

Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument "From Tradition" is not the "Traditional" Argument



I begin this essay with a story:

Back in the days when families still baked bread, a mother was teaching her daughter to bake bread using the recipe that had been passed down from her mother and her grandmother before her. After she had kneaded the dough and formed it into a loaf, she took a knife, cut off the end of the loaf, threw away the cut-off end, and proceeded to bake the remaining loaf that was left. Being a dutiful daughter, the young girl followed her mother's instructions, but one day she asked an innocent question: "Mom, why do we cut off the end of the loaf, and throw it away before we bake the bread?" Her mother responded, "I'm not really sure. That's just how my mother taught me to bake bread. We've always done it that way in my family. Let's telephone your grandmother, and ask her why we do that." So they telephoned the girl's grandmother, and asked her why she had taught her daughter always to cut off the end

of the loaf of bread before she baked it. She replied as her daughter had. "I'm not really sure. That's just the way my mother taught me to do it, so that's how our family has always baked bread. Let's ask my mother." So they telephoned the girl's great grandmother, who was quite elderly but still baked her own bread, to find the reason for this ancient family tradition. The great grandmother laughed. "When you were a young girl, and I taught you to break bread," she told her daughter, "we only had one bread pan, and it was too small to hold the entire loaf from the recipe that my mother taught me to make, so I just cut off the extra. Years later, after you had grown up and were married, I bought a new bread pan, and I haven't cut off the end of the loaf in years."

I tell this story to make a point. A tradition is only as good as the reasons behind it. The same tradition done for different reasons is not the same tradition, but a new tradition. After learning the true story of why Great Grandmother had cut off the end of the loaf, the mother and daughter of our story might have decided to continue to cut off the end of the loaf when they baked bread – perhaps just as a way of honoring an old family tradition – but they would not have been keeping the old tradition, because they would not have been doing it for the traditional reasons. They would have been inventing a new tradition – the tradition of cutting off the end of the loaf "because we've always done it that way."

One of the most frequently used arguments against women's ordination is the argument from tradition: The contemporary church cannot ordain women because there is a universal tradition against it. In my first essay in this series, I distinguished between "Catholic" arguments and "Protestant" arguments against women's ordination. The argument from tradition is primarily a Catholic argument; those who oppose women's ordination for "Catholic" reasons link ordination to a sacramental understanding of orders and the sacraments that is

often connected to a particular understanding of apostolic succession. Contemporary ordinations are valid only if they can be traced through an unbroken chain all the way to the time of the apostles. On such a view of ordination, an unbroken tradition is necessarily important because if someone is ordained invalidly, the chain of apostolic tradition is broken.

At the same time, the argument from tradition, while not as important for a "Protestant" understanding of ordination – which bases its case more on biblical exegesis – still has weight because the argument can be made that ordaining women is an innovation, something that Christians have never done. Protestants who oppose women's ordination can argue that they are simply defending a position that all Christians held until recently because it is the self-evident teaching of the Bible, and it is the way that the Bible has always been interpreted.

It is for this reason that I began with the story I did. Traditions are wonderful things. However, traditions are always based on reasons, and traditions are only as valid as the reasons behind them. If one discovers that the reasons for which a tradition is practiced are bad reasons, yet one decides to preserve the tradition anyway, but now claims different reasons for the practice, one is not really preserving the tradition. Rather, one has either begun a brand new tradition, or one has continued what is a bad tradition, but has come up with a new reason to rationalize what can no longer be justified based on the old reasons.

The argument against the ordination of women based on tradition is the argument that one cannot ordain women because there is a universal tradition against it. In the words of Roman Catholic author Sara Butler: "The Church does not have the authority to admit women to priestly ordination. This judgment, ordered by Pope John Paul II in 1994, simply confirms a tradition observed in practice from apostolic

times.” Butler also writes, “The tradition of reserving priestly ordination to men is unbroken and unanimous in the Catholic Church. If ever women were allowed to exercise priestly functions, this innovation was quickly denounced.” However, Butler then qualifies, tellingly, “This tradition has been so solid that it has never required an explicit formulation by the magisterium.”¹ If the tradition is as solid as Butler states, then it should be easy enough to trace the tradition and the reasons for it in the history of the church. However, this means that it should also be easy to compare the historic reasons with the recent “explicit formulation” to discover if they are the same reasons. If they are not, then the practice may be the same, but the theology is actually a *new* tradition, not the preservation of an old one.

It is not my concern at this point to argue against the claim that there is an “unbroken tradition” of ordaining only males in the church. There have been scholars in recent decades who have attempted to make an historical argument that there were women clergy in the early church, either in the New Testament period or in the patristic period.² Such judgments are necessarily controversial and open to challenge, and, in face of the argument from tradition, have little consequence. Even if a good case could be made that some women may at one time have been ordained, the argument from tradition could always claim that these were anomalies. Few and far between, a few isolated cases would simply confirm that at almost all times, and in almost all places, women have not been ordained.

What is crucial to the argument from tradition is to address the reasons behind the tradition, and these are not difficult to trace. Historically, there is a single argument that was used in the church against the ordaining of women. Women could not be ordained to the ministry (whether understood as Catholic priesthood or Protestant pastorate) because of an inherent *ontological* defect. Because of a lack of intelligence, or a tendency to irrationality or emotional

instability, a greater susceptibility to temptation, or an inherent incapacity to lead, women were held to be inferior to men, and, thus, were not eligible for ordination. Moreover, this argument was used to exclude women not only from clerical ministry, but from all positions of leadership over men, and largely to confine women to the domestic sphere.

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.³ 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.)

