

# A Note from Antiquity on the Question of Women's Ordination

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The summons that has come to us all in the last decade or so has been this: re-think radically your understanding of the masculine-feminine phenomenon. In America, at least, very often the public rhetoric surrounding this summons follows lines such as these: human history presents a bleak, not to say a grim, picture of masculine hegemony that has managed to keep women from coming to their full personhood, and has denied to society (or the church) the gifts that women can bring if they are set free from their bondage to ancient roles of passivity, domesticity, and child-care in which civilization has locked them. These roles are stereotypes. Demure icons of woman as mother and housekeeper must be smashed if we are to move towards authentic freedom for all persons. Indeed, it is that very word itself—persons—that has been buried under the stereotypes of 'man' and 'woman' by which humanity has spoken of itself for too long. It is the liberation of persons that we are urging, not just of one special-interest group.

It is difficult in the extreme, as it always is in discussions that are amplified by becoming public, so that everyone's voice becomes strident and shrill—it is difficult in the extreme to keep the root issues from becoming tangled with items that are not germane, such as one's own inclinations, or party spirit, and so forth.

The task of a traditionalist in this discussion is an ambiguous one, in that he has, as it were, nothing new to say. It will sound as though he wants above all either to arrest things where they are, or, better still, to go back. In this sense, his task is hard: he finds himself urging the obvious, the platitudinous even. He swims against the immense tide of 'progress'. On the other hand, he is forced, by his very attachment to notions and canons that have been with us all for some millennia, to scrutinize them narrowly to find out if perhaps they have, in fact, become otiose. After all, the mightiest oak in the wood one day falls and rots, and it would be a pity for a man who is enthusiastic about oak as a building material to build his house from the bole of this tree. So that no matter how fierce he may be in his traditionalism, he nonetheless has the task of making sure he is working with materials that are still sound.

One early part of the traditionalist's job is to clear away what he is not arguing for. This essay, for example, rejects the idea which has almost wholly pre-empted the word 'chauvinism' in America, namely that men are better than women, or stronger, or more intelligent, and that they ought therefore to be at the helm in all situations. A view which urges this is patently objectionable, and not a fair challenger in the lists.

Moreover, a traditionalist will want to protest at a notion that has got abroad (again, at least in America) that 'radical' stands somehow at the polar extreme from 'traditional.' The idea is that the radical is the one who really wants to dash boldly into topics at any cost, while the traditionalist peeps timorously from behind the little pickets and barbicans of convention and custom, afraid of what will happen if he comes into the open. But that is to set up a false picture. The traditionalist will urge that a robust and vibrant respect for antiquity, custom, convention, history and myth is the truly radical point of view, since it insists, in the face of the tempest of contemporaneity, upon staying rooted or, to return to the metaphor of the dash, in driving straight through the muddle to the centre. The word radical has come, altogether too often, to mean 'rash' or 'sweeping'. That is not what it means. It should designate this rootedness (*radix* = root). And our human roots are nowhere if they are not in antiquity, custom, history and myth.

The particular topic here is the question of the ordination of women in the church to the presbyterate. It has been discussed long enough now, and fervently enough, for us all to be aware of the general arguments on either side. The following seem to me to be lines along which any Christian at all, whether he thinks of himself as being a traditionalist or a progressive, ought to pursue at least the opening stages of his thinking on the topic. At almost every stage of the discussion, the Christian will find himself at some odds with mere contemporaneity, in that he does have a very deep and prior commitment to a whole array of things rooted in antiquity and is therefore never at liberty to be *merely* contemporary.

### **The very stuff of creation**

For a start, he will be forever testing and scrutinizing and judging current struggles and fashions by ancient, nay protohistoric, canons. He believes in fixity: not, he hastens to explain, the ossification and sterility and entropy which our age attaches to the word; but rather in the sense in which the psalmist saw it ('Forever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven') and which all stars in their courses, and all columbines in their faithful blooming, and all mothers suckling their young, know as the blissful guarantee that things are designed and purposeful and not random and futile.

