

# Concerning Women's Ordination: Conclusion

## In memory of Martha

For Tina, Amy, Hannah, Christina, Peg, Rebecca, Noel, Seretha, Connie, Ann, Meg, Lauren, Lilly, Becky, Mary Ellen, Christen, Tracey, Grace, Wendy, Gaea, Mary, Bonnie-Marie, and numerous other women colleagues, students (former and current), friends, and countless others I have forgotten to mention: May God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for his Bride the Church, bless you and your vocations, whether lay or ordained.



Whether women should be ordained to church office is an issue of both hermeneutics and doctrinal development. That is, how might the teaching of Scripture and the history of the church's tradition faithfully be appropriated in a very different historical and cultural context from that in which the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were written? However, it is also a case of doctrinal amnesia. As documented in an earlier essay, the historical reason for opposition to women's ordination is located in assumptions concerning ontological inferiority: women could not be ordained because they were considered to be less intelligent than men, emotionally unstable, and more susceptible to temptation.<sup>1</sup>

In the last several centuries, two changes led to abandonment of the church's historical reason for opposition to women's ordination. First, the rise of modern industrialization produced social and economic changes that meant that women were no longer confined to the domestic sphere, and it became common for women to work outside the home. Second, an expansion of the understanding of Christian liberty beyond freedom from sin to include freedom in one's person (including social and economic freedom) provided theological warrant for the church's endorsement of social movements such as representative democracy, the abolition of slavery, workers' rights, social welfare, racial equality, universal suffrage, and equality of women in the work place.<sup>2</sup> This theological endorsement of social liberty and equality is arguably a genuine development of doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

This notion of social liberty and equality means that in all mainline churches – Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican – women are now recognized as having equal ontological status with men.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the church has quietly abandoned the historical reasons for opposition to women's ordination. No historic mainline church now claims that women are less intelligent, more emotionally unstable, or more subject to temptation than men. This recognition of women's equality is something genuinely new, and, along with the notions of social liberty and equality, is also a genuine doctrinal development.

How did the churches respond to this new recognition of women's equality? Some have argued that the new understanding leads logically to the ordination of women. If the historic reason for opposition to the ordination of women no longer obtains, then it follows that women should be ordained. That is the position represented in this series of essays. However, some have responded with *new* arguments against the ordination of women that are not recognized as new, combined with a

theological amnesia or forgetfulness of the historical reason for opposition to women's ordination.

Both Protestant and Catholic opponents of women's ordination have put forward arguments that are connected with some traditional function of ordained ministry, whether exercising authority (in the case of Protestants) or presiding over liturgical worship and administering the sacraments (in the case of Catholics). These new arguments represent new theological positions that have been defended as if they were traditional, but are not. If historic Christian tradition had rejected women's authority over men, it was because women were considered to be ontologically inferior to men, with the consequence that all female authority over men was rejected in every social sphere, not simply in the field of ordained ministry. To the contrary, the new Protestant opponents to women's ordination endorse neither the historic position, nor its reasons. Complementarians claim emphatically that their opposition to women exercising authority in the church is not based on any understanding of female intellectual or moral inferiority; rather, subordination of women to men is based on a new notion of different gender "roles" presumably founded in creation, a new theology of male "headship" based on an interpretation of the metaphorical use of the Greek word *kephalē* in two of Paul's epistles to mean "authority over," and then read into the rest of the biblical canon in cases where the word does not actually appear, along with a problematic doctrine of ontological subordination within the Trinity. As noted in previous essays, although earlier Christian tradition would not have done so, Protestant "complementarians" allow women to teach theology or the Bible in secular universities, just not in the church. Presumably, they allow women to work in secular occupations where they might exercise authority over men. So where the earlier tradition restricted women's authority over men in every sphere, the new complementarian position apparently does so

only in the context of the church and the family.<sup>5</sup>

If the historic Catholic tradition rejected women priests, the church did not oppose women's ordination for liturgical or sacramental reasons. Roman Catholic author Sara Butler has appealed to the church father Epiphanius for an argument that women cannot be ordained because Jesus Christ called only male apostles. But Epiphanius did not connect this opposition to liturgical celebration of the sacraments; he did not argue that women cannot preside at the Eucharist because they do not resemble a male Christ or male apostles. Rather, Epiphanius appealed to the usual historical argument; specifically, he claimed that women are foolish and easily tempted.<sup>6</sup>

Both complementarian and sacramental opponents of women's ordination also appeal to Christology, but for different reasons. Women cannot be ordained because they both do and do not resemble Jesus Christ. For Protestant complementarians, (1) males resemble Christ in exercising authority in the same way that a male Christ exercises authority over the female church; (2) females resemble Christ in being subordinate to men in the same way that Jesus Christ the Son of God is subordinate to God the Father. Catholic opponents of women's ordination characterize resembling Christ not in terms of exercising authority or in submission to authority, but in terms of sexual iconography. Only male priests can represent a male Jesus Christ in the celebration of the sacraments based on a literal physical resemblance between the male Christ and the male priest.

Protestant complementarians and Catholic sacramentalists appeal to Scripture to provide support for their positions, but in very different ways. Complementarians point to the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2, to Paul's use of the word *kephalē* ("head") to refer to men in relation to women in 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5, to Paul's injunction that wives submit to their husbands in Ephesians 5, as well as to

two of Paul's injunctions against women speaking in church or teaching men. Catholic traditionalists point to the exclusively male priesthood of the Old Testament, and to Jesus having called only male apostles. In previous essays, I have addressed these arguments at length, arguing that complementarians misread the passages to which they appeal, and that there are reasons for the Old Testament male priesthood and Jesus having chosen male apostles that have nothing to do with whether women can rightly exercise church office. I have also argued that the narrative structure of the texts of the Old and New Testament provides the interpretive key to interpreting what the Scriptures say about men and women and their relationships, and that these narrative texts engage in a process of christological subversion that challenges traditional patriarchal notions of masculine hierarchy and privilege.

Given the weakness of Protestant complementarian and Catholic sacramentalist appeals to Scripture and tradition, I have argued that those who reject women's ordination tend to buttress their arguments with appeals to notions or norms imported from outside the biblical text, in the light of which they then interpret the texts, imposing on the texts a theology of sexuality originating from outside the Scriptures. Certainly the cultural setting and historical background of both the Old and New Testaments is that of all traditional agricultural societies, in which some men exercise authority over other men and over all women; Protestant complementarians appeal to this structure as a normative pattern for contemporary relationships between men and women, but they do not acknowledge that the pattern is rooted in pre-industrial agricultural socio-economic structures that were common to all ancient societies, which no longer exist in post-industrial cultures, and in which women's tasks are no longer confined to home and hearth for biological reasons having to do with child-rearing and breast-feeding. Complementarians also do not acknowledge the extent to which the New Testament patterns of

cruciformity and mutual submission challenge and subvert the first-century Mediterranean honor/shame culture that provided the social setting and cultural justification for this hierarchy.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, Catholic opponents of women's ordination truly recognize that a shift has taken place. Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* advocates equality in marriage and mutual submission between husbands and wives; at least in theory, women can now exercise any role of authority within the church; they can teach; they can preach; they simply cannot preside over the Eucharist or ordain others to preside over the Eucharist. To justify this single exception of liturgical presidency, Catholic opponents also appeal to an extra-biblical norm in the light of which the texts are then re-interpreted. The norm in this case is a theology of the Eucharist and priestly ordination that first appeared in the writings of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century – that in presiding at the Eucharist, the priest represents (or acts in the person of) Jesus Christ. However, the modern Catholic position interprets this understanding of priesthood in a manner that Aquinas did not – that the priest must literally resemble Jesus Christ in a physical manner; that only a male priest can represent a male Christ. This later theology of priesthood as male representation is then read back into Jesus' choice of male apostles to provide the warrant for what is actually a later theology.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, despite official Catholic rejection of male-female sexual symbolism as normative, at least some Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican opponents of women's ordination appeal to an understanding of male-female symbolism in which they apply the masculine imagery of God as Father, Jesus Christ as a male, and male apostleship to demand a male priesthood; and the female imagery of the virgin Mary and the church as the bride of Christ, to a symbolically female laity – although lay people include both men and women. I have argued that this

appeal to sexual symbolism is a case of “natural theology” that finds its origins not in Scripture, but in Hellenistic, intertestamental and post-New Testament oppositional understandings of the relationship between male and female, understandings of male-female relationality that are rather contrary to the personalist biblical understanding of man and woman as relationally oriented to one another because equally created in the image of the Triune God.<sup>9</sup>

A question could be raised at this point. If opponents to women’s ordination in historic mainline churches now recognize (and indeed affirm) that women are ontologically equal to men, are not less intelligent, not emotionally unstable, and are not more susceptible to temptation to men, and yet they still have refused to endorse the ordination of women, certainly there must be a reason for this besides logical incoherence. Perhaps the real reasons for opposition to women’s ordination are not rooted in inequality after all? Perhaps what I have referred to as “new” reasons for oppositions to women’s ordination are not actually new at all, but are rather the church’s articulation of the actual (albeit implicit) reasons that it had never ordained women, but simply had never needed to articulate until now because the issue had never before been raised seriously. Something like this is the argument that Sara Butler makes when she distinguishes between the historical “argument” (the ontological inferiority of women) and the church’s “fundamental reasons” (Christ’s choice of male apostles and the priest as a “sacramental sign” of Christ) for opposition to women’s ordination.<sup>10</sup>

In reply, given the theological inadequacy of the new “fundamental reasons” to oppose women’s ordination, I would suggest different explanations for this continuing opposition to women’s ordination in spite of recognition of women’s equality. First, I think, most of those who continue to be opposed to women’s ordination have failed to acknowledge that the current arguments against women’s ordination really are

new positions. I referred to “doctrinal amnesia” at the beginning of this essay because continuing opponents have not recognized that historic opposition to women’s ordination was grounded in claims of ontological inferiority and inequality. Given the collapse of this historic reason for opposition, the affirmation of ontological equality between men and women really is a game-changer. It is not enough to presume that what are really entirely new arguments are simply minor adjustments, or, even more misleading, that they actually are the historic reasons – which they clearly are not – and that the old position can still hold apart from what actually were the historic reasons.

