

Response to the Anglican Diocese of the Living Word “Response”: It’s about Hermeneutics



In reading the *Response* of some writers from the Anglican Diocese of the Living Word to the essay “Women in Holy Orders,” written by Bishop Grant LeMarquand and myself, I was reminded of an interchange between Anglican apologist C. S. Lewis and Episcopal theologian Norman Pittinger seventy years ago. Lewis complained that Pittinger had seriously misrepresented what he had written in his book *Miracles*: “How many times does a man need to say something before he is safe from having said exactly the opposite?”¹ How many indeed?

Are You Now or Have You Ever Been a Post-modernist?

The writers of the *Response* apparently think that Bishop Grant LeMarquand and myself are post-modernists. They ask “What if progressive theologians are actually reading a dualistic, detrimentally hierarchical and patriarchal structure *into* the text before deeming the text void for consideration?” They refer to a “linguistic turn” that “results in the idea that an authoritative interpretation of a text is not possible,” and

to a “new consciousness of pluralism, ambiguity, and hope.” Their next sentence reads: “Several hermeneutical factors of this type are at play when Drs. Witt and Marquand (*sic*) argue against what they believe to be the conservative position on the ordination of women” (p. 8).

Of course, neither I nor Grant LeMarquand believe that Scripture contains a “dualistic, detrimentally hierarchical and patriarchal structure.” We would categorically reject such an interpretation of the Bible. Neither do we believe that an authoritative interpretation of a text is “not possible.” We wrote: “Most of all, we contend that there is a substantial body of scriptural reasoning and theological argument in favor of ordaining women as priests. . . . This scriptural witness leads us to believe that the ordination of godly women as leaders in Christ’s church should continue to be authorized . . .” To be clear, if we thought that an authoritative interpretation of a text is “not possible,” it would make no sense for us to claim that “this scriptural witness leads us to believe . . .”

In our summary of Richard Hooker’s position concerning the ordination of women, we wrote:

Anglican Divine Richard Hooker wrote of women that their “judgments are commonly weakest because of their sex.” In the marriage service, the practice of women being given to their husbands by their fathers “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 . . .” Hooker was opposed to women being “ministers in the Church of God,” for the traditional reason: “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.’”

In response, the authors comment that the “traditional reason”

that Hooker cites is “not the traditional reason the authors reference,” and “It is nothing short of striking that the authors here identify the plain teaching of the Bible as the traditional reason (undermining their arguments elsewhere), and treat that reason as something to be rejected.”

The immediate context of what we had written makes clear that the “traditional reason” to which we were referring was Hooker’s claim that women’s “judgments are commonly weakest because of their sex,” and that the “very imbecility of women” means that they must always be “directed, guided and ordered by others.” Hooker’s citation of 1 Timothy 2:12 is not the “traditional reason,” but provides a *theological warrant* for what is the traditional reason for Hooker. Hooker appeals to the apostle Paul, but why did Hooker believe that Paul did not permit a woman to teach? Because their “imbecility” demands that they always be “directed, guided and ordered by others.”

I will address this question of the distinction between “theological warrant” and “theological position” in a later essay. But let’s be clear. It is not the case that Bishop Grant or myself reject the “plain teaching of the Bible.” We disagree with Hooker’s *interpretation* of 1 Timothy 2:12. We do not agree that his reading of the passage is the “plain teaching of the Bible.” We also disagree with the “complementarian” interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12 endorsed by the authors of the *Response*. We do not treat 1 Timothy 2:12 *at length* in our essay – we had been asked to keep the essay as short as possible – but we make clear later on how we understand the text: “It is our contention that these texts (1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15) should be understood as implying that women who are not educated should learn before they become teachers.” We provide a footnote that lists five separate references that argue this position, all written by competent biblical scholars, all of whose theological orthodoxy is above question. Certainly exegetical arguments can be challenged, and the authors of the *Response*

are free to make the case that the writers we cite are mistaken in their reading of these two texts. But disagreement about the correct interpretation of a biblical text is a disagreement about *what the text says*, not about whether texts are theologically normative, and certainly not about whether it is even possible for texts to be interpreted. Knowing that we had written this later in our essay, why do the authors accuse us of treating the “plain teaching of the Bible” as something to be “rejected”?

