

## A Theological Reflection on upholding Complementarian Integrity with a female Archbishop

For complementarian evangelicals committed to upholding the Scriptural teaching about the role differences of men and women in marriage and ministry ([summarised here](#)), the nomination of Bishop Sarah Mullalley as the 106<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury presents obvious challenges. For those seeking to obey the 'headship' principles of 1Corinthians 11:2-16, how are we to respond to the appointment of a woman as 'head' of the Church of England?

I offer the following to aid our reflections.

**1. The Church of England is committed to providing for our conscience.**

The Five Guiding Principles state that explicitly, and I have every hope and expectation, particularly in the light of my experience of working alongside +Sarah, that arrangements will be made that are consistent with our convictions. It is most relevant for my own ministry, in that in line with my role description, I will not receive the ordained ministry of women presbyters or bishops. As a suffragan in Canterbury Diocese, that will require some special arrangements to be made for my role to have integrity, so that it is clear that I am not under the archbishops spiritual oversight – but I have every expectation that this will be forthcoming.

**2. We are already in 'impaired fellowship' with +Sarah, under the terms of the 5 Guiding Principles**

+Sarah herself acknowledges that the situation for which my ministry is provided, is already a tangible expression of the impaired fellowship that was introduced by the 2014 settlement, let alone any further complications arising from the PLF process. I have a longer section on the significance of impaired fellowship in Section D & E of the document "[Questions on Prayers of Love and Faith](#)". However, while impaired fellowship does require a response from us and a provision for our biblical integrity, it is an expression of our response to an error in the Church, not a separation from the Church, and is effectively a call for us to work for its reformation insofar as we are able.

**3. There is a distinction in canon and scripture between the spiritual and legal authority of a bishop/archbishop – so you are not necessarily under +Sarah's spiritual 'headship'.**

A Church of England bishop or archbishop's legal authority is their '*jurisdiction as Ordinary*' (Canon C17.2 & C18.2) – which expresses their legal responsibilities to order the church according to law. They are the person who oversee the ordination and licensing of clergy to their legal responsibilities in parishes, and their compliance with canon law– which is expressed by clergy taking an oath of 'canonical obedience' and promising to obey them in all things 'lawful and honest', which makes explicit this legal aspect.

A Church of England bishop's spiritual authority is expressed as them being '*chief pastor of all that are within his diocese*' (Canon C18.1) – which expresses a spiritual oversight expressed in faithful teaching and discipline, holy living and peace-making: '*it appertains to his office to teach and to uphold sound and wholesome doctrine, and to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange opinions; and, himself an example of righteous and godly living, it is his duty to set forward and maintain quietness, love, and peace among all men.*' So in broad terms, their spiritual authority describes 'what a bishop can do', their jurisdiction describes 'where a bishop can legally do it'!

This distinction of legal oversight and spiritual oversight is explicit in Canon C19 which directs how '*spiritual jurisdiction*' is managed distinct from '*jurisdiction by the laws*', and Canon C20 which describes how any jurisdiction or episcopal power of a suffragan bishop is delegated by their diocesan bishop, while their spiritual oversight belongs to their consecration (*ie they remain bishops even if not licensed*).

When fellowship with a bishop is impaired, it is primarily their spiritual ministry and authority that is impacted, their teaching, discipline, example and ability to make peace that is compromised. It is those aspects of oversight that a minister and parish require from an alternative bishop, to whom the suitable delegation of jurisdiction is made. Where spiritual ministry has been delegated, it is to that bishop that spiritual headship belongs.

This same distinction is echoed in Scripture in Acts 23:5 where Paul recognises the legal authority of the high priest, while resisting his spiritual authority. Jesus himself makes a similar distinction in John 19:11 where he contrasts the guilt of failed judicial power with that of spiritual responsibility. Most especially in Matthew 23:1-3, Jesus calls for his disciples' obedience to those who 'sit in Moses' seat' – that is, publicly reading and teaching Scripture; but not to follow them in their disobedience to those Scriptures – because they don't 'practice what they preach'. We are to honour their office in the law, but not their unfaithfulness in spiritual ministry

It is also true that this distinction between legal and spiritual oversight lies at the heart of the arrangements under which I express my episcopal ministry. I am fully, completely and spiritually a bishop, but my ministry is restricted only to those places where I have been granted legal authority. That is the same as a parish presbyter – spiritually you are a presbyter everywhere, legally you can only be the presbyter in the parish to which you are licensed.

The implication of this is to recognise that being under the legal authority of a bishop or archbishop whose episcopal ministry you cannot receive, does not require you to be under (ie in obedience to) their spiritual authority. The former is a matter of canonical obedience – submission to governing authority (Romans 13:1-5); the latter is an expression of spiritual obedience – submission to God expressed through biblical authority (eg Hebrews 4:12f). Therefore you can faithfully minister under a bishop with whom you are in impaired fellowship, by remaining faithful to your calling to serve your flock, while not receiving the ministry of those who are in spiritual error. This is explored explicitly in Article 36, which speaks of how to rightly relate to 'evil ministers' in the church.

#### 4. What does a female Archbishop change?

For those in ordained ministry in the Church of England, it changes very little. Those of us in impaired fellowship with bishops who are women, will continue to seek provision for our biblical conscience. That will be especially complex for me personally, but as long as a clear public legal delegation of my spiritual oversight is made, I should otherwise be able to continue, even with a legal title still in Canterbury.

For the wider Anglican communion, the existing impaired fellowship with the Archbishop of Canterbury will likely continue, not only over the PLF arrangements, but also because a majority of Anglican Provinces do not recognise the consecration of women as biblically legitimate, so it will complicate those relationships further. It will almost certainly accelerate the trajectory, already begun, to see that ++Canterbury is not necessarily the ceremonial 'head' of the Anglican Communion, particularly if the role is understood as a necessary 'instrument of communion'.

For our witness to the nation, it will further complicate our desire to communicate a positive complementarian understanding of the differences between men and women, in marriage and ministry. What is given by God for our good, is likely to be obscured by this appointment. However in Scripture and history it has always been those remaining faithful to Scripture that have been the seed of the Church's revival. At a time when the Church is at its lowest ebb in a lifetime, the call for courage and faithfulness to biblical truth and ministry has never been stronger.

I know that for some, appointing a women to the role of Archbishop will feel like another step from the simplicity of a Church that clearly submits to the authority of Scripture in its doctrine. However it is still the case that *'The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures.'* (Canon A5). Our faith and calling have not been changed. The needs of our nation remain as serious as ever. The Lord is still on His throne, the gospel is true and our future is secure in Christ. Let's continue to spur each other on to the love and good deeds our nation and Church needs. And if there are particular concerns or questions I can help you to explore further, please let me know and I will happily follow them up with you. Remember our monthly virtual coffee time is always open as well – Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> October 10-12am [LINK](#).

Yours faithfully,



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