Second, it helps to consider how changes actually take place within a tradition. Here I appeal to standard discussions in the works of philosophers and theologians such as Thomas Kuhn, Michael Polanyi, Bernard Lonergan, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Helmut Thielicke.<sup>11</sup> When confronted by radical changes in a new cultural context – such as the change from pre-industrial to industrial culture with an accompanying change from an understanding of male and female inequality based on inferiority to one of ontological equality – there are inevitably three responses: (1) reaction, resistance, opposition or entrenchment; as much as possible existing communities or social groups reject the new change. Theologically, this has been the response of “fundamentalism” or “conservatism” to modernity; (2) assimilation; the “progressive” response is to embrace the new change without question, and modify or even discard any previous understanding to accommodate the new. Theologically, this has been the response of “liberal” Protestantism and Catholic “modernism”; (3) Conversion and re-actualization: the adoption of a new intellectual paradigm (Kuhn) that is able to incorporate insights from new knowledge while better explaining what was previously known; conversion to a new intellectual, moral or spiritual horizon (Lonergan); creative engagement with the new situation in coordination with re-



actualization of what was previously affirmed (Lonergan, MacIntyre, Thielicke). This is the approach of what I would call "critical orthodoxy."

Reaction is not in all cases simply refusal or resistance, however. As Thomas Kuhn argued in his classic work on "paradigm shifts," a conservative tradition can "accommodate" to change by making minor adjustments to the previous "paradigm" in an effort to maintain the earlier tradition. In Kuhn's example, when it became impossible to fit new astronomical observations into the traditional geocentric model of the universe, traditional astronomers did not abandon the earlier position. Rather, small adjustments were made (the postulation of additional epicycles) to allow the old paradigm to accommodate the new data.

In the same way, the new Protestant complementarian notion of male "headship," of different gender "roles" combined with what really is a new Trinitarian theology of eternal subordination of the Son to the Father, or the slight but unacknowledged alteration by Catholic traditionalists of Thomas Aquinas's *in persona Christi* eucharistic theology to mean a *physical* resemblance between the priest and Christ, appear to be just such minor adjustments (something like theological epicycles) made in the hope of accommodating the newly acknowledged equality of women without having to make any drastic changes in the actual participation of women in the life of the church.

Confirmation of this reading of the situation is found in that opponents of women's ordination also engage in a bit of exegetical sleight-of-hand; both complementarians and Catholic opponents read things into the biblical text that simply are not there. Complementarians (1) find in Genesis 1 and 2 a hierarchy of men over women before the fall into sin; (2) interpret Paul's "headship" language to mean authority of men over women; (3) read Paul's language of "mutual submission" in Ephesians 5 to mean a submission of women only to men; (4)

read two notoriously difficult to interpret Pauline restrictions on women's speaking in worship settings and teaching of men as universal and permanent prohibitions rather than as addressing specific historical situations. Catholic opponents of women's ordination read into the biblical texts a symbolism concerning Jesus Christ's masculinity and his choice of male apostles, and draw implications for eucharistic theology that had occurred to no one before the twentieth century.

## **Are Women Human?**

How to respond?

First, the full implications of what really is a new understanding of the ontological equality of men and women needs to be taken seriously. Given what really is a new doctrinal development and a rejection by all parties of the historic reason for opposition to women's ordination, minor adjustments are not adequate. The churches need to address the issue of whether they really do consider women to be of equal spiritual worth with men. I point readers not to contemporary writings by feminist theologians but to four essays written decades ago by Anglican mystery writer and lay apologist Dorothy Sayers.

In "Are Women Human?," Sayers points to the changes that had already taken place as a result of the industrial revolution and their consequences for men's and women's roles in the work force. In reference to the kinds of domestic work that used to be done by women in pre-industrial cultures – spinning, dying, weaving, catering, brewing, preserving, pickling, estate management – Sayers writes:

*Here are the women's jobs – and what has become of them? They are all being handled by men. It is all very well to say that woman's place is in the home – but modern civilization has taken all these pleasant and profitable activities out of the*

*home, where the women looked after them, and handed them over to big industry, to be directed and organised by men at the head of large factories.*<sup>[12](#)</sup>

Sayers notes the incoherence of insisting that women should continue to restrict their occupations to traditional domestic household functions when the pre-industrial household no longer exists:

*It is perfectly idiotic to take away women's traditional occupations and then complain because she looks for new ones. Every woman is a human being – one cannot repeat that too often – and a human being must have occupation, if he or she is not to become a nuisance to the world.*<sup>[13](#)</sup>

More than half a century ago, Sayers had already pointed out that interpreting differences between men and women in terms of symbolic archetypes is a male rather than female obsession:

*[I]t is very observable that whereas there has been from time immemorial an Enigma of Woman, there is no corresponding Enigma of Man. . . . [T]he entire mystique of sex is, in historic fact, of male invention. The exaltation of virginity, the worship of the dark Eros, the apotheosis of motherhood, are alike the work of man . . .*<sup>[14](#)</sup>

Over against the abstractions of sexual archetypes of masculinity and femininity, Sayers offers the corrective of the concrete reality of actual men and women and the concrete good of personalist relationalism:

*[T]he average woman of intelligence is fairly ready to believe in the value of a personal relationship, but the idea of a peculiar mana attached to femaleness as such, deriving as it does from primitive fertility-cults and nature-magic,*

*is likely to strike her as either nonsensical or repellent.*<sup>[15](#)</sup>

The most fundamental characteristic of women in comparison to men is that they are, first and foremost, human, and thus are more like men than they are like anything else:

*But the fundamental thing is that women are more like men than anything else in the world. They are human beings. Vir is male and Femina is female: but Homo is male and female.*

*This is the equality claimed and the fact that is persistently evaded and denied. No matter what arguments are used, the discussion is vitiated from the start, because Man is always dealt with as both Homo and Vir, but Woman only as Femina.*<sup>[16](#)</sup>

Accordingly, many of the stereotypical assumptions about similarities and differences between men and women are simply nonsensical. For example, there is the inscrutable mystery that men presume is at the center of femininity when they ask the perennial question, “What do women want?”<sup>[17](#)</sup> Sayers writes:

*I do not know that women, as women, want anything in particular, but as human beings they want, my good men, exactly what you want yourselves: interesting occupation, reasonable freedom for their pleasures, and a sufficient emotional outlet. What form the occupation, the pleasures and the emotion may take, depends entirely upon the individual.*<sup>[18](#)</sup>

Closely tied to Sayers’s insistence on the basic human equality between men and women is another central theme in Sayers’s writing, that of a Christian theology of work. Drawing on Genesis 1:26-28, Sayers brings together the notion that humanity is created “in the image of God,” that humanity is created “male and female,” and what has been called the

“cultural mandate” – that humanity is created to exercise stewardship over creation – to argue for a Christian “understanding of work.”<sup>19</sup> Sayers states that “work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do,” that “good work” and not profit should be the primary point of work, that one should do work for which one is “fitted by nature,” that “[w]e should clamor to be engaged in work was worth doing, and in which we could take pride.” Finally, that work should be viewed as a vocation, and “that every maker and worker is called to serve God in his [or her] profession or trade – not outside it.”<sup>20</sup>

How is this notion of work connected with the affirmation that men and women are equally created in the image of God, and that, first and foremost, “woman are human”? Sayers acknowledges that there are some practical differences between men and women that make some work more suitable for most men than they are for most women: “[T]here is no harm in saying that women, as a class, have smaller bones than men, wear lighter clothing, have more hair on their heads and less on their faces . . . ,” but such comparisons only apply for particular cases: “Few women happen to be natural born mechanics; but if there is one, it is useless to try and argue her into being something different.”<sup>21</sup> What is important is that the particular job should be done by the particular person who does it best:

*If the women make better office-workers than men, they must have the office work. If any individual woman is able to make a first-class lawyer, doctor, architect or engineer, then she must be allowed to try her hand at it. Once lay down the rule that the job comes first and you throw that job open to every individual, man or woman, fat or thin, tall or short, ugly or beautiful, who is able to do that job better than the rest of the world.*<sup>22</sup>

The point is not that every occupation or interest that used to be done by men should now be done by every woman. As a classics scholar, Sayers points out that not every woman wants to know about Aristotle anymore than every man wants to know about Aristotle, "but I, eccentric individual that I am, do want to know about Aristotle, and I submit that there is nothing in my bodily shape or bodily functions which need prevent me from knowing about him."<sup>23</sup>

The implications for a theology of women's ordination are, of course, obvious. The crucial question is whether there are any essential differences between men and women that are significant for exercising church office. Specifically, granted that there are obvious physical and social differences between men and women (only men can be fathers, sons, or brothers; only women can be mothers, daughters, or sisters), do any of these have anything to do with the capacity to speak or teach or exercise authority (Protestant complementarianism) or to preside over worship or celebrate the sacraments (Catholic objections), or exercise pastoral care for parishioners, that would indicate that certainly not every woman, but women with the specifically necessary callings and gifts could not perform these functions?<sup>24</sup>

Opponents of women's ordination might well respond to the above question in two ways. First, it could be argued, while it is generally the case that those with the requisite skills are best suited for particular kinds of work, the ordained ministry is not simply "work," but a vocation, a divine calling to be recognized by the church, and which must be distinguished from merely secular occupations. Problematic in this claim, however, is the recognition since the Reformation that *all* forms of work, if they are good work, should be considered as "vocations." Sayers herself emphasizes this when she writes that any work worth doing is a vocation: "It is the business of the Church to recognize that the secular vocation,

as such, is sacred.”<sup>25</sup> But the converse is also true. If the secular vocation is sacred, the sacred vocation is also “good work,” and should be done by the person who is most able to do the work well. Given the choice, do opponents of women’s ordination really believe that it would be preferable to have a man who preaches poorly, presides at worship in a slovenly manner, and has poor pastoral skills (and the examples of these are far too many) over a woman who preaches well, presides reverently at worship, and exercises compassionate pastoral ministry, simply because he is a man and she a woman?

