

Concerning Women's Ordination: The "Tradition" Challenge



Recently, I posted the following on Facebook in response to the recent ACNA College of Bishops Statement on Women's Ordination:

As a member of the ACNA, I was a consultant to the ACNA Women's Orders Task Force. When the ACNA was founded, it was decided that we would be a "large tent" representative of orthodox Anglicanism, extending hospitality to those Anglicans who could not affirm women's orders, even though they held a minority opinion within worldwide Anglicanism. I am happy that the ACNA has continued to recognize that there is room for disagreement on this issue.

However, I am unhappy with this statement in particular, which does not tell the whole story: "However, we also acknowledge that this practice is a recent innovation to Apostolic Tradition and Catholic Order."

Yes, the practice is recent, but so is the recognition that women are of equal moral, intellectual, and spiritual status with men. The historic argument against women's ordination was that women lacked intelligence, were emotionally

unstable, and were more subject to temptation than men. Given that the current arguments against WO are NOT this argument, the continuing opponents of WO are as much endorsing a “recent innovation” as those of us who favor it.

I accompanied the post with a link to this page:

[Concerning Women’s Ordination: The Argument “From Tradition” is not the “Traditional” Argument.](#)

I quickly discovered that posting this was a mistake, as I received responses like the following that made clear that people read my statement, but had not actually read my essay:

Who has made this “historic argument”?

To make matters worse, my statement was shared elsewhere without the link to my accompanying essay, where it received responses such as the following:

I would truly love for someone to post even one demonstration of the Early Church arguing specifically that women cannot be ordained due to their inferior intellectual, moral, or spiritual state, or even an inferior ontology. Just a quote from them that speaks for itself.

The substance would be giving a quote from the Early Church that shows – rather than assumes – that they argued from a view that women are inferior:

– not merely subordinate, but inferior, for assuming that subordinate implies inferior merely assumes what Witt needs to demonstrate,

– not merely that a writer or several made an observation or rebuke or rhetorical flourish against the female sex (for they did that against men, too)

Basically, just someone, provide something from the early church that clearly shows that they said, basically, “the mind of the Church is that women can’t be priests because

women are without exception intellectually incapable/wanton/etc."

Lots of words, lots of assertions, lots of analogies, lots of debate over whether the analogies are valid... but no early church quotes, viz, no actual evidence.

I am tempted to respond by again referring back to my earlier essay, but that would be too easy. I'm more than willing to accept a challenge, and will raise the challenge with one of my own.

So first a response to the above challenge.

My argument consists of the following two assertions:

First,

The historic argument against women's ordination was that women lacked intelligence, were emotionally unstable, and were more subject to temptation than men.

This can be broken down as follows.

First is what I will call the "ontological deficiency" claim. Writers in the tradition claimed (all quotations are from my original essay):

(A) Women are less intelligent, more emotionally unstable, and more subject to temptation than men.

Claims that women are less intelligent than men:

"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 . . ."
John Chrysostom

“[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.” Albert the Great

“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.” Thomas Aquinas

Their [women’s] “judgments are commonly weakest because of their sex.” Richard Hooker

“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” Richard Hooker

Statements that women are emotionally unstable compared 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” Albert the Great

“Nature I say, doth paynt them furthe to be weake, fraile, impacient, feble and foolishe.” John Knox

Statements that women are more susceptible to temptation than

men:

“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.” Tertullian

“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.” John Chrysostom

“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.” Albert the Great

“Women are unstable, prone to error, and mean-spirited.” Epiphanius

Second is what I will call the “exclusion by nature of subordination” claim:

(B) Ordination necessitates exercising authority over others, particularly teaching and speaking in an authoritative manner. Women cannot be ordained because they are necessarily subordinate to men, and therefore cannot exercise authority in this manner. This is primarily an exclusion from women exercising any authority whatsoever over men, and only secondarily a specific exclusion from ordination.

Claims that women are subordinate to men:

“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.”
Augustine

“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.”
Thomas Aquinas

Eve “had previously been subject to her husband, but that was a liberal and gentle subjection. Now, however, she is cast into servitude.” John Calvin

“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.” Heinrich Bullinger

“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” Richard Hooker

“So, I say, that in her greatest perfection woman was created to be subject to man.” John Knox

Claims that women cannot be ordained because they are in a state of subjection to men, and therefore cannot teach or exercise authority over men:

“It is neither right nor necessary that women should be teachers, and especially concerning the name of Christ and

the redemption of his passion. . .” Didascalia apostolorum

“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?” Apostolic Constitutions

“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. . . .” John Chrysostom

“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.” Thomas Aquinas

“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.’” Richard Hooker

“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.” John Knox

“The apostle taketh power frome all woman to speake in the assemblie. Ergo he permitteth no woman to rule aboue man.” John Knox

Third is what I will call the “inherent correlation” claim.

