

'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us'?

A reply to Dick France

Melvin Tinker

Many of us are grateful for the work of Dr Dick France over the years – in particular for the way he brings his sharp mind to bear on matters of scriptural exegesis, so producing outstanding and helpful works such as his IVP commentary on Matthew.

In the article now published in *Churchman*, Dr France ventures out of his particular field of expertise. He considers a matter which, while involving some exegetical considerations, relates more pertinently to doctrinal and systematic theology and, to a lesser degree, philosophical theology as well. By his writing on this subject we are indebted to Dr France for unintentionally highlighting for us the primary issues which divide evangelicals at the present time. We shall argue that the answer to the question 'How can it be that the same Scriptures can be understood by different people as requiring quite opposite conclusions?' does not (as argued by Dr France) depend on their willingness or otherwise to re-examine Scripture in the light of changing circumstances; it is rather that some have adopted an hermeneutic which is ultimately subversive to an evangelical approach to Scripture.

There are many points raised by Dr France with which we would wish to take issue, but the temptation must be resisted in order to focus on what we believe to be the central underlying thesis which needs questioning. However, since in the debate on the ordination of women it has often been alleged that 'The long-delayed recognition that slavery was not in accordance with the mind of God is often, I believe rightly, cited as in some ways parallel to the current debate', this is one point which is deserving of some response.

Is it really a parallel? We think not. In the New Testament neither the preservation of marriage nor the mirroring of the headship principle within the family of the church parallels the preservation of slavery. The first two are rooted in the creation ordinance, as Paul argues in Eph 5, 1 Cor 11 and 1 Tim 2; the last is not. The seeds for slavery's dissolution were already sown in the New Testament (Philemon 16, Eph 6:9; Col 4:1, 1 Cor 7:21). Paul grounds his reasons for the way a woman is to relate to her husband and to authority within the church in creation, but he does not use such

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reasoning to support his contention that slaves should submit to masters.

Attention must also be drawn to the fact that, whereas in the slavery debate of the 18th and early 19th centuries it was a reading of the Bible and a desire to be consistent in its application which led many within the church to try to change society's thinking and behaviour, in the debate on the ordination of women the reverse is the case. This is implicitly, if not explicitly, recognised by Dr France when he says 'Society has changed . . . Society is impatient with the few remaining bastions of male privilege'. The irony is that evangelical feminists (if one may use the term) resemble the 19th century defenders of slavery, in that both have used arguments from the Bible to justify conformity to strong pressures from society!

Let us now turn to Dr France's main argument in which he cites Acts 15 as an example of the way the early church changed its mind in the light of changing circumstances, which supposedly led them to a re-reading of Scripture.

The first thing to note is that this seems to be a case of someone wanting to 'keep their cake and eat it'. At one point Dr France refers to Acts 15 as 'an interesting parallel', and then backtracks by saying 'I am not suggesting, of course, that there is a direct parallel'. However, for the argument to have force a parallel must be assumed. But is such an assumption warranted?

Dr France writes that the issue in Acts 15 'was essentially one of how the Scripture must be applied in the new situation which now confronted the church'. However, this is not how Luke (nor Paul if Galatians 2 refers to the same incident) sees it: Acts 15:1 'Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved"'. The issue was the nature and means of salvation. It was a Gospel issue. This is not the case with the ordination of women. One is not raising questions about the basis for women's salvation or their entry into the church.

Without going into close detail of the events themselves, Dr France loosely relates the events in Acts in such a way that he posits that the issue is one of a disagreement between those Jewish 'traditionalists' who insist on reading the Old Testament one way, and others who, in the light of recent experiences, contend that they should be read another way. But is this a fair handling of the texts? For example, Dr France writes that following Acts 11:18 came 'the disturbing news of the large-scale evangelisation of Gentiles in Antioch, which Barnabas was sent to investigate'. Disturbing for whom? Not for the majority of the church or for those active at its centre. So I. H. Marshall writes of this development:

It is not necessary to assume that their action was motivated by suspicion still less by hostility. At the most, it may have been necessary to do something to placate a group of right-wing Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were to cause difficulty at a later stage and who may already have been opposed to the admission of Gentiles to the church without circumcision

being demanded of them; nothing suggests that this group was dominant in the church, but the leaders did their best to conciliate them.¹

The central thesis is that changing circumstances led to a change of mind and a re-reading of the Scriptures in this regard. Certainly a change of circumstances did lead the early Christians to re-read the Scriptures, but not in the way Dr France argues in his paper. It was the life, death and resurrection of Christ which caused them to view the Scriptures differently – including their understanding of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2). But this was not something which came years later with the 'synod' of Acts 15 being the setting for an official re-reading of Scripture. For what was being confirmed in experience was *already* recognised as being taught in the Old Testament (the quote from Amos 9 being but one example) and prepared for by Christ himself (Matt 8:5ff; 12:18ff; 15:21ff; 28:16). Those centrally active in the life of the church at the time were simply attempting to be consistent in their understanding and application of Scripture in this regard. Certainly in some cases God had to take remarkable steps to overcome natural prejudice, as with Peter at Joppa, and even after that natural weakness and inconsistency surfaced again (see Gal 2:11). But it was clear all along that Gospel principles, already present in the Old Testament, required the admission of Gentiles to the Church. The lesson of Acts 15 is that this was done in a pastorally sensitive manner; there is no hint that this involved a change of Scriptural principle.