He can never, for example, be a mere progressive—if by that we

mean someone who believes that things started poorly in some helter-skelter primeval havoc, and have been struggling upwards ever since, so that there is a direct ratio between the words 'recent' and 'good'. He cannot take this view, since he believes in the doctrine of creation. Not only were things made, but they were made by a wise Creator and, beyond that, he saw that it was good. He liked what he saw. There was something exactly right at the beginning: a certain harmony and order and bliss and liberty for all things. If something is wrong, it has *gone* wrong. And, says the Christian, *we* are the culprits. The *culpa* is ours, our own, our own most grievous fault, as one liturgy phrases it.

And not only that: the Christian, accepting as he does the biblical account of history, is inclined to descry in all human efforts a tragic irony, by which our most sedulous efforts to build Jerusalem somehow always end up producing Babylon. We cannot get it right, somehow. The tower we raise has a disquieting way of falling on our heads. Every one of our noble civilizations has enacted this bleak drama, and even our utopian institutions—our Leagues of Nations and our nineteenth-century New England transcendentalist communal farms and our twentieth-century soviets. They don't set us free. They don't make us happy. There is a joker in the pack. Loki is abroad somewhere, mucking things up.

What is wrong? Well, evil, says the Christian, taking his cues from the Bible. The curse. We went astray in the beginning, and have turned out to be virtually incorrigible. For this reason, any Christian will want to be testing the movements and ideas that pop up in his own epoch—testing them in the long light of the history, law, prophets, and evangel that the church holds to be authoritative.

For example, one of the ideas that has risen now in the discussion of sexuality (which is the larger category under which lies our immediate topic of women's ordination) is the 'androgynous' ideal. This would see our real human liberty and fulfilment to lie in a wholly new view of ourselves, not as men and women, but as 'persons'. The idea is that there is an entity 'person' which is somehow trapped inside this traditional cloak of anatomy, and that part of our job now is to strip this cloak away and liberate the creature inside, allowing him/her to step out and stand tall as what he/she is, namely a person, and not as a man or a woman. If it is urged that I am constructing a straw man here—or a straw person, rather—I must confess that I never would have thought of the idea. It has been advanced by others in the discussion, and is sweeping all before it, in America at least. One of its odder points is the idea that if we will refrain from giving toy lorries and pistols to little boys, or dolls and aprons to little girls, we will discover that they have no prior inclination to enjoy these things at all, and that they will thereby be liberated from the Procrustean bed of sexuality into which we ('society' tends to be the

villain here) have crushed them. There are no inclinations or energies peculiar to boys, nor to girls. It is we who have perpetrated the fraud on them, leading them to suppose that, if they are girls, there is some reason for them to incline to take care of babies. That is all a ruse.

So runs the argument in its more strident form.

Over against this, any Christian has an old idea nagging at him: 'Male and female created he them.' For some millennia now, that statement has been experienced as a joyous one by Jews and Christians. It states, with elegant simplicity, the great datum that lies at the root of the whole order in which we live. From it proceeds all the richness that has gilded human existence with bliss since the creation. Upon it is founded the central human phenomenon, the family. In it we see articulated the great mystery that we, alone of all creatures in the universe, as far as we know, bear the *imago dei*, given to us under this splendid and dual modality of man and woman.