(C) Proposition (B) is a direct corollary or consequence of Proposition (A). Women are necessarily subordinate to men, and cannot exercise authority over them because of an ontological incapacity located in a deficiency in reason, emotional instability, and susceptibility to temptation. Because of this ontological deficiency, they cannot exercise authority over or

teach men, and so cannot be ordained.

Claims that women cannot exercise authority over men because of an intellectual, emotional, or moral incapacity (which necessarily implies that they cannot be ordained):

“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 . . .”

John Chrysostom

“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.”

John Knox

Actual claims that women cannot be ordained because of such an incapacity:

“Never at any time has a woman been a priest. . . . And who but women are the teachers of this [that women can be ordained]? Women are unstable, prone to error, and mean-spirited.” Epiphanius

“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.” Apostolic Constitutions

*“For ‘if the head of the wife be the man,’ it is not reasonable that the rest of the body should govern the head.”
Apostolic Constitutions*

“So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates. . . . 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.” Thomas Aquinas

“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.” Boswell’s Johnson

*“The apostle taketh power frome all woman to speake in the assemblie. Ergo he permitteth no woman to rule aboue man.”
John Knox (compare with the above statement by Knox)*

The above should be enough to make clear that there is a traditional understanding of why women cannot be ordained which can be expressed in terms of the inherent connection between propositions (A), (B), and (C). Any argument against women’s ordination that does not include all three propositions is not the traditional argument, but an innovation.

This leads to my second affirmation:

Given that the current arguments against WO are NOT this argument, the continuing opponents of WO are as much endorsing a “recent innovation” as those of us who favor it.

To elaborate this claim, there are three new positions concerning women’s ordination: (1) The Egalitarian position that women can and should be ordained; (2) The Protestant “Complementarian” position that women cannot be ordained. (3) The Catholic “Sacramental” argument that women cannot be

ordained. All are innovations insofar as they reject some element of the traditional argument. This can be illustrated by the following propositions.

(A1) Women share an equal intellectual, moral, and spiritual capacity with men. They are not less intelligent, emotionally unstable, or more subject to temptation than men.

Egalitarians, Evangelical Complementarians, and Catholic Sacramentalists equally affirm (A1).

But (A1) is directly contrary to (A).

I have yet to find a contemporary opponent of W0 who will acknowledge that (A) is inherent to the traditional position, but the above citations clearly demonstrate that it is.

The (1) Egalitarian position is that in light of (A1), there is no valid argument against W0, and therefore women should be ordained. The (2) Complementarian and (3) Sacramentalist positions argue that despite (A1), women should still not be ordained.

The (2) Protestant Complementarian affirms (A1), but also continues to affirm (B). However, because the Complementarian does not affirm (A), he (or she?) cannot affirm (C). Rather, the Complementarian affirms:

(C1) Although (A1), women still cannot be ordained because God has created different "gender roles" rooted in "male headship."

For Complementarians, men can exercise any role in the church that women can fulfil, but women have the exclusive role of always being in submission to male authority. In a religious setting, women cannot teach, speak publicly where men might be present, or exercise authority over men.

Complementarians do affirm (B), but rather than affirm (A) and (C), they affirm (A1), and (C1), and are thus an innovation in

relation to the previous tradition.

The (3) Catholic sacramentalist also affirms (A1), but differs from the (2) Complementarian in the following:

(B1) The argument from authority no longer applies. Women can exercise any role of teaching, exercising authority, and speaking, and even preaching within the church. (There are no "gender roles" rooted in "headship.")

Rather, the sacramentalist affirms:

(B2) The distinct function of ordination has to do with presiding at the sacraments. The presiding minister (the priest) represents Jesus Christ, that is, acts in the "person of Christ" (*in persona Christi*) when presiding at the sacraments. Because Jesus Christ is a male, only a male priest can represent a male Christ.

(B1) and (B2) are decided departures from the historic traditional arguments against women's ordination. To the best of my knowledge, no traditional theologian raises this sacramental argument against WO. It does not appear until the 20th century, first in essays like C.S. Lewis's "On Priestesses," but most definitively in Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Inter Insigniores*. Non-Roman Catholics (Orthodox and Anglo-Catholics) borrow the argument from Roman Catholics.