The Tradition Against Ordaining Women

Origen, quoting the apostle Paul, wrote that “‘It is shameful for a woman to speak in church’ [1 Cor. 14:35], whatever she says, even if she says something excellent or holy, because it comes from the mouth of a woman.” (*Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, fragment 74).⁴ John Chrysostom insisted that women are forbidden to 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. . . . If they don’t want to learn but rather want to teach, they destroy both themselves and those who learn from them. . . . [S]he is subjected to the man and that . . . subjection is because of sin.” (*Discourse 4 on Genesis 1*).⁵

Tertullian is infamous for the following admonition to women:

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert— that is, death— even the Son of God had to die.” (On the Apparel of Women, Bk 1, ch. 1).⁶

Chrysostom makes clear that women should confine themselves to domestic roles: “To woman is assigned the presidency of the household; to man all the business of state, the marketplace, the administration of government . . . She cannot handle state business well, but she can raise children correctly . . .” (*The Kind of Women Who Ought to be Taken as Wives* 4).⁷ In warning males of the dangers of temptation, Chrysostom pointed out that women have a great tendency to sin, but also to incite to temptation:

For it is not possible for the Bishop, and one who is concerned with the whole flock, to have a care for the male portion of it, but to pass over the female, which needs more particular forethought, because of its propensity to sins. But the man who is appointed to the administration of a Bishopric must have a care for the moral health of these, if not in a greater, at least in no less a degree than the others. For it is necessary to visit them when they are sick, to comfort them when they are sorrowful, and to reprove them when they are idle, and to help them when they are distressed; and in such cases the evil one would find many opportunities of approach, if a man did not fortify himself with a very strict guard. For the eye, not only of the unchaste, but of the modest woman pierces and disturbs the

mind.” (On Priesthood, VI, ch. 8).⁸

Thomas Aquinas’s teacher Albert the Great had this to say about the inherent inferiority of women in comparison to men:

[G]enerally, proverbially, and commonly it is affirmed that women are more mendacious and fragile, more diffident, more shameless, more deceptively eloquent, and, in brief, a woman is nothing but a devil fashioned into a human appearance . . . [A] female is less suited for proper behavior than a male. For a female’s complexion is moister than a male’s, but it belongs to a moist complexion to receive [impressions] easily but to retain them poorly. For moisture is easily mobile and this is why women are inconstant and always seeking after new things. . . . Therefore there is no faithfulness in a woman. . . . Moreover, an indication of this is that wise men almost never disclose their plans and their doings with their wives. For a woman is a flawed male and in comparison to the male, has the nature of defect and privation, and this is why naturally she mistrusts herself. And this is why whatever she cannot acquire on her own she strives to acquire through mendacity and diabolical deceptions. Therefore, to speak briefly, one must be as mistrustful of every woman as of a venomous serpent and a horned devil . . . [T]he female is more prudent, that is, cleverer, than the male with respect to evil and perverse deeds, because the more nature departs from the one operation, the more it inclines to the other. In this way, the woman falls short in intellectual operations, which consist in the apprehension of the good and in knowledge of truth and flight from evil. . . . Therefore sense moves the female to every evil, just as intellect moves a man to every good. (Quaestiones super de animalibus XV q. 11).⁹

Although I greatly admire Thomas Aquinas in most respects, it is evident that he embraced a hierarchical understanding of

the sexes, based on an inherent inequality. 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:

It was right for the woman to be made from a rib of man. First, to signify the social union of man and woman, for the woman should neither "use authority over man," and so she was not made from his head; nor was it right for her to be subject to man's contempt as his slave, and so she was not made from his feet. Secondly, for the sacramental signification; for from the side of Christ sleeping on the Cross the Sacraments flowed – namely, blood and water – on which the Church was established. (Summa Theologiae 1.1.92.3).^{[10](#)}

However, in answer to the question "Whether Woman Should Have Been Made in the First Production of Things," Thomas responds that woman was made to be a "helpmate" to man primarily for the purposes of sexual reproduction, since a man can be more efficiently helped by another man in most matters. Thomas places the subordination of women to men in an inferiority of nature. On the one hand, he argues that women share equally in human nature with men. At the same time, however, women are subject to men based on an economic subordination in which "the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good. . . . For good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates." (S.T. 1.92.1). This intrinsic inequality is reflected in Thomas's answer to the question "Whether the female sex is an impediment to receiving Orders?" Thomas answers that it is: "Accordingly, since it is not possible in

the female sex to signify eminence of degree, for a woman is in the state of subjection, it follows that she cannot receive the sacrament of Order.” (*Supplement to the Summa Theologiae*, q. 39).

Key to theological interpretation of the role of women is the exegesis of Genesis 1-3. Significantly, traditional commentators focus much more on Genesis 2 and 3 than on Genesis 1. Although all affirmed woman’s equality in redemption, nevertheless, they found more in support of subordination in Genesis than of equality.¹¹ Although all agreed that women were to be subordinate to men, an important question was whether this subordination was something that was intrinsic to creation, or, rather, was a consequence of the fall into sin. The majority opinion is that woman was created subordinate to man, but the fall brought about a worse state of subjection. Augustine’s position was typical: “Even before her sin, woman had been made to be ruled by her husband and to be submissive and subject to him. But . . . the servitude meant in [Genesis 3:16] denotes a condition similar to that of slavery rather than a bond of love.”¹²

When we turn to the Reformation, we discover that it continues in this general tradition. John Calvin notes that Eve “had previously been subject to her husband, but that was a liberal and gentle subjection. Now, however, she is cast into servitude.” Heinrich Bullinger paraphrases Gen. 3:16: “He [the man] will dominate you [the woman], that is, you will decide nothing by your private inclination but will act in everything by the inclination of your husband.” Bullinger goes so far as to quote Tertullian’s “You are the devil’s gateway” with approval.¹³