Moreover, it is clear that the writers themselves do not embrace Hooker’s position. They do not believe that women have weak judgments, or that women need to be guided because of their “imbecility”; they are only able to claim Hooker as an ally by making a distinction between Hooker’s “cultural influences” (which they reject) and his use of the Bible as an authority (which they claim to accept). Parsing Hooker in this way will not work, however, as I will show in a later essay.

C. S. Lewis responded to Pittinger: “I am not for a moment imputing dishonesty to Dr. Pittinger; we all know too well how difficult it is to grasp or retain the substance of a book that one finds antipathetic” (Lewis, 179). Nor do I accuse the writers of the *Response* of being deliberately dishonest. I think that they are convinced that their position is correct, and that it is based on what they call the “plain teaching of the Bible.” Presumably if Bishop Grant and I disagree with them, the only plausible explanation they can imagine for this disagreement would be that we either do not know how to read texts, or we believe that authoritative reading of texts is impossible, or that we reject the “plain teaching of the Bible.” What becomes clear in the writers’ *Response*, however, is that they themselves cannot actually believe that we hold the positions they accuse us of. They don’t really believe that we deny that authoritative interpretation of texts is impossible because they make an attempt to respond to our readings. Moreover, if we were simply rejecting the “plain

teaching of the Bible," there would again be no reason to respond to our readings. They could simply cite the places in our essay in which we had rejected the Bible's "plain teaching." Such passages do not exist. Of course, it is conceivably possible that we are simply incompetent in our reading of texts, but we make no pretense to originality. If we are incompetent so are the many widely recognized biblical scholars we cite in our essay and in the bibliography we supply. It is possible that the biblical scholars that we cite are less capable of reading texts than the writers of the *Response*, but that seems unlikely. However, if none of these three accusations raised against us is true, this might demand a more careful reading of what we had actually written.

It's about Hermeneutics, Not Biblical Authority or Post-Modernism

What accounts for this incoherent reading of our position? First, I think a general antipathy to our position and the assumption that we *must be wrong* has resulted in a tendentious (and mistaken) rather than sympathetic reading of what we had written. The authors set out to refute our position, not understand it, and this is evident throughout the *Response*. Second has to do with a failure to recognize a fundamental distinction between biblical interpretation and hermeneutical application. Although disagreements of biblical interpretation are certainly important in this discussion, I would suggest that the real disagreement between the two of us and the writers of the *Response* has to do primarily with hermeneutics, not *primarily* with the exegesis or interpretation of Scripture. In this essay, I intend to focus on this issue of hermeneutics itself. In a subsequent essay, I will show how a failure to make certain basic hermeneutical distinctions has led the writers of the *Response* not only to misread our essay, but also to misread the historical texts to which we refer. In a third essay, I will argue that the writers' commitment to the hermeneutic of complementarianism has caused them to

misinterpret not only our own position, but the Catholic position as well. I will address the actual discussion of biblical texts later.

In an earlier essay (now in my forthcoming book), I wrote:

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

I note that the writers of the *Response* make both of the assumptions I express concern about here. They presume throughout that a simple appeal to 1 Timothy 2:12 is enough to establish the "plain teaching of the Bible" and to settle the question of women's ordination. As for the "tradition" argument, in a discussion of Epiphanius, they identify Epiphanius's mere appeal to church tradition as a "sacramental argument," when Epiphanius says nothing about sacraments beyond the mere appeal to tradition.

The reason that the ordination of women must be primarily a

hermeneutical issue and not simply a matter of biblical exegesis is that no biblical text specifically addresses the issue. The "Preface" to the *Response* insists that ministry and orders are not "secondary matters," while at the same time acknowledging that churches "may differ greatly as to the nature of their ministry or how it should be constituted." But certainly the reason that churches "differ greatly as to the nature of their ministry," is that Scripture itself says very little about the nature of church order, and what it says is largely descriptive rather than prescriptive. Whether a church should be governed by a Pope with an infallible magisterium, led by bishops, be governed congregationally, or by a presbytery, is not something that can be decided by exegesis alone. If Scripture says little about church order, it says even less about the issue of whether women can hold church office. There are no biblical passages that state: "Women should be ordained," but neither are there any passages that state "Women should not be ordained."

