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Q&A#42 What is the Case Against Women's Ordination?

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Today's question: "How would you summarize the argument against the ordination of women?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, how would you summarize the argument against the ordination of women? It's a rather big question to answer within one small video, but I'll give some very initial thoughts that will help us to think about that question. First of all, we have the very basic biblical commands and restrictions that we have within the New Testament in places like 1 Timothy 2 and other places like that, where there are limitations placed upon women's teaching, exercising authority, and speech within the context of the church.

And these teachings themselves provide an initial basis for the restriction. Then we have the circumstantial evidence, the fact that Jesus chooses 12 apostles who are all men. He surrounds himself with men.

He establishes the leadership of the early church with men. And throughout, we have this pattern of male leadership within the church. And so that's a significant thing to notice too.

In the Old Testament, we also see an all-male priesthood. We see the kings are all male, with the exception of one who's the usurper, Athaliah. And so apart from that, there are entirely male monarchs, entirely male priests, and there are also male apostles.

Now, people will talk about the character of Junia, and Junia, much more could be said about her. That can be in another video if someone wants me to answer that. But looking at these cases, there is already, there seems to be clear evidence that men and women are not regarded as interchangeable when it comes to the positions of leadership within these positions, whether it be priest or king.

Another thing to notice is that throughout scripture, there is a lot of emphasis given to the symbolic importance of male and female. That male and female, no matter what the skills or gifts and abilities of a particular man or woman, they are not interchangeable because fundamentally at root, they are either a man or a woman with all the symbolic significance that comes with that. So, for instance, when you go to the Levitical system of the sacrificial system and you see a distinction made between sacrifices.

Now, why would it be necessary to sacrifice a male goat for the leader of the people or a bull for the priest? These are questions that we should be asking. There is a symbolism and a symbolic weight given to gender and to sex that we find it very hard to understand in our society because our society is built around detached organisations with people who are fairly interchangeable, just functions. We see people as functions rather than as representing a deeper symbolic order.

And yet this symbolic order is prominent throughout the whole of scripture. We see the whole of scripture about men and women and the symbolic weight that they both have. And so men have a symbolic importance that we see coming to the foreground in figures like Adam or in the figure of Christ as well.

That Christ is incarnated as a man. That's significant. And Christ takes a bride to the church.

Likewise, the creation of Eve. Eve is distinct from Adam. Adam is created with a particular orientation in the world and Eve is created with a particular orientation in the world.

Eve is created from the side of Adam to bring unity and communion through joining with Adam. And Adam is created from the earth primarily in order to form and till and God and establish God's order within the world and upon the earth. We see that within the curses as well.

When we look more deeply, we see deeper connections between men and women and larger symbolic realities. So, for instance, the man is associated more closely with heaven. The woman is associated with the earth.

And so if we look, for instance, in the curse, the woman is associated with the earth. She brings forth fruit from her body just as the earth brings forth fruit from its body. The earth is the Adamah and the man is the Adam.

The woman is the one from whom all future men come. Men come from the womb of the woman and the womb of the woman is associated with the earth. Naked I came from my mother's womb.

Naked I will return there. Knit together in the lowest parts of the earth. We have these images that are very significant for understanding the symbolic world of scripture.

And so when God talks about himself as father, this is significant. The earth is our mother. God is our father.

And as father, God is in a different relationship to us. We do not arise from God's womb. Rather, God creates us through his word and he is bound to us by his word and his commitment and love for us.

But there is a gap, a distance, a break, a fundamental distinction between creature and creator, which is established in part by calling God father. Now, what is the office of the pastor to do? The office of the pastor, in large part, is designed to represent the fatherly and husbandly form of authority in relationship to the church. And so it is proper that it is performed exclusively by men.

It's one of the reasons why we have exclusively male priesthood within the Old Testament. God is not a mother. God is a father.

And so God's transcendence is symbolically masculine. And we see all these symbolic connections within scripture that are quite alien to us within our society, because we tend to think about the pastor as just performing certain functions, certain therapeutic functions, certain teaching functions. They need to know their theology.

They need to know how to work with people and they need to know how to speak publicly and these sorts of things. And that's what a pastor is. But yet within scripture, a pastor stands for something as well.

The pastor represents and symbolizes God's authority within the congregation. And we respond to motherly and fatherly authority differently, not because of primarily the behaviors, but because where that behavior comes from. The behavior coming from a mother has a different salience and a different resonance than the behavior coming from a father.

