

An Initial Response to the Anglican Diocese of the Living Word's "Response" to "Women in Holy Orders"



A couple of years ago, several bishops of the ACNA approached Grant LeMarquand, fellow Professor at Trinity School for Ministry, former Bishop in the Horn of North Africa, and current interim Bishop for the Diocese of the Great Lakes in the ACNA, and myself with the request to write a short summary of the biblical and theological case for women's ordination to the priesthood (presbyterate). We were asked to keep this as short as possible; initially ten pages was suggested, but the final copy was still only 22 pages, plus bibliography. At that length, we could not attempt a complete argument, but only a summary, which, of course, meant that some concerns could receive only cursory attention, and even where a bit more detail was given, only a few essential points could be mentioned. One of the purposes of the attached bibliography was to point people in the direction of further resources to address some of the questions that such a short summary inevitably would raise.

The document was released only to the House of Bishops, not publicly. The primary reason for this, as an ACNA bishop wrote to me in email, was that the bishops who requested it "didn't want your work to begin another round of a 'T I T for T A T'

debate on the blogs.” Both Bishop Grant and I have been frustrated that what we wrote was not made publicly available, but we are also quite aware of the low level of discourse on the internet. As we wrote in the original essay, “In producing this statement we have no desire to be contentious. Our desire is simply to uphold what we believe to be a biblical and godly practice.” What we intended is expressed in the following paragraph:

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is not to attempt to coerce any diocese into the practice of ordaining women as presbyters. This statement acknowledges that the reasons given for not ordaining women are coherent (although we disagree with them) and that it has the weight of much (but certainly not all) of the history of the church on its side. What the signers of this paper contend is that the argument in favor of ordaining women is also coherent and that there are important arguments in its favor. Most of all, we contend that there is a substantial body of scriptural reasoning and theological argument in favor of ordaining women as priests. This statement will not present every argument which could be made: substantial arguments have been made elsewhere (see the short bibliography attached). Our statement is meant to be merely an outline of the major arguments, especially those from scripture. This scriptural witness leads us to believe that the ordination of godly women as leaders in Christ’s church should continue to be authorized in ACNA dioceses that have decided, or may in future decide, in favor of this policy.

I want to emphasize upfront that the purpose of our original essay was not to engage in polemics, but to open up conversation. Although we disagree with those who oppose women’s ordination in the church, we assume that they hold their positions in good faith, and that they intend to uphold the teaching of Scripture and church tradition. At the same time, those who affirm the ordination of women also hold their

positions in good faith, they intend to uphold the teaching of Scripture and church tradition, and they are not insignificant in number. The majority of dioceses in the Anglican communion affirm the ordination of women, as probably do the majority of historic Reformation churches (Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist). The authors we cite in our bibliography are representative biblical scholars and systematic theologians from numerous church traditions: mainstream Protestants (Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist), Anglicans, and (despite the opposition of their own churches) Roman Catholics and Orthodox. They include some of the most respected and authoritative voices in biblical and theological scholarship of the last two generations. To the best of my knowledge, none of the authors in our bibliography could be characterized as "revisionist," theologically "liberal," or "modernist" in their theological approaches.

When Christians who agree in affirming the sufficiency and primacy of Holy Scripture, embrace the historic creedal faith of the church, value and respect the catholic tradition of the church, agree in upholding the historic moral stances of the church as expressed in Scripture and tradition, yet find themselves in disagreement about a controverted theological issue, the question arises as to how we should go about resolving, or at least acknowledging, disagreement. The approach of a generous evangelical and catholic orthodoxy would be to affirm mutual agreement where it exists, to acknowledge inevitable disagreement, to continue in conversation in hope of resolution of disagreements, but until then to listen respectfully to one another's arguments, and neither to misrepresent another's position, nor to dismiss someone for holding a positions that he or she does not actually hold.

That of course would be the ideal. Unfortunately, far more in keeping with the current spirit of the age would be to echo the pattern of the partisan debates that so frequently poison

the rhetoric of the internet. One might not actually accuse those with whom one disagrees of heresy (although this certainly happens), but it is almost as bad to imply that those in the church who disagree with us are either ignorant, scoundrels, or fools, and perhaps all three. One might summarize one's opponent's position in a way that he or she would not recognize as what he or she actually believes, one could then address one's arguments against those "straw men" positions created by one's own imagination, refute positions not actually held, and then declare victory. Sadly, this has too often been the pattern of disagreement in the history of the Christian church even among those who self-identify as orthodox Christians.

Which leads me back to the topic of the essay written by Bishop Grant and myself. Although we did not release our essay to the public (at the request of the bishops of the ACNA), we were both surprised to discover recently that not only had the document been publicly released (without either of the authors being notified or consulted), but that what we wrote as a short essay and an outline was accompanied by a "Response" (actually an attempted refutation) that was quite a bit longer than the original essay. The "Response" seems to be an official document of "The Anglican Diocese of the Living Word." The "Response" is anonymous, produced by a "team of four clergy" at the request of the Rt. Rev. Julian Dobbs.

