

Part 1: The Ordination of Women as Priests

A. Vocation and Calling of God

1. *The fundamental issue concerns God's call* In 1976 Bishop Max Thomas (Bishop of Wangaratta) argued that the only real theological point at issue concerned God's call. The Church's main task was to decide whether God was calling women to the priesthood. What the Church needed to do was to apply to women the same methods of testing a vocation as the Church had traditionally done for men.

2. *1982 Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* This international ecumenical document stated the matter clearly and succinctly:

Where Christ is present, human barriers are being broken. The Church is called to convey to the world the image of a new humanity. There is in Christ no male or female (Galatians 3:28). Both women and men must discover their contributions to the service of Christ in the Church. The Church must discover the ministry which can be provided by women as well as that which can be provided by men. A deeper understanding of the comprehensiveness of ministry which reflects the interdependence of men and women needs to be more widely manifested in the life of the Church.

The statement went on to acknowledge that there remained different views regarding this matter. In the accompanying commentary the following was stated:

Those churches which practise the ordination of women do so because of their understanding of the Gospel and of ministry. It rests for them on the deeply held theological conviction that the ordained ministry of the Church lacks fullness when it is limited to one sex. This theological conviction has been reinforced by their experience during the years in which they have included women in their ordained ministries. They have found that women's gifts are as wide and varied as men's and that their ministry is as fully blessed by the Holy Spirit as the ministry of men. None has found reason to reconsider its decision.

3. *A 30 year consensus* For over 30 years the consensus of the Anglican Church of Australia has been that God is calling women to the ordained ministry. 'The Church's responsibility is to discern the nature of God's activity in the women who attest to a call, using the

same methods it employs when men present for ordination.’ (Muriel Porter). The real danger for the Church is ignoring the work of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit.

4. *Women’s ordination and the coming kingdom of God* It is surprising and regrettable that the central issue of vocation and God’s call has far too often been ignored or marginalised by a Church too focussed on difficulties and problems. The question of vocation and God’s call belongs to that part of the Lord’s Prayer: ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth and it is in heaven.’ As women share fully with men in the ministry of the Church of God so the Church is enabled to participate more fervently, joyfully and richly in the coming kingdom of God.

B. Women bringing gifts for ministry

1. *The fact of giftedness* This is linked in the New Testament with ‘power from on high’. This has to do with what the theologian Michael Welker refers to as the outpouring of the Spirit upon all people signalled at Pentecost. ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. (Acts 2:17). This outpouring is a sign of the power of the Spirit. ‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13) My speech and my proclamation were made not with persuasive words of wisdom^[a] but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 1 Cor 2:4) There are three things here Spirit, power and gifts.
2. *Gifts of God are bestowed upon the people of God by the ascended Christ.* The Anglican Theologian, the late Stephen Sykes stated:
The point of ordination is to recognise this giftedness of lay people, to give them the opportunity of nurturing the gift, and then to entrust them with the responsibility of exercising it. The gifts, we should note, are given to lay people. In the theology of giftedness they are specific gifts for a specific purpose, set in the context of all the gifts given to the people of God, to be used harmoniously and in co-operation with the full diversity of gifts of the whole people. In the context of the totality of giftedness, it only makes sense to

say that those called "clergy" and those called "laity" are alike part of the people or laos of God.

3. *Women in the threefold Anglian order* Sykes had long reckoned that such gifts of the Spirit ought to be exercised by both men and women in ordination to the threefold order. Ordination of women as priests was, in Sykes considered view, an appropriate and needful sharing in the power of the Holy Spirit for ministry. Indeed he had argued some years before that the great Anglican divine and exponent of what became known as 'classical Anglicanism', Richard Hooker (late 16th century) had sown the theological seeds in the 16th century for the ordination of women as priests in which ministry was very much a collaborative venture of a discipleship of equals.¹
4. *A new-grown occasion is upon us* Sykes made the point that 'Equality, even in the Church, had little currency value until women acquired equal access to education and wives freedom from the burden of involuntary pregnancy.' He concluded thus: 'A new-grown occasion is upon us, and Richard Hooker provides us with the fundamental equipment with which to face it.'

