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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Representative Priesthood ?

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GOOD wine needs no bush, nor do good causes need bad arguments. Bad arguments, indeed, will make their goodness suspect. Whether ordaining women to the presbyterate is a good cause or not may here be left open, but it is certainly daunting to see how often arguments in favour of this practice turn out to be bad ones. A case in point is the line of argument expressed in recent years as follows (my italics):

'We are convinced that the Church needs without delay a *representative* ministry of women just as it needs a *representative* priesthood of men' (*Gender & Ministry*, CIO, 1962, p. 17).

'The ordained ministry is *representative* of Jesus Christ in the Church and of the whole Church which is His Body. . . . Since he *represents* both men and women the ordained ministry ought surely to be composed of both. Can it be truly *representative* of the whole Church if it does not comprise both sexes? Is there not a sense in which the present three-fold ministry is "defective" or "lame" because it excludes the characteristics, qualities and experience which women would bring?' (*Women & Holy Orders*, Anglican Group for the Ordination of Women to the Historic Ministry of the Church, n.d., p. 2).

'A woman's priesthood, it is true, would not be the same as a man's. But women would bring to the priesthood particular gifts and insights which would enlarge its scope, enrich its witness and make it truly *representative*' (*Women & Holy Orders*, CIO, 1966, p. 29).

In this argument, which turns on the idea of the ministerial priest as a representative person, two assumptions are involved.

1. It is assumed that presbyteral priesthood is a form of ministry which involves a representative relationship (a double one, in fact, as we shall see) operating at two distinct levels. In addition to being the appointed delegate of the parties represented, the priest (so it is being assumed) ought as far as possible to exhibit the personal qualities of those parties, and so be a sample as well as a spokesman. Now it is true that the words 'representative' and 'represent' can be used in either of these senses separately, as when a political leader is said to represent those for whom he speaks irrespective of character-differences

between him and them, or when Dr. Billy Graham is said to represent a whole class of American evangelists inasmuch as they are like him and he like them. But when it is assumed that Christian presbyters must represent the Church in both senses at once the question arises whether this is an insight or a confusion, and in the absence of scriptural argument for the former it is hard to avoid concluding the latter.¹

2. It is also assumed that as priests are representative persons in this double sense, so they represent two distinct parties to each other: God in Christ to the Church, and the Church to him. This is not controversial: the Ordinal tells presbyters to preach, teach, declare forgiveness and shepherd the flock in the Lord's name, and the liturgy tells them to address God in the congregation's name (and it is inevitable, just as it is regrettable, that the world judges the Church by its clergy). But why should this ministerial representation of the Lord and the Church to each other be held to necessitate that some priests be women? Such necessity seems neither logical nor theological (i.e., biblically determined). Perhaps what is in the minds of those who call the all-male Anglican ministry 'defective' and 'lame' is that whereas the presbyter's ministry involves the showing of pastoral sympathy (as did that of the Jewish High Priests, and as does that of the Lord Jesus: see Heb. 4:14-5:2), men and women differ so much that men cannot appreciate or minister to women's problems. Experience, however, down the centuries testifies otherwise; the supposition is as false as it would be to assume that Christ, being sinless, cannot feel for and with sinners.

The idea that the ministry represents the church has been an Anglican commonplace since R. C. Moberly's *Ministerial Priesthood* appeared in 1897—'still' according to Professor A. T. Hanson in 1969 'the best single work written by an Anglican' on its subject.² Moberly's contention is that the Christian presbyterate and episcopate are priestly by virtue of being the church's appointed organ for the liturgical fulfilment of its corporate priesthood in Christ. A liberal catholic, steering between the view that priestly ministry in the apostolic succession is constitutive of the Church and the view that there is nothing specially priestly about the Christian ministry at all, Moberly argued three positions: first, that the total Church is priestly because its life in Christ is one of loving self-offering to God and man, as Christ's own life was and is; second, that this life-activity requires external liturgical expression (supremely in the eucharist); third, that ordained clergy are the authorised and empowered agents who 'represent, act for, and wield ministerially the powers of the whole', and who as individuals may properly be called priests because they embody 'with an eminent distinctiveness' the 'concentrated meaning' of the Church's priesthood.³ But Moberly's line of argument, even if accepted in its entirety, does not bear on the point at issue, which is whether the existing ministry is 'lame' for lack of women. Moberly is arguing that what is concentrated in ministerial priests is the Church's priestly calling, not its

bisexuality as a human community nor its corporate experience of grace; his line of thought does not touch the question of women in the ministry, and it contains nothing to counter the observations that 'a male priest represents both sexes in a way which a woman does not, in organised society and church', and 'men and women on the whole will not value women as representatives; they estimate women in their own personal right'.⁴ The very existence of Women's Lib. shows that these observations are true as a matter of fact, and public reaction to the movement suggests that they are likely to remain so.

Indeed, if sexual correspondence is held to be required for truly representative ministry the argument for an all-male clergy because of the maleness of Christ (the emblem of his masterfulness as our Saviour) is much stronger than the argument for a bisexual clergy because the Church is bisexual, if only because the minister's representative relations to Christ, as his ambassador, is in every way prior to his relation to the Church, as its liturgical agent. C. S. Lewis argued that a Church which ordains women becomes 'less like a church' because its order then witnesses a degree less clearly to the spiritual reality which makes the Church, namely the lordly saving ministry of Christ himself. In the army, wrote Lewis, 'you salute the uniform, not the wearer. Only one wearing the masculine uniform can (provisionally, and till the Parousia) represent the Lord to the Church; for we are all, corporately and individually, feminine to him.'⁵ In the orders of both creation and redemption, what man is to woman is an emblem of what God is to us all: 'we are dealing with male and female not merely as facts of nature but as live and awful shadows of realities utterly beyond our control are largely beyond our direct knowledge,'⁶ and where our knowledge lacks fulness as it does here we are in no position to innovate. It is hard to counter reasoning like this from any Christian standpoint, and from the standpoint of the argument under review impossible.

We conclude, then, that the particular argument which we set ourselves to examine is intrinsically unconvincing, boomerangs, and so tends to discredit its own cause.

Notes

¹ As does V. A. Demant when he speaks of the sentence quoted above from *Gender & Ministry* as containing 'a confusion between representation as meaning likeness of the specimen to the things represented, and representation as a deputed delegative function' (*Women & Holy Orders*, p. 110).

² Introduction to SPCK reprint, 1969, p. xviii.

³ Moberly, *op. cit.*, pp. 259-262. Moberly's view, though widely accepted, can be criticised as (a) giving precedence to a function (priesthood in the church's name) which the New Testament nowhere explicitly mentions (b) not giving precedence to the functions of preaching, teaching and ruling in Christ's name which are central in the New Testament account of the Christian ministry (c) assimilating the Church's priesthood too closely to Christ's High Priesthood. The remarkable influence which Moberly's view has had may reflect less its intrinsic cogency and scripturality than its attraction as a counterweight to Roman views and its strong moral appeal to an institutionalised body of clergymen.

⁴ Demant, *op. cit.*, pp. 110, 111. ⁵ *Undeceptions*, Bles, 1971, p. 195. ⁶ *op. cit.*, p. 196.