

Obstacles to Christian Unity

By Mark Mayberry

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Introduction

According to Mr. Brian Farrell, who serves as a [Bishop](#) in the Roman Catholic Church, and also as secretary of the [Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity](#), the appointment of Anglican women bishops in the Church of England is an “enormous obstacle” to unity between the Anglican and Catholic churches. Granted, Mr. Farrell gives voice to typical Roman Catholic errors: misunderstanding the role of a bishop, overemphasizing the role of tradition, etc. Nonetheless, he correctly acknowledges that Christian unity cannot be divorced from doctrine/practice.

Vatican official: Anglican women bishops an ‘enormous obstacle’ to Christian unity

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In an interview published July 15, Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, called the prospect of the appointment of women bishops in the Church of England an “enormous obstacle” to Christian unity.

“All the Churches of the first millennium, Catholic, Eastern and Orthodox, state that only men can be ordained,” he said. “These Churches see the ordination of women as an illegitimate abandonment of authentic Tradition.”

“It saddens us that on this point the Anglican Communion has left what we consider the essential Tradition of the Church since its beginning,” he continued. “But the process began a long time ago.”

“We will continue the ecumenical dialogue with a realism that accepts things as they are and is aware that the road ahead is long and arduous. Knowing, however, that dialogue is a task imposed by Christ himself and sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit, soul of the Church of Christ.”

Bishop Farrell emphasized even apart from the provisions of *Anglicanorum Coetibus*-- the 2009 document that paved the way for Anglican communities to be received into the Catholic Church-- individual Anglicans may be received into the Church in local parishes at any time they wish.

Source: <http://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=6943>

Understanding the Role of Tradition

We would agree that the ordination of women is, indeed, “an illegitimate abandonment of authentic Tradition,” so long as emphasis is placed upon the authority of divine traditions (1 Cor. 11:2-3; 2 Thess. 2:13-15; 3:6-9) rather than the human variety (Matt. 15:1-9; Col. 2:20-23; Titus 1:13-14).

According to the inspired apostle Paul, “women are to keep silent in the churches” (1 Cor. 14:34-36). Additionally, he said, “A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet” (1 Tim. 2:11-15).

Moreover, the qualifications of a bishop/overseer restrict the office to men. If any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. He who would serve in this capacity must be the husband of one wife, managing his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity, etc. (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

The teaching efforts of women find proper expression in the home, with mothers instructing their children (Prov. 31:10, 26-27), in private, as when Aquila and Pricilla took Apollos aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately (Acts 18:24-26), or among themselves, as when older women instruct younger women regarding domestic and familial duties (Titus 2:3-5).

Understanding the Role of a Bishop

It is important that we have a proper understanding of the role of a bishop. The New Testament uses a family of Greek words to identify the office and work of a bishop. The Greek noun *episkopos*, occurring 5x, refers to a guardian, overseer, superintendent, or supervisor (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 2:25). A related noun, *episkopē*, twice refers to an office of responsibility or oversight/supervision (Acts 1:20; 1 Tim. 3:1). The Greek verb *episkopeō*, occurring 2x, means to give attention to (Heb. 12:15), and also signifies the acceptance of responsibility for the care of someone, i.e., to oversee (1 Pet. 5:2).

Let us recognize that the terms elder/presbyter, bishop/overseer, and pastor/shepherd refer to the same function or office. The Greek word *presbuteros*, translated “presbyter” or “elder,” identifies one who is an older man, one advanced in life, an elder. The Greek word *episkopos*, translated “bishop” or “overseer,” identifies a superintendent, an overseer, one who sees that things are done properly. The Greek word *poimen*, translated “pastor” or “shepherd,” identifies one who does in the church what a shepherd does for a flock of sheep. Just as the words “church,” “body,” “kingdom,” etc., collectively refer to the people of God, so each of these words refer to the same office (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

Finally, we must distinguish between universal and local oversight. Jesus Christ, the Shepherd and Guardian of our Souls, possesses absolute authority (Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 1:20-23). As ambassadors of Christ and inspired agents of revelation, the apostles exercised authority over all the churches (1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 14:33; 16:1). However, the oversight of elders is limited to the local congregation of which they are members (Acts 20:17, 28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Pet. 5:1-2).

Understanding the Role of Doctrine

It is important that we have a proper understanding of the role of doctrine. Some mistakenly restrict the application of 2nd John 9 to those who deny that Jesus has come in the flesh. Certainly the humanity of Christ must be affirmed, but acceptance of His deity is equally important. What is meant by “the doctrine of Christ?” I affirm that it refers, comprehensively, to the teaching that came from Christ and was communicated through inspired apostles and prophets (2 John 7-11; cf. John 14:25-26; 15:26-27; 16:12-15).

When Jesus said, “My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me,” He was not only speaking of the doctrines relating to His person (i.e., His deity and humanity), but also to the gospel message as a whole (John 7:14-18). Similarly, when Solomon said, “My son, observe the commandment of your father And do not forsake the teaching of your mother,” his emphasis was not on the identity of one’s father/mother, but rather on the instruction that they provided (Prov. 6:20-25).

In warning against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus was not so much concerned with who they were, but what they taught (Matt. 16:5-12). The same principle applies to “the teaching of Balaam” and “the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Rev. 2:14-16).

Sailing to Cyprus, Barnabas and Paul encountered Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Paphos, a man of intelligence who gave ear to the word of God. However, Bar-Jesus/Elymas, a magician and Jewish false prophet, sought to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Pronouncing divine judgment upon this evil man, Paul struck him with blindness for a season. Afterwards, the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord. Once again, note that “the teaching of the Lord” was comprehensive, including not just who Jesus was, but also what He taught (Acts 13:4-12), being synonymous with “the word of God” (vs. 5, 7), “the faith” (vs. 8), and “the straight ways of the Lord” (vs. 10).

Writing to Titus, Paul commanded servants to “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.” Once again, a consideration of the context demands a comprehensive understanding of “the doctrine of God,” requiring not only a proper understanding of the person of God, but also the varied demands that He places upon His children (Titus 2:9-14).

Conclusion

In the aforementioned article, Mr. Farrell demonstrates a misunderstanding regarding the role of a bishop, and the authority of tradition. Roman Catholics affirm the general oversight of bishops, and appeal to the authority of human traditions. Holy Scripture limits the oversight of elders to the local congregation of which they are members. Furthermore, it denies the authority of human tradition, exalting the word of God as the sole basis of religious authority.

However, at least in principle, Mr. Farrell understands that deviation from Biblical teaching directly impacts Christian fellowship. Unity among believers is a noble goal, but it must be established upon a proper foundation. Let us, therefore, strive for Scriptural unity based upon truth, not a pseudo-unity that comes from setting aside the same (Psa. 133:1-3; Eph. 4:1-6).