C. A Gospel and Cultural Imperative

1. *A radical Gospel for a patriarchal society* What is surprising about the biblical witness regarding the place of women is the radical tradition exemplified in the Gospels and early church. Respected scholar Dorothy Lee considers evidence from the New Testament and early church to show that women's ministry is confirmed by the biblical witness. Her comprehensive examination explores the roles women played in the Gospels and the Pauline corpus, with a particular focus on passages that have been used in the past to limit women's ministry. She argues that women in the New Testament were not only valued as disciples but also given leadership roles, which has implications for the contemporary church.²

¹ 'Richard Hooker and the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood, in Stephen Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism*, London: DLT, 1995, pp. 81-98.

² See *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: reclaiming the biblical vision for church leadership*, Baker Academic, 2021.

2. *The trajectory of Holy Scripture* Support for the ordination of women to all three orders in the church is based on the understanding that the overwhelming trajectory of Scripture points to the 'essential equality, dignity, and complementarity of the whole of humanity before God' (Porter). Both men and women 'serve with equal authority in the universal ministry of representing God within the whole created order'. This fundamental intent of God's ways with the world and human relations is signaled in Genesis 1:27: 'so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them'. This is the foundation on which the biblical view of men and women in relation to God and to each other is built. The following verse – in which God gives the man and woman together dominion over everything on earth – is a statement of joint leadership and authority. Here is no hint of the subjection of one to the other, but of real equality. Eve, as the equal partner of Adam, is the 'crowning, completing work of creation'.
3. *New Testament restoration of women* Women were restored to their rightful place in Jesus' own radical, full acceptance of women in his ministry. His first Resurrection appearances to women make this restoration plain. 'He empowered Mary Magdalene to be the 'apostle to the apostles', sending her to be the first witness of his Resurrection. In the early church, there are many examples of women in leadership - in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the letters to the Romans, the Philippians, and to Timothy, for instance. St Paul spoke of named women as his co-workers, and provided the foundational theological truth governing the relationships between men and women when he proclaimed the restoration in Christ of male/female equality (Galatians 3:28)' (Muriel Porter).
4. *Cultural change and a new openness* The twentieth century has witnessed profound cultural and societal changes on many fronts including the recognition of and empowering of women within many domains of life extending way beyond home and family into positions of leadership in public society and its institutions, including the churches. This has not been a smooth and uncontroversial development. Often it has been deeply resisted by the status quo and its underlying powers. The irony is that the churches have often been in the vanguard rather than the at the forefront of such change. This is particularly case given the radical challenge to embedded power relationships and the place of women that the Gospel accounts of Jesus ministry among women offer.

D. Underlying Assumptions for ordination of women as priests

1. *Theological Anthropology – equality without subordination*

(a) Sharers in the Imago Dei Both male and female together are sharers equally in the image of God. This implies a mutually enhancing way of being together. Genesis 1: 27 is key: ‘so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them’.

(b) One new humanity Both male and female belong together as one new humanity under God through the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. ‘He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it (Ephesian 2:15).

© All one in Christ Jesus There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28)

2. *Ecclesial – members of the Body of Christ in collaborative ministry*

(a) Members one of another For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another (Romans 12:4)

(b) Diverse gifts We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Romans 12:5-7)

3. *A dynamic and developing ministry*

(a) To live is to change and the be perfect is to change often (John Henry Newman). History, science, tradition and life’s experiences teach us that alongside our quest for permanency is the reality of change. These two features of life seem to operate in creative tension; indeed this is the way in which life works best. New knowledge requires new responses. There are always new things to grapple with and new discoveries.

(b) The irony is that while on the one hand the fact of the ordination of women as priests is a relatively new development; on the other hand this development echoes and instantiates a reality that is embedded within the gospel tradition albeit sublimated over the centuries. In

short, the seeds of this development of the gospel are to be located in the one new humanity born of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Anglican Church across the globe is increasingly recognising that this development is now ripe for receiving. Its time has come and is growing in acceptance as the people of God discern the movement and discipline of the Holy Spirit.

