

Concerning Women's Ordination: A Response to the "Ordination Challenge"

The following presupposes some familiarity with two earlier essays: [Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument "From Tradition" is not the "Traditional" Argument](#) and [Concerning Women's Ordination: The "Tradition" Challenge](#)



A gentleman named [Michael Joseph](#) has responded to my "ordination" challenge.

1) C. S. Lewis once responded to an unsympathetic critic who had clearly gotten his views wrong: "[W]e all know too well how difficult it is to grasp or retain the substance of a book one finds antipathetic." I suppose I should not be surprised if a response to my essay seems rather seriously to miss much of the point of my argument. A key point in the misreading seems to be the presumption that I assume that the Church Fathers were simply irremediable sexists and had nothing good to say about women. Accordingly, the author presumes it sufficient to point out that if Tertullian says some good things about women or that Chrysostom speaks positively about women in marriage, or if Augustine does not believe that "Eve is by nature more a sinner" that this somehow invalidates my argument.

A single paragraph in my earlier essay should set straight that misunderstanding:

In making this point, it is not my intention to embrace the kind of diatribe that one occasionally encounters in revisionist feminist scholarship that portrays the entire history of the church as nothing but an unmitigated practice of oppressive subjugation and patriarchal abuse of women. Such one-sided readings can find their counterparts in equally one-sided accounts of how Christianity remarkably improved the status of women in the pagan world, and was, on the whole, a remarkably good thing for women. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to trace a consistent pattern in the history of the church that explains why the church has not ordained women. Some selective examples follow. (These are typical, but not exhaustive.)

So no, I do not at all believe that pre-modern church tradition is simply uniformly negative toward women. To the contrary, I state concerning Aquinas:

Thomas could speak in almost glowing terms of the relations between men and women. Asking whether woman should have been made of the rib of man, he responds with an illustration that points to the partnership and companionship of men and women, an adapted form of which has been used in countless wedding services . . .

Moreover, in my recent challenge I state: "It is not enough to provide some individual positive statement about women mentioned by a Patristic, Medieval, or Reformation author."

And indeed it is not. The same Aquinas who could speak so positively about Christian marriage could also write: "So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates."

The same Richard Hooker who could glowingly write about marriage – "The bond of wedlock hath been always more or less esteemed of as a thing religious and sacred." (Laws 5.73.3) –

could also write: “And for this cause they were in marriage delivered unto their husbands by others. Which custom retained hath still this use, that it putteth women in mind of a duty whereunto the very imbecility of their nature and sex doth bind them, namely to be always directed, guided and ordered by others” (*Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book 5, 43.5)

So much of what Mr. Joseph says is simply beside the point of my argument. Tertullian, Chryostom and others could simultaneously say very positive things about women in some respects, while simultaneously agreeing that women could not exercise church office for the very reasons I mentioned – that in comparison to men they are less intelligent, more emotionally unstable, and more subject to temptation. Mr. Joseph’s assumption seems to be that it is impossible for a single person to hold both opinions. Since the church fathers say many positive things about women, he assumes that they could not simultaneously believe that women are ontologically inferior in certain respects. I agree that there should be a logical inconsistency here, but the inconsistency is not on the part of the one recognizing the inconsistency.

And it is this presumption that makes up almost the whole of Mr. Joseph’s argument. Over and over he follows the pattern:

Witt quotes A affirming X which Witt interprets to mean Y.

However, X cannot possibly mean Y because A also says Z, and no one who says Z could also believe Y.

Therefore, Witt has to be mistaken when he says that A affirms X, and whatever it sounds like A is affirming, A cannot mean Y.

However, the argument fails if it is possible that A might possibly affirm both Y and Z simultaneously. That the simultaneous affirmation Y and Z seem incoherent from our point of view does not give us permission to conclude that no

one could ever have thought differently.