It would seem to be an unqualifiedly blissful statement. The distinction would seem to be a bright and fruitful one, the very modality of our true liberty as whole people. It would seem to suggest that what appears to us in terms of anatomy reaches to the very centre of the meaning of human existence, and that what is celebrated in all mythologies and assumed in Scripture is of the very stuff of creation itself. 'Celebrated in all mythologies': a Christian would tend to attach some weight to this, since he would understand these mythologies to be, somehow, clues to what we still were able, with our dimmed eyes and befouled minds, to perceive of the tissue of reality after our expulsion from Eden. One thing that we all did remember and keep alive was that this male-female distinction is a bright and fruitful one. Babylonian, Greek, Nordic, African, Oriental, and North American mythologies, as well as Jewish and Christian Scriptures, celebrate the distinction. And, further, the distinction is assumed to run down to the root of the world and up to the top of things. Nothing is sexless. Indeed, almost nothing is even hermaphroditic. In a few tales you find a sort of self-fructifying going on at the very beginning, in which the world is brought forth. But this 'uni-sex' state of affairs does not last for more than a moment. Everything and everyone divides itself up into male and female. The creator, the demiurge, the sun, the titans, the chief gods—they commonly appear as male. (There are some titanesses—Rhea, for example.) There has been, obviously, some notion rooted deeply in human consciousness, of an initiating or generating office attached to the masculine image. The myths are of a piece with the cloth of human sexual anatomy on this point. The creator begets life upon the earth. The sun pours energy into the earth and things spring up. The god begets offspring from the goddess. For Jews and Christians, the Creator is spoken of as 'he'.

'Spoken of' is crucial, of course. Christian orthodoxy does not

suppose God is a male. The ontology of the deity escapes our powers of description. But Jews and Christians worship and obey the god—the God, shall we say—who has gone to vast and prolonged pains to *disclose* himself to us as he and not she, as king and not queen, and, for Christians, as Father and not mother; and who sent his Son, not his daughter, in his final unveiling of himself for our eyes. These are terrible mysteries, and we have no warrant to tinker with them.

I am aware of the argument that says this was all done as a sop to ancient patriarchal imagination. But a true Christian radicalism would want to dig further on down the root at this point. It would suspect that the very antiquity and universality of this patriarchalism (anthropologists tell us that it is very difficult to track down a truly matriarchal society), coupled with the looming datum that God offered his self-disclosure to us under the imagery of maleness—it would suspect that this doubly massive data allows us a peek at mysteries that we must not violate.

The argument here, by the way, is not for a return to patriarchalism politically. Very few people nowadays, be they never so ferociously orthodox, would quarrel with the notion of a queen regnant, or of a woman prime minister (they might quarrel with that on more partisan grounds). Nor is it an effort to smuggle back in the idea of man as boss. It is a more modest argument, namely, that when you stand in front of data as ancient and high as this, you pause for a very long time before you tuck in and start briskly rearranging it. Especially do you not do it under the gun of one decade's, or one century's, debate.

But to return to the imagery. It is interesting to note that ancient narratives do not get very far before we find some most interesting roles assigned to femininity. The earth, of course, usually appears as feminine (the matrix, the womb, fruitfulness—all that). But there are several other deities, forces, and qualities that often appear in feminine garb as well. The Fates are feminine. The Graces are feminine. The Furies are feminine. The seasons, the muses, the moon, justice, wisdom, love—these all appear as feminine (Venus is the mother of Cupid in many tales, although of course Hesiod has Cupid there at the beginning). It is inviting to speculate on how it came about that these all should be feminine.

Over against all this, and against the whole testimony of poetry and drama that has lauded heroes (Achilles, Beowulf, Gilgamesh) and heroines (Antigone, Brunhilde, Elizabeth), we find an androgynous ideal proposed now, in which we will affirm each individual as a person, and not be locked in to the stereo-types. Someone, however, who has come across all these tales might wonder whether, when you find a type that is so ancient and so universal, you have found, not a stereotype but rather an *archetype*.

Any reflective Christian, committed as he is to the notion that God

has revealed something of himself in nature and history as well as in Scripture, will recognize that indeed we do find all human qualities (toughness, tenderness, intelligence, grace, courage, and so forth) distributed to both sexes, so that we cannot assign, say, toughness to men and tenderness to women. But he will be curious as to the antiphonal way in which men and women will *exhibit* toughness differently. Any man who has ever known a woman, for example, knows full well that there are things she is far better equipped to endure and weather than he is, and that he needs her resilience and stamina in more than one situation. But she exhibits this toughness without being obliged (as we see too often now, alas) to ape the masculine way of exhibiting toughness. Antigone did not need to strut about like a man in order to prove to us her stature. She needed neither boots nor spurs to make her point. The Virgin Mary was called upon to endure an ordeal that no patriarch, king, prophet, or apostle was equal to, but she needed to borrow no trappings from them for her role.

