

Australia's Presbyterians have changed their minds.

PETER BENTLEY reports on the restrained and charitable debate of the recent general assembly, when three women and about two hundred men voted on the future of women's ordination. Only one guess is required on the outcome.

How can a woman be saved?

In this, the final battle(?), the 'traditionalist troops' only occasionally emerged from the trenches.

It was quite clear that the valiant attempt by the 'rebels' to maintain their ground would not succeed.

The casualties were already being counted and as usual, most of the silent victims were women. For this observer, the shell-shock is wearing off and now part of the strategic victory can be reported.



The 1991 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia has secured a place in history. During this century more and more churches have allowed women to enter their ordained ministry. The Presbyterian Church, however, did a complete backflip. By margins of 124-60 and 116-61 respectively, the Assembly decided to:

- delete the clause which said that "women shall be eligible for admission to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments" and
- approve that "men only shall be eligible for admission to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments."

To understand the decisions at the Assembly one must understand the process which has operated during the last few years as the issue has been discussed, debated and voted on at the Presbytery level and at the State Assembly level. For the 1991 General Assembly to decide on it, the issue had been remitted to the other church levels where two-thirds of the states and a majority of presbyteries had to agree on the change. A majority of presbyteries did agree and the required number of four states voted in favour of the changes (Queensland, Victoria, W.A and Tasmania).

• *Decision 'already made'*

AFTER a series of complicated motions concerning the validity and compliance of some state returns, the Assembly moved to decide the issues at hand. It was quite clear that for many Assembly commissioners (official delegates), the state and presbytery voting patterns had already dictated the direction the church should take and the only thing they had to do was to confirm the changes.

The Rev. David Burke stated "The Church has spoken" and Dr Nigel Lee told the Assembly that the only issue was the notice of motion — it was an administrative decision. However, the people who opposed the changes wanted to engage in debate. Dr Helen Clements (one of the three women commissioners out of a possible total of 214!) spoke about the difficulties of actually getting debate on the issues. She also reminded

Some women are saying they no longer have a role to play in the church!

Next year we review our position on slavery!

They must be patient.



the Assembly of the little material (information) available to it.

There was a constant flow of speakers to the floor, with a reasonable proportion both for and against.

A speaker to an earlier motion, the Rev. Graham Bradbeer, placed the debate firmly in a historical and Biblical context by referring to the women who were the witnesses to Jesus. He noted that Presbyterians had been one of the last to recognise the cultural position of slavery in the New Testament. He also pointed out that many evangelical scholars now recognised the cultural dimensions of the passages concerning the role of women in the church. Few in opposition picked up this key point.

The Rev. Peter Hastie later stated that he had surveyed 19 scholars of varying persuasions and that they all had similar positions on the key text for those opposing the ordination of women (1 Timothy 2: 11-14). Unfortunately he did not provide a list of these scholars. I can only assume that it did not include people like F.F Bruce, who had been the 'darling' of evangelicals, particularly in Sydney, until a paper of his supporting the ordination of women was found; or Australian theologian Kevin Giles, who is one of the most prolific writers on the issue.

Hastie said that the Biblical position was clear and was only opposed by evan-

gelicals who did not want to accept it. He went on to say that Jesus had been betrayed by a kiss, but now he was betrayed by an interpretation.

The headline position of those evangelicals who oppose the ordination of women must be understood within a framework of Biblical respect bordering on fundamentalism and authoritative interpretation. To these evangelicals, women's ordination is not a minor matter, but one of the issues of faith. Allowing women to be ordained means giving women authority which in turn undermines a perceived evangelical position on Biblical authority.

Having women in authority is seen as the first step toward apostasy. To stop what many perceive as the slippery slide to Goddess rituals, homosexual ministers etc, the Presbyterian Church chose to purify itself and establish a particular view of Biblical interpretation as the final authority for all time.