And, of course, the key point of my argument concerning the new tradition concerning women's ordination is that all sides now agree that it really does not make sense to affirm both Y and Z simultaneously. Since the church really wants to affirm Z, it quietly quit affirming Y.

2) Joseph makes things easier for himself, but also concedes a central point in my argument by restricting the allowed time of discussion to the "first five centuries" of church history. To my claim that "a sizeable body of Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation" authors was presented, he responds: "A sizable body of early church writing was certainly not presented," and "Only nine quotes were provided . . . from the period from before 500 AD."

However, it was never my intention to provide an exhaustive discussion and I certainly never intended to restrict myself to the patristic era. I did not claim to be presenting a sizeable body of any single period, but a sizeable body of selective writers from the entire history of the pre-modern church. My intention was to be both representative and comprehensive – to include writers who were patristic, Medieval, Reformation, Eastern, Catholic, Protestant. Given that this was a blog essay (not an entire book), it could not be exhaustive. I wrote:

Nonetheless, it is not difficult to trace a consistent pattern in the history of the church that explains why the church has not ordained women. Some selective examples follow. (These are typical, but not exhaustive.)

However, by restricting the discussion to the patristic era, Mr. Joseph actually makes a major concession. The later writers that Joseph excludes from the discussion necessarily have to be excluded since they so inarguably confirm my claim.

At the same time, however, Mr. Joseph (perhaps unwittingly) makes things more difficult for himself because he is trying to make a case for a theology of ordination for which there is no evidence in the patristic period. There is almost no discussion of such notions as clerical priesthood, eucharistic sacrifice, or priestly representation in the patristic period because there is very little discussion about the priesthood of Christ. As I write [elsewhere](#), "What is missing from the writings of the church fathers is any detailed discussion of this relationship between Christ's priesthood and the priesthood of the ordained clergy."

If the discussion is to be kept to the first five centuries, it will be a very short discussion.

Now to the discussion of the specific texts:

3) Tertullian

Joseph tries to soften Tertullian's claim concerning women being the "devil's gateway" by claiming that Tertullian is simply following Scripture: "Is Tertullian not allowed to make this observation?" He then follows the pattern I mentioned above. Tertullian exhorts women to holiness. He calls them "fellow servants and sisters." Then the key quote: "Tertullian's tone dramatically shifts, doesn't it!" That is, because Tertullian affirms Z, he could not possibly have meant Y when he said X. (Oh, yes, Tertullian also says some critical things about men, so it all evens out.)

However, what if Tertullian could affirm both Z and Y, whether we ourselves find that consistent or not?

I included Tertullian as affirming "Statements that women are more susceptible to temptation than men:" Tertullian does not simply warn women against following Eve's example. He states that they too are Eve, and they are personally responsible for Eve's sin, and thus share her guilt. Because Eve yielded to temptation, the women Tertullian addresses yield to

temptation. Because they yield to temptation, they are “the devil’s gateway.” According to Tertullian, women (not men) are the “first deserter of the divine law.” And the women to whom Tertullian is speaking (not men) are those who persuaded “him (men) whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack.”

This goes beyond simply affirming the teaching of Scripture. Does Tertullian claim that women are more susceptible to temptation than men? Yes. (The devil was not valiant enough to attack the man because he would not have yielded.) Do women lead men into temptation? Again. Yes.

4) Epiphanius

Mr. Joseph selectively reads Epiphanius, whom I discussed at some length in my earlier essay. I acknowledged that Epiphanius refers positively to both the virgin Mary and the four daughters of Philip the Evangelist. But I then made the following points: 1) Epiphanius does not actually make any argument beyond appealing to historical precedent: Eve, Mary, and Philip’s daughters were not ordained. 2) At no point does Epiphanius make a connection between male ordination and the celebration of the sacraments. At no point does he suggest that the male apostles resemble a male Christ, or that there is a correlation between masculine priesthood and the eucharistic presidency.

