

On the Ordination of Women

The various issues surrounding human sexuality continue as matters of intense debate in the Church. The ordination of women to the ministry of priesthood and episcopacy (the bishop) is still, after 25 years, a matter of unresolved controversy.

I cannot accept the ordination of women to the priesthood or episcopacy because I do not believe God has willed it; I do not believe God has called women into it. And, until I do, I am left with little choice but to disagree with this practice.

All Christians have a ministry. Refraining from ordaining women to the priesthood says nothing against women in ministry. All baptized Christians are automatically called into ministry whether they are male or female (Galatians 3:26-29). All baptized persons in the Episcopal Church have agreed to perform Christian ministry (Book of Common Prayer, p. 304-5). And all baptized Christians are equally called to become saints. The controversy is over the peculiar ministry of sacramental priesthood – a unique (but not superior) ministry in God's kingdom. Women are indeed called to ministry as are men, but not to priesthood. Women perform a wide variety of ministries, including serving as deacons, as we see witnessed in scripture. [Phoebe, a female Christian in Rome, is referred to by St. Paul as a deacon (Rom. 16:1).] The diaconate however is not a sacramental ministry; deacons cannot consecrate wine and bread, they cannot bless, nor pronounce absolution. The diaconate is a servant ministry very different from priesthood.

The Testimony of Tradition. The reason the Church cannot say God has called women into priesthood is simply because He never has. We have, beginning with the Old Testament, approximately 3700 years of an unbroken chain of exclusively male priesthood. From the time of Melchizedek in Genesis 14, God chose male priests throughout biblical history. As Pope, John Paul II says the ordination of women to the priesthood “is a departure from tradition of the kind I am not competent to authorize.” In other words, despite the authority granted him by Roman Catholicism, the Pope insists this authority does *not* include altering well established traditions of the church. It is not a matter that he will not, it is that he *cannot*. Even if he liked the idea, he maintains it is not in his bailiwick to authorize such a radical change. Neither do we – the Episcopalians of late twentieth century Christendom – have the authority to make such a change in the established traditions of the Church. Nevertheless, we presume to move forward with these ordinations, and we do so with a marked absence of humility, and we do so with no regard for the rest of Christendom and Christian history. This is a demonstration not of superior intellect but of arrogant independence.

A Change in Tradition? Before we can accept a revision in the fundamentals of Christian belief and practice, we must see evidence that it is the will of God. One such item of supportive evidence would be the witness of the whole church, not just a small portion of it. Priesthood is an order of ministry in Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Anglicanism. When the early Church had to answer various controversies, they convened to pray, ask for guidance of the Holy Spirit, and study the scriptures. They did this to come to conclusion about such things as the identity of Christ or the role of the Trinity. When the whole council could agree on an issue, the decision was accepted, assuming the Holy Spirit had affirmed it. Before we can accept that the ordination of women to the priesthood is the work of the Holy Spirit, there must be an affirming movement like this through all the sacramental branches of the Church.

However, after all these years, those who advocate the ordination of women to the priesthood still remain in the overall minority amongst Christians today. Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and a large portion of Anglicanism throughout the world continue not to sanction the ordination of women to the priesthood. If the change were God's will, we would expect to find support from all quadrants of the faithful Church, including its most humble members. This has not happened.

A Flawed Process. Moreover, the process of making the revision within the Episcopal Church of the USA (ECUSA) was flawed from the start. Rather than giving the change a due process of canon law, which requires a number of years, the change was ordered as a revision to the Prayer Book – a kind of a political, short-circuit, end run – which is hardly a responsible method of determining God's will, even on minor matters. On top of that, the 1976 election was decided by only one vote – God's will determined by a 51% majority?!

What kind of Spirit is it? There clearly is a movement in society that gave birth to the ordination of women to the priesthood. But what kind of movement is it? Advocates of women's priesthood wish to assume it is the Holy Spirit, but the evidence is vastly to the contrary. Christians have reason to believe various spirits do influence our contemporary society, but is it the Spirit of Jesus – the Holy Spirit – that lends influence in this matter? No, it is not, because it does not have the character of Jesus. St. John wrote,

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. (I John 4:1-3).

The spirit giving birth to the women's movement, particularly women's liberation, hardly has the self-giving, self-sacrificing nature of Jesus Christ. Instead its focus is on personal rights. This spirit says, "I should have the freedom to do and to have what I want," and it is characterized as strong, aggressive, and self-ambitious. The truth is we have no rights in the Kingdom of God. Disciples of Jesus (men and women) deny their rights, take up their cross, and follow Jesus, as He commands. They make sacrifices and lay their material desires aside as they offer themselves exclusively to God. The general message of women's liberation speaks some truth and corrects some wrongs, but we should be reminded Satan has always gained influence with God's people by telling some truth and supposedly correcting some wrongs (ref the serpent in the Garden of Eden and Satan with Jesus in the wilderness). Half-truths are Satan's greatest levers.