Second, the opponent of women’s ordination could well respond that nothing Sayers writes demands that women ought to pursue ordained ministry. Modern opponents of women’s ordination nonetheless insist that they recognize women’s lay ministries, and there is nothing to prevent a woman with skills in writing (such as Sayers), preaching, teaching, or pastoral care, to fulfill her vocation in a lay ministry. This argument is probably more credible if coming from Catholic opponents to women’s ordination who (at least in theory) restrict women’s ministry only from presiding at liturgical functions; however, it is still question-begging insofar as the very same argument could be made concerning men. It could be said of any man (as it is said of women), that the pastoral skills that are usually recognized as signs of vocation to ordained ministry could also be exercised in some form of lay ministry. So the question is not whether some (not all) women might pursue ordained ministry rather than some form of lay ministry, but rather whether anyone (male or female) should do so when vocational gifts could always be fulfilled in some kind of lay ministry instead? If one argues that, at least in some particular cases, some men should pursue ordained ministry, then *ipso facto*, the case is the same for some (not all) women.

## **Toward a Positive Theology of Non-Gendered Ordination**

In much of what I have written in this series of essays, my arguments have been defensive, responding to objections to the ordination of women. In what follows, I would like to provide a short summary of a theological case in favor of the ordination of women, or, more specifically, an argument for a non-gendered approach to ordained ministry. Specifically, what is the purpose of ordained ministry within the church, and what would be the requirements for selecting certain persons for church office, whether men or women?

First, any positive argument that men and women are equally eligible for ordination to church office must say “no” to the “culture wars” of the last few decades, and to non-theological arguments concerning sexuality, and its relationship to ordained ministry. A properly biblical and systematic theology of sexuality is not hierarchical (as in complementarianism); neither, however, does it derive its understanding of sexuality from post-modern identity politics. Although certainly affirming an equality between men and women, a biblical and systematic theology of sexuality does not regard male and female sexuality as fluid or interchangeable, as does much contemporary sexual identity politics. Again, only men can be fathers, sons, and brothers; only women can be mothers, daughters, and sisters.

At the same time, an argument for the suitability of the ordination of both men and women is not interested in debates between patriarchy and post-modernity for either upholding or rejecting traditional cultural notions of masculinity and femininity. As Carrie Miles points out, traditional notions of male and female “personality” are rooted in pre-industrial divisions of labor between the sexes. In pre-industrial agricultural societies, successful males need to be physically strong, ambitious, intelligent, competitive, independent, and aggressive. Those who succeed will be those who subdue and master others. Correspondingly, in pre-industrial cultures, women compete not for the best jobs, but for the best



husbands. Successful women will be physically attractive, nurturing, good household managers, accommodating, emotionally sensitive, patient, interested in children. These are, of course, traditional cultural understandings of what makes men masculine and women feminine. They also correspond economically to the descriptions of the consequences of sin for men and women in Genesis 3: the curse on the ground means that there is a scarcity of provisions, and men must work hard in order to survive. Women must turn to their husbands in that they are financially dependent, and husbands rule over their wives insofar as, in an agricultural economy, men necessarily have more power in the family relationship. (The very thing that makes women valuable – their ability to bear and nurse children – makes them economically dependent on their husbands.)<sup>26</sup> Traditional male and female cultural stereotypes also correspond to the reward/punishment structures of traditional honor/shame cultures, a structure which, I have argued, was undermined by the principles of “christological subversion” and “mutual submission.”

In addition, however, insofar as traditional notions of masculinity and femininity are tied to the economics of pre-industrial cultures, they are increasingly irrelevant in a post-industrial culture. For most jobs, modern men do not necessarily have to be physically stronger or more aggressive in that they are no longer restricted to physical labor to make their livings. Modern women are no longer tied necessarily to work that keeps them physically close to children in that modern economic production is no longer home-based. Accordingly, even if it were desirable to maintain traditional stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity, it would not be possible apart from a return to a pre-industrial economy that created the distinctions in the first place, a return which is culturally implausible, and which even traditionalists would likely not desire.

Second, a positive argument for a non-gendered account of

ordained ministry should be grounded in a theology that is creational, Christocentric (cruciform), and Trinitarian (redemptive-historical and ecclesial). An egalitarian biblical theology of ordination is founded on a proper reading of (1) the account of the creation of humanity in the image of God as male and female in Genesis 1 and 2; (2) Jesus' teaching on marriage and sexuality, along with his relationship to his female disciples; (3) Paul's egalitarian theology of marriage and sexuality; (4) the practice and ministry of both men and women in the early church. Consequently, an egalitarian anthropology will be grounded in a Trinitarian Christocentric personalist ontology. In terms of symbolism, such a theology will be rooted in a reciprocal Trinitarian personalism, rather than a "binary" and hierarchical male/female symbolism; a personalist ontology will emphasize that relationality and mutual submission are crucial to what it means to be male or female. (Many of the details of the above argument have been made already in the preceding essays and will not be repeated at length here.)

### **Returning to Genesis**

A personalist and relational Christian ontology will begin with a return to God's intentions in creation prior to humanity's fall into sin: There is a correlation between the creation of humanity in the image of God as male and female and trinitarian personalism; all human beings are created to know and love the triune God who has created humanity in his image. The relational orientation of men and women toward one another is a reflection of the eternal love between the Triune persons. The creation of human beings as male and female is a reflection of and participation through grace in the pericherotic relations of the Triune persons. Men and women are created to know and love God; but they are also made for one another, for mutuality, and relationality, and not for a subordination of one sex to another. To the contrary of complementarian hierarchicalism, the historic subordination of

women to men characteristic of all pre-industrial cultures is a consequence of the fall into sin, and redemption entails a reversal of this subordination, a return to the equality, mutuality, and reciprocity between men and women intended by God in the original creation. Again, the creation mandate of Genesis 1:28 applies to both men and women, and this certainly has implications for a gender-neutral understanding of ordination to church office because the specific roles of ordained ministry parallel the demands of the creation mandate (or, rather, creation blessing, as Carrie Miles argues).<sup>[27](#)</sup>

### **Christocentricity**

The New Testament expands on the Old Testament by applying to Jesus Christ what Genesis says about the image of God. James 3:9 uses language much like that of Genesis, but other passages in the New Testament speak of Jesus Christ as the Son who is the “image of God” (Col. 1:15), of the “glory of Christ, who is the image of God,” (2 Cor. 4:4), as the one who pre-existed “in the “form of God,” but took on the “form of a servant,” (Phil. 2:6-7), as the “radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3), and as the typological fulfillment of the “Son of Man” language in Psalm 8, “who was made for a little while lower than the angels” (Heb. 2:5-9; cf. Ps. 8:3-8). As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ is the perfect image of the Father. Also discussed previously, Romans 5 identifies Jesus Christ as the second Adam.<sup>[28](#)</sup>

Two passages in particular (already discussed at length) pick up on the male-female imagery of Genesis and apply it either to Jesus Christ and humanity or to Christ and the church (1 Cor. 11:3, 11-12, Ephesians 5: 21-23), speaking of Christ as the “head of every man” (1 Cor. 11:3) or “head of the church,” and the church both as Christ’s body and his bride (Eph. 5:23, 32). (The church fathers developed this bodily and nuptial imagery to suggest that just as the woman was taken from the

side of Adam, so the church as the bride of Christ is taken from Christ's bleeding side on the cross.)

Just as in Genesis 1, however, the focus of these two passages is on nurture and reciprocity, not authority. 1 Cor. 11 emphasizes that the woman is the "glory of man" and that, just as the woman was originally taken from the man, so now all men come to be through women. The only reference to "authority" in the passage is to the woman's own authority (1 Cor. 11:10). Similarly, Ephesians 5 focuses on the mutual subordination of all Christians to one another, and to the way in which both men and woman resemble Jesus Christ by "walking in love as Christ loved us" (Eph. 5:2; cf. 5:25) and by "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (5:21; cf. 5:33). (Also of significance is that neither passage specifically says anything about church office; 1 Cor. 11 is addressing disruptive worship practices; Ephesians 5 addresses worship insofar as *all* Christians are encouraged to address one another in "hymns and spiritual songs," and the Christian family is to echo this mutual submission of all Christians to one another.)<sup>29</sup>

The New Testament insistence that it is Jesus Christ who is the true image of God leads to a modification of Old Testament anthropology. Accordingly, all Christians now image Jesus Christ as disciples who are "in Christ," and in whom Christ dwells, who participate in Christ who is the image of God as they are joined to the risen Christ through the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Unlike Moses, Christians "beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (1 Cor. 3:18).

At the same time, cruciformity is crucial to an understanding of Christian discipleship, of how Christians resemble or represent Jesus Christ; Three New Testament passages are crucial in this regard: Phil. 2:5-11 is the "master story" for

Paul's account of cruciform spirituality; as Christ "emptied himself" by taking on the form of a servant, so also Christians are to look not to their own interests, but to those of others. Ephesians 5 portrays the mutual submission of all Christians to one another, who "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:2). 2 Cor. 4 describes the practice of Christian ministry as exemplified by the apostles, of those who carry a treasure in jars of clay, carrying in their bodies the death of Jesus so that Jesus' life is manifest in their bodies (2 Cor. 4:7-12). This model of cruciform spirituality is the correct pattern for the manner in which the ordained minister does or does not represent or resemble Jesus Christ.<sup>30</sup>

Ironically, despite their different ways of insisting that the ordained minister must resemble Christ, both Protestant complementarians and Catholic sacramentalists miss the New Testament's most crucial point regarding resemblance of Christians to Jesus Christ – what I have designated by the terms "Christological subversion" and "cruciformity." For the New Testament, "resembling Jesus Christ" is consistently expressed in terms of cruciformity. Christians resemble Jesus Christ by pointing away from themselves to the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, and through sharing in his suffering. Resemblance to Jesus Christ through cruciform discipleship is expected of all Christians, and it is not gender-specific. All Christians resemble Jesus Christ through following the path of the cross. This is the model that the New Testament sets up for following Christ in Phil. 2:1-11. It is the model of mutual submission demanded of all Christians, men and women, parents and children, masters and servants, in Eph. 5:1-6:9. It is the model for apostleship in 2 Corinthians 4.