Epiphanius does provide an explicit warrant against women’s ordination, however: “Women are unstable, prone to error, and mean-spirited.”

So what is the point of the appeal to Mary and Philip’s daughters? They provide a negative example against ordinary women. If Mary and Philip’s daughters were not ordained, then *a fortiori* we cannot ordain women who are “unstable, prone to error, and mean-spirited.”

5) I’m not sure what point Joseph is making in reference to the Augustine quote. In my challenge essay, I had included

Augustine as an example of "Claims that women are subordinate to men." In my original essay, I had written that Augustine was "typical" of the claim that even before sin, women had been subject to their husbands. This claim is certainly correct. Joseph asks "Is Augustine's argument that Eve is by nature more a sinner?" Well, no. But I had affirmed no such thing.

6) Chrysostom

Joseph seems to have completely missed the point of my Chrysostom citation. Again, he follows his predictable pattern. Chrysostom says lots of good things about how men should love their wives. Joseph then makes much of a sentence I quoted that "the modest woman pierces and disturbs the mind."

However, he completely ignores two more crucial quotes:

First that the bishop must have more care for the "female, [in the congregation], which needs more particular forethought, because of its propensity to sins."

Second, Joseph insists that Chrysostom's claim that women are more adept at household management while men are better at worldly affairs is simply an affirmation of what he calls a "complementarian" outlook. He misses, however, that in an agrarian society, management of worldly affairs would certainly have been associated with greater intelligence. To the extent that women could not be ordained because they presumably lack these skills, there would certainly be an understanding of not just difference but deficiency. Moreover, Joseph ignores Chrysostom's explicit statement about why women cannot teach: "Why not? Because she taught Adam once and for all, and taught him badly. . . . Therefore let her descend from the professor's chair! Those who know not how to teach, let them learn. . . ." This is not simply an affirmation of gentle love and complementarity. And, again, given that

Chrysostom's position is a kind of "complementarianism," restrictions on women's teaching "because they taught Adam badly" points to an ontological incapacity.

And, finally, even if Chrysostom's argument is that women cannot be ordained because of different kind of intelligence related to household management, this corresponds to no contemporary argument against WO. Contemporary complementarians studiously avoid making those kinds of claims. Contemporary sacramentalist arguments are not interested in gender differences at all except insofar as they relate to an ability to resemble a male Christ.

7) The Obsession with Complementarianism

Joseph anachronistically describes the position of Chrysostom and others as "complementarianism" and "headship" and also refers positively to the organization CBMS and the Danvers Statement. In so doing, he ignores a crucial point of both of my earlier essays. The "complementarian" position has been explicitly repudiated by both the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. It is because of this explicit repudiation that new arguments have had to be embraced concerning masculine sacramental representation.

To the extent that Joseph repeatedly characterizes the church fathers as "complementarians," he confirms my point. Insofar as the contemporary Catholic position repudiates complementarianism, it is at odds with the historic position.

At the same time, there is something odd about appealing to the church fathers to support what is actually a Protestant argument. However, even here, as I've again made clear, Tertullian, Chrysostom et al, do not simply affirm the contemporary complementarian argument. They do indeed claim that women are less intelligent, more subject to temptation, etc., which is contrary to the complementarian position. That they can also say nice things about women does not somehow

undo this.

8) Apostolic Constitutions

Joseph claims that my quote from The Apostolic Constitutions is simply another example of “complementarianism.” However, the connection between the man being the “head” to the “unreasonableness” of the body (the woman) governing the head indicates not merely a subordination, but a subordination rooted in a difference in intelligence. According to AC, it is only “reasonable” that the “head” (the thinking and talking part) governs the body (the irrational part).