But if it is not a "spirit" spurring the women's movement and secular society into the advancement of women's rights, it is secular society itself that has influenced the Church towards the acceptance of women's ordination to the priesthood. The problem here is that the Church must never listen to secular society to determine what it should teach and believe. Yes, the Church must listen to society to ascertain how best to preach the Gospel to it. The Church is compelled to preach the Gospel truth in the face of every movement emerging in society. But the Church must never permit secular society to determine what it should teach and believe. When the Church conforms to secular society (ref Romans 12:2), the power of the Gospel is lost from its message.

Following the will of God. Knowing and following God's will has always been and still is at the crux of every decision the Church must make – ever since Genesis chapter 2: “And the Lord God commanded the man...” Anytime early Israel departed from following the commandments of God, they got into trouble; whenever they followed His will, they were blessed. If there is a single message from the Old Testament, this is it: we should always walk the narrow path of truth and obedience that leads to the Kingdom of God, wavering neither to the left nor the right (ref Matthew 7:14). For us it is the same. We must seek the will of God – as we are guided and “led into all truth” by the Holy Spirit – and any failure to do so or any deviation from the path will harm us. Naturally, as humans, we are subject to failure, and we have the privilege of His grace and mercy when we fail. But in this endowed freedom we are able also to defy God's will. Therefore, we must watch over ourselves and hold to the path he taught us, and never become arrogant and defiant before Him.

Questions and Answers

1. **Many women priests seem to function well. Doesn't that prove that ordaining them to the priesthood is a good decision?** No, it does not. Women have always been good at caring for people, speaking in public, preaching the Gospel, and teaching the faith. Why should ordaining them change anything? God's will is not determined by what looks good or works well. King Saul lost his kingship (and his sanity) for doing what looked good and seemed right (I Samuel 15). Goodness, one priest argued his point to a seminarian that he wasn't “struck by lightning” when he received communion at the hands of a woman priest. When truth can be determined by the absence of lightning, the discipline of determining God's will shall change radically! God's will is determined by his own revelation to humanity. God, and those who are lead by His Spirit seek to follow only His will. The ordination of women to the priesthood is not a matter of whether women can function well. That two homosexuals can get along well in a “same-sex marriage” will not prove that God approves its existence.
2. **Why wouldn't God want women priests?** One may ask, "If God wants women in various ministries of the church, why not the sacramental ones as well?" This question is difficult, or impossible, to answer. We cannot know the complete mind of God, only that portion of it that he chooses to reveal. But clearly in the peculiar role of male as giver in social life and the female as receiver, it is just quite possible that God (and Christ as male) sees the sacramental ministry of His Church as a peculiarly male type task – much as He sees bearing and nursing children to be a female task and thus he created it. Remember, Jesus chose only men to be apostles, and Jesus was as uninfluenced by cultural norms as anyone ever was. He could have chosen women to fill this sacramental role but flat did not.
3. **The Bible doesn't say we can't ordain women to the priesthood.** This is true. St Paul did say things about women not assuming church leadership, but that is actually a different matter. And some of what he said was said to resolve local concerns, not establish universal doctrines. But Jesus, as I said above, did choose an all-male apostolate, and did so at the behest of His father. An important verse in the Gospel of John says,

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise" (5:19).

That may seem of minor significance, but it is not. Jesus claims that His actions – which were not influenced by cultural norms – are the express reflection of what He “sees” His father doing. Choosing twelve men is His father’s will.

There is also the matter of an absence of approval in scripture. If God desired women in priesthood, involving women in the apostolate should have received some degree of attention. It did not. Scripture shows that Jesus clearly did not fail to reach out to the children, the poor, and the oppressed when they had been neglected. Women had never been given the ministry of the priesthood, and He did nothing to change that.

As Anglicans have said since the beginning, decisions of the Church need to be affirmed in scripture and (not *or*) tradition. Not only is there an absence of supportive scripture, there is neither any support of tradition.

4. **Why does it matter what Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox say to this issue?** It matters because the determination of God’s will is not, nor should it ever be, a matter of unilateral decision-making. These Christian denominations are part of the Christian family, and they are as invested in an orthodox priesthood and we are. They should be consulted in the consideration of any revision.
5. **Have those who oppose the ordination of women to the priesthood proven their point adequately?** One must be reminded that, using legal terminology, it is “not our burden of proof.” To make a departure from a well-established tradition of an integral aspect of the church and its ministry *always* places the burden of proof on those seeking change, in this case upon those advocating female priesthood. It is their responsibility to prove that a change has rightly occurred, not ours to maintain it has not.
6. **What about women ordained in Protestant denominations?** The question before Protestant denominations involves women in leadership and in teaching roles in the Church. This is a different matter. The question could be applied to the case of leadership in the Episcopal Church, but the more critical question involves whether God has changed His direction and chosen to gift women with the capability of sacramental ministry. Since Protestant denominations do not have sacramental ministry, listening to their debate does not help us.
7. **Since, in the Epistle to the Hebrews it says Jesus became the Great High Priest, does this not say we no longer have a Christian priesthood at all?** No, it does not. Jesus became the *high* priest. Israel always had a high priest; and it was from that one high priest that the ministry of all other Hebrew priests emanated. The same is true today. It is from Christ’s priesthood that ours continues to be effective now. His becoming the High Priest actually affirms and establishes continuance of a Christian priesthood.
8. **What about the “priesthood of all believers.”** That term has good usage. It brings to light that every baptized Christian has a priestly ministry. This is true. Priesthood is the Christian ministry of mediation between man and God. All lay people have this ministry. They pray to God on behalf of man; they talk to man on behalf of God. The difference is actually not whether those ordained become “priests,” it is that they become “ordered.” That is why the