Against complementarianism, the New Testament does not speak of leadership simply in terms of authority of some over others; rather, the New Testament consistently challenges what Alan Padgett has called Type I submission. All Christians are

called to represent Jesus Christ in terms of what Padgett calls Type II submission, the mutual submission of voluntarily taking on the role of servants in relation to one another.<sup>31</sup> Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament specifically rejected Mediterranean social institutions, yet Christological subversion consistently challenges those institutions. Leaders are not told simply to exercise authority or power over subordinates. Rather, as in Ephesians 5, mutual submission is the model of authority expected of all Christians. When Paul uses the word *kephalē* ("head") metaphorically in 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5, he does not use the metaphor to speak of authority, but rather of mutuality, nurture and self-sacrifice. Cruciformity is also the model provided for apostleship and pastoral leadership in 1 Cor. 4-6. The church's office holders resemble Jesus Christ as those who carry a treasure in clay jars, who proclaim not themselves but Jesus Christ, who represent Christ by carrying in their bodies the death of Jesus (1 Cor. 4:7-12). This is a resemblance to Jesus Christ that is based neither on authority nor in sexuality.

Against Catholic sacramentalist arguments, how does Paul suggest that the church's apostles resemble Christ? Not in terms of masculine sexual imagery, but rather by pointing away from themselves toward the crucified Jesus Christ, as does John the Baptist in Grunewald's painting. The church's office holders resemble Christ as earthen vessels, and through sharing in Christ's suffering. Nothing in any of this New Testament imagery is gender-specific.

## **Word and Sacrament**

What are the responsibilities of the ordained minister? Ecumenical consensus points to two main tasks: proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments.

## **Ministry of the Word**

Historically, there are four primary ways in which the ordained minister is understood to exercise the ministry of the Word: authority, preaching (and teaching), the power of the keys, and pastoral care.<sup>32</sup>

Complementarians have focused on the exercise of authority as the primary function of the ordained minister, and everything else flows from that. The complementarian argument is that women cannot be ordained ministers because they cannot exercise authority over men, and, in consequence, cannot preach or teach either. (As noted above, the Catholic understanding of ordination no longer focuses on masculine authority in this way.)

Much of what I have written in this series of essays has challenged the notion of a permanently hierarchical top-down notion of authority in which some (namely men) always command, and others (women, children, and other subordinates) always obey in what Alan Padgett has referred to as “Type I” submission. However, nothing in what I have written rejects the notion of authority as such. Insofar as ordained ministry involves genuine leadership, it necessarily entails a kind of authority, yet an authority re-interpreted through the lenses of cruciformity and Christological subversion. Ordained clergy exercise authority by pointing away from themselves to the crucified Christ.

Recent authors have corrected both an authoritarian permanently hierarchical understanding of authority as well as the post-modern tendency to reject all authority as inherently oppressive.<sup>33</sup> Post-modern culture is distrustful of authority, and in recent decades, much of the mainline church has been trying to downplay that part of the pastor’s (or priest’s) mission. One of the chief ways in which the twentieth-century church did that was by substituting different understandings of authority for the pastor’s authority. The ordained minister was no longer someone who points to Jesus Christ, but a

therapist, a social worker, or the Chief Operating Officer of the congregation. At the same time, when people are uncertain about the source of their authority, they become frightened, and they fall back on their own personal authority. There are clergy who have no problem imagining themselves to be representatives of Christ, but the image they prefer is that of Christ enthroned in glory, the *Christus Pantokrator*.

To the contrary, in the 1st epistle of Peter, the apostle explains the proper type of ministerial leadership: "So I exhort the elders (presbyters) among you, as a fellow elder (presbyter) and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God among you, not by way of compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not lording (μηδ' ὡς κατακυριεύοντες, *mēd ōs katakurieuontes*) it over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." (1 Peter 5:1-4, my translation). The presbyter is asked to *shepherd* the flock as one whose role is modeled on that of the Good Shepherd. The language of suffering ("witness of the sufferings of Christ") is reminiscent of similar language in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12.

Lacking in the passage is any use of such terms as *exousia*, the normal Greek NT word for "authority"; to the contrary, the presbyter is specifically forbidden from exercising any domineering top-down authority. In 1 Peter, office-holders are called to exercise authority as did Jesus, who said "[W]hoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:26-28). Verse 5 does indeed call on those who are younger to "submit" (ὑποτάγητε, *hypotagēte*) to the elders/presbyters (πρεσβυτέροις, *presbyterois*)." At the same time, however, the submission is not top-down hierarchical submission (Padgett's "submission



I”), but the mutual submission of all to each other: “But all of you (πάντες, *pantes*) be subject to one another (ἀλλήλοις, *allēlois*), and be clothed with humility: for God resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble.” (modernized KJV).

As the role of the Good Shepherd is to lay down his life for the sheep (John 10:11), so the ordained pastor follows the example of the One Shepherd. That kind of leadership is more difficult than being a social worker or a CEO. It demands more long-suffering than does top-down authority. Ordained clergy cannot act as shepherds unless they love the people they are called to serve, and unless they are willing to suffer. The pastor or priest does not then act on his or her own authority. Pastoral ministry is that of a shepherd who shares in the ministry of the One Shepherd. Any authority that ordained clergy have comes from beyond themselves. It is the authority to share with the Good Shepherd in laying down their lives for the sheep. Obviously such sacrificial authority is not gender-specific.

The second role of the presbyter is that of preaching or proclaiming the Word. The primary job of the preacher is to communicate the Word of God about Jesus Christ as contained in the Scriptures. The main point of such preaching is, once again, to point to Christ. The pastor’s sermons should focus on the Good Shepherd, who Jesus Christ is, and what Jesus did. Who is Jesus? He is the Son of God, the incarnate Word become flesh, the second person of the Trinity. What did Jesus do? He became human, he died for our sins, he rose from the dead, and he is coming again. As noted above, in the incarnation, Jesus Christ models a cruciform pattern of life that is the paradigm for all Christian discipleship. That is the gospel. That is what the pastor is to preach. The gospel is that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead, and is coming again. The good news is about Jesus Christ, and his person and work, and that is what the preacher needs to come back to in his or her preaching, over and over. And if he or she does that, he

or she will play the same role as does John the Baptist in Grunewald's painting, and God will speak through his or her words. As the Anglican priest and poet George Herbert wrote:

*Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?  
He is a brittle crazy glass  
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford  
This glorious and transcendent place  
To be a window, through thy grace.  
(George Herbert, "The Windows")*

And again, to proclaim the word that Jesus Christ has died and risen is not something gender-specific. To the contrary, the gospels make clear that it was not men, but rather women, who first came to the empty tomb, who were the first witnesses that the crucified Jesus was no longer dead but risen. In his first sermon in the book of Acts (2:14-40), the apostle Peter makes clear that this proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a fulfillment of a prophecy of the Old Testament prophet Joel. When God pours out his Spirit on all people, sons and daughters will prophecy; God will pour out his Spirit on his servants, both men and women (v. 17-18).

The next way in which the pastor acts as a shepherd is that of the "power of the keys." The power of the keys is the ordained minister's authority to proclaim Christ's forgiveness to the repentant. Reformation Christians get uncomfortable here, but we need to be reminded that this is an authority that Christ has given to his church. The Anglican Reformer John Jewel stated:

*Moreover, we say that Christ hath given to His ministers power to bind, to loose, to open, to shut. And that the office of loosing consisteth in this point: that the minister should . . . offer by the preaching of the Gospel the merits of Christ and full pardon, to such as have lowly and contrite hearts, and do unfeignedly repent themselves, pronouncing*

*unto the same a sure and undoubted forgiveness of their sins,  
and hope of everlasting salvation.*<sup>34</sup>  

To be able to pronounce Christ's forgiveness to repentant sinners is not in conflict with the Reformation understanding of justification by faith alone; it is a way of making forgiveness concrete and objective. Again, it is important to remember that the ordained minister does not proclaim forgiveness on the basis of his or her own authority. The pastor is a sinner, just like the person who comes for confession. As the prophet Isaiah says, we are all people of unclean lips, dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips (Is. 6:5). But One greater than a seraphim has touched our lips, and he has said, "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (Is. 6:7). It is because Jesus Christ has forgiven him or her that the presbyter can proclaim that Christ forgives others. In order to do this, clergy need to acknowledge their own sins, and they need to accept Christ's forgiveness.

Finally, there is one last way in which the ordained minister acts as a shepherd of Jesus Christ. The minister is pastor and spiritual director. The words "pastor" and "pastoral" come from the Latin word that means "shepherd." There is a uniquely pastoral dimension to ordained ministry. The traditional exhortations given to clergy at ordination speak to this responsibility. One of the responsibilities of the pastor is to get to know his or her parishioners, to spend time with them, to pray with them, to baptize them, to marry them, to bury them.

### **Administration of the Sacraments**

If Protestant accounts of ordained ministry have focused on the pastor's authority and proclamation of the word, Catholic accounts have focused on the role of the presbyter in administering the sacraments, specifically in presiding at the

celebration of the Eucharist. As noted previously, Catholic arguments against the ordination of women often focus on the Catholic understanding of church office as a “sacramental priesthood.”