And even if they did exactly the same thing, it would be very different because one would be a father's action and the other would be a mother's action. And this is one of the reasons why priests and pastors are to be exclusively male, because it is a fatherly form of authority that is being represented. God is also presented in ways that highlight a certain male authority as king, as judge, as sovereign.

He's lawgiver. He's master. He's father.

All these sorts of images are male images. Now, you can have the female counterparts, but if you have the female counterparts, you lose something in the process. They do not function in the same way.

And when we start to talk about God in mother God language, it's not surprising that we shift in the direction of a more panentheist approach. We start to think in terms of our union with God. God doesn't stand over against us.

That God's relationship to us is a relationship where he does not give law. He does not stand over as creature to creator. All these sorts of relationships start to break down in the process and we start to reconceive what it means to relate to God.

We start to see it in a sort of primal intimacy between the child and the mother, rather than in the more biblical concepts as the son growing up into maturity in relationship to the father and the bride relating to her husband. And these sorts of images, these are the images that are primarily the ones in which we understand our relationship with God and his authority as it's represented within the church is represented by men in large part for that reason. But then there are also other reasons that we can add to this.

I think that's the most fundamental reason, because men and women mean something different. They are not the same creatures. We are both humans, but we are male and female humans.

And those things stand for different sorts of relations, different sorts of meanings. Beyond that, though, manly traits are needed in church leadership. If you do not have manly characteristics in church leadership, church leadership fails.

This is one of the things that we don't like to talk about much, but there is a reason why patriarchy is pretty much the universal norm historically and socially. It's because men are the source of power and strength within society. For the most part, this is how institutions, societies and social structures are formed.

They're formed by male strength, by male groups. And the vision of church leadership, as we've tended to conceive it, has been more therapeutic, more a vision of the leader who's supposed to be just vision forming and relating to people in a very nurturing way. But yet, within scripture, we see that the elders and the pastors are primarily the guardians of the church.

We see that they are shepherds. As shepherds, they're supposed to be those who fight and maintain the safety of the sheep. And what you see when that is lost, when the manly traits that should characterize this leadership are lost, what we end up with is nice leadership.

Nice leadership that won't stand for anything, that does not keep churches safe, that does not uphold truth. And there's a sort of effeminacy that has arisen in church leadership, along with the rise of women in leadership, in the positions of pastoral office. Because the pastoral office requires manly traits.

It requires the symbolism of manly identity, but also requires those manly traits. And where those are lacking, what we have is weak leadership. And we have, as a result of that, a weak church.

Now, many people will bring forward people like Deborah as examples of this is the sort of leader we need. But it's worth noticing that Deborah sees herself as a mother in Israel whose purpose is to raise up sons that will be able to fight and represent Israel. And so her point is not to go into the battle.

She wants to get Barrett to go into the battle. The problem is that when Barrett doesn't go, Jael has to kill Sisera, where he's reluctant to go. Jael is the one that has to kill Sisera.

And Deborah has to go with him. Now, ideally, he would be the one that would step up and do that. And Deborah is pushing for that.

It's not because she doesn't believe this is a woman she should have any influence or significance within Israel. Far from it. Rather, it's because she believes that Israel is better off when it has the strength of men protecting it and upholding it and securing its safety and its truth and its civil order and its national order against these forces that have broken it down.

And it's broken it down. And as these forces, surrounding forces, have broken down Israel, they've done that precisely by removing the power of men. And it's one of the things we see throughout scripture that forces that want to control a society do it generally by breaking down the power of their men, by killing the baby boys or doing something along those lines.

That it's the men that give strength and particular backbone to the society in its maintaining of its borders, establishing of its foundations. Now, the filling and the glorifying and the heart of the society, the life, the inner reality of the society is primarily ordered around women. Women are the ones who establish that, who give men something to fight for, something that's a meaning for them to lay down their lives for.

All of these things. And we'll get into a bit later some of the problems that arise when we mix up these things. And so the significance of these traits, the traits of male strength

being used in service and protection of the larger community, those are things that are required in the leadership of the people of God.

And something we notice as we go throughout scripture, again and again, the leaders of the people of God are tough men. These are not pushovers. Just about every single man that you meet in leadership in scripture is a man who has killed someone.

Now, we don't think about that enough because we have a very effeminate idea of leadership. But these men were tough men because they are guarding the people of God. They are guarding against wolves, against bears, against lions.

