

A Woman's View of Women's Ordination

~ Melora Adams ~

How do we answer this question?

Should women be ordained? How should we go about answering this question? What criteria should we use to bring us to a conclusion?

In all parts of genuine Christianity, Holy Scripture is recognized to be God's Word written, and is held in the greatest regard. But there are different ways of reading Scripture. One way I can read Scripture is to look for passages which seem to me to shed light on a subject, reading and interpreting them as seems sensible to me. In this way, I am trying to find the plain meaning of Scripture; directed, I pray, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Anglican way of reading Scripture is to read it with the interpretation which church tradition has shown to be true. Reading Scripture in this way is much more challenging, since I must take it as the church gives it, not as it seems right to me. (Heresies make perfect sense to their adherents, so I must beware of my private judgment.) If I were to disagree with that reading, I would be defying those who, guided by the Holy Spirit, have spoken with wisdom from the earliest days of the faith; I would be supposing that I am more enlightened than them. That would be spiritually dangerous arrogance and foolish defiance on my part.

This is not to say that the Holy Spirit does not speak to me afresh through my study of the Bible, or that Bible study is not vitally important for me. Far from it; but I believe that the God-inspired voice of the early and historical Church speaks the truth, and I believe that the Holy Spirit will never lead me to a meaning opposed to that truth. God never contradicts Himself. I trust the historic voice of the Church more than a majority vote of any modern council. And I have to trust it better than my own voice, as well.

Where do political/cultural/legal considerations come into play? Nowhere. This is not a secular issue. The life of the church is apart from the life of the culture; we are to be in the world, but not of the world. The Church is the Body of Christ, not an altruistic bureaucracy or social club with liturgical window-dressing. Politics – be they secular or church politics, cultural considerations, or equality under the law – do not speak to the question, though naturally they color my emotions and opinions. I must ask to know God's answer to this question, and not my answer. I must strive, as best I can, to follow God's direction, not my own emotions and ideas and culture and politics. I am a fallen creature, and I can never rely on answers I develop apart from His Word as spoken through centuries in the church.

In preparing this article, I visited websites and read materials which would inform me of arguments for and against women's ordination. I developed rebuttals to the arguments that I disagreed with (some of which I consider merely silly; for instance, "If girls can be baptized, then why can't women be ordained?"). I have decided not to include most of those arguments and rebuttals, but instead to try to do as I was asked: put forth my own view on women's ordination.

Scripture

What, then, is the historical reading of Scripture, with regard to the role of women in the church? I am not going to cite very many passages of Scripture here. Although I found many such passages, I want to focus on summarizing what they say, rather than parsing them in particular.

From the beginning, Scripture tells us that God ordained for there to be two distinct kinds of human beings: male and female. His purpose for women is different from his purpose for men. He made man first, and then made woman from man, to be his helper. As a woman myself, this place in the order of creation is hard for me to accept. I suspect that my sinful pride is the biggest problem.

As a mother, I know that there are times when children do not understand the purpose behind a rule or a decision. Sometimes we can only say, "Because I said so," knowing that we are doing what is best for the child, even though they may not understand it at the time. God is the perfect

Father. There are times when we need to be satisfied with (and thankful for) God's "Because I said so," even though we may not understand His plan at the time. We have to trust Him, if we are to trust the salvation He gives us. We cannot expect to receive His blessings while ignoring His direction for our lives, any more than our children can expect to receive candy from us when they are disobedient. My point is that my place in the order of creation is not up to me, and I would be a better Christian if I were to be thankful for that place, and do my best to live it out as God directs me.

Moses was reluctant to accept God's call to the work of leading the children of Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land. He and Aaron and Miriam did the work of leadership. The precise nature of Miriam's role is not known, but we know that she was a prophetess and led a song of victory to celebrate Israel's safe crossing of the Red Sea:

Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. (Ex. 15:20)

In this passage we have a biblical account of Miriam leading a vibrant music ministry.

There were many faithful women in the Old Testament who did important work for the Lord (and are important examples for us, such as Sarah, Ruth and Naomi), and many prophetesses. However, all priests and members of priestly orders in Israel were male. For example, consider Melchizedek, the priest-king, and the sons of Levi.

Priscilla and Aquila taught and testified, as did the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, who testified to Jesus' identity as the Christ. It was done in a private setting. It was not done in an assembly of the church, as an ordained ministry. Paul tells us that women should pray and they should prophesy (speak God's message), and so should all Christians – that is not, *per se*, work that requires ordination.

Some quote the writings of St. Paul and accuse him of misogyny, but just as often his references to the ministry of women in the church are used to suggest that he believed women should be ordained to the diaconate. (By the way, the earliest use of the word "misogyny" was in the 17th century; fairly recently in church history.) I believe he meant that women could be set apart to serve Christ in His church, but not ordained to preside at public worship. The order of (female) deaconesses, a lay order, is easily confused with the order of (male) deacons, which is an ordained ministry. A deaconess is not a female deacon. The order of deaconess has often been neglected by the church, and I wonder whether this neglect of women's ministry has been a part of the impetus for women's ordination. I believe God is indeed calling women to be set apart for active ministry in the church.