It seems that Martin Luther may be an exception to the patristic and Medieval notion that women are inherently less rational and capable of leadership than men. In Luther’s *Lectures on Genesis*, he emphasizes the full equality and

partnership of man and woman before the fall. Luther interprets Gen. 1:26 to mean that both man and woman have a mandate to rule over creation. Luther explains the difference between man and woman as primarily lying in their different bodily characteristics as related to their roles in reproduction. Luther states, "If the woman had not been deceived by the serpent and had not sinned, she would have been the equal of Adam in all respects." (WA 42:87, 23-25).¹⁴ Both man and woman are created in the image of God; both man and woman possess the same mental powers, and could understand the word of God, and there was a perfect harmony of will between them. After the fall, this changed. There was no longer mutual relation between man and woman, but an inequality in which the woman is now subordinate to the man, who rules over her. Nonetheless, Luther insists, even in the fall, woman and man are not separate, and woman does not live in isolation from the man. The chief penalty the woman entails as a result of the fall is pain connected with child birth, but she is promised that her offspring will crush the serpent. The chief penalty of the man is that he must now support his family, and he now has the role of ruling over and teaching over a recalcitrant creation. Even after the fall, this inequality is not the entire story, however. Man and woman are still mutually interdependent. Both still have a mandate to rule creation together. The promise of redemption points to a restored harmony between the sexes, and (in contrast to the Medieval tendency to downplay the role of the family in light of an exalted view of celibacy), Luther emphasizes the concrete good of marriage.¹⁵

Turning to Anglicanism, we find similar affirmations of woman's inherent subordination tied to a lesser rationality. There is the rather infamous quote from Samuel Johnson, responding to his friend Boswell, in reference to a Quaker woman preaching: "I told him I had been that morning at a meeting of the people called Quakers, where I had heard a

woman preach. Johnson: 'Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprized to find it done at all.'"¹⁶

The views of Richard Hooker, perhaps Anglicanism's foremost divine, on the role of women in the church, are infrequently expressed, but are not significantly different from the patristic and Medieval Catholic tradition that had preceded the Reformation. Hooker mentions the status of women only three times in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. In the Preface, he recognizes that many women embrace the Puritan cause; he believes that this reflects an intellectual inferiority, as their "judgments are commonly weakest because of their sex." (Preface 3.13).¹⁷ The second question has to do with the emergency baptism of infants by women, which Puritans rejected, as had Calvin and Bullinger. Hooker defended the practice, but says that it does not imply that women can be "ministers in the Church of God": "To make women teachers in the house of God were a gross absurdity, seeing the Apostle hath said, 'I permit not a woman to teach.'" (Book 5, 62.2). Finally, in Hooker's discussion of marriage in Book 5, he discusses the practice of the delivering up of the woman by her father, the reason for which he explains as follows: "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). Hooker was a "traditionalist" for whom the subordination and intellectual inferiority of women is simply assumed.¹⁸

We wrap up this somewhat lengthy list of citations by referring to the Scottish Reformer John Knox's notorious *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, often considered to be a prime example of male misogyny.

Knox's book was written against the Catholic queens, Mary of Guise of Scotland, and Mary Tudor of England. Knox was opposed to the rule of women, or of any female authority over men, basing his views on what he considered to be biblical revelation: "I am assured that GOD hath revealed unto some in this our age, that it is more than a monster in nature that a Woman shall reign and have empire above Man."¹⁹ Knox argued that the rule of women was contrary to nature:

Nature I say, doth paynt them furthe to be weake, fraile, impacient, feble and foolishe: and experience hath declared them to be vnconstant, variable, cruell and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment. And these notable faultes haue men in all ages espied in that kinde, for the whiche not onlie they haue remoued women from rule and authoritie, but also some haue thoght that men subiect to the counsel or empire of their wyues were vn worthie of all publike office.

Knox appeals to St. Paul as an authority here:

Of whiche words it is plaine that the Apostle meaneth, that woman in her greatest perfection shuld haue knowen, that man was Lord aboue her: and therefore that she shulde neuer haue pretended any kind of superioritie aboue him, no more then do the angels aboue God the creator, or aboue Christ Iesus their head. So, I say, that in her greatest perfection woman was created to be subiect to man.

This inherent subjection of women to men is only increased by the fall into sin:

Herebie may such as altogither be not blinded plainlie see, that God, by his sentence, hath deiected all woman frome empire and dominion aboue man. For two punishmentes are laid vpon her, to witte, a dolor, anguishe and payn, as oft as euer she shal be mother; and a subiection of her selfe, her appetites and will, to her husband, and to his will.

Knox builds on what he understands St. Paul's restrictions of ecclesial authority to women to a general prohibition. If women are forbidden to have authority in church, they are the much more forbidden to have political authority:

The apostle taketh power frome all woman to speake in the assemblie. Ergo he permitteth no woman to rule aboue man. The former parte is euident, whereupon doth the conclusion of necessitie folowe. For he that taketh from woman the least parte of authoritie, dominion or rule, will not permit vnto her that whiche is greatest: But greater it is to reigne aboue realmes and nations, to publish and to make lawes, and to commande men of all estates, and finallie to appoint iudges and ministers, then to speake in the congregation. For her iudgement, sentence, or opinion proposed in the congregation, may be iudged by all, may be corrected by the learned, and reformed by the godlie. But woman being promoted in souereine authoritie, her lawes must be obeyed, her opinion folowed, and her tyrannie mainteined: supposing that it be expreslie against God, and the prophet [profit] of the common welth, as to[o] manifest experience doth this day witnesse.