The ancient record, then, affirms and celebrates the distinction. Christians will want to keep in touch with this root in the discussion.

This is to take up a great deal of space urging points that might appear obvious, and are certainly only preliminary. The Christian commitment to the testimony of antiquity, for one thing, and his fealty to the male-female distinction as being essential—these are preliminary, of course. But they are crucial.

### **Expediency or principle?**

To move to the immediate question, then: what about the ordination of women to the presbyterate? All Christians stand in the presence of the following data: 1) the practice of the church catholic for two thousand years; 2) the example set by Christ in choosing the people who would bear the weight of authority in his church; and 3) the instructions given by St Paul to the church. On each point, as we well know, there are differing responses.

We may put the point about the church's ancient practice first, even though it is last chronologically, since it is the least weighty of the three. Even if one takes an ultramontane view of the church's authority (as most readers of *Churchman* do not), one would not rule out the possibility of some modification in a practice like this, since the ordination exclusively of males to the presbyterate has never been defined as dogma. There are strong reasons supporting the church's practice, of course. But the practice has never been declared to be *de fide*. Hence we may only refer to this in passing.

But all Christians, except for the most flagrantly individualistic and peripheral sects, attach *some* weight to what the church has done. One decade is a very brief period in which to judge, condemn, and jettison, the universal practice of the church catholic. So that perhaps one point to be urged here is that we give the question time (two gen-

erations, say, or a century perhaps) to arrange itself entirely clearly in our minds. This seems frosty advice to someone in the heat of revolutionary fervour, especially someone gripped by the rhetoric of the 'injustice' being done to women by the church in keeping them in thrall to some second-class status, ruling them out by virtue of their anatomy as candidates for full participation in the teaching and priestly office of Christ's body, and so forth. When there are slaves to be freed, or outrages to be sorted out, the time is now! (This sort of thing, I expect, is more common in America than in Great Britain; since America began with a revolution, and tends to look upon two centuries as a very long time.)

Furthermore, still on this point, there is the question of catholicity as well as of mere time. That is, with the universal practice of the church being what it has been, who has the authority to change it, especially when it is a practice touching so exquisitely on matters like sacrament, priesthood, authority, the mystery of the body of Christ, and so on? Not all of these matters will loom with equal size or weight for all Christians, or even for all Anglicans. Evangelicals, latitudinarians, and catholics in the Church of England will tend to attach varying degrees of seriousness to them. But nonetheless, the Anglican Church at least (as opposed to a sect), with its claim to apostolicity and catholicity, will want to attend very carefully to the question as to the sort of warrant she has for making this change by herself without regard to the practice of the rest of the catholic church. So that, even if one personally favours the ordination of women to the presbyterate, one still has this to settle.

I may speak here briefly of the experience of the Episcopal Church in the United States since its General Convention in late 1976 when the decision to permit the ordination of women was taken. As readers will know, the Church has been torn apart over it, with the Presiding Bishop offering to resign. There are nearly 100 women priests now, and American theological colleges are accepting, and graduating, increasing numbers of women whose goal is the priesthood. The various species of churchmanship in the Episcopal Church tend to herd together on the question. The evangelicals have not adopted much of a viewpoint at all, since for them ordination itself is something of an ambiguous question, and no sacerdotal questions arise in any case. If they have any difficulty with ordaining women, it would arise from St Paul's language about the teaching authority of women in the assembly. The Protestant liberals in the Episcopal Church would be almost 100 per cent in favor of the action of the Convention. In these circles, the discussion tends to proceed along political, juridical, and sociological lines, with questions of rights, justice, equality, 'job description' and 'second-class citizenship' forming a good part of the vocabulary. The catholics in the Church tend on the whole to oppose the move, although there are some variations;

many liberal catholics approve the measure, while conservative catholics are divided, not over the question itself, but over whether or not to leave the Episcopal Church. One articulate catholic presence is the Evangelical and Catholic Mission, which sees its task to be a matter of staying in the Church and working for the reversal of the decision. The other major catholic group has left the Episcopal Church, and formed the Anglican Church in North America. They have three bishops now, although they may find themselves with a Nag's Head situation on their hands, since only two bishops showed up for the consecration of the three new ones, and Anglican practice has been to have three. Canterbury does not recognize the new church as validly Anglican.