But even if one were to grant that here we have the culmination of a development leading to a new re-reading of the Old Testament Scriptures and the *church* changing its mind, one cannot push the analogy with the Church of England's synod too far. While claims were made there that 'the Spirit of God was guiding' (bearing in mind that similar claims have recently been made in the Church of Wales yet resulting in a different decision), here in Acts we are talking about a very special period in the church's life. It is the formative period of the apostles – a period which is now at an end, unless one is going to abandon traditional evangelical belief and adopt a Newmanian approach to the development of doctrine. However highly we may esteem Dr George Carey, it cannot be at the same level as Peter or the Apostle Paul!

In passing, it might be worth protesting that the parallel with Acts 15 is unfortunate for another reason. By implication, those who oppose the ordination of women for biblical reasons are being likened to the Judaizers and those in favour as the more enlightened, liberated Gospel men like Paul and Peter. The emotive effect of the way Dr France marshalls his case is to put his opponents in the worst light possible by undesirable association. I wonder what the reaction would have been if the advocates of women's ordination had been tarred with the Sadducee brush?

Now to the nub of the matter.

Dr France quite rightly does not argue that the chief reason why evan-

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gelicals differ on this issue is because the texts are ambiguous, for they are not. Even Paul K Jewett who argues for the ordination of women has said regarding 1 Cor 11:

Whatever obscurity one may feel in the reference to angels, such obscurity does not affect the plain meaning of Paul's argument as a whole set forth in 1 Cor 11. The subordination of the woman to man is an essential part of the hierarchy which God himself has established to ensure a proper order in the relationships of life.²

Our exegesis has not substantially changed. Nor has our attitude towards the authority of Scripture in principle changed. What has changed is society, the church and hermeneutics.

This is the key issue.

Dr France, together with some other evangelicals, has adopted what Dr John Woodhouse of Moore College, Sydney has termed a 'developmental hermeneutic'. According to this model we have in the New Testament 'worked examples' of how the early church applied principles derived from the Gospel. How those principles are applied will vary from situation to situation. In Ephesus Paul applied them one way; we in our situation may apply them another way. But surely, what this does not allow us to do is to apply principles to our situation in such a way that the resulting practice subverts and works in a direction which is entirely the opposite to that in which it is worked out in Scripture. But the effect of developmental hermeneutics on the women's ordination issue is precisely this.

If change in our society creates pressure within the church to re-read Scripture in the way Dr France suggests, then under what conditions will Scripture be allowed to 'read' society, that is challenge it and oppose it? This developmental hermeneutic is too much 'one way'. The assumption is that we are in a better position to read certain parts of Scripture than Paul was (including his understanding of Genesis 1 and 2). We are certainly more sophisticated in our application. But let us suppose that it is we rather than Paul who are culturally blinkered, reading the Scriptures through the lens of whatever the prevailing *zeitgeist* is in society? How, with Dr France's approach to hermeneutics, can we be corrected? How does Paul have to speak for us to hear him and be corrected by him? One may wonder whether a more appropriate title for a paper which argues this position would be 'It seemed good to the spirit of the age and to us'.

We too would like to draw a parallel. The parallel is between the arguments used by Dr France for the re-reading of Scripture to allow for the ordination of women and the arguments used for endorsing homosexual practice. If the attitude of society were to change to an extent that, to modify Dr France's words, 'it became impatient with the few remaining bastions of heterosexual privilege and began tarring the church, and therefore its Gospel with the brush of homophobia and injustice', would this mean that we should go back to the Scriptures and reinterpret those texts

which appear to rule out homosexual practice? If one is to be consistent then the answer must be 'yes'. Society has changed, the church may change too, and 'developmental hermeneutics' is at hand to enable the church to adjust to such changes with minimum of effort. Formally the arguments and methodology used by Dr France in his paper are exactly the same as those used for legitimising homosexual practice. Is it not time to question seriously an hermeneutic which leads to such results?

The language may not be particularly conciliatory, but we would do well to heed this warning from Dr Carl Henry:

in recent years . . . a type of theft has emerged as some fellow evangelicals, along with non-evangelicals, wrest from the Bible segments that they derogate as no longer the Word of God. Some now even introduce authorial intention or cultural context of language as specious rationalizations for their crime against the Bible, must as some rapist might assure me that he is assaulting my wife for my or her own good. They misuse Scripture in order to champion as biblically true what in fact does violence to Scripture.³

It was Peter Berger who complained that whereas Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss, today we betray him with an hermeneutic. Intentional betrayal is not the issue, but whatever the motive, the effects of betrayal remain the same—a destruction of relationships and the subversion of truth. The plea is that as evangelicals we do not let this happen.

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NOTES

- 1 I. H. Marshall, *Acts* (IVP, 1990), p. 202.
- 2 Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1975), p. 57.
- 3 Carl F. Henry, 'The Bible and the Conscience of our Age', in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, ed Radmacher and Preus, p. 917.