Knox concludes with a vehemence:

And therefore yet againe I repete that, whiche before I haue affirmed: to witt, that a woman promoted to sit in the seate of God, that is, to teache, to iudge or to reigne aboue man, is a monstre in nature, contumelie to God, and a thing most repugnant to his will and ordinance.

Needless to say, Knox's book did not endear him to Queen Elizabeth I of England, when she succeeded her sister to the throne, and reintroduced Reformation Anglicanism to England.

The point of this somewhat lengthy summary, including numerous quotations, is to provide documentation of the claim made

earlier. I hope it is clear from the above that the church has indeed had a historic position against the ordination of women. From a variety of sources – Eastern, Western, patristic, Medieval, Reformation, Catholic and Protestant, – the following has been the key argument: Women cannot be ordained or indeed exercise any positions of leadership in the church because of an inherent ontological incapacity. Women were characterized as less intelligent, more sinful, more susceptible to temptation, unstable, incapable of exercising leadership. In addition, it needs to be recognized that this disqualification was not merely a disqualification from clerical ordination, but from any position of leadership or of exercising authority over men, whether in or out of the church. An extreme position, perhaps, but Knox's essay shows that male theologians were willing to expand the disqualification beyond the clerical sphere to the secular. *A fortiori*, if women could not exercise leadership in the church, they certainly could not do so elsewhere.

There has been a major shift from this position in recent decades. Somewhere around the mid-twentieth century, the historic claims about women's essential inferiority and intellectual incapacity for leadership simply disappeared. Instead, all mainline churches – Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican – recognized the essential equality between men and women, including fundamental intellectual and moral equality. The kinds of negative rhetoric about women's incapacities that is summarized above disappeared. Arguably, this is a good thing, and a real advance.

Following this shift, three new theological positions appeared in recognition of the equality of women. First, there have been those who recognized that, since the historic reason for refusing to ordain women (inequality) no longer held, it was permissible, indeed necessary, to admit women to ordination.

However, there also have been those who, despite the shift from affirming the inequality to the equality of women and

men, nonetheless, insisted that women still could not be ordained. There were both Protestant and Catholic versions of this refusal.

In current rhetoric, there is a tendency to speak of those in favor of ordaining women as representing a new position, a shift against the church's historic position. However, it is important to recognize that both the decision to ordain women and the two positions that refuse to ordain women are *new* theological positions. All three positions are responses to the new recognition of the equality of women. None of these three positions represent the traditional position because all of them reject the historic arguments rooted in inequality. Indeed, the advocates of both the new Catholic position against the ordination of women and the new Protestant position are emphatic that they endorse the essential equality of men and women, and that their opposition to women's ordination is not based on any belief or claim that women are inherently inferior to men, or have an intellectual or moral incapacity that would make them incapable of ordination. In making this concession, however, those who still refuse to ordain women are admitting (whether they acknowledge it or not) that their reasons for refusing to ordain women are departures from the historic tradition of the church, just as much as is the decision to ordain women.

The New Catholic Tradition

Sara Butler, one of the more articulate defenders of the new Catholic position against the ordination of women, basically recognizes that a shift has taken place. The first appearance of the "new position" in Catholic circles appeared in Pope Paul VI's reply to the Anglican Archbishop Donald Coggan of Canterbury, expressing concerns about women's ordination among Anglicans. Butler notes that "the 'fundamental reasons [the pope] supplied were not those commonly understood to explain the position of the Catholic Church.'"²⁰ In response to the

assumption of feminist theologians that the [Roman Catholic] Church's opposition to women's ordination was based on defective "anthropology," Butler acknowledges that "until quite recently Catholic theologians generally *did* explain the Church's practice, at least in part, by appealing to the difference and the 'hierarchical' ordering of the sexes. They appealed as well to the Pauline texts that prohibited women's public teaching in the Church and their exercise of authority over men." Furthermore, "Many Catholic theologians relied on the teaching of Saint Thomas." However, notes Butler, "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."²¹ Indeed, Butler is emphatic that contemporary Roman Catholicism affirms women's "equal rights," both in society and in the church, devoting an entire chapter to make this point. Women can (and do) exercise positions of leadership both in society and in the church, but they cannot be ordained.²² Instead, contemporary Catholics adopt different reasons for the inability of the church to ordain women based on arguments from sacramentality, specifically having to do with Jesus' choosing of twelve male apostles, and of the necessary resemblance of a male priest to a male Christ when celebrating the Eucharist. Butler notes that "The fact that Jesus did not choose any women to belong to the Twelve, and that the apostles followed his example by handing on the apostolic church only to men, was seen to be the 'fundamental reason.'"²³ This new position first appeared in Paul VI's *Inter Insigniores*, in 1977. The new position is followed by John Paul II in *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, *Mulieris dignitatem*, and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. Although first formulated by Roman Catholic popes, the new reasons for refusing ordination to women then began to be appealed to in the years following by Orthodox theologians and Anglo-Catholics who opposed women's ordination.