service by which a candidate is made a “priest” is called “ordination,” and not “priesting.” The ordained priest has a ministry which is primarily to the Church and is primarily sacramental. The lay “priests” have a ministry that is primarily to the world and it is primarily of the word.

9. **St Philip “the evangelist” had four daughters who were prophetesses (Acts 21:8-9). If women can be prophets, does this affirm they can be priests?** Not at all. In our Judeo-Christian history, there have been many women prophets, judges, queens, even warriors. Jesus Himself was honored by the prophetess Anna at His presentation to God in the temple (Luke 2:36-38). There are a number of institutional ministries in the Old and New Testaments offices of which many of them were held from time to time by women, but not sacramental priesthood. Priests and prophets are not the same; they have two very different types of ministry. Priesthood is a sacramental ministry; prophethood is not. Prophets proclaim God’s word, and the laity do this, also. Whether or not there are female prophets in Christendom speaks nothing to the issue of priesthood. However, with the fact that there are women in so many institutional ministries in our Judeo-Christian history, the exception of women from priesthood is significant.
10. **If we agree that ordaining women to the priesthood is not of God, how are we to look at those women who function as priests?** Be careful not to judge them, lest one do what we were expressly taught not to do (Matthew 7:1-2). Women did not make the decision to start ordaining women, the church did. It is those who lead others away from the will of God who shall first be judged, not the victims of their misguided decisions. Many women who function as priests are committed Christians who preach the Gospel of Christ and seek to do His will, and have been told by their church superiors that ordination for them is the right thing. Many ordained women are clearly sisters in Christ and should be treated as such, but this does not compel us to acknowledge in them a viable sacramental priesthood, nor from them receive a sacramental ministry.
11. **Even if it is not God’s choosing to ordain women, is it possible that He has relented and sanctions the action anyway?** Yes, of course it is possible, He is God. There is, in fact, a precedent for this. In I Samuel we read about the people’s request for a king to govern them.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "Behold ... appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations." But the thing displeased Samuel ... And Samuel prayed to the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, "Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them (8:4-7).

The Lord saw in this request for a king an act of distrust, but nevertheless, He appointed and anointed a king of His own choosing. The difference is that here we have scriptural evidence of God appointing and anointing though His preference is to the contrary. In our current situation, we have no such evidence. So, while it is *possible* that God could sanction the decision to ordain women, we have been given nothing by which we can believe this has happened. There remains, at minimum, the reasonable doubt. And therein lies the problem. We cannot act upon or accept something of this magnitude when there is doubt. “It is a departure from tradition of the kind I am *not competent* to authorize.”

In Conclusion

I wish that I did believe in and accept the ordination of women to the priesthood. It would make my life easier. As it is, here in the Episcopal Church (USA), being opposed, I am in the minority position, and this is not a pleasant place to be. Most people prefer to be in the normal drift of things, and I am no different. Those who support ordaining women to the priesthood have more “friends” in the church, and they can move about more easily, and be trusted and are invited more places. It is easier to find positions in various parishes and dioceses.

Consequently, I have sought out people who might convince me to change – mostly old friends who have turned the corner and accepted the priesting of women. I asked them how they changed. Most of them answer, “the Church made its decision and I decided to go along with it.” I respond, “What if the church decides to ‘marry’ same sex couples?” or (trying to stay away from added controversy), “What if the Church decides we should baptize house pets? Will that make it so?” They always answer, “no.” “Then why do you think our church has the authority to make this decision?” I have never gotten a credible answer. And, again, therein lies the problem; I need credible answers to these questions ... and they do not seem to exist.

One bishop told me he was against the ordination of women until one time he saw a woman function as a priest and it “felt good.” So much for our spiritual leadership’s critical theological examination! We change what we believe because of what we “feel” about things? I know of persons who were burned at the stake because of their commitment to the Christian Faith. I shouldn’t wonder how they “felt” about that. No, feelings are not how we determine God’s direction on theological matters; it’s not how we determine truth. We believe in accordance with what is revealed to us.

Again, it would be easier to believe in the ordination of women to the priesthood. I do not write this paper to convince anyone they should believe as I do, as much as I write it to invite others to convince me. I am left with the things I see, and, until I can be convinced with credible reasoning that God has sanctioned the ordination of women to the priesthood, like it or not, I am stuck where I am; I am stuck with what appears to be truth.

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