A theologically nuanced understanding of ordained ministry does not necessarily see these two models as opposed so much as complementary. The office of the presbyter includes both preaching and proclaiming the Word, but also presiding at the celebration of the Eucharist. At the same time, as with the Protestant understanding of ministry as the proclamation of the Word, so an understanding of ministry that emphasizes ordination as “priesthood” needs to recognize that New Testament office is not simply a repristination of the Old Testament sacrificial system; rather, as with proclamation of the Word, New Testament priesthood must be re-defined Christologically: Jesus Christ is not only the perfect image of God and the Good Shepherd; he is also the One High priest, who not only fulfills, but also transforms Old Testament worship. As Cyril of Alexandria emphasized, the church’s worship is not something of its own that the church offers to God, but a participation in the risen Jesus Christ’s vicarious worship of the Father through the Holy Spirit.<sup>35</sup>

The teleological end of Christian worship is the church’s union with the triune God as the church becomes the body of Christ united to the crucified and risen humanity of Jesus Christ its head through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Sacraments do not have an end in themselves, but exist as means of grace to enable this union between the crucified and risen Christ and the church. As they are united to the crucified and risen Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit in baptism (Rom. 5), all Christians reflect Christ’s image, and are conformed to it. So in Thomas Aquinas’s discussion of baptismal character, it is Jesus Christ who is the primary “character” or image of God (following Hebrews 1:3); all Christians participate in and resemble Christ’s character

through baptism; it is this participation in Christ's character through the act of baptism which brings one into the church that enables the priest/presbyter to represent Christ.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the logic of Aquinas's position is that *in persona ecclesiae* (in the person of the church) precedes *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ). Or, at least, that representational symbolism is dynamic. All Christians resemble Jesus Christ insofar as Christ is the head of the church; the church represents Christ as sharing in Christ's character through baptism. It is thus through their union with Christ in baptism that Christians are made one with his body, the church, and all Christians represent Christ.

Thus, the way in which the ordained minister acts *in persona Christi* when presiding at the church's worship is neither unique, nor is it based on male sexuality. The eucharistic minister resembles Jesus Christ in first receiving the baptismal character shared by all Christians. It is thus not the Eucharist, but baptism, that is the originating sacrament of identification with Christ. In the church's worship at the Eucharist, the presiding minister represents the church as having received the baptismal character that makes worship possible, and thus represents Jesus Christ who is the head of the church. In the eucharistic prayer, the celebrant first acts on behalf of the church as its representative (*in persona ecclesiae*). The eucharistic prayer is a prayer – it begins and ends with the words “we” – and, in this prayer, the priest represents Jesus Christ as first representing the church, which is his bride. Thus there is a crucial significance to the *epiclesis* in the eucharistic prayer; in invoking the Holy Spirit to descend on bread and wine to make it the risen Christ's body and blood, and on the gathered people to make them Christ's body, the priest acts as a representative of the church as the body of Christ, and in this manner as a representative of Jesus Christ as the head of this body.

If we describe the church's worship using the language of

“eucharistic sacrifice,” it is necessary to affirm (as do all contemporary ecumenical agreements) that it is Jesus Christ who offers the sacrifice, not the presiding minister. It is Jesus Christ who makes himself present, not the celebrant. Moreover, as the patristic church taught, and as modern ecumenical agreements also emphasize, the Eucharist is not a new sacrifice, but simply the same sacrifice of the cross which is “re-presented.” Jesus Christ is not “sacrificed again”; rather, as the risen Jesus Christ becomes truly present through the invocation of the Holy Spirit, so Christ is present in the once-for-all atoning significance of his life, death, and resurrection. The eucharistic sacrifice does not depend, then, on the person of the ordained priest, but on the person of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. The celebrant does not “offer” anything of him or herself; nor is the priest a “mediator” in the sense of being a substitute for Christ or an *alter Christus*.

In the eucharistic prayer, then, it is Jesus Christ who is the primary celebrant, not the ordained priest. Again, it must be emphasized that the eucharistic prayer is a prayer, not a drama. The presiding minister is praying on behalf of the entire congregation, not acting a drama or playing a role in a play. The “words of institution” recited in the eucharistic prayer are part of this prayer in which the presiding minister prays on behalf of, and acts as a representative of, the gathered community (*in persona ecclesiae*).

Of course, in a manner similar to the proclamation of the Word, the eucharistic minister represents Christ not only to the extent that he or she represents the church as Christ’s bride, but also, once again, in terms of cruciformity; in recalling Jesus Christ’s atoning sacrifice in the “Words of Institution” – “This is my body given for you; This is my blood shed for you” – the celebrant points away from him or herself and his or her own inadequacies or accomplishments to the complete sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ – crucified,

risen, and returning in glory – to redeem and sanctify the church. It is the crucified and risen Jesus Christ's own sacrifice that is made present in the church's worship, not that of the church's ordained clergy. The worship of the church is a matter of the church pointing away from itself to Jesus Christ's finished work, but it is also a participation in the risen Christ's own worship on the church's behalf. The structure of the eucharistic prayer makes clear that the presiding minister is praying on behalf of and as a representative of the gathered community of the church; insofar as the church is the bride of Christ (and is thus symbolically feminine), women most appropriately have the capacity to illustrate this by leading the church's prayers, especially the eucharistic prayer.<sup>37</sup>

### **Concluding Reflections**

What might be the implications of what really is the church's *new* understanding of the equality of men and women, and of a gender-neutral understanding of ordination to church office?

First, a trinitarian understanding of personhood and a relational and reciprocal understanding of the relationship between men and women means not only that men and women are equals, but that their identity as male and female is established in relation to one another; man and women need one another and should be friends with one another. Thomas Aquinas transformed Aristotle's notion of friendship from *The Nichomachean Ethics* in light of Jesus' statement in John 15:15 – "I call you no more servants . . . but friends" – to suggest that charity as the highest theological virtue is friendship with Jesus, and friendship with God. But charity is also friendship with fellow human beings, and grounds Aquinas's understanding of ethics summarized in the Ten Commandments as love of God and love of neighbor.<sup>38</sup> Certainly this has implications for the relationships between men and women in the church.

Karl Barth famously developed his understanding of the relationship between men and women in light of the two creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2. Gen. 1:27 points to the interpersonal and relational nature of what it means to be created in the image of God; man as male and female indicates that the *imago dei* is fundamentally relational, and that the image of God is a reflection of the triune interpersonal relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That humanity is male and female means that humanity cannot be humanity alone, but only as male in relation to female and female in relation to male. There is no man or woman as such, but “only concretely masculine and feminine co-existence and co-operation in all things.” The creation narrative of Genesis 2 indicates that humanity means “fellow human”: “the encounter of man and woman as such is being in encounter and therefore the center of humanity . . .” The basic distinction and connection of I and Thou is thus “coincident with that of male and female.”<sup>39</sup> So, for both Barth and Aquinas, the image of God is essentially personal and relational, grounded in the trinitarian relations of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Barth goes beyond Aquinas, however, in emphasizing that it is precisely the mutual and complementary relationship between humanity as man and woman that is the ontological foundation of the personalistic and relational image of God in human beings.<sup>40</sup>

Second, the centrality of cruciformity as the paradigm for Christian discipleship, combined with Paul’s call for mutual submission, and both Paul’s and 1 Peter’s description of ministry, leads to a transformed understanding of Christian ministry and authority in terms of servanthood and mutual submission rather than top-down exercise of authority of some over others. That is, the New Testament challenges the first-century Mediterranean honor/shame culture exemplified in what Alan Padgett calls “Submission I,” and offers instead the paradigm of mutual submission (“Submission II”). For the New



Testament, to exercise church office means to be a servant to one's fellow servants. Again, there is nothing about mutual submission in love patterned on Christ's cruciform self-sacrifice that is inherently gender-specific.

Third, Paul's coordination of a theology of the Eucharist as participation (or communion) in the body of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, combined with his imagery of the church as a diverse body of many members points to hospitality at the core of the church's fellowship (*koinonia*) (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31). Hospitality means not only welcoming the stranger who is outside the church, but, more specifically, welcoming one's brother or sister inside the church. Neither men nor women can say to the other, "I have no need of you." However, a hierarchical understanding of sexual "gender roles" leads necessarily to an antagonistic relationship between men and women. At least insofar as it comes to the question of the kinds of gifts that would normally indicate a call to ordained ministry, the refusal to ordain women is to say to another member of the body of Christ, "I have no need of you."

A proper understanding of Christian community will lead necessarily to male repentance for failure to recognize the gifts and calling of women within the Christian congregation. It will also mean a willingness to listen to the voices of women in the church. In a TED Talk entitled "How to Speak Up For Yourself," Adam Galinski points out that courage to speak depends on (1) moral conviction, (2) a position of power in tension with a fear of punishment, and, finally, (3) community support. When it comes to public speaking, even those with moral conviction will tend to be silent if fear of punishment is not balanced by both some kind of position of power and community support. Galinski points out that what appear to be differences between the sexes actually tend to reflect differences in power. When it comes to public speaking, women find themselves in a double bind. They lack the power to

speaking, but they are also punished if they do speak.<sup>41</sup>

Galinski's points are directly relevant to the question of women's ordination in the church. Resistance to women's ordination contributes to the double bind in which women find themselves in the church in that women are denied the moral authority to speak; they lack the power to speak to the church, they are punished if they speak, and they lack support of the community if they do speak.

But refusing to women the freedom to speak to the church is not only to deny to them the moral integrity of the word that they need to speak to the church, but also to deny to the Christian community the word it may need to hear from women. In my years teaching in a seminary, I have found that women as a whole are often better preachers than men as a whole. At the seminary where I teach, women graduates consistently win the "outstanding preaching" awards at graduation out of proportion to their actual numbers in the student body. There are likely numerous reasons for this. It is a truism that women tend to be more verbal than men and are thus perhaps better speakers. It is also likely, however, that those women who pursue ordination tend to be more determined than those men who do so. After all, only those women who are strongly convinced of their vocations tend to overcome community pressure against ordination; men are rewarded for a "vocation" for which women are punished. By denying women ordination, we deny them the ability to use a divinely given gift. But more than the harm done to women by refusing to allow them to speak is the harm done to the church. Denying to women the opportunity of ordination means that women cannot speak the Word of God to the church. The church needs to hear the word that women are called to speak.