Joseph appeals to the Apostolic Constitutions speaking positively about women (there’s the standard argument again) and to the claim (as in Epiphanius) that Jesus did not ordain women. Actually, the claim is that Jesus was not *baptized* by his mother. (Of course, contrary to AC, the modern church does allow women to baptize.) But again, the historic argument is rooted in hierarchical authority of men over women, specifically including teaching. There is nothing here of the modern Catholic argument concerning sacramental resemblance to a male Christ, and, again, as noted above, the most straightforward reading has to do with rationality: it is not “rational” for the body to govern the “head.”

Joseph also makes the odd claim that because the *Didascalia Apostolorum* is essentially contained in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, it is “not really a separate quote.” However it says something about the transmission of a tradition that a distinct community takes up an earlier writing and incorporates it again as a new text. We would not argue that Luke’s gospel is not really a separate witness because Luke incorporates material from Mark’s gospel.

In the end, my reading of the texts still stands.

Some final observations. I stand by my claim that the new complementarian and sacramentalist arguments against WO

represent new traditions insofar as they depart from the logic of the earlier tradition.

I find it ironic that I was challenged for providing insufficient patristic evidence for my argument – “A sizable body of early church writing was certainly not presented – and then Mr. Joseph concludes with a series of suggestions about early church history that are entirely speculative, and without any patristic textual evidence whatsoever. The advantage of my argument is that it is at least based on actual textual citations. It is also confirmed by the readings of other scholars who may not agree with my position concerning W0, but who acknowledge that a genuine change has taken place. Sara Butler, whom I cite as the preeminent advocate for the new Roman Catholic position, acknowledges that the position introduced by Pope Paul VI is not the historic position, and the the historic arguments are no longer considered tenable.

I also find it ironic that Joseph appeals to a Protestant “complementarian” reading of the patristic tradition to justify what is actually a “Catholic” position concerning the normativity of church tradition. He does not acknowledge that the Evangelical “complementarian” position is at odds with the new Catholic sacramental position. Both the Roman Catholic Church as well as the Orthodox Church have rejected complementarian understandings of the relationship between men and women, and are emphatically clear that they do not base their opposition to W0 on complementarian grounds. So to the extent that Joseph affirms a complementarian reading of the patristic tradition, the more difficult it becomes to make the claim that the current Catholic position is not a departure from that tradition.

Finally, Joseph repeatedly makes reference to an “apostolic tradition” based more on speculation than textual evidence. He refers to a “mind of the early church” and an “apostolic consensus.” But we know that “mind” only from actual texts,

which don't say a whole lot about ordination, and even less about women's ordination. Insofar as they address women's ordination at all, they provide problematic arguments against it. Moreover, the primary concern in these patristic arguments has nothing to do with sacramental practice (the Catholic concern), but is entirely about authority of men over women. Insofar as the question is raised as to why women cannot exercise authority over men, there is a consistent answer – which I've documented, and which appears again and again in the later history of the church.

Joseph states that “Jesus Christ, the GodMan, apparently had compelling reason(s) to not clearly ordain women . . .” To the contrary, [Jesus Christ did not ordain anyone](#). Jesus did call twelve Jewish male apostles, but the [typologically symbolic reasons for that are obvious](#). Jesus could not have called women apostles for the same reason that he could not have called Chinese apostles or fifty-seven apostles. Although it can be argued that clergy are successors to the apostles, there is no more reason that they would have to be male than that they would have to be Jewish or that their numbers would be restricted to twelve.

Finally, I note that Joseph responded to my challenge by addressing a different issue instead – that I was mistaken in my reading of certain of the church fathers. He did not make the case for explicit parallels to either the modern Complementarian nor the modern Catholic sacramentalist position. (Pointing out that the fathers say some nice things about women does not cancel out what they also say about why women cannot teach or exercise authority – which is the crucial patristic argument against W0). Interestingly, although his appeal to “tradition” presupposes a “Catholic” position, he argued instead that the patristic tradition actually has affinities with the Protestant Complementarian position. He quietly avoided discussing the issue of sacramental resemblance to a male Christ, but that would be an

extremely hard argument to make insofar as the fathers simply do not make that argument.