The second item which stands before all Christians is the practice of our Lord. In one sense, this ought to be the final and weightiest one, but debate swirls around this point since the Lord never made a pronouncement on the topic. He chose twelve men and no women to be apostles, but he never commanded his church to insist on this.

The two responses to his example on this question run something like this: Jesus did this simply because he was an authentic man of his time, and since the society then was patriarchal, he would have raised hopelessly complicated problems by appointing women to the apostolic office. His act was a first-century act, but not normative for the rest of the church's history.

The other view says that the Lord's example reaches deeper than this expedient level. Jesus was a Jew of course, and a first-century man. But his ministry was prophetic. We may even call him a revolutionary, if we wish, in that the Gospel he preached *did* represent a total overturning of men's categories. We may even call him a profeminist, in that he scandalized everyone by consorting with women without any patronizing attitude, and by speaking openly with them, accepting them into his circle, and honouring them generally. But the difficulty here is that this revolutionary, this feminist, this liberator, suddenly recoiled at the most crucial point of all, threw a sop to first-century patriarchalism, and chose twelve men to bear the weight of authority in his church. Surely he had more in mind than mere expedience here? Surely this act was of a piece with his proclamation of God as Father and not mother, with his incarnation as the Son and not the daughter of God, and with his office as fulfiller of what was adumbrated in the whole history of God's revelation of himself to his bride Israel.

This brings us to the third consideration, namely, St Paul's explicit instructions to the church. Galatians 3:28 is often appealed to as a key passage opening the way for the ordination of women to the presbyterate. The male-female distinction, like the slave-free one and the Jew-Greek one, is abolished in Christ and ought therefore not to appear in the church. Therefore it does not make any difference



whether priests are men or women.

But this, says the other view, is to mutilate a text. The apostle is speaking here, not of offices in the church, but of our respective eligibility as recipients of grace. If we stick on this phrase alone, we may well conclude that sexuality is abolished in the church. But then we must huddle almost everything else St Paul said on the topic into the cupboard. For when this apostle of liberation came to spelling out the concrete details of how this liberty will look in practice in the church, we find him, like the Lord, suddenly recoiling from the implications of what he has said elsewhere, and capitulating to first-century prejudices—at least if Galatians 3:28 does mean that no recognition of sexuality is permissible in the church.

In the classic passages, scrutinized by everyone on both sides of the ordination question (1 Cor.11:2ff; 1 Cor.14:33ff; Eph. 5:2ff; Col. 3:18ff; 1 Tim. 2:11ff; Titus 2:4ff) we find St Paul spelling out the gospel for Christian marriage and the church—the two areas where, in a secular world order, the divine order may still be enshrined—and in every case he seems to hand primacy to the men. Husbands are to be 'head' at home; women are to keep quiet in church. It is a fairly dismal picture, if we are thinking of 'equal rights' as that phrase is used in public discussion now.

Very few Christians of course will argue that *nothing* of what St Paul enjoined is cultural and therefore capable of being modified. Very few sects still insist on women's heads being covered in church, for example. But in all these instructions for order in marriage and in the church, unless the apostle suffered from lapses of attention and forgot what he had said in other places about Christian liberty, we seem to be nudged towards an awareness of a whole new way of seeing things, diametrically opposed to worldly preoccupations with questions of power and rights.