This will also mean that the church needs to reconsider its theology of vocation to embrace an understanding of vocation based on "Spirit-gifting."<sup>42</sup> It helps here to recognize the

difference between two different understandings of vocation, what might be called the difference between “Benedictine” and “Dominican” models of ministry. Historically, there has been a tension between Benedictine and Dominican understandings of vocation. Benedictines are cloistered monks, and the understanding of vocation among monks tends to be that it is assumed that one does not have a vocation until one proves otherwise. This is the case because the Benedictine model is that of a “religious” way of life that is primarily concerned with spiritual formation within the monastery. The monastic tradition is concerned to provide a safe setting in which people can form good habits and escape from temptation. It is only after one has been formed in the cloister that it is considered safe to enter once again into the outside world.

To the contrary, the Dominicans were not cloistered monks, but mendicant preachers, the Order of Preachers. The Dominican model of vocation is thus that of an “apostolate”; Dominicans exist in order to preach for the salvation of souls. The goal of Dominican spirituality is then, not primarily inward (spiritual formation), but outward – to be useful to others. This results in an entirely different understanding of vocation. The Medieval Dominican Humbert of Romans emphasized that preaching is too urgent to wait until people think that they are ready to do it. To the contrary, to avoid preaching until one thinks one is ready is a temptation to be avoided. The Dominican understanding of vocation is that if one has the gift of preaching, one *must* preach – one has the vocation to preach.<sup>43</sup>  

I would suggest that the church’s understanding of vocation to ordained ministry has been too often based on the Benedictine model – the assumption that one does not have a vocation unless one proves otherwise, and in the case of women, the church always presumes otherwise. To the contrary, if particular women (not every woman) demonstrate the gifts in preaching, liturgical celebration, and pastoral skills that

would (in the case of men) indicate a calling to ordained ministry, then the church should presume that these women have a call to ordained ministry until proven otherwise. The burden of proof is not on those who would argue for the ordination of women, but on those who would deny it.

Dorothy Sayers's insistence on the connection between vocation and good work is again helpful. The way that one knows that one has a vocation is if one has the gifts to do it. What does it say about our understanding of vocation when particular women have good theological minds, have the ability to speak well (preach good sermons), can lead worship reverently (have liturgical skills), have organizational skills (the ability to exercise leadership), and can exercise pastoral sensitivity, yet we exclude them from ordination?

For complementarians, the refusal to consider the ordination of women indicates a false understanding of authority, one that roots authority in sex rather than in competence. For Catholics, insofar as they have allowed women to exercise all kinds of pastoral leadership except for administering the sacraments, this reduces the gifts and callings of women in the church to a kind of glorified "lay ministry." Does allowing women to exercise every ministry in the church except that of presiding at celebration of the sacraments not itself indicate a kind of reduction of the office of ordained ministry to a kind of mechanical understanding of the relationship between the ordained minister and the sacraments?

Again, the adoption of a "Spirit-gifting" or Dominican understanding of vocation makes clear that the purpose of ordained ministry is not that of exercising power over others or of privilege. To the contrary, the point of ordained ministry is one of service. As Katherine-Greene McCreight has pointed out, the focus of orthodox "biblical feminists" in the church is not on gaining equal rights for women in the church, but on asking for an equal opportunity to serve within the

church.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, I conclude with one last consideration concerning possible differences between men and women and how this might affect their vocations within the church. What I have written in this series of essays has focused primarily on similarities between men and women. As Dorothy Sayers emphasized, women are human, and women are more like men than they are like anything else. Of course, there are fundamental biological differences between men and women, and both the complementarity between women and men, and many of the social roles that men and women fulfill are rooted in these essentially biological differences – again, only men can be husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers; only women can be mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters. I have also argued (following Carrie Miles) that many of the so-called social and cultural differences between men and women in pre-industrial cultures are rooted in basic differences in biology that necessarily restrict women largely to domestic tasks in agricultural societies, but allow men more flexibility to work outside the home: men are physically stronger than women; women give birth and breast-feed infants.

However, we can still ask whether there are also psychological differences between men and women that might have relevance to the question of women's ordination. Are men (broadly speaking) more rational and abstract? Are women (broadly speaking) more emotional and relational?<sup>45</sup> Here, I would suggest that caution is in order. While such psychological differences may exist *broadly* speaking, there will always be exceptions; despite broad tendencies, some particular women will always be more rational, independent, and abstract in their thinking than some men, while some men will always be more emotional and relational than some women.<sup>46</sup> However, even to recognize such differences (again, broadly speaking) between men and women is not an argument against women's ordination, but for it. The relevant corrective here would again be the apostle Paul's

discussion of different gifts within the diversity of the church as the one body of Christ. If there are inherent psychological differences between *some* women and *some* men, this would indicate that those women would exercise pastoral ministry differently than those men, but they would do so in a complementary manner to serve the church in a manner in which those men could not. The church should not refuse the pastoral gifts of women because of possible intellectual, emotional, or psychological differences between women and men. To the contrary, the church *needs* the pastoral gifts of women in order to avoid one-sidedly masculine church leadership.

1 "Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument 'From Tradition' is not the 'Traditional' Argument," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-the-argument-from-tradition-is-not-the-traditional-argument>.

2 See my earlier essays: "Non-theological Arguments Against the Ordination of Women," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/non-theological-arguments-against-the-ordination-of-women>; "Concerning Women's Ordination: Beginning with Genesis," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-beginning-with-genesis>.

3 On the notion of development of doctrine, see John Henry Newman's classic work, *An Essay in the Development of Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), along with the definitive Anglican response by J.B. Mozley, *The Theory of Development: A Criticism of Dr. Newman's Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London, Oxford, and Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1878). Against Newman, Mozley argued for two different senses of the notion of development: (1) a simply explanatory process, in which an idea is said to be developed, but not altered; and (2) a development which is a positive increase in the substance of the thing developed, a fresh formation not contained in or growing out of the original subject matter. Mozley argued that the Nicene formula

and the Athanasian Creed were examples of the first notion of development, not the second (144, 146, 149-153). In this series of essays I am arguing that the notions of “social liberty and equality” as a development of the notion of Christian liberty, and the ordination of women as a development from the church’s affirmation of the ontological equality of women are developments of the first kind. They do not add something *new* in the sense of something “different,” but something *new* in the sense of an explanatory process or drawing out of the logical implications of something inherent in the original subject matter of Christian faith.

4 “Equal” does not mean “identical.” Certainly there are clear differences between men and women; only men can be fathers, brothers, and sons; only women can be mothers, sisters, and daughters. Ontological equality in the sense in which I am using it affirms that women are of equal intellectual, moral, and spiritual status with men. Men and women are equally human, and mutually complementary, mutually created for relationship with one another and with the triune God as their Creator and Redeemer. More specifically, the notion of equality denies the historical claim that women are less intelligent, emotionally unstable, and more susceptible to temptation than men. Obvious physical differences between men and women mean that there are some tasks for which some men would be more suitable than some women; for example, most men are physically stronger than most women. However, there is nothing intrinsic to the differences between men and women that imply that men and women are not equally suited for most tasks. The specific tasks that would be excluded would obviously be those that are biologically determined. Again, only men can be fathers; only women can be mothers.

5 On the new “complementarian” Protestant argument against women’s ordination, see my earlier essay “Concerning Women’s Ordination: Hierarchy and Hermeneutics,” <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-hie>

rarchy-and-hermeneutics.

[6](#) On the new Catholic argument against the ordination of women, see my essay "Concerning Women's Ordination: Women's Ordination and the Priesthood of Christ (in persona Christi)," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-and-the-priesthood-of-christ>. Sara Butler appeals to Epiphanius in *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church* (Chicago/Mundelein, Ill: Hillenbrand Books, 2006), 61, 63. Epiphanius's statement can be found in *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, Books II and III, trans. Frank Williams (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 79.7, 2,3; 3,1.

[7](#) On these issues, see especially Carrie A. Miles, *The Redemption of Love: Rescuing Marriage and Sexuality From the Economics of a Fallen World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) and David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

[8](#) See my essay "Concerning Women's Ordination: Women's Ordination and the Priesthood of Christ (in persona Christi)."

[9](#) See my essays "Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument From Symbolism Part 1 (God, Christ, Apostles)," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-the-argument-from-symbolism-part-1>; "Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument From Symbolism (Part 2: Transcendence, Immanence and Sexual Typology)," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-the-argument-from-symbolism-part-2>.

[10](#) Butler, 46-51.

[11](#) Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1970); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962);



Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith Volume One: Prolegomena, The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974).

[12](#) Dorothy L. Sayers, "Are Women Human?," *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 24.

[13](#) Sayers, "Are Women Human?," 25.

[14](#) Dorothy Sayers, "Introduction," *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Cantica II Purgatory*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1955, 1980), 33.

[15](#) Sayers, "Purgatory," 38.

[16](#) Dorothy Sayers, "The Human-Not-Quite-Human," *Are Women Human?*, 37.

[17](#) That this continues to be a male obsession is evident in the title of the film *What Women Want* (2000) released over fifty years after Sayers's essays.

[18](#) Sayers, "Are Women Human?," 32.

[19](#) See particularly Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), and "Why Work?," *Creed or Chaos?* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1995).

[20](#) Sayers, "Why Work?," 72-78.

[21](#) Sayers, "Are Women Human?," 19, 29.

[22](#) Sayers, "Are Women Human?," 25.

[23](#) Sayers, "Are Women Human?," 21.