It is because Scripture does not specifically address the issue that any arguments either in favor of or against women's ordination must be inferential, based not on what Scripture specifically says about the issue (nothing), but on the implications of what it says elsewhere about other issues. As I wrote in a previous essay (now in my forthcoming book):

A central issue for the discussion of the biblical texts to which complementarians appeal is the recognition that the crucial issues of disagreement are primarily hermeneutical, not exegetical. There are disagreements about exegetical issues, of course. For example, what did Paul mean by "headship" in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians? Was Junia a female apostle? However, while such issues are important, the key issue has to do with hermeneutics: How does the church apply what we find written in the Bible to our contemporary situation? Both sides agree that in significant portions of the Bible, women are subordinate to men. Both sides agree

that St. Paul said in Ephesians that women should submit to their husbands, and elsewhere that women should be silent in church. The larger hermeneutical concerns center around what the significance of certain biblical texts was during the times when Scripture was written, and what their implications are for today.

At the same time, it is misleading to suggest that *opposition* to the ordination of women is simply affirming the “plain teaching of the Bible.” The standard texts to which opponents of women’s ordination appeal are not straightforward in their interpretation. For example:

1) A plain-sense reading of Genesis 3:16 would indicate that the subordination of the woman to the man was a consequence of the fall into sin, yet the authors of the *Response* are certain that this cannot be the case so they appeal to inferential arguments for a subordination rooted in creation. (The authors appeal to standard complementarian authors Thomas Schreiner and Wayne Grudem for what they call “hints” of subordination. “Hints” are not the “plain teaching of the Bible.”)

2) Everyone agrees that the Old Testament priesthood was exclusively male, and Jesus called twelve male apostles. Is this masculinity normative for future leaders of the church? The writers of the *Response* claim that it is, but neither the Old Testament nor Jesus say anything about the gender of presbyters or bishops because neither the Old Testament nor Jesus discuss later church order at all. Nowhere in the NT is there any suggestion that the offices of bishop, presbyter, and deacon are based either on the OT Levitical priesthood or on the model of Jesus’ twelve apostles. So any conclusion drawn from the gender of either Old Testament priesthood or the masculinity of Jesus’ twelve apostles is *necessarily* an inference.

3) After several decades of discussion and debate, probably

the majority of contemporary NT exegetes agree that the apostle Paul's metaphorical use of *kephalē* (translated "head") in 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5 should *not* be interpreted as "authority over," yet the writers of the *Response* rely heavily on the scholarship of a single individual (Wayne Grudem) who reaches his conclusions based on how he claims the word is used in sources *outside of Paul's own writings* to claim that it definitely means "authority over."

4) A plain-sense reading of 1 Corinthians 11:10 would indicate that the authority referred to is the authority of the woman – as the majority of contemporary exegetes recognize. Yet for the writers of the *Response*, this *cannot* be the case so the authority *must* be the authority of the man *over* the woman – something mentioned nowhere in the text.

5) A literal reading of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 would be that no woman should ever utter speech of any kind in any church (no women in church choirs) or should never under any circumstances teach a man anywhere under any circumstances. Since no interpreter of the text thinks that Paul's ban is absolute in this sense, the hermeneutical question has to address the nature and extent of the restrictions. The authors of the response do not advocate an absolute ban either, so they make the standard "complementarian" qualifications. The restriction on speaking refers to "authoritative exercise in *public* worship." The restriction on teaching refers to "authoritative . . . *public*" teaching. Is it necessary to point out the text says nothing explicit about *public* speaking?

6) If 1 Timothy 2:12 is a permanent ban on women teaching men, then a plain-sense reading of 2:14 should conclude that women cannot teach men because women are more subject to deception than men, but the writers of the *Response* presumably do not want to affirm that! (They repeatedly insist that ordination is not based on "skills.") But even more so, 1 Timothy 2:12 is descriptive, not prescriptive. The apostle does not write "no

woman should ever teach a man,” but “I am not allowing . . .” Is this a permanent *prohibition* (as the writers of the *Response* claim), or a *description* of a temporary restriction – as Bishop Grant and I believe (and to which I devote an entire chapter in my forthcoming book), and as is argued by the authors we cite.

None of the above are issues that can be decided by the “plain teaching of the Bible,” especially of English translations.

The point of the above list of exegetical concerns is not to claim that the writers of the *Response* are wrong in their interpretation of Scripture and that Grant LeMarquand and I are right (I will argue that elsewhere), but that in both cases, we are dealing not with matters of the “plain teaching of the Bible,” but with issues of the interpretation of Scripture, and with hermeneutics, the contemporary implications of what Scripture teaches. All exegetes necessarily engage in a certain amount of speculative interpretation to make sense of these passages, and of their implications for contemporary practice. By using such language as the “plain teaching of the Bible,” the writers of the *Response* misrepresent not only the position of Bishop Grant and myself, but the task they themselves engage in.