(c) In uncertain and transitional times there is a natural human resistance to change. Certainly, we need wisdom and care as we step out. We also need courage to move into new things. That is how we live our life on planet earth. We step out in faith and hope mindful of our doubts and open to the new directions in which the good God is leading.

Part 2: Challenges to Women's ordination as Priests

A. The subordinate status of women in the Christian tradition³

1. Historical views regarding women's status

- (a) Women are inferior to men 1 Timothy 2:11-14
- (b) Women should keep silent in public; excluded from public and church leadership I Corinthians 13:34; 1 Timothy 2:12-14
- (c) Reasons for (a) and (b)
 - 1. Women are not made equally in the image of God
 - 2. Women were created second and therefore second rank, inferior to men. Genesis 2. Aquinas, 'women by nature of lower capacity and quality than man'.
 - 3. Women are more prone to sin and deception. Genesis 3; 1 Timothy 2:14

2. Modern shifts from traditional views

- (a) No longer are women regarded as inferior but rather equal to men.
- (b) Women are subordinate to men in the home setting and forbidden in general from exercising authority in the church esp. teaching though are permitted to speak in church but not authoritatively. Not forbidden to speak and/or teach outside of a mixed church gathering
- (c) Women are made fully in the image of God.
- (d) Women are subordinate to men because of 1. the social order established by God in creation (not as previously because women were

³ For an extended discussion of the above see Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: the doctrine of God and the contemporary gender debate* (IVP, 2002) esp. chaps 6 & 7.

created second); 2. By analogy with the highly contested doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father so too women are permanently subordinate to men.

(e) Women not subordinate by virtue of their moral weakness and prone to sin.

3. Conclusion

(a) Modern challenges to women being priests show the impact of changing cultural and societal views. No longer do advocates for women's subordination to men argue that this is because women are not made fully in the image of God; or that they are inferior or more prone to sin by nature.

(b) Instead the arguments to maintain subordination rely on: (1) a theory of the place of women within the social order of creation and (2) exegesis of certain biblical texts.

(c) Stephen Sykes' critique of the social ordering being permanently set in creation is apposite: 'Those who urge the Church's tradition as an argument against women's ordination are inconsistent with that tradition in failing to deplore female monarchs, prime ministers, members of parliament, of members of church synods, heads of church colleges, and chair persons of bodies of great power in State and Church.' The attempt to cordon off an area around the Church's ministry, undermined the very argument relied upon (i.e. the social ordering embedded in creation that involved the subordinate role of women) to exclude the ordination of women as priests.

B. Women presiding at the Eucharist⁴

(a) The argument in brief is that 'the key to God's will is to be found in the fact that the eternal son of God became human as a male; and what matters is the link between this truth and the eucharistic presidency'. Where maleness as such is deemed constitutive of the one who presides at the eucharist then a woman presiding at the eucharist is no longer a secondary matter of order but an integral part of the mystery of faith. Those who adhere to this position regard the priest at the Eucharistic as an *alter Christus* (a second Christ) 'as truly as the mundane bread and wine become Christ's body and blood'. But when

⁴ For an insightful and clear discussion of this challenge see the highly respected late Anglican scholar, John Austin Baker, 'Eucharistic Presidency and Women's Ordination', *Theology*, September 1985, pp. 350-357.

this is the way the mystery is conceived it can become difficult to accept that a woman can perform this liturgical function. The maleness of the incarnate Christ becomes the controlling issue.

