

Concerning the Ordination of Women: Preliminaries



The following is the first in a series of essays on the question of women's ordination. This is something that I have not addressed on my blog up to this point, for a number of reasons. Most of what I write, I hope to be in the flavor of what C.S. Lewis called "mere Christianity." I prefer to be an apologist for Evangelical Catholic theology from an Anglican perspective. Theologically, my approach tends to be ecumenical, looking for areas of agreement and consensus among orthodox Christians. On the occasions where I have ventured into polemics, it has been in response to the challenges of those who reject this perspective. So I have consistently written against liberal Protestantism, which I think is the great heresy in the church today. I have engaged in argument against those who have challenged the catholicity of Anglicanism on such questions as the development of doctrine. But there are some issues on which I have not written precisely because I have preferred to avoid the kinds of heated polemics that these issues raise. I have not yet written on Christianity and politics. I have not written on women's ordination.

However, in recent years, a number of people have asked me to write something on women's ordination, either because they wondered what my position was, or because they knew my

position and wanted me to put it in writing. I do endorse the ordination of women, and it is a position endorsed by numerous orthodox Christians. T. F. Torrance, Ben Witherington, N.T. Wright, Richard Hays, Michael Gorman, Robert Gagnon, and Alan Padgett are just some of the male orthodox biblical scholars and theologians who have written in favor of gender equality or women's ordination or both. The number of orthodox Christians endorsing women's ordination is not a small or insignificant group. Unfortunately, for whatever reasons, they are not as vocal as those opposed to women's ordination, and, especially among orthodox Anglicans lately, the loudness at least of those opposed to women's ordination has reached such a crescendo (at least in public discussion) that one might get the impression that this was a decided issue.

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 essays primarily for these women.

Where I Stand

First things first. I am strongly in favor of the ordination of women, and have been since I was in my twenties. I was raised in a church that did not approve of the ordination of women, and still does not. I left that church for a number of reasons and became an Anglican. The journey from free church Evangelical to sacramental Anglicanism was a long story that took a number of years. 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. I have never been

attracted to theological liberalism, and my reasons for becoming an Anglican had nothing to do with the liberalism of the Episcopal Church. Indeed, I became an Episcopalian because the Episcopal Church was the American representative of Anglicanism. Because the Episcopal Church embraced liberal Protestantism as its official theology at General Convention 2003, I am no longer an Episcopalian, but I am still an Anglican. When I was first considering the question of the ordination of women, I read the literature, and I embraced women's ordination for theological reasons. I found many of the arguments against women's ordination to be weak and illogical. Consistently, those arguments were marked by a kind of *ad hoc* reasoning. Having decided in advance that women should not be ordained, opponents then advanced arguments to explain why this had to be the case. Despite the weakness of these arguments, they continue to be used.

Three Different Kinds of Arguments Against Women's Ordination

There are basically three different kinds of argument against women's ordination. The first kinds of arguments are non-theological pragmatic arguments. For example, WO is part of a secular agenda. WO was introduced into the church by liberals. WO will lead the church to liberalism. There is no difference between ordaining women and ordaining practicing gays. These arguments are characterized by their lack of properly theological substance.

More properly theological arguments tend to fall into two different kinds as there are basically two different kinds of traditions that do not ordain women: Protestant arguments and Catholic arguments. By "Protestant," I mean Christian traditions that have their roots in the Reformation, affirm *sola scriptura*, do not allow much authority to church tradition or councils, with the exception perhaps of Saint Augustine and the Reformers, and who tend to have a low (if not Zwinglian) view of the sacraments. Some in Reformation churches – such as Anglicans and Lutherans – would not

necessarily fall into this category, but there are Anglicans and Lutherans who would. By "Catholic," I mean Christian traditions that, while affirming the significance of Scripture, also place a high value on church tradition, and have a high view of the sacraments. Churches that fall into this category would include not only Roman Catholics, but also the Orthodox, and some (but not all) Anglicans and Lutherans.

Protestants and Catholics (in the specific sense in which I am using the terms) understand the purpose of ordination differently, and consequently use different theological arguments against women's ordination. Protestants tend to understand the purpose of ordination as having to do with authority, with preaching, and with teaching, and their arguments focus on the exegesis of Scripture. Accordingly, the kinds of anti-ordination arguments they use generally focus on three related issues in biblical interpretation: (1) hierarchical relations between men and women (men are in charge, and women are not); (2) whether women should preach in the pulpit; and (3) whether women should teach men. Protestant arguments tend to be exegetical, appealing to biblical passages that seem to affirm (1) a hierarchical understanding of the relation between men and women, (2) forbid women to speak in church; (3) forbid women to teach.

Catholics tend to understand the purpose of ordination as having to do with celebrating the sacraments (particularly the Eucharist). Catholics tend not to be concerned with exegetical issues involving Scripture, but rather focus on the tradition of the church, and arguments regarding sacramental theology. Their arguments generally focus on (1) the tradition of the church; (2) the conditions of valid sacramental ordination; (3) in terms of biblical exegesis, such questions as the function of the Old Testament priesthood; the relation between Jesus and his apostles; the kinds of roles women exercised in the church both in the Bible, and in the history of the church.

Different understandings of ordination, and different concerns result in anomalous contrasts between the two positions, with Catholics arguing, for instance, that women cannot be ordained because they do not resemble Christ, and Protestants arguing that women cannot be ordained because they do (more on this in subsequent discussion). Protestants who believe that lay people can celebrate the Eucharist would presumably have no problem with women doing so, but would not allow the same women to preach or teach or exercise authority over men. Catholics might have no problem with women preaching, teaching theology, and, even, perhaps, exercising some kind of pastoral leadership, so long as they do not celebrate the sacraments. Because of these differences, particular arguments of Protestants and Catholics have to be addressed separately. Arguments that impress Protestants have no interest for Catholics, and vice versa.

The Hermeneutical and Theological Difference

It is also important to note that there is a crucial difference between Scripture and tradition on the one hand, and hermeneutics on the other. This is the difference between understanding what the writers of Scripture taught, and what was taught in the traditions of the church (exegesis and church history), and how we address the same issues today in a different ecclesial and cultural setting (hermeneutics and systematic theology). It is the difference between “what did it mean?” and “what does it mean?,” between what Scripture and tradition said then, and how we apply it today. Too many opponents of WO think that the question can be resolved by a simple appeal to Scripture or tradition. Protestants will appeal to Paul’s prohibitions against women speaking in church or having authority over men. Catholics will appeal to the church’s tradition of ordaining men, and assume that this settles the question. But the question needs to be addressed theologically. Biblical or historical precedent alone is not a theological argument without addressing the theological

reasons behind the precedent.

One last point. Some topics are, by their nature, polemical. Discussions of politics and women's ordination inevitably raise hackles. That's just the way it is. It is not my intention to offend, but some will no doubt take offense at what I write. I wish anger and hurt feelings could be avoided, but this is not a reason not to say things that I think need to be said.

So much for preliminaries. Future essays will consider individual arguments.