That's what shepherding meant within that context. Shepherding was Moses striking the Egyptians with his rod. Shepherding was David killing the bear and the lion.

Shepherding is Christ laying down his life for the sheep. Shepherding is Moses driving away the false shepherds. All of these images of shepherding are key ones that help us to understand what it means to be in a pastoral role.

It means that you need people who are strong within that position. And the problem is that within our understanding of women's ordination, increasingly, it's become ordered around a narrative of empowerment. And there's a difference between people who have natural strength going into an office where they exert that strength for the sake of a community and people who seek office for the sake of empowerment.

The more that the latter type get into positions of office and authority, formal authority, the more that those positions of authority will lack weight, will lack strength and will lack the ability to serve the community and to empower the community at large in the way that they ought to. And so that's another significant thing. Beyond this, there's also the fact that, as I mentioned, women stand for something.

They stand for the heart of the community, the unity, the bonds of the community, the inner life of the community, the generative source of the community. In all of these respects, they have a particular meaning and salience in their symbolic presence that makes it very difficult for them to be involved in certain offices without changing their dynamics in significant ways. And so one of the things you do see is when women get involved within these positions of leadership, the agonistic dimension of them tends to close down.

People tend to become more agreeable or women become hardened. And so either what we have is the loss of the sensitivity of the heart of society or we have non-combatants, as it were, on the front line of these social antagonisms protecting the community with the result that people do not fight error. And so the niceness of the church, the niceness that is designed to be welcoming, affirming, empowering and inclusive of women, ends up with a church that will not fight error.

And so much of what we have in this emphasis upon inclusivity within pastoral roles is a loss of that duty. A further thing that we notice is that the rise of women in pastoral ministry goes along with what I've mentioned earlier, the rise of the corporate organisation, the organisation that is detached from the normal structures of life. And I mentioned this yesterday in the context of elders.

When we lose a sense of the natural organic structure of human society, we will end up just thinking in terms, corporate terms, of offices to be filled with individuals who have certain skill sets, not recognising the differences that exist between people. Because the corporate model is designed to flatten out individuals, to see individuals as fundamentally detached, as lacking symbolic meaning, as lacking rootedness in particular place within society, within culture and history and all these sorts of things, and ordering them within the community according to certain skill sets. Whereas within scripture, what we see is the organisation of the church built upon the organic structure of society, the organic structure of society with the relationship of husband to wife and the relationship of husband to children and these sorts of dynamics.

And when that natural relationship has been lost, what we end up with is abstract organisations that do not develop the natural life of the culture, the natural organic structure of the culture. And so I think these are key problems. Beyond this, there are other problems that arise from our failure to understand what pastoral office means.

We have increasingly focused, first of all, upon the church as an organisation, the church as an institution, the church as a realm of control and order of teaching, of formal structure, these sorts of things. And as a result, we have tended to focus upon pastoral office, upon the official positions, the formal roles that are performed within the church. What we lose in the process is this sense of the church as primarily an organism, primarily a realm of life, of shared life in community.

And once that is lost, we will end up pushing more and more weight onto what happens on the front, at the front on a Sunday morning and on to the position of the pastor. And the pastor ceases to be primarily the guardian and the backbone of the church in that sense, and increasingly becomes the person who performs the majority of the church's ministry. And so as a result of this, women get pushed to the margins and all the work that they do within the church either goes unrecognised or is pushed outside of the realm of the church.

And so the church implicitly becomes the ministry team or the staff members. And that's a very modern way of seeing things. It's a way that arises from a very corporate model of the church with the congregation as religious consumers.

It's also related in part to a sacerdotal model that pre-existed where the church is associated with the priestly function that performs certain rights to sacralise things. Now, that's a problem, but the modern corporate model is no less a problem. And so we need

to move beyond that to understand that part of what it will mean to recover a sense of the prominence of women within the church is a reconsideration of an ecclesiology that's become so narrowly focused upon the institutional aspects of the church that it's unable to see the richer range of what exists within the church and its primary existence in the realm of the organic.

And so I think this is a helpful start in thinking about a very big question. There's so much more that could be said about this question. And I have said in various contexts published and yet unpublished.

But if you have any further questions on things that have arisen within this discussion or things completely unrelated, please leave them on a Curious Cat account. If you would like to support these and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account and I'll give the links to both of those below. I hope you found this helpful.

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