Paul made it clear that he would not permit a woman to be an ordained leader in the church, and he referred to overseers in specifically male terms, though he obviously approved of women's ministry in the church. Like Jesus, he had a very high opinion of women, but he also had, like Jesus, a clear

picture of their place in creation and their rightful place in the church.

Jesus often refers to His Heavenly Father, but never to His Heavenly Parent or His Heavenly Mother. Jesus refers to Himself as the Son, never as the "Daughter of God" or even "Child of God". Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as "He". Jesus was and is unequivocally male. Our God is one God in three masculine persons. God is not "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier." Certainly He acts to create, redeem, and sanctify us, but those are not His names; they are His works. It is significant to note that "the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" is the one which Jesus commanded us to use. It is not a name invented by humans to serve their own purposes. God's Name is not "gender neutral," it is male. The Godhead is male.

Jesus had a very high opinion of women and mothers. In His earthly ministry, they had a vital yet different role from his male disciples. The women were bearers of children (e.g. mothers of Jesus and of St. John the Baptist), faithful followers (consider the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, and Mary, the sister of Martha, who neglected serving to hear Him teach), showed great devotion (the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears, and the women who went to care for His body after the crucifixion), showed faith in Him (consider the woman who believed she would be healed if she merely touched the hem of His robe), witnessed Jesus' crucifixion, and bore witness to the empty tomb. They took the news to the male disciples, who were hiding for fear of the

Jews. Mary and Martha were hostesses of Jesus and his followers. They bore witness to His identity as the Christ, both during his earthly ministry and afterward in the early church. Women helped to nurture the faith of the early church through witnessing and teaching, though not within the context of assemblies, but privately. At the crucifixion, Jesus gave Mary the responsibility of being mother to the disciple John. Unlike the men who followed Jesus, the women who followed Him never betrayed or denied Him.

It is a fact that Jesus chose men to be His closest disciples. They were the first ones He called to follow Him, they were the ones who witnessed his transfiguration, they were His companions at the Last Supper (the first Eucharist), and He chose them to be apostles and the first to receive the Holy Spirit. He gave them authority to forgive sins. (Matthew 16:19 – *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."*) They witnessed his ascension to the Father. Their role was to be one of spiritual fatherhood in the church. The priest acts in the person of Christ.

If we point out that Jesus went against his culture in holding women and motherhood in high regard, then we also must reckon with Jesus' selection of only men to be his apostles. If we argue that St. Paul was a misogynist because he commanded that women not be given authority over men in the church, then we must reckon with his references to women who were his fellow-workers for the Gospel, and the fact that his

references to the role of overseer are exclusively male. If all Scripture is to be believed, then what conclusion can we reach from these seemingly contradictory passages?

Here is my own conclusion: In Scripture, women are witnesses and teachers to individuals (not in public worship), they set godly examples for their families, they lead music ministries, they minister to other women, and they support the Gospel ministry through generosity and hospitality. In Scripture, men preach publicly, they perform healings in Jesus' name, and they are ordained by the laying on of hands and prayer and the invocation of the Holy Spirit.

Church Tradition

In The Apostolic Tradition by St. Hippolytus of Rome, a reason given why women are not to be ordained is that "she does not offer the oblation nor has she a liturgical ministry." Further, she is to be "instituted by word only." The ancient church tradition does define ministries for women, but they are not ordained ministries. Throughout church history, only males have been ordained to preach and to minister sacramentally. Women have also been chosen for ministry since the earliest days of the church (for example: ministry to other women), but it was not sacramental ministry.

In the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, which is descended from the earliest written liturgies in English, there is no provision for the ordination of women.

Women's ordination also presents a barrier to reunion with the Roman Catholic Church . . . in a talk by Cardinal Kasper in June, 2006:

". . . the Pontiff stated that the Catholic Church was convinced that it had no authority for [women's] ordinations. It therefore considers such ordinations invalid.

This position has often been misconstrued as misogyny and denial of the equal dignity of women. But in the apostolic letter "*Mulieris Dignitatem*" on "The Dignity and Vocation of Women" (1988) and in his "Letter to Women" (1995) Pope John Paul made it clear that the position of the Catholic Church in no way arose from a denial of the equal dignity of men and women or a lack of esteem for women, but is based solely on fidelity to apostolic testimony as it has been handed down in the Church throughout the centuries.

The Catholic Church distinguishes between the equal value and dignity of men and women on the one hand, and on the other hand the differentiation of the two sexes, which are intended to have a complementary relationship with one another."