(B1) and (B) are also in opposition. Complementarians continue to affirm (B), but Sacramentalists do not.

(C2) Because women do not resemble a male Christ, women cannot be ordained.

(There is a variation of the above argument that does not strictly follow the Roman Catholic position that the priest acts *in persona Christi*, but still appears to "male/female" symbolism. Because only a male priest can symbolize a male Christ, only males can be ordained. The substance of the

argument is still the same.)

Thus, (1) Egalitarianism, (2) Evangelical Complementarianism, and (3) Catholic Sacramentalism equally represent innovations to the tradition.

In light of (A1), (1) Egalitarians are an innovation in advocating the ordination of women, but only in the sense of recognizing the implications of what Scripture teaches about the intellectual, moral, and spiritual equality of men and women. Women's ordination is the logical consequence of a Christian doctrine of vocation.

In addition to (A1), the Egalitarian would affirm:

(B3) The primary call of the ordained minister is to service (Matt. 20:26-28; 1 Pet. 5:1-14). Insofar as the ordained minister has a representative function, the minister first represents the church as the body of Christ, and the (female) bride of Christ. Insofar as the minister represents Jesus Christ, the minister represents Christ as the head of the church which is his bride, but most significantly through cruciformity, by pointing away from him- or herself to the crucified and risen Christ, and through following Christ in suffering. The ordained minister represents Jesus Christ as a "jar of clay." This sort of Christocentric representation is not gender-specific, not unique to men or women, to clergy or laity, but is at the heart of discipleship for all Christians (Eph. 5:1, 2; Phil. 2:1-11; 2 Cor. 4:5-12).

(C3) Insofar as the call to ministry is primarily a call to service, and the minister represents first the female Church (as the bride of Christ), and, second, Jesus Christ in terms of the cruciform pattern to which all Christians are called, ministry qualification is determined by Spirit-gifting and vocation, not by gender.

However, (2) Evangelical Complementarians and (3) Catholic sacramentalists are just as much positions of innovations as

are Egalitarians. No one holds to the traditional position.

Rather than affirming (A), (B), (C), (2) Complementarians affirm (A1), (B), and (C1). Complementarians reject two of the original three indispensable premises of the traditional position.

Rather than affirming (A), (B), (C), (3) Catholic sacramentalists affirm (A1), (B1), (B2), and (C2). They reject all three of the original indispensable premises of the traditional position.

Moreover, the only position of agreement shared between (2) Complementarians and (3) Sacramentalists is (A1), not only a departure from the tradition, but also an agreement with (1) Egalitarians. Evangelical Complementarians continue to affirm only one of the original premises (B), while Catholic Sacramentalists affirm none, and Complementarians and Sacramentalists disagree not only with the tradition, but with each other concerning (B) (which Sacramentalists reject), (B1) and (B2) (which Complementarians reject), and (C1) and (C2), about which Complementarians and Sacramentalists disagree.

I think the above adequately addresses the original challenge. However, I conclude with a challenge of my own. I have argued that Evangelical Complementarians and Catholic Sacramentalist opponents to women's ordination represent innovations to the historic tradition. Their advocates insist that they do not, and are simply following the historic tradition. My challenge:

Provide an actual historical reference from the Christian tradition that corresponds to what I have called the Complementarian or Sacramentalist positions. It is not enough to provide some individual positive statement about women mentioned by a Patristic, Medieval, or Reformation author.

Rather, from a discussion that specifically deals with the issue of women's ordination and opposes it, provide an example from a Patristic, Medieval, or Reformation author (or authors)

that clearly endorses either (A1), (B), and (C1), or (A1), (B1), (B2), and (C2) as a coherent and integrated position. It is not enough to find individual quotations from an author that can be read to endorse any single one of the above propositions. Rather, in the same way that I have shown through detailed quotations that there is a sizeable body of Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation writers who endorse (A), (B), and (C) and bring them together to form a coherent argument against women's ordination based on female ontological incapacity, an adequate demonstration that what I have called the (2) Protestant Complementarian or (3) Catholic Sacramentalist positions are not innovations to the tradition would have to substantiate with actual textual references that one or the other of these two was an actual position that was held by someone in the history of the church before the mid-twentieth century.

I do not think that this challenge can be met, and so I stand by my initial claim: *Given that the current arguments against WO are NOT this argument, the continuing opponents of WO are as much endorsing a "recent innovation" as those of us who favor it.*