It is not the case that there is no discussion of hermeneutics in the *Response*. In particular, the writers appeal to Sarah Coakley for a “more nuanced” approach. The appeal to Coakley is surprising because Coakley not only *endorses* women’s ordination, but has expressed views on gay marriage about which I imagine writers of the *Response* would have some reservations. What they appear to like about Coakley is that she suggests that “theology must be done as an act of contemplative prayer,” and that “Women find their place in the Church, not by flattening out the gender binary, but by setting that binary within the context of the work of the Spirit.” I certainly would not disagree with either of these statements. I have [written](#) (and published) about [prayer as a](#)

[context](#) for theology, and of [theology as a kind of contemplative discipline](#). I have written at length affirming the [distinction between the sexes](#) and regard this distinction as essential for any understanding of [Christian anthropology](#). The ordination of women does not “flatten” or eliminate the [difference between the sexes](#).

However, even to recognize such differences (again, broadly speaking) between men and women is not an argument against women’s ordination, but for it. The relevant corrective here would again be the apostle Paul’s discussion of different gifts within the diversity of the church as the one body of Christ. If there are inherent psychological differences between some women and some men, this would indicate that those women would exercise pastoral ministry differently than those men, but they would do so in a complementary manner to serve the church in a manner in which those men could not. The church should not refuse the pastoral gifts of women because of possible intellectual, emotional, or psychological differences between women and men. To the contrary, the church needs the pastoral gifts of women in order to avoid one-sidedly masculine church leadership.

Where I would disagree with the authors of the *Response* is that one of the crucial differences between men and women would not be that women cannot be ordained, or that there should be some kind of permanent subordination of women to men based on a “creation order” of “headship.” This would seem to be a case of the authors presuming that because we do not endorse *their* position, we necessarily must deny any distinctions between men and women whatsoever.

Similarly, another false accusation made in the essay (and a major concern expressed several times) is that we have “argued” that “the nature of the Church is reduced to a *mere functionalism* of ‘roles’ in one or more of the following: teaching, administration, leading worship and governance.” The

footnote to which this passage refers is a section in our essay in which we discuss how OT purity laws would have forbidden women from performing “priestly functions,” and that “Such concerns about ritual purity would not be relevant for New Testament Christians in light of the fulfillment of Old Testament ritual law by the priesthood of Jesus Christ.” Nothing in this statement leads to the conclusion that we propose that “the nature of the Church” in “teaching, administration, leading worship and governance” is a mere “functionalism of roles,” only that OT purity laws would not be grounds for restriction for those practicing ministry in the NT church. Actually nowhere in the document do we discuss whether we think that NT office is a matter of “function” or perhaps of “ontology.” This is another case of the writers of the essay presuming that because we do not agree with their position we must necessarily ascribe to some other position that they find objectionable, and then assigning that position to us.

This is not the first time in my life when those who have disagreed with me have falsely ascribed positions to me that they are certain I must hold. Because I wrote my dissertation on Jacobus Arminius, at least one Calvinist has assumed that I must be a “Semi-Pelagian.” Because I admire Thomas Aquinas and because of a misinterpretation of my views on sacramental theology, I have known Evangelicals who have accused me of being “Anglo-Catholic” or “sacerdotalist.” Conversely, I have been accused by Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglo-Catholics of being “low-church” and a “Protestant.” I have also been amused to be cited as an “Orthodox” theologian because I wrote a positive blog essay on Cyril of Alexandria. I have been labeled a “Fundamentalist” by Liberal Protestants. I suppose I should not be surprised then if opponents of women’s ordination presume that I can only disagree with them because I am a post-modernist who rejects the “plain teaching of the Bible,” who “flattens out the gender binary,” and who reduces the office of church ministry to a “functionalism” of “roles.”

As Lewis wrote in his response to Pittinger, “But if the Patagonians think me a dwarf and the Pygmies a giant, perhaps my stature is in fact fairly unremarkable” (Lewis, 181).

[1](#) C. S. Lewis, “Rejoinder to Dr Pittinger,” *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 178-179.