The difference in length between the two documents means that the "Responders" can raise issues or objections of which we certainly would have been aware, and which we might well have addressed in a longer essay, but could not address in a short summary. I myself have written a series of essays on women's ordination that comes to 500 pages of written text, that has been edited and accepted for publication by a major academic religious publisher. There is almost no objection or observation raised in the "Response" that I have not already addressed somewhere in those essays. My immediate temptation

is to respond to the "Response" with the suggestion that people can read my response when my book is published in a few months.

Nonetheless, I intend to respond to the "Response." Because of its length, and the numerous issues it raises, I will not be able to do so in a single essay. First, however, I want to express my concern about the tone of the "Response," which all too often echoes the typical rhetoric of internet debate. Bishop Grant and myself are accused of sharing an "examined bias in the ecclesiology of our culture" ("unexamined bias" was probably meant). The "Responders" refer to "progressive theologians" who read "a dualistic, detrimentally hierarchical and patriarchal structure *into* the text," who embrace a "*linguistic turn* [that] results in the idea that an authoritative interpretation of a text is not possible." They then go on to claim: "Several hermeneutic factors of this type are at play when Drs Witt and Marquand (sic) argue against what they perceive to be the conservative position on the ordination of women." However, neither Bishop Grant nor myself believes or claims that Scripture has a "dualist," "detrimentally hierarchial," or "patriarchal structure." Neither do we believe that "an authoritative interpretation of a text is not possible." The authors of the Response do not offer actual evidence that we engage in "several" such "hermeneutic factors," because we do not, so they cannot. The objection ascribes to us dishonorable motives based on assumptions that we affirm positions that we would actually oppose.

In a similar example, the Responders write that we "have been so influenced by late 20th and early 21st century notions of gender equality that they cannot help but read these notions into the text." One wonders how the Responders know so much about the real sources of our theological views, given that our arguments in the essay are exegetical, historical, and theological, and it is a very short essay. One would be hard-

pressed to trace the “influences” behind any twenty-odd page essay.

We are told that the “authors misrepresent the Catholic position,” “inaccurately characterize the Catholic position,” and that “the authors seriously misrepresent the Catholic argument against the ordination of women.” Actually, we represent the Catholic position correctly, as I will show in a later essay. But “misrepresent” and “seriously misrepresent” speak not to competency, but to honesty. The criticism goes beyond disagreement with our interpretation of texts to accuse us of moral turpitude.

On occasion, the essay puts forth positions that we neither assert nor agree with, addresses them as if they were our positions, and then refutes not something we actually wrote, but rather something else instead. Concerning our discussion of the translation of the word *kephalē* (translated as “head” in Ephesians 5 and 1 Corinthians 11), the Responders claim that use of the word in the LXX means that “they cannot *now* argue that Paul, familiar with the LXX, would be utterly unfamiliar with that usage” (my emphasis). Of course, we argued no such thing, nor would we.

About our claims concerning church tradition, they write: “Their analysis of this reality . . . is so flawed that it can be disproved by appeal to their own sources, as has been demonstrated already.” If our position were “so flawed that it can be disapproved” from our own sources, how could we not have noticed the inconsistency? Here I’m not sure if we’re being accused of stupidity or dishonesty. Again, concerning our reference to Epiphanius and the *Apostolic Constitutions*, they write: “We must conclude that these claims put forward by the authors are simply false.” Again, we are being accused here of either dishonesty or stupidity.

So before I begin to address the actual arguments of the “Response” in later essays, I want to note first my concern

about the essay's tendentious rhetoric. A person who was not theologically trained, and was unfamiliar with the current state of scholarly discussion concerning these issues would inevitably have to conclude that Bishop LeMarquand and myself were either frauds or fools, or more likely both. I myself would certainly not trust anything written by two such scoundrels as Bishop Grant and myself are portrayed to be in this document.

This is not the first time I have encountered such rhetoric from those opposed to women's ordination. It is unfortunate that those who profess to be orthodox Christians cannot engage in disagreement without casting suspicions on the motives or the competencies of those with whom they disagree. Unfortunately, that is too often the nature of such discussions these days. It is unfortunate that a "Response" to an essay we wrote that began with the statement "We do not desire to be contentious" would itself be not only deliberately contentious, but would question our motives, and accuse us of either poor scholarship or of deliberate misrepresentation. We stated in our original essay: "The use of arguments *ad hominem* (the logical fallacy which attacks the person rather than the position – a form of argumentation which, sadly, have become prevalent on the internet) should be resisted." Unfortunately the writers of the "Response" proved unable to resist. I certainly understand why the ACNA bishops "didn't want your work to begin another round of a 'T I T for T A T' debate on the blogs." Unfortunately, that is exactly what has happened.

My own response to the "Response" will follow in later essays.