

Objections to My Essays on Women's Ordination



I am pleased to discover that someone actually takes the time to read my blog. An Anglican deacon named Christopher Little has taken the time to address my series of essays on women's ordination. I am happy to have my views challenged. I believe that what I have written is defensible, but, if not, the sooner I am corrected, the better. Little begins by addressing my first essay, "Concerning the Ordination of Women: Preliminaries."

I began that essay by noting the names of a number of contemporary orthodox theologians and biblical scholars who embrace women's ordination: T. F. Torrance, Ben Witherington, N.T. Wright, Richard Hays, Michael Gorman, Robert Gagnon, and Alan Padgett.

Deacon Little comments:

Now, it's of course fallacious to argue or even imply that because a number of noted "orthodox Christians" defend women's ordination ("WO" going forward) that Witt therefore stands in good company. It may be the fact that each and every one of these ostensibly orthodox Christians happens to be heretical on this particular issue, and defenders of the traditional view believe that they are in fact so, their commendable orthodoxy on all the other issues notwithstanding. Also fallacious is the argument that "the number of orthodox Christians endorsing WO is not a small or insignificant group." Size doesn't matter in this discussion.

What matters is whether or not WO is an unbiblical and uncatholic innovation.

It is of course correct that the number of adherents to a position does not determine its truth. At the same time, the number of those who disagree with a position does not determine its falsity. The point here was not to "count noses." When there is disagreement about an issue, it does mean something that there is *sizable* disagreement. It is possible that one side is simply stupid or deliberately deceptive, but charity would not assume that without giving a fair hearing to the opposition.

I deliberately listed the above names because they are some of the most significant and respected scholars in late twentieth century and early twentieth-first century *orthodox* theological and biblical scholarship. T.F. Torrance was one of the most significant systematic and historical theologians of the late twentieth century. If one wants to know something about trinitarian theology, then one had better know Torrance. Christology, incarnational theology and atonement? Ecumenical theology? Sacramental and liturgical theology? The relationship between theology and modern science? Torrance.

The other scholars I mentioned are all experts on NT scholarship. Hays, Wright and Gorman are recognized authorities on Paul. Witherington has written critical commentaries on every single book in the NT, and his doctoral dissertation (later published by Cambridge University Press) was likely the first ever study of every single passage referring to women in the NT. It is still considered an indispensable work in the field. Gagnon's book on homosexuality and the Bible is considered the definitive work in the field. Given that so much of the discussion about women's ordination rests on the interpretation of passages in Paul, it might have some significance that perhaps the majority of contemporary NT Paul scholars say that there is

nothing in Paul's theology that would forbid the ordination of women. It might be significant if the foremost expert on what Paul says about homosexuality also says that nothing in Paul forbids women's ordination. If we have Wayne Grudem (pretty much alone) on the one side, and a significant number of the most respected Pauline scholars on the other, that alone is worth noticing.

Deacon Little writes:

What matters is whether or not WO is an unbiblical and uncatholic innovation.

And, of course, that is correct. However, it is also the case that the people I mentioned are in fact experts in the area of both biblical studies and (in Torrance's case) evangelical, ecumenical, and catholic theology. It is, of course, possible that these intelligent *orthodox* theologians and biblical scholars suddenly become either "dunces," dishonest, or "heretics" when they discuss the issue of women's ordination, but it would be presumptuous to make such an assumption without first hearing what they have to say.

I wrote:

I have also known a number of orthodox ordained women clergy who are my friends, and whom I greatly admire, and, at the seminary where I teach I have been privileged to have as students women who were among the best students, finest preachers, and some of the most promising theologians of any of my students. I think it would be a great tragedy for the church to deny these women the opportunity to use their gifts and pursue their callings, but, even more, to be served by them. I am writing this series of posts primarily for these women.

Deacon Little comments:

So we see here something of the emotional motivation for Witt's series of articles. He has close female friends who have been ordained to the priesthood and valued female students who are headed there. I again want to commend Dr. Witt for his honesty, because there's a lot of emotional fuel here at work in his thinking and writing. Enough emotional fuel, in fact, to create a very bad argument.

I'm not quite sure why Little presumes that because I have had women friends who are ordained clergy that my primary commitments on this issue are emotional. I also have friends (including male clergy) who do not believe in women's ordination. If my emotional commitment to my friends who do not believe in women's ordination is not decisive for my *disagreement* with them on this issue, then neither should my friendship with ordained women be considered emotionally decisive for my endorsement. I am quite capable of being friends with people without allowing my friendships to be decisive about whether or not I agree with them. I would hope that is true of most people.

The one area where my friendship with ordained women was decisive was that it provided the reason for me to write this series of essays. I have other projects I would prefer to work on, and I would have preferred someone else write these essays. However, no one else was doing it, and so, as I stated, I decided to do the job because I care about these women.

Deacon Little adds:

But Witt also begs an essential question when he refers to these women's "calling" to the priesthood, for the very question to the apostolic and catholic Christian is whether such a "calling" can even exist.

I would only be "begging the question" if I somehow assumed

that my assertion here was *itself* an argument, and that I had no actual warrants for my position beyond the assertion. But setting out those warrants is the entire purpose for this series of essays. Of course, I did not provide the warrants in *this* essay. It is, as I state, *preliminary* to the discussion. After the essays have been read and my arguments have been addressed would be the time to decide whether I was “begging the question.”