Unfortunately, many evangelicals in the Presbyterian Church seem unaware that the debate has simply passed them by. They are still arguing on levels which have been rejected by other evangelicals during the last few years. In the Anglican Church it is now established that the debate has swung the other way. It is now up to those who oppose to prove their case. Even evangelical doyens like John Stott have admitted this.

Evangelicals always want to be distinguished from fundamentalists, and one of the key differences is the use of exegesis, but the tone of some of the speakers lacked this evangelical character. It was more a case of "here are the words — believe". This approach is of course inconsistent with being an evangelical, and it is probably realistic to say that it reflects the dominance of the growing fundamentalist body in the Presbyterian Church.

Sometimes this concentrated Biblical focus can encourage the taking of what are really quite extraordinary positions for someone who it is presumed is an evangelical. One speaker, who is best left unnamed, actually proposed that the maleness of Christ revealed to us the fundamental principle or nexus of the abiding pattern of men-women relationships. The fact that Jesus had 'male flesh' was depicted as necessary. This point must have been very disturbing to

conservative group to enter into dialogue over some of the key practical points. Helen Clements outlined a simple logical argument concerning the Rev. Joy Bartholomew (the only woman minister commissioner at the Assembly), but also applicable to the five practising women ministers in the church. Joy Bartholomew was ordained in 1976.

Helen argued that the moves to *not* ordain any more women meant that Joy had to be either bad or mad. Bad because she had misled the church over her calling or mad because she was deluded that she had a calling in the first place. It is obvious why this argument was not addressed by the conservatives. They were unable to encompass their position, but also explain Joy's calling. It was like Jesus asking those without sin to cast the first stone.

Joy Bartholomew clearly outlined that she had come not to seek authority, but to "serve Jesus Christ my Lord." She

daind, but they have in effect told them they were not really ordained. People may say that these new regulations have no effect on the continuing status of the women who are presently ordained, but really this is like Brutus placing a bucket under Julius Caesar to catch the blood.

Overall, the spirit of the meeting was perhaps surprisingly restrained. There was little venom displayed. Still there was a contrast between the conservative evangelicals — who overall presented themselves as a cold, determined group — and those supporting the ordination of women, who displayed greater passion and a wider range of Biblical, philosophical and pastoral reasoning.

• *Plea for pause*

WITH others, the Rev. Stuart Clements pointed to the closeness of the vote as a reason to give the church pause, and await greater consensus: "We Presbyterians have such a bad record in conserving the church. I plead with you!"

One of the more worrying aspects of this decision is the question of who or what will be next. Already in Queensland, the Presbyterian Church has withdrawn from The Bible Society because many view the membership of the Roman Catholic SDA churches as encouraging compromise on the church's position on the Bible.

With the doctrinal relationship in the church between the ordained ministry and the eldership being so close, the eligibility of women as elders will surely now be on the list for review. Women in any authoritative role will operate under suspended clouds.

In closing, it is appropriate to quote from Geoff Barnes' book about the history of the laity, *The Forgotten Factor*. In discussing the need to welcome the rich diversity in the Christian community, Geoff warns of another approach.

"There is an eerie myth about a Greek innkeeper who invited many guests into his standardised beds. If guests were too small, they were racked and stretched until they fitted, even if they died. If others were too big, they were cut down to size ..."

*"Joy had to be either bad or mad.
Bad because she had misled the
church over her calling or mad
because she was deluded that she
had a calling in the first place."*

even the very conservative evangelicals present, not only because it uses an argument from another tradition which fundamentalists regard as apostate, but because if one follows the argument, it is quite logical to assume that maleness is necessary for salvation and thus plain that women cannot be saved or at least saved as much as men.

Another disturbing feature of the debate was the seeming reluctance of the

was responding to the Rev. John Davies who had referred to rich fat women in Rome who wanted authority (1 Corinthians). Joy took this to imply certain things about her calling. Mr Davies indicated that he had not made any personal reference and was sorry if his comment on one of the Biblical records had been misinterpreted.

Of course the church has not de-ordained the women who have been or-