Butler justifies the claim that what is clearly a new position is “not a new doctrine,” but a “teaching preserved by the constant and universal tradition of the Church” (citing John Paul II)²⁴ by distinguishing between “arguments” and “reasons.” Some of the “reasons” that were given against women’s ordination in the past were “theological arguments” that have had to be abandoned, but these are not the [Roman Catholic] Church’s “fundamental reasons” for not ordaining women. The single “fundamental reason” why the Church cannot ordain women is the “fact” of Jesus having chosen twelve male disciples.²⁵

To the contrary, however, “facts” do not speak on their own, apart from interpretations of their significance. The argument that women cannot be ordained because Jesus chose only male apostles is just as much an argument as the abandoned argument that women cannot be ordained because of an ontological inferiority. It is just a new argument, and must stand or fall on its merits as an argument. The distinction between arguments and reasons will not hold. The very distinction between “arguments” and “reasons” is a recognition that a genuine shift has taken place. The historic “arguments” against women’s ordination are not the contemporary “reasons” (which are simply new arguments) why women cannot be ordained. It is, accordingly, misleading simply to affirm, as Butler does, that the Church has an “unbroken tradition” of not ordaining women without being clear that there is no connection whatsoever between the “reasons” (or as Butler would say, “arguments”) that theologians would have given for their unwillingness to ordain women in the past and the new “reasons” that the Roman Catholic Church would give today.

A significant difference between the traditional position and the modern one is that church fathers and Medieval figures like Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas do not tie questions of the ordination of women to sacramental integrity, but to capacities for morality, leadership, rationality, teaching, and authority. Even when patristic writers note that Jesus

chose only male apostles, the concern is about authority to teach and have authority over men, not about sacramental integrity, and again, they base their opposition on the ontological inferiority of women.

For example, Butler appeals to the fourth-century bishop, Epiphanius of Salamis, the “first undisputed witness of patristic opposition to the priestly ordination of women,” whom she recognizes as “arguably the most important piece of patristic testimony.”²⁶ Epiphanius appeals to the biblical tradition that “Never at any time has a woman been a priest.” Eve was not a priest; nor was the virgin Mary. Epiphanius writes, “If it were ordained by God that women should be priests or have any canonical function in the church, Mary herself, if anyone, should have functioned as a priest in the New Testament.”²⁷ As Butler correctly notes, Epiphanius also appeals to the masculinity of the twelve apostles: “Successors of the episcopate and presbyterate in the household of God were appointed by this bishop [James] and these apostles, and nowhere was a woman appointed.” The daughters of Philip the evangelist prophesied, but they were not priests (*Panarion* 79.7, 3-4).

However, Epiphanius is simply appealing to tradition here. He makes no theological argument. At no point does he draw an inherent connection between male priests or apostles and a sacramental argument concerning the apostles resembling a male Jesus Christ; nor does he attach any significance to the role of male apostles in celebrating the Eucharist. He does, however, provide a kind of warrant for his rejection of women’s ordination in the section just preceding, when he refers to the women in the sect against which he is arguing: “And who but women are the teachers of this? Women are unstable, prone to error, and mean-spirited.” (*Panarion* 79.7, 1,6). He goes on to write: “[H]ere the devil has seen fit to disgorge ridiculous teachings from the mouth of women.” (*Panarion* 79.7, 1,7). He precedes the discussion about male

priests and apostles to which Butler appeals by stating:

Now, then, servants of God, let us adopt a manly frame of mind and dispel the madness of these women. The speculation is entirely feminine, and the malady of the deluded Eve all over again . . . [W]e shall have reason to suppose that the minds of these women which have been ensnared by the pride of that snake, are like the ideas of the deceiver . . . Once again he is bringing death on that sex . . . [my emphasis] (Panarion 79.7, 2,1-2).

It is only then that Epiphanius continues: "Never at any time has a woman been a priest." (*Panarion* 79.7, 2,3). Epiphanius' estimate of women is then, the one we have seen already. Women are irrational, emotionally unstable, and subject to temptation.

The *Didascalia apostolorum* also appeals to a male apostolate; however, the argument does not concern sacramental theology, but rather male authority:

*It is neither right nor necessary that women should be teachers, and especially concerning the name of Christ and the redemption of his passion. . . For he the Lord God, Jesus Christ our teacher sent us the Twelve to instruct the people and the gentiles, and there were with us women disciples, Mary Magdalene and Mary the daughter of James and the other Mary; but he did not send them to instruct the people with us. For if it were required that women should teach, our Master would have commended these to give instruction with us.*²⁸

Again, the *Didascalia's* appeal to a male apostolate is unhelpful because the contemporary Catholic Church's objection to women's ordination is not to women teaching, but to presiding at the celebration of the Eucharist.

Similarly, *The Apostolic Constitutions* forbids women to baptize, calling it “wicked and impious”:

But if in the foregoing constitutions we have not permitted them to teach, how will any one allow them, contrary to nature, to perform the office of a priest? For this is one of the ignorant practices of the Gentile atheism, to ordain women priests to the female deities, not one of the constitutions of Christ. For if baptism were to be administered by women, certainly our Lord would have been baptized by His own mother, and not by John; or when He sent us to baptize, He would have sent along with us women also for this purpose. (3.9).²⁹

It is clear that the concern has to do with the authority of men over women and, a hierarchy rooted in ontological difference, not with administration of the sacraments:

For if the “man be the head of the woman,” and he be originally ordained for the priesthood, it is not just to abrogate the order of the creation, and leave the principal to come to the extreme part of the body. For the woman is the body of the man, taken from his side, and subject to him, from whom she was separated for the procreation of children. For says He, “He shall rule over thee.” [my emphasis] (3.9).

And earlier:

We do not permit our “women to teach in the Church,” but only to pray and hear those that teach; for our Master and Lord, Jesus Himself, when He sent us the twelve to make disciples of the people and of the nations, did nowhere send out women to preach, although He did not want such. For there were with us the mother of our Lord and His sisters; also Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Martha and Mary the sisters of Lazarus; Salome, and certain others. For, had it been necessary for women to teach, He Himself had first

commanded these also to instruct the people with us. For "if the head of the wife be the man," it is not reasonable that the rest of the body should govern the head. [my emphasis] (3.6).