[24](#) The question might well be raised “Where did Sayers herself stand on the question of women’s ordination?,” to which the answer is that she took an ambiguous stance. In 1948, C.S Lewis wrote Sayers a letter in which he asked her to speak out against the “innovation” of women’s ordination by “Chinese Anglicans” (actually Hong Kong. The first Anglican women were actually ordained in Hong Kong in 1944). Sayers responded that it would be “silly” and “inexpedient” to establish a new barrier between Anglicans and “Catholic Christendom.” At the same time, she rejected what would become the new Catholic argument against the ordination of women: “I can never find any logical or strictly theological reason against it. Insofar as the Priest represents Christ, it is obviously more dramatically appropriate that a man should be, so to speak, cast for the part. But if I were cornered and asked point-blank whether Christ Himself is the representative of male humanity or all humanity, I should be obliged to answer ‘of all humanity’; and to cite the authority of St. Augustine that woman is also made in the image of God . . .” In the end, she declined Lewis’s invitation: “The most I can do is to keep silence in any place where the daughters of the Philistines might overhear me.” The letters are cited in Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (NY: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1993), 358-359.

[25](#) Sayers, “Why Work?,” 76.

[26](#) Miles, 50-56.

[27](#) “No gender-specific responsibilities are given in creation, nor does the text in any way imply that one sex will take a role different from the other. . . . Moreover, the imperatives in verse 28 are not commandments as often thought but gifts or *blessings*. . . . Genesis 1 portrays man and woman as the beneficiaries of great munificence. . . . Everything on earth was a gift to them, intended for their happiness. Even sexuality itself – humankind as male and female – was one of the blessings of creation.” Miles, 20. See my essay

“Concerning Women’s Ordination: Beginning with Genesis,” <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-beginning-with-genesis>.

[28](#) Stephen R. Holmes, “Image of God,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, General Editor (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 318-319.

[29](#) See my essays “Concerning Women’s Ordination: Mutual Submission,” <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-mutual-submission>; “Concerning Women’s Ordination: Women in Worship and Headship,” <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-women’s-ordination-women-in-worship>.

[30](#) See especially Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

[31](#) Alan Padgett, *As Christ Submits to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

[32](#) Much of what follows is based on a sermon I preached that appeared as “Icons of Christ: A Sermon Preached at an Ordination,” in *The Living Church* (September 9, 2012) 16-17, 36-41.

[33](#) Yves R. Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962, 1980); Victor Lee Austin, *Up with Authority: Why We Need Authority to Flourish as Human Beings* (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2010); David T. Koyzis, *We Answer to Another: Authority, Office, and the Image of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

Much confusion about authority arises insofar as authority is confused with coercion or the oppressive use of power. Rather, power is the ability to get something done. Authority is the delegated responsibility of an individual to act on behalf of

a community or group to get something done. An Amish farmer who organizes a barn raising is exercising authority even though no coercion is involved.

[34](#) John Jewel, *Apology of the Church of England* (London: Cassell & Co., 1888), Part II.

[35](#) On Cyril, see Thomas F. Torrance, "The Mind of Christ in Worship: The Problem of Apollinarianism in the Liturgy," *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 139-214.

[36](#) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3.62-63.

[37](#) For the above, see especially Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, trans. Fr. Steven Bigham (Redonda Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1991); Elisabeth Behr-Sigel and Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000); Edward Kilmartin, S.J. *Christian Liturgy: Theology and Practice I. Systematic Theology of Liturgy* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1988) and *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998, 2004); George R. Sumner, *Being Salt: A Theology of an Ordered Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007); Thomas F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry*, 2nd Edition (London: T & T Clark, 1993, 2003); *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975),

[38](#) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.54; *Summa Theologiae* 2-2.23.1; Jean-Pierre Torrell, "Charity as Friendship in St. Thomas Aquinas," *Christ and Spirituality in St. Thomas Aquinas*, Bernard Blankenhorn, O.P., trans. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 45-64.

[39](#) Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume 3 – The Doctrine of*

*Creation Part 2 – The Creature*, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, eds. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 286, 292, 293.

[40](#) Paul K. Jewett's early book *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), is a development of this theme.

[41](#) Adam Galinski, "How to Speak Up for Yourself," [https://www.ted.com/talks/adam\\_galinsky\\_how\\_to\\_speak\\_up\\_for\\_yourself?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/adam_galinsky_how_to_speak_up_for_yourself?language=en).

[42](#) Gordon D. Fee, "The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry," *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 241-254.

[43](#) On the difference between the monastic and the Dominican understanding of vocation, see Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (Springfield, ILL: Templegate Publishers, 1985), 138-151; on Dominican spirituality, see Tugwell, *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982); *The Way of the Preacher* (London: Dayton, Longman & Todd, 1979). Of course, while there were women Dominicans, there were no female Dominican priests or preachers. The reason for that would have been the traditional one based on female intellectual incapacity.

[44](#) Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Feminist Reconstructions of Christian Doctrine: Narrative Analysis and Appraisal* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 36-40.

[45](#) For an earlier feminist argument that such differences exist, see Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982, 1993).

[46](#) Dorothy Sayers was one such an example of a woman who tended to be more rational than emotional, and was thus not “typically female.”

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## Why I Don't Take the New Atheism Seriously, Or Penn Jillette on the Bible



It turns out that I have a lot in common with Penn Jillette. Because I had watched some YouTube videos on science, the YouTube Bots assumed that I would be interested in (and recommended to me) a YouTube channel called “Big Think.” Big Think advertises itself as “the leading source of expert-driven, actionable, educational content . . . [W]e help you get smarter, faster. We aim to help you explore the big ideas and core skills that define knowledge in the 21st century, so you can apply them to the questions and challenges in your own life.” Sounds impressive. What Big Think actually seems to be is a bunch of videos largely by popular media scientists like Bill Nye (the “Science Guy”), Neil de Grasse Tyson (Nova, Cosmos), Michio Kaku, and “public intellectuals” of the “New Atheist” variety.

If I were to express the underlying logic of many of the videos on Big Think, it would go something like this:

1) We're scientists and we're really smart (or maybe we're not scientists, but we're still really smart, and we think that scientists are smart too).

2) We don't believe in God.

Therefore,

3) If you want to be smart (like a scientist) or at least have people think you're smart (like those of us who aren't scientists), you won't believe in God either.

Anyway, YouTube recommended a Big Think video in which Penn Jillette (the magician) explained how he became an atheist. As I said, it turns out that Jillette and I have a lot in common. Both of us were raised in "generic" Protestant churches – what he calls the church of the "covered dish supper." (I'm assuming that Jillette's church was generic Liberal Protestant, while mine was generic [very] conservative Evangelical. He was raised Congregationalist; I was raised Southern Baptist.) Both of us were actively involved in high school youth groups connected with our church, and we were both influenced by a "cool" youth group leader. Jillette claims that when he was in high school that he read the Bible "cover to cover." So did I. Jillette claims that he took theological questions "very seriously," and read most of the theology books in his local library. I also took theology "very seriously" and I read a lot of books, although I certainly did not read most of the theology books in my local library.

Here's where the similarities end. Jillette tells his listeners that he made a deal with his parents that he would not have to go to church services if he went to the High School youth group instead. Jillette claims that it was reading the Bible that turned him into an atheist, and that eventually he was asked to leave the youth group because he was using his new-found knowledge to convert other members of

the youth group to atheism. Not only did I not leave either my youth group or my church, but for awhile I was the president of the youth group. Far from making me an atheist, reading the Bible became a life-long passion. I continue to read it every day and have read it "cover to cover" numerous times. After high school, I majored in philosophy in college, and later earned both an MA and a PhD in theology. None of this made me an atheist.

So what are the actual arguments that Jillette raises in this video? What about reading the Bible turned him into an atheist?

Jillette states:

1) "Anyone thinking about being an atheist, if you read the Bible or the Koran or the Torah cover to cover, I believe you will emerge from that as an atheist." "The Bible itself will turn you atheist faster than anything."

Okay, I'm intrigued.

2) "What we get told about the Bible is a lot of picking and choosing."

Here's where I get suspicious.

3) "When you see Lot's daughter gang-raped and beaten, and the Lord being okay with that."

Lot had two daughters. Neither was gang-raped or beaten. Quite the contrary; a significant point of the story of Lot is that although the men of Sodom threaten the strangers who are staying with Lot, no one is gang-raped or beaten. Not the strangers, not Lot's daughters. Later Lot's daughters do get their father drunk, and seduce him – the narrator clearly disapproves of this – but this is evidence that Jillette did not actually read the Bible cover to cover. He gets the story wrong.



4) “When you actually read about Abraham being willing to kill his son . . .”

This is correct, but at the most, it shows that Jillette has not read the text very carefully. A key part of reading any text is understanding context. From beginning to end, the story of Abraham is the story of God’s promise to provide Abraham a son against overwhelming odds. Abraham and Sarah are too old to have children. Eventually Abraham does have a son, but the context makes clear that Abraham does not kill his son. And Abraham himself tells Isaac that God will provide a sacrifice, which God does. Moreover, the reader knows that Abraham did not kill his son, because the nation of Israel are descended from Abraham’s son. The point of the story is that Abraham has learned to have faith in God – that God can be depended on – something that Abraham consistently fails to do in the early parts of the story. The whole point of the story is that Abraham has finally learned to trust God – and God demonstrates that he is trustworthy because he prevents Abraham from killing his son.

5) “When you read the insanity of the talking snake . . .”

Again, this is proof that Gilette did not read the text very carefully. The story in Genesis 2 is not about the snake, but about temptation. The snake has a “walk-on” part – to provide an occasion of temptation. That later interpreters understood the snake to be a personification of Satan, the “tempter,” make it clear that no one understood “talking snakes” to be a normal everyday reality. (If there is a “talking snake” in Genesis, it’s the only one.)

6) When you read the hostility toward homosexuals, toward women . . .”

This shows that Jillette has been influenced by what he has been told is in the Bible rather than actually having read the Bible. The Bible says very little about homosexuality – and,

when Jillette was a teenager, few people in the culture would have approved of homosexuality, so it's unlikely that this was the reason he lost his faith. Modern studies like those of Jewish writer Tikva Frymer-Kensky make clear that the Hebrew Bible is not hostile toward women. It also seems clear that Jillette had not read the New Testament – he says nothing about Jesus' relationships to women, especially in the gospel of Luke, or the significant role of women in the book of Acts. Jillette does not seem aware that the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection were women. Moreover, the letters of Paul make clear that women had important roles of leadership in his churches. Paul's instructions about family life in the "household codes" in Ephesians and Colossians challenge the sexism of first-century culture by encouraging husbands to love their wives. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says that men do not have control over their own bodies, but their wives do.

