity to stand back a little and consider fundamentals as well as immediate circumstances — and to search for fruitful connections. Much of what I have touched upon in this short paper is, of course, relevant to women and men working together, whether they are married to each other or not. Much of it is crucial to Christian life generally. I believe passionately, however, that God has a particular purpose for those of 'double vision'! There is so much giftedness in this room, so much potential to share the love of God powerfully. For the sake of the kingdom, the Church needs to take us seriously. If we are 'problems', then we are no less than God-given ones!

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