Accordingly, the distinction between arguments and reasons does not hold because there is no logical correlation whatsoever between the two. There is no logical way to get from an intellectual incapacity indicating an *inequality* that demonstrates an inability to teach or exercise leadership to an intellectual and ontological *equality* that now allows teaching and leadership, but nonetheless does not allow celebration of the sacraments. If the "arguments" are so different from the "reasons" as that, then the current "reasons" represent the equivalent of an entirely new theological position. The claim simply to be representing the Church's unchanging tradition collapses.

The New Protestant Position

If the current Catholic position against the ordination of women represents a new position, so does the Protestant position. In the last few decades, a position designated as "complementarianism" has been advocated by some Evangelicals. The influence of this perspective can largely be traced to a collection of essays edited by John Piper and Wayne Gruden that appeared in 1991.³⁰ As with the new Catholic approach, complementarianism departs from the earlier tradition in recognizing the ontological equality of men and women. What makes the position distinctive is that it argues that, while men and women are equal in being, they nonetheless have distinct *roles* to play. It is the role of men to lead and to direct; it is the role of women to submit to the leadership of men. While using the language of equality and complementarity, the position is essentially hierarchical. In contrast to the new Catholic position, it embraces a hierarchical understanding of the relationship between men and women,

prohibiting not only the ordination of women, but any situation in which women might have authority over or exercise leadership over men.

Complementarians appeal primarily to two theological arguments based largely on exegesis of the writings of the apostle Paul: a hierarchical understanding of “headship” in which men exercise authority over women (1 Corinthians 11), coupled with an argument about female subordination to male authority based on Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 5, buttressed by pointing to passages where Paul forbids women to teach or exercise authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12; 1 Cor. 14:34). In addition to these two themes, there is the notion of “roles” itself, and, recently, an argument based on a Trinitarian analogy in which it is argued that there is a parallel between the “eternal subordination” of the divine Son of God to the Father, and the subordination of women to males. Although complementarians claim (as do those advocating the new Catholic position) that they are simply affirming the church’s historic stance over against the innovations of a *new* Evangelical feminism, complementarianism is as novel a position as the new Catholic position. Methodist theologian Alan Padgett points out: “[W]e should notice that this view is no older on the historical evidence than about 1975. Though it makes a number of claims to be the true expression of historical Christian teachings, the historical evidence tells us otherwise. Complementarian theology is just as revisionist, just as influenced by modern thought, as the egalitarian view it paints as new and unbiblical.”³¹

In my own reading, I have found two possible earlier parallels to complementarianism. Karl Barth’s theology of men and women is considered one of the great theological contributions of the twentieth century. Barth emphasizes the equality and inherent mutual orientation of man and woman based on their creation in the image of God. Barth sounds like complementarianism when he suggests in a well known passage:

*Man and woman are not an A and a second A whose being and relationship can be described like the two halves of an hour glass, which are obviously two, but absolutely equal and therefore interchangeable. Man and woman are an A and a B, and cannot, therefore be equated. In inner dignity and right, and therefore in human dignity and right, A has not the slightest advantage over B, nor does it suffer the slightest disadvantage. What is more, when we say A we must with equal emphasis say B also, and when we say B we must with equal emphasis have said A. . . .They stand or fall together. . . . Yet the fact remains – and in this respect there is no simple equality – that they are claimed and sanctified as man and woman, each for himself, each in relation to the other in his own particular place, and therefore in such a way that A is not B but A, and B is not another A but B.*³²

But Barth's point here is not so much hierarchical as pointing to the mutual and inherent co-relationality of man and woman while maintaining their distinct identities as male and female.

In another possible early anticipation of complementarianism, Donald Bloesch in 1982 endorsed a view of male headship in his book *Is the Bible Sexist?* based on his reading of Paul, but then insisted that "Headship as Paul understood this does not mean domination." Bloesch states, "Man and woman are not equivalent but complementary," but also insists, "The Bible disclaims the authoritarian headship of patriarchy." In a chapter titled "Women Ministers?," Bloesch endorsed the ordination of women. Although some of the language is similar, Bloesch's position is clearly not the same as that of the later "complementarians."³³

As we compare the new Catholic and Protestant positions rejecting women's ordination, we notice some inherent tensions between them. Where the new Catholic position has abandoned

any arguments based on the traditional interpretation of Paul's writings in favor of a hierarchical understanding of the relationship between men and women, it is precisely such a hierarchical position that is at the heart of complementarianism. Where the new Catholic position defends itself against critics by pointing out that the equality of women means that they can teach and exercise various kinds of secular and ministerial leadership with the single exception of celebrating the sacraments, the complementarians argue that these are precisely the kinds of things that women must not do.

Both positions are also in tension with the previous traditional arguments against women's ordination. The more the new positions emphasize the ontological equality of men and women, the more they are in discontinuity with the arguments of the earlier tradition. The more they emphasize hierarchy, the more they are in continuity with the previous tradition, but the more they must struggle with logical incoherence in simultaneously speaking of "equality in being," but "difference of roles." The new Catholic position is more in harmony with the equality of women, but less in continuity with tradition in emphasizing that women can exercise leadership and authority, just not ordination to the priesthood. The new complementarian Protestant position, because it is hierarchical, is more compatible with the arguments of tradition, but less coherent in that it embraces the hierarchical stance of the tradition while rejecting its historic reasons.

