

The Programme

Now we know. There is a programme to be followed. Any lingering doubts about its existence have been removed. Church members, politicians and journalists speak of it. They have done so especially since the defeat of a measure to make women bishops in the General Synod of the Church of England on 20 November 2012.

Reactions

The comments are stark. George Carey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, says the church rule book should be torn up. Rowan Williams, the out-going archbishop, thinks the church has lost credibility and needs to explain itself. And Justin Welby, who succeeds him in 2013, believes the decision marks a very grim day for the church.

In the political world the Prime Minister sees the church as out of step with the equality agenda of the 21st century. It needs to get with the programme. Sir Tony Baldry thinks the Church of England no longer looks like a national church but more like a sect. Diana Johnson believes the church is outdated, eccentric and frankly irrelevant. Whilst Chris Bryant argues there should be no nomination of any future bishop without the feminization of the church.

Similar reactions have been found amongst journalists. Perhaps the most risible is that of Caitlin Moran (*The Times*). She admits she does not know church history or doctrine and yet denigrates the decision.

Response

What are we to make of all this?

First, we need to know what happened. The synod was not asked to vote on whether women should be made bishops. It had previously stated, by a majority vote, that no theological reason exists to stop the development. On that point the synod is in error. On 20 November the synod was asked to agree a particular way to make women bishops. It failed to get the required two thirds majority vote in the House of Laity. Why? Because a big enough minority saw the proposed legislation would split the church. It would put many loyal Anglicans in an impossible position. It would require them to go against the

teaching of the Bible and conscience. No Christian should ever do that.

Secondly, we need to recognize we are not served well by our bishops. Almost 40 voted for the measure. And nearly all diocesan bishops believe the church should accept something God forbids. Leading the way were the out-going and the incoming Archbishops of Canterbury. On 23 November a former archbishop compounded matters by calling for the rule book to be torn up!

Thirdly, we need to resist the near hysterical calls of many to embrace the secular equality agenda or have it imposed upon us by Parliament. Clearly the secular humanistic sub-culture of today thinks its views trump the teaching of God's Word. It wants to eradicate functional distinctions between men and women.

This last point is very important. If Christians now apply themselves to challenge the prevailing ideas of this age then benefits will follow for all. We are not here to embrace the world's agenda. We are not to endorse erroneous ideas. Rather we exist to proclaim the revealed will of God. Our duty is to live by the standards of God's kingdom. It is to show the world God's way, the best way.

The signs that the Church of England will do this are not that clear. But we do not despair. Nor are we ready to abandon the church. It is a very serious matter when Christians part company.

Our duty is to correct error. It is to show the world what it means for men and women to equally share the privilege of being created in and as the image of God (though we are marred by sin). It is to demonstrate God gives believers an equal status (each is a child of God). It is to affirm all share the same inheritance (each will enter and dwell forever with Christ in the new heavens and earth). And it is to demonstrate God calls and equips men and women to fulfil different yet complementary functions.

To do otherwise is to subvert God's order, adopt a sectarian spirit, and forfeit his blessing.