It is sometimes objected that the headship of husbands over wives, for example, is a product of the curse. But St Paul roots his teaching on this topic, not in the curse, but in creation, and in the eschatological metaphor of Christ and the church. The headship spoken of is no male supremacy. It is a matter of gift: the man must bear the weight of headship in the household, and offer this to his wife, as Christ offers his to the church. Similarly, the wife offers her gift to her husband. Here is Christian mutuality. There is no question of better or worse, or of first and second-class citizens. True lovers, of course, don't need to have it explained to them in any case, since love rejoices, not in equal scores and closely-tallied balance sheets, but in the riotous and blissful inequalities that make the Dance possible.

### **A ministering body**

In the church we may expect to find the difference between men and women set free from being sources of friction or tyranny and raised,

sanctified, and liberated for use in their proper fullness. Just as the imagery of Christ as husband and the church as wife seems to hint at the deepest mystery of all, and to exclude interchangeability, so the church has felt bound to affirm this imagery in her ordering of her own life under St Paul's instruction. The pastors serving under the Chief Pastor have, in obedience to dominical example and apostolic injunction, been drawn from among the males in the church. Teaching and ruling authority has seemed to attach somehow to these pastoral offices, just as headship seems to attach to the father's role at home. Since men are manifestly neither wiser, stronger, nor holier than women, the church would doubtless suppose that this ordering of things must have something to do with fidelity to the male-female imagery at work in creation and sanctified in the church.

But that is only part of the story. It is not as though the church were an inert mass of women led about by a cadre of ruling men. It is a body, made up entirely of men and women together. If the pastoral offices of presbyter and bishop have been borne, or must be borne, by men for whatever reasons, nonetheless this body is a ministering body, needing the gifts and offices of all its members. It is perhaps a pity that the word 'ordination' came to refer almost exclusively to the setting aside of men to the pastoral office. The body is maimed, and all its members the poorer, if it is supposed that there are two orders only: a male clergy and a mixed laity, and that the former order is to be identified with 'ministry'. That is like saying that the ear is to minister to the body but not the hand.

It would seem that one of the tasks before the church at this point in her history would be to think, most patiently and rigorously, about the plain fact of masculinity and femininity, and to have that thinking informed by the whole record of human experience as it comes to us in history, myth, and Scripture, and then to consider how it is that the Christian gospel redeems our nature from bondage.

What does it mean to be a father or brother in the church? There is surely no warrant for restricting this wholly to presbyters. What are the manifold forms, in teaching, service, counselling, and leading, in which 'fatherhood' may be recognized and set free in the church? A man brings with him by virtue of the maleness he bears a whole aspect of humanness that women do not bring. This is set free, not suppressed, by the gospel. Again, what does it mean to be a mother or a sister in the church? Is there no ordination, no setting apart of members of the body for the manifold forms, in teaching, service, counselling, and leading, in which 'motherhood' may be recognized and set free? If we are, really, men and women, and if the witness of history, myth, and Scripture has not been all wrong, then there is a great mystery in our flesh, enacted willy-nilly in our sexuality at home, and attested and brought to its redeemed glory in the church. The Christian religion is incarnational, not Manichaeism. It sees the

material world (and hence our very bodies) as both cloaking and revealing what is true.

There is neither male nor female in Christ, says the apostle. Neither male nor female? No neither—but also the Virgin Mother, highly exalted where no mere patriarch or apostle can come, precisely because he is a male and can never be *theotokos* in exactly the sense that she is. Neither male nor female? No neither—and also the Son of God and his spouse. Neither male nor female? No neither—and also apostles and presbyters and bishops taken from male ranks by dominical example and apostolic ruling, to bear the particular kind of responsibility that attaches to those forms of authority. Neither male nor female? No neither—and also virgins and widows granted a specific ministry not mentioned for bachelors and widowers.

These are puzzling things for us all, especially in this day of egalitarianism and universal suffrage. But the church will want to pause in front of the mysteries, since she is the custodian of them. And she will want to pay attention to the imagery since that seems to furnish the connection between the visible world and the unseen. And she will want to stay in touch with the root—a root that reaches deep into the creation where maleness and femaleness reside blissfully, as embodiments of something to do with the Eternal.

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## NOTE

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