Another interesting anomaly is that Christology plays a key role in each position, but for opposite reasons. The new Catholic position argues that women cannot be ordained because they do not resemble Christ, and only a male priest can resemble Christ. The new Protestant position uses an analogy based on a subordinationist understanding of the Trinity to argue that women cannot be ordained because they do resemble

Christ insofar as Christ is equal to but subordinate to the Father in the same way that women are equal to but subordinate to men. (It is questionable whether such a subordinationist understanding of the Trinity is orthodox.) Whether these two sets of Christological arguments are mutually coherent – they obviously are not – it is important to note that in both cases, these are *new* arguments against the ordination of women. One does not find arguments in historic Christian tradition that women cannot be ordained because they do not resemble Christ. One does not find arguments against women's ordination in the tradition based on analogies with the Son's subordination in the Trinity.

This lack of historical precedent makes clear that in both cases, the arguments against ordination "from tradition" are not the "traditional arguments." In both cases, the recent Catholic opposition to women's ordination and the recent Protestant opposition represent new theological positions, unknown to previous Christian tradition. It is all to the good that Catholics and Protestants have embraced the inherent ontological equality of men and women and no longer argue against women's ordination based on an inherent inferiority, irrationality, or sinfulness of women. However, in so doing, they can no longer argue that they are simply adhering to the church's historic stance against the ordination of women.

To return to the original analogy, as with the story of the mother and the daughter who eventually discovered the original reasons why Great Grandmother had cut off the end of the loaf when baking bread, the church has become aware of the historic reasons why it is that women have not been ordained. And they have not been good reasons. In affirming the equality of women, the church has abandoned the historic reasons that women were not ordained. In that light, the church needs to address the question of whether it should continue a practice that was based on a faulty anthropology. Rather than abandon the practice, however, current opponents of women's ordination

have discovered new arguments (or reasons) to explain why women cannot be ordained. In future essays, I will look at these arguments.

Appendix: What About the Virgin Mary?

One possible response to the above argument is simply to deny that the church's historic opposition to the ordination of women could be based on an ontological inferiority. Orthodox theologian Thomas Hopko summarizes a similar argument to that which I have raised: "Another possible explanation for the absence of women bishops and priests in Orthodox [and other churches] is that cultural conditions of the past, including philosophical and biological understandings, forbade the inclusion of women in these ministries on the basis of their natural inferiority to men." Hopko cannot bring himself to believe that this is the historic reason for opposition: "I believe . . . it impossible to think that women were excluded from the Church's episcopal and presbyterial ministries for reasons of sin, ignorance, convenience or custom." As a counter-argument, Hopko appeals to the church's historically positive estimate of women as "canonized saints . . . women prophets, martyrs, missionaries, monastics, ascetics, elders . . . [etc.] . . . all of whom are glorified for exactly the same activities and accomplishments as men. . . . But we find no women bishops or priests. This can hardly be attributed, in my view, to evil or ignorance. It appears much more likely that there must be good reasons . . ." Later Hopko refers to the most honored Orthodox saint: "The Church's lives of saints are filled with stories of holy men and women who, except for biology, have all but wholly died to this age and attained remarkable progress in divine perfection and holiness. First among these saints, for the Orthodox, is Christ's mother Mary."³⁴

In response, nothing in what I have written above implies that the tradition of the church is an unmitigated history of the

oppression of women. As I wrote above, one-sided portrayals of the oppression of women can be encountered by off-setting views of the church as having been largely a blessing and an improvement to the status of women. Having said that, the only way to assess the historical reasons for the opposition of the church to the ordination of women is to examine the texts themselves. As I have shown, they repeatedly return to a single argument: that women cannot be ordained because they are less intelligent than men, emotionally unstable, and more subject to temptation. As noted above, Mary Butler, one of the more able defenders of the new Catholic argument against the ordination of women, recognizes that the prevalent historic argument against the ordination of women was an appeal to female inferiority. Hopko's own argument is a combination of the complementarian appeal to male headship with a sacramental appeal to the bishop/presbyter acting as a representative of the male Christ.³⁵ Again, however, these are new theological arguments; they do not appear before the mid-twentieth century.

Moreover, appeals to the examples of women saints, and especially to that of the Virgin Mary, are mixed blessings at best, exceptions that rather prove the rule. New Testament scholar Ben Witherington points to a heightened emphasis on asceticism, celibacy, and virginity that arose in the patristic period following the New Testament and that led to a devaluing of marriage. This meant that women in the church could either serve in the celibate ministries of deacons, virgins, or widows, or they could marry, in which case, their role was restricted to that of wife and mother. The consequence was that the sexual identity of women as women was devalued.³⁶ The canonized women saints to whom theologians such as Hopko appeal as examples of the church's positive estimate of women were typically celibate and cloistered, not examples for most contemporary women who might be pursuing a call to ordained ministry. Moreover, the virgin Mary sets what is

literally an impossible example for contemporary women to emulate. Mary, as both mother and virgin, combines roles that are mutually exclusive for every other woman. Moreover, in both Catholic and Orthodox theology, Mary is sinless, again, in contrast to every other woman. Thus, historically, it has been quite possible to combine a high estimate of the virgin Mary (mother but not sexual, the perfect sinless example of the church's receptive faith) with a low estimate of women in general. The church father Epiphanius provides a prime example. He was able simultaneously to appeal to the virgin Mary as a *negative* example for other women – if God had intended for women to be priests, the virgin Mary would have been a priest – while simultaneously denigrating those other women: “Women are unstable, prone to error, and mean-spirited.” (*Panarion* 79.7, 1,6). Thus, the argument that the church has had a high evaluation of *some* women is not in itself a counter-argument to the claim that the church's historic argument against ordaining women was based on an assumption of ontological inferiority.