- (b) Underlying this challenge to women priests is a question about the nature of the Eucharist. This remains a disputed matter between the churches.
- (c) The Anglican tradition expressed through its Articles of belief and liturgy is both Catholic and Reformed. Our formularies do not bind the Church to a view of the Eucharist which in principle prevents a woman presiding at the Eucharist.
- (d) Christ is present in his Church in many and various ways: at prayer, works of mercy, in daily living, in preaching, in governance and polity, in the administration of the sacraments and in a concentrated and dramatic way in the Eucharist. But all such ways by which the living Christ acts are Christ's actions administered by human agents both men and women. As one Anglican theologian succinctly states 'Such agents are representatives not representations of Christ'.
- (e) Anglican theologian John Austin Baker:

An iconic theory of the eucharistic presidency, confining that role to someone of the same gender as the incarnate Lord, runs the risk of suggesting that Christ is present and active in the eucharistic minister in a unique mode and degree, an idea for which there is no basis in the general doctrine of grace or in specific authoritative teaching. By so doing it obscures the central affirmation of Catholic eucharistic theology, that Christ and his sacrifice are contained and communicated within the consecrated elements, and that is where his people find, adore and receive him. Furthermore, it blurs the nature of the Eucharist by presenting it as a re-enactment of the Last Supper, rather than a fulfilment of the command there given to plead the sacrifice of the cross before God by the sacramental means proleptically provided

Austin Baker regards the above problems as serious distortions of Catholic belief. He concludes thus: 'To admit women to the order of priesthood is the straightforward way to remedy them and to promote a truer Catholic tradition'

- (f) More positively it is critical to remember that it is the resurrected Christ (the second person of the Holy Trinity) in the power of the Holy Spirit who is present and active in the Eucharistic celebration. The incarnate Christ is now the ascended Christ in eternal glory with the

Father and the Spirit. It is this Christ, beyond the confines of male and female identities, who the priest represents before God.

C. The Ecumenical context: the Anglican Branch Theology of the Church

- (a) The argument here has its roots in the Reformation whereby the Church of England understood itself as both Reformed and Catholic. Accordingly, it saw itself as a protest within the great Catholic tradition and also understood itself as a Protestant church to that extent. But essentially the Church of the Tudor Settlement conceived itself as representing a third continuing strand in Christianity tracing its roots to earliest times; the other two being Roman Catholicism and the Orthodox Churches. This self-understanding sharpened in the early nineteenth century into what became known as the Branch Theory of the Church. It meant that on contentious matters the Church of England's position was relatively simple i.e. only when the three branches of the great Church were in agreement was change of a fundamental kind permitted.
- (b) But it can't help us now because it does not give a true and accurate account of the world-wide Body of Christ in its diversity and division; nor does it provide a basis for a new mission for a new time. Today the branch theory of the church theory flies in the face of empirical reality. Moreover, what now constitutes a legitimate branch church? Take Pentecostalism for example. The more the people of God have become aware of one another as part of a global Church in a way hitherto not possible (due to ease of travel and communications; missionary endeavours etc) the more the question of church unity has to be reconceived in terms of radical diversity and richness. The older branch theory was never equipped to deal with the actual reality on the ground and worked as an abstract construct that could be called upon to silence challenges to the status quo. It became essentially a recipe for do nothing.
- (c) The complex contemporary situation is the context in which the issue of women's ordination as priests in the Church of God has to be addressed. To what extent does ordaining a woman as a priest constitute a schism in the church of God? It is hard to see how this ministerial practice (which is very different from a departure from the ancient Creeds) creates an intolerable ecclesial rupture in an already deeply fractured world-wide Church. Unity, such as it exists, is

increasingly formal and paper thin and reduced to somewhat transactional institutional forms.

- (d) The argument that Anglicans can only accept women as priests when the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches of the East do, simply ensures that, this side of the eschaton, women will never be priests in the Anglican Church. But in fact, they have been so ordained across global Anglicanism.
- (e) In brief to resist the ordination of women as priests on the basis that it undermines the unity of the Church simply does not square with what unity actually looks like on the ground in the twenty-first century global Christianity. Indeed, women priests provide a remarkable window into other dimensions of the unity of the gospel that resonates powerfully and authentically with our current cultural context. It is a development that we can confidently embrace for the sake of the coming one church of Jesus Christ.