7) “. . . the celebration of slavery . . .”

Slavery was universally practiced in all ancient cultures. The Bible certainly does not *celebrate* slavery. In ancient Israel, slavery was significantly modified and humanized compared to surrounding cultures. (Old Testament slavery was not life-long; it was closer to indentured servitude for a limited period of time.) More significant, how could Gillette have missed that the foundation story of Israel is the story of the deliverance of a people from slavery? In the New Testament, one begins to see the beginning of the humane attitudes that eventually led to the abolition of slavery. One of the healing stories about Jesus concerns the healing of a slave. The same "household codes" that encourage husbands to love their wives, challenge slave-owners to consider themselves fellow "servants" of their slaves. In Philemen, Paul actually encourages a slave-owner to release his slave.

8) "When you read in context that 'Thou shalt not kill' means only in your own tribe. There's no hint that it means humanity in general – that there's no sense of a shared humanity; it's

all tribal.”

This is the only time when Gillette gives any indication that he knows what context means, but unfortunately, what he says is so much nonsense. The Old Testament provides special protection for foreigners and “sojourners” (Ex. 22:21, 23:9, Lev. 19:34, Dt. 10:19). There are numerous stories in the Old Testament in which Israel’s mission is extended to Gentiles. A major theme of eschatological passages is that the Gentiles will be included in God’s kingdom. Also, Gillette seems painfully oblivious about how he, a Gentile, was attending a Congregational church in Connecticut. A key theme of the New Testament concerns the proclaiming of the gospel to Gentiles. This is a central theme of the book of Acts as well as Paul’s epistles. Moreover, although Jesus explicitly restricted his ministry to Gentiles, there are numerous occasions when he healed Gentiles and spoke highly of them. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes so far as to tell his followers to “love their enemies,” and to “bless those who curse you.” Far from “no hint,” the mission to the Gentiles is a key theme in the Old Testament, and at the heart of New Testament teaching. And, of course, the context of the very passage that Gillette had referred to earlier – the “insanity of the talking snake” – is the story of the creation of *Adam* (ha’adam in Hebrew, which means “human being”) as the progenitor of the entire human race. In Genesis 1, we are told that God created humanity as “male and female” *in his image*, and the entire human race are descended from this original humanity. This is not “tribal” by any stretch of the imagination.

9) “When you see a God that is jealous and insecure. . .”

This is, again, a prime indication that Gillette simply misses the point of context and seems entirely ignorant of the historical setting of the Old Testament. The Old Testament does describe God as “jealous”; it also says a lot of other things about God. At the foundation of Israel’s faith is God’s covenant with Israel, after having delivered Israel from

slavery. The prologue to the Ten Commandments begins, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This prologue provides the context for everything that follows in the Ten Commandments. One of the key terms that is used of God throughout the Old Testament is *hesed*, translated "loving kindness" and "mercy." It is because God has shown love and mercy to Israel by delivering the people from slavery, and by entering into a "covenant" with the people that a special relationship has been formed. Countless studies have shown the significance of the ancient Middle Eastern understanding of "covenant" for understanding the relationship between God and Israel. In this Middle Eastern covenant concept, God is portrayed as similar to a "liege-lord" who has shown great favor to a lesser partner. In entering a covenant, both parties have obligations. If one party violates the terms of the covenant, there are, of course, consequences.

Moreover, Israel's religion was unique not only in the Middle East, but also in the world, in being monotheistic. If there is only one God, then worship of any other god is not only a violation of the covenant, but also a case of self-delusion. One of the central themes of the Old Testament has to do with the foolishness and delusional character of idolatry. The New Atheists seem to think they show originality in their contempt for what they consider the false god of Christianity. They are fairly late on the scene. Nothing the New Atheists write can compare to the sarcasm of Elijah's words to the prophets of Baal, or Deutero-Isaiah's dismissal of idolatry. But this dismissal of idolatry occurs in the immediate context of Isaiah's proclamation of the oneness of God and uniqueness of God: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god." (Is 44:6)

It is the combination of this covenant partnership (based on God's favor and mercy toward Israel), combined with radical monotheism, that provides the occasion of God's "jealousy."

God is not “jealous” because he is insecure, but because he, and he alone is God, and he, and he alone, can provide for Israel’s security. Idolatry is foolishness. (Ex. 34:6,14); it is believing a lie.

In the New Testament, it is the notion of “grace” (*charis*) or “love” (*agape*) that becomes the equivalent of the Old Testament notion of *hesed* (mercy or loving-kindness”), which is now located in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8). And it is because God is good to all without measure, that Jesus commands his followers to love even their enemies (Matt. 7:43-48).

If Jillette really had read the Bible “cover to cover,” he would have known this. Or at least, he should have.

10) “When you see that there’s contradictions that show that it was clearly written hundreds of years after the supposed fact, and full of contradictions . . .”

Jillette presumes to be a biblical scholar here, but he does not say what the contradictions are, or which parts of the Bible were written “hundreds of years after the supposed fact.” Is he talking about the New Testament? No biblical scholar believes that the gospels were written “hundreds of years after the supposed fact.” Paul’s letters were written within a few decades of the facts; the scholarly consensus is that the gospels were written some time between 65 and 95 AD, well within the life-time of eyewitnesses. Much of the Old Testament also gives indication of being written by eyewitnesses – the court story of David; the writings of the major and minor prophets – even though they may contain later material as well.

Jillette seems to be thinking of the Torah here – about which there is disagreement among biblical scholars. Very conservative biblical scholars would argue for the Mosaic

authorship of the entire Pentateuch; very liberal scholars would say that none of it goes back to Moses. A great many scholars would land somewhere in between. The Torah is a composite work, with some parts coming from a much later period, e.g., the book of Deuteronomy, and many of the laws. At the same time, there is no reason to doubt that the book has a substantial historical core, and contains substantial ancient material, much of which may go back to Moses himself. At the same time, unless one assumes a "fundamentalist" notion of biblical authorship, that the Torah was written over a period of time does not detract from either the historical reliability or the theological significance of the text. It is the final canonical form that is Scripture, whenever it was finally written.

11) "It's like reading the Constitution. It's in English. You don't need someone to hold your hand. . . . Read what the Bible says. Going back to the source material is always the best. Someone's trying to interpret something for you, they always have an agenda."

Well, no. The Bible is not in English. The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. What we have in English are translations. I do agree, however, that reading the text itself is the best approach, even in English translation. But it seems that Jillette could have profited from having someone "hold his hand," since his understanding of the Bible seems so deficient that he clearly did not read it carefully. Much has been written on the Bible. Universities and seminaries are full of professors who have PhD's in Old and New Testament. If Jillette had read any competent commentaries or introductions to the Old or New Testament in addition to reading the Bible, he would not have made such egregious errors.

12) "I read the Bible, and then I read Bertrand Russell, and I read a lot of other stuff. . . . I read a lot of 'em" [theology in the local library]. I was asked to leave the

youth group because I was converting everyone to atheism.”

I also read Bertrand Russell, and Plato and Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hume, Sartre, Camus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Victor Hugo, Dostoevsky, C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, George MacDonald, Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Walther Eichrodt, Oscar Cullmann, Joachim Jeremias.

I was not asked to leave because I was converting everyone to atheism. I became the president of the youth group.

13) “With the help of Martin Mull, Randy Newman, Frank Zappa – the idea that these three men were out of the closet atheists, was so inspiring to me. . . . Having those people say the simple words, ‘There is no God’ meant the world to me, and gave me joy and gave me passion, and gave me love and gave me confidence.”

Martin Mull? Randy Newman? Frank Zappa? Really? I remember the first time I read Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Barth, Pannenberg. Was it like that?

14) “I’m on the side that’s winning. . . . If you counted atheism as a religion, it’s the fastest growing religion in America.”

This is a classic example of *Argumentum ad populum*, or the “bandwagon” fallacy. (If you’re a *really smart* “New Atheist,” you can look it up on Wikipedia.)

Finally, and most important – in typical “New Atheist” fashion, Jillette claims to be criticizing “religion” in general. However, the single religion Jillette is really criticizing (as are all the “New Atheists”) is historical orthodox Christianity. He begins by talking about his own upbringing as a Protestant Christian, and how he lost his Christian faith. Although he begins by talking about “the Bible, the Koran, and the Torah,” he then states that “reading

the Bible will turn you atheist faster than anything.” (Oddly, he does not seem to recognize that “the Torah” is actually part of “the Bible.” The Koran is not.) The rest of his talk is a criticism of “the Bible,” by which presumably he means the Christian Bible, which he claims to have read “from cover to cover” when he was in High School. Despite this claim, Jillette’s criticisms are all addressed to the book of Genesis, with a single reference to the Ten Commandments. At this point, Jillette’s “cover to cover” claim begins to sound very suspicious. Most puzzling in Jillette’s argument is his complete omission of any reference to the New Testament whatsoever. He neither acknowledges nor even addresses the fundamental claim of New Testament and Christian religion, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God incarnate, who died on a Roman cross and rose from the dead three days later. If a “talking snake” is “insanity,” what are we to make of a crucified God who rises from the dead? Jillette’s criticism of the Bible is something like the film critic who claims the latest movie is “terrible,” but it turns out that he walked out of the theater during the opening titles.

Is it fair to pick on Penn Jillette, a celebrity magician not known for his expertise in biblical studies, theology or philosophy? If a YouTube channel calls itself “Big Think,” and advertises itself as “the leading source of expert-driven, actionable, educational content,” and that YouTube channel presents Penn Jillette as an example of “the big ideas and core skills that define knowledge in the 21st century,” then “yes.” I’ll take “New Atheism” seriously when it takes itself seriously enough to present serious arguments.