In a later essay, I will address the question of the use of masculine and feminine symbolism as it applies to the question of the ordination of women. However, as it relates to the place of ordinary women in the church, it is difficult not to see the high value that some male theologians have placed on the Virgin Mary as primarily a reflection of their own self-identity as males. In the drama of salvation, the male Jesus Christ necessarily plays the primary active role, while the female Mary necessarily plays a subordinate and passive role. Moreover, the role that Mary plays is precisely that of being a mother. In this theology, while males can also be fathers, they play their primary role in terms of active accomplishment. Conversely, the primary role of the woman is that of motherhood, exemplifying passive receptivity.³⁷ As Paul K. Jewett wrote in one of the earliest books addressing issues of women's equality in the church: “It is difficult beyond measure for this writer to escape the suspicion that such an

approach, in the last analysis, is simply an erudite statement of the man's understanding of himself as being like the Creator and of the woman as being like the creature."³⁸

1 Sara Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church* (Chicago/Mundelein, Ill: Hillenbrand Books, 2006) viii, 59.

2 I argue that evidence indicates that women held church office during the New Testament period. See "Concerning Women's Ordination: Women's Ministry in the New Testament (Office)"; <http://willgwitt.org/theology/womens-ordination-office>.

3 So, for example, Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

4 Origen, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, fragment 74, text in Claude Jenkins, ed. "Origen on 1 Corinthians," *Journal of Theological Studies* 10 (1908-9): 29-51; Citations from Patricia Cox Miller, ed. *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 29.

5 John Chrysostom, *Discourse 4 on Genesis*, in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church: Message of the Fathers of the Church 13* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983), 43.

6 *Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4, Tertullian, Minicius Felix, Commodian, Origen*, The Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994).

7 Cited in *Women in Early Christianity*, 271,

8 *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 9, Chrysostom Chrysostom: On the Priesthood, Ascetic Treatises, Select Homilies and Letters, Homilies on the Statues*, Philip Schaff, ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994).

[9](#) Albert the Great, *Questions Concerning Aristotle's On Animals (The Fathers of the Church, Mediaeval Continuation, Volume 9*, trans. Irven M. Resnick, Kenneth F. Kitchell, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 454-455.

[10](#) Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, O.P. (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012); *Summa Theologica* (NY: Benziger Bros, 1948; reprinted Christian Classics, 1981); <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa>; <http://www.dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/index.html>.

[11](#) Noted by John Lee Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of Calvin, His Predecessors, and His Contemporaries* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1992), 107, 108.

[12](#) Augustine, *Genesis to the Letter*, 11.37.50, cited in Thompson, 137. An overview of "Eve in the History of Exegesis: Arguments for Women's Subordination," can be found in Thompson, 107-159.

[13](#) Calvin, *Comm. Gen.* 3:16; Bullinger, *Comm. 1 Tim* 2:11-15; cited in Thompson, 138.

[14](#) Cited in Theo M. M. A. C. Bell, "Man is a Microcosmos: Adam and Eve in Luther's Lectures on Genesis (1535-1545)," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (April 2005) 69:2, 159-184, 168; ET Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5*, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1958).

[15](#) Bell suggests that there are ambiguities in Luther's discussion of male and female equality before the fall. For instance, Luther suggests that God gave the law to Adam before the creation of Eve, which would imply that Adam (and not Eve) has a mandate to preach. Adam hears God's word directly, which he then gives to Eve. WA 42:80,11. Bell points out that there

is a “certain tension” between this view and Luther’s affirmation elsewhere that the woman could perceive God’s word on her own; Bell, 170.

[16](#) James Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson* (London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, New York and Toronto: Henry Frowede, 1904), 309.

[17](#) Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 2 vols. (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1907).

[18](#) Stephen Sykes, “Richard Hooker and the Ordination of Women,” *Unashamed Anglicanism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 81-98. Sykes notes that Hooker’s reference to women’s “imbecility” was not a “gratuitous insult, but a standard piece of legal theory” at the time (86).

[19](#) John Knox, *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, Edward Arber, ed. (Southgate, London, 1878); <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/knox/blast>; <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9660>.

[20](#) Butler, 8.

[21](#) Butler, 46-47.

[22](#) Butler, 26-34.

[23](#) Butler, 50.

[24](#) Butler, 2.

[25](#) Butler, 46-51.

[26](#) Butler, 61, 63.

[27](#) *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, Books II and III, trans. Frank Williams (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 79.7, 2,3; 3,1.

[28](#) *Didascalia apostolorum* 5.6,.trans. R. Hugh Connolly

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929); cited in *Women in Early Christianity*, 51.

[29](#) "Apostolic Constitutions," *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, vol. 7; Philip Schaff ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994).

[30](#) Wayne Grudem and John Piper, ed. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991). An earlier volume with a similar approach was George W. Knight, *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1977).

[31](#) Alan Padgett, *As Christ Submits to the Church: A Biblical Understanding of Leadership and Mutual Submission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 10.

[32](#) Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics The Doctrine of Reconciliation IV.3* (T & T Clark, 1988), 169.

[33](#) Donald Bloesch, *Is the Bible Sexist?* (Westchester, Ill: Crossway Books, 1982), 30-31.

[34](#) Thomas Hopko, "Presbyter/Bishop: A Masculine Ministry," *Women and the Priesthood*, Thomas Hopko, ed., new edition (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 139, 140, 141.

[35](#) "Man's priority and headship in his union of love with woman in no way signifies his superiority over woman, neither ontological nor relational. . . . [The presbyter/bishop] presents the gifts at the eucharistic offering in the place of Jesus, the one great high priest of God's priestly people . . ." Hopko, 144, 156.

[36](#) Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 205.

[37](#) For a lengthy example of such a theology, see Manfred

Hauke, *Women in the Priesthood? A Systematic Analysis of the Light of the Order of Creation and Redemption*, trans. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986).

[38](#) Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships From a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 187.