I wrote: “My path to Anglicanism and my path to the approval of women’s ordination was the same path, and the theological arguments that led me to the one were of the same kind of arguments that led me to the other.”

Deacon Little comments:

Here we get a glimpse into the long-standing nature of Witt’s emotional attachment to the proposition that women may be ordained to the Anglican priesthood. He confesses that he rejected the traditional view of ordination he encountered of his free church past, and that this was one of the reasons he was attracted to Anglicanism – at that time represented in North America by The Episcopal Church.

Here I fear that Little has simply misread what I wrote. I did not say that my commitment to women’s ordination was one of the reasons that I was attracted to the Episcopal Church. I wrote: “My path to Anglicanism and my path to the approval of women’s ordination was the same path, and the theological arguments that led me to the one were of the same kind of arguments that led me to the other.”

My path to Anglicanism was somewhat peculiar. The only Southern Baptist studying theology at a Roman Catholic seminary, I decided at the end of the period working on my Master’s degree to become an Anglican because, during my time at seminary, I immersed myself in the specific theological issues that were the focus of disagreement at the time of the

Reformation, and came to theological conclusions that led me to Anglicanism. That decision had nothing to do with women's ordination. I wrote something about that process here.

In the same way and at about the same time, I came to endorse women's ordination for *theological* reasons, after having done a great deal of reading on the issue, both in favor and opposed. In both cases – becoming an Anglican, endorsing women's ordination – I followed a similar process: doing the necessary research, weighing the theological arguments, coming to a reasonable conclusion – but there was not a *causal* connection between the two positions.

Little concludes that my summary of the difference between Protestant and Catholic objections to women's ordination is largely accurate, but then adds:

Witt's assessment at this point is more or less correct, although I would argue that there really isn't such a neat and clean distinction between "Protestant" and "Catholic" arguments as he seems to suggest. While it's true that Evangelical opponents of WO tend not to argue along liturgiological, ecclesiological and other theological lines as Catholics do, it isn't true that Catholic defenders of the traditional view tend to shun the biblical argument for male headship in home and church.

Little is correct that there does exist some overlap among Catholic and Evangelical opponents of women's ordination – especially among Anglicans. What he does not acknowledge is that what he calls "Catholic defenders" who embrace arguments for "male headship in home and church" are at odds with the official position of the Vatican. Modern Roman Catholic theology (including Pope John Paul II himself) is officially egalitarian. As Sara Butler writes: "Because the contemporary magisterium has abandoned the view that women are unilaterally subject to men, it obviously does not supply this as the

reason women cannot be priests.”¹

Deacon Little expresses dissatisfaction with my distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics:

Both the “Protestant” opponents of WO whose emphasis is on the exegetical approach and “Catholics” who emphasize the theological approach understand well the role that understanding of 1st-century culture plays in conservative hermeneutics, but they would argue that the pertinent biblical material in this case is not culturally conditioned, say, as Paul’s comments on slavery would be. Surely Witt understands that liberal Episcopalians would argue that the Bible’s proscription of homosexual behavior is just as much “culturally conditioned” as is its proscription of WO, and thus because of such a “hermeneutical” consideration 1st-century religious culture must give way to 21st-century secular culture. So, it would seem Witt’s argument proves too much. If neo-Anglicans can undo 2,000 years of tradition with respect to WO on the basis of “hermeneutics”, liberal Anglicans can do the same with respect to homosexual behavior. He can’t have it both ways.

But surely Little is aware that there were defenders of chattel slavery in the nineteenth century who would have argued that what Paul said about slavery was *not* “culturally conditioned.” Of course, I am aware that theological liberals argue that the Bible’s prohibitions of homosexuality are culturally conditioned, and that opponents of women’s ordination (whether Protestant complementarians or Catholic sacramentalists) argue that male-only ordination is *not* culturally conditioned. It is precisely because disagreements like this are possible that simple appeals to either Scripture or tradition will not resolve the issue – why the questions of (1) slavery; (2) same-sex sexual activity; and (3) women’s ordination, are a matter of hermeneutics – how to apply what the authors of the Bible said addressing issues of first-

century culture to our different current cultural situation. Nineteenth-century advocates of chattel slavery argued that *none* of (1), (2), and (3) were culturally conditioned. Conversely, modern advocates of same-sex unions argue that (1), (2), and (3) are *all* culturally conditioned. Contemporary opponents of women's ordination argue that (1) is culturally conditioned, but not (2) and (3), while orthodox proponents of women's ordination argue that (1) and (2) are culturally conditioned, but not (3). That's not *quite* my argument – I don't argue when addressing exegetical questions that the biblical writers held views about women that can be ignored because they were culturally conditioned, but rather that the complementarian arguments are misreadings – but the point is clear. Simple appeals to Scripture and tradition will not resolve the issue; nor will simple assertions that biblical references to slavery are culturally conditioned, but traditional opposition to women's ordination is not. If *I* can't "have it both ways," *neither* can opponents of women's ordination.

1 Sara Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2006), 47.