From the Address of Benedict XVI to the Clergy of Rome on March 2, 2006:

". . . we also want to see women more visibly in the government of the Church. We can say that the issue is this: The priestly ministry of the Lord, as we know, is reserved to men, since the priestly

ministry is government in the deep sense, which, in short, means it is the sacrament (of orders) that governs the Church.

This is the crucial point. It is not the man who does something, but the priest governs, faithful to his mission, in the sense that it is the sacrament, that is, through the sacrament it is Christ himself who governs, both through the Eucharist and in the other sacraments, and thus Christ always presides."

For nearly two thousand years the tradition of ordaining only males was observed. It has been only recently, when women have become "liberated" in western society, that this choice has been challenged. I hardly think that a change in the secular realm ("women's liberation") can mean anything to God's church tradition. Let me give you an example: the development of germ theory in modern times is irrelevant to the ancient tradition of using a common cup at Holy Communion. (Some churches drink grape juice from shot glasses, but that is not apostolic tradition; that is their own practice.) I have already mentioned my conviction that it is mere arrogance to believe that we are so enlightened and advanced that we can change the path of God's church for the better, as if we knew better than those who kept the faith of the apostles in spite of bitter persecution.

Reason, Emotion, & Experiences

Here I will give reign to my own impressions and ideas. Please keep clearly in mind that I

am not suggesting that these trump Holy Scripture or the historic faith.

How can the ordination of women be possible? Simply following the rules of an ordination service does not produce an ordained person. It is a "right substance" problem. One cannot take potato chips and Coca-Cola and celebrate Holy Communion by having a duly ordained priest say the words of a Holy Communion service over them. When he finishes reading the words of institution, the chips and soda will not be Sacraments; they will still be merely a snack. Likewise, when women are "ordained," they do not become priests or deacons; they are still merely women who want to be priests or deacons. If using a right substance did not matter, any food and drink could be used for Communion, any liquid could be used for Baptism, and anyone or anything could be ordained — a trained monkey, for example. No, when the historic liturgy says, "he," it does not mean "he/she."

It is not a woman's commitment, or her parenting ability, which determines whether she is able to bear a child. It is not a man's commitment or parenting ability which determines whether he can father a child. The fitness of a woman to bear a child is God-given. The fitness of a man to father a child is God-given. Likewise, the fitness of a man to be a priest is God-given (whether he is called to it is another matter, just as a woman may or may not be called to be a wife and mother).

A woman can earn a Bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering and become a successful engineer. A woman can earn a

Masters degree in Divinity, but she cannot become a deacon, or a priest, or a bishop. This is because the analogy does not hold: the priesthood is not merely a career. There is nothing in the work of engineering that dictates which gender the engineer must be. But to represent Christ at the altar requires a male. To represent Jesus to the people within the Bride of Christ requires a male, because Jesus himself is male.

I think it is noteworthy that Paul's teaching is *apostolic* teaching on the role of women in Christian life and in the church. He did not hate women, but some women hate the role he defined for them in the church. Some women hate not being in authority over men, not being allowed to preside at public worship. But their personal reaction to Paul's writings is irrelevant to me. I have to trust apostolic teaching over my own, despite how it may limit my role in the church; certainly I can trust apostolic teaching better than anyone's personal reaction to it.

God ordained that there would be two kinds of human beings: men and women. It is not our right to pretend that they are interchangeable, or that there are more than two kinds. It is not something we can decide on, by vote or otherwise. I use the word 'ordained' carefully; God chose to order things in a certain way, and he has revealed that choice to us. It is presumptuous, prideful, and in fact rebellious, for us to think that we can decide otherwise and have our own way.

We live in a culture where we do not want to admit that we are helpless. In spite of all our efforts, our money, our technology — our

hubris — we really have control over very little. We are not in charge of the world. We can decide for ourselves how to spend our tax rebate check, but we cannot decide for ourselves whether women can be ordained, any more than we can decide whether we will have snow this winter. No matter how well-written our liturgy may be, it is God who ordains, not us. So actually, the question is not whether we can ordain women; rather, the question is whether God calls women to be ordained.

My conclusion

The value of women in Christian ministry is impossible to overstate. They were some of the first witnesses to Christ, and continue to be His witnesses down to this day. Women have been (and are called to be) church musicians, church treasurers, Sunday school

teachers, deaconesses, witnesses to Christ in their own families, and godly teachers of younger women, just to name a few examples. These are vital ministries. I think that some of them, frankly, do not receive enough recognition in the church today; and that may be one reason why women are prompted to seek ordination. But I believe that women are not called by God to ordained ministry in the church.

Men are not called to all roles in life or in the church, either. They are not called to be mothers, for example; only women are called to that role. They are not, I believe, called to be ministers to young women. Those, among others, are not their functions. But we are taught from Holy Scripture as read by the historic church, that men are called to stand in the place of Christ in the liturgy, that they alone are called to the ordained ministry.

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