

# A Review of a Book I Did Not Write



Around a month ago, Matthew Colvin, a minister of the Reformed Episcopal Church, provided a review of my recently published book *Icons of Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Theology for Women's Ordination*. This is now the second time there has been a critique of my position from within the ACNA. About a year ago, there was a criticism of a short essay that Trinity Professor Grant LeMarquand and I had written entitled "Women in Holy Orders." I had begun an initial series of responses to the Anglican Diocese of the Living Word, but work on another writing project (not about women's ordination) has kept me away from my blog. I note at the beginning of this essay that Colvin's review follows many of the same patterns as the original Diocese of the Living Word critique so there will be some repetition in my response.

## **1) Colvin makes no real attempt at understanding what my position actually is:**

My book is largely a response to arguments against women's ordination, but (as with all books) there is a positive thesis as well. My fundamental thesis would be something like the following:

There is a reciprocal relationship between Trinitarian personalism and the creation of humanity as male and female in Genesis 1 and 2. The creation of humanity as male and female

mirrors the equality and relationality of the Triune persons. This means not only that men and women are equal (no more hierarchical subordination between men and women than between Father and Son in the immanent Trinity), but that men and women are fundamentally oriented toward one another and need one another. There are no men without women; there are no women without men. This model of the relationality between men and women provides the fundamental pattern for the relationships between all human beings. As it is not good for the man to "be alone" (Gen. 2:18), so it is not good for human beings in general to be alone.

This has at least two implications.

Our identity as men and women and the relationality toward one another that implies is fundamentally constitutive of what it means to be human. Even apart from the relationship to our spouse in marriage (if we are married) all of us are either sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, nieces or nephews, aunts or uncles, etc. There is then no getting around our fundamental sexuality. Even outside of marriage, the fundamental distinction between man and woman (and our mutual orientation toward one another as male or female) is fundamental to who we are. None of us can be alone. All of us are in relationship to other people. And, most important, neither men nor women can say to one another, "I have no need of you." Even outside the context of marriage, men and women relate to one another as the primary paradigm of what it means to be human – to be in relationship to another who is both other than the self, but also equal to the self.

The church is not then fundamentally a group of individuals who each do their own thing. Neither however is it a hierarchy where those in leadership positions "rule over" those at the bottom. Rather, the church is a community of both equality and mutuality in which none of the members can say to one another "I have no need of you," but it is also a community in which those in leadership positions lead primarily by being servants

to those whom they lead

This means that Colvin's criticisms that my position is "individualist" or "unable to oppose homosexuality," or would lead to transgenderism, is not only fundamentally mistaken but is a radical misreading. A more plausible criticism would be that my position tends toward "communitarianism," a critique leveled against people like Alasdair McIntyre and Michael Sandel. If that is the criticism, I plead "guilty as charged."

Turning from Genesis to the New Testament, the fundamental hermeneutical lens is provided by the principles of Christocentricity and cruciformity as articulated in the narrative structures of the gospels, and, in the apostle Paul, the paradigm passage of Philippians 2:1-11 (what Michael Gorman points to the "master story" for Paul's notion of cruciform discipleship). The pattern of cruciform discipleship is spelled out for marriage and family in Ephesians 5:1-6:9, and in ministry in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12. Both of these passages make clear what it means for Christians to imitate Christ or to resemble Christ. Does it mean that we resemble Christ through our physical gender? No. We resemble Christ through cruciform discipleship. Paul prefaces his discussion of family relationships in Philippians 5:1-2: "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." This verse is crucial for everything that follows in the passage. All Christians resemble Jesus Christ (not just males), and they do so by "walking in love . . . as Christ loved us."

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul is absolutely clear how it is that those in ministry resemble Christ: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. . . . We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also

be revealed in our mortal body.” Again, the pattern here is cruciformity (“given over to death for Jesus’ sake”), not gender.

Originally I intended to title the book “Treasure in Earthen Vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7) to make that point about how it is that Christians resemble Christ, but the publisher and I agreed on “Icons of Christ” instead. The last sentence in the cover description explains the title: “[A]ll Christians are baptized into the image of the crucified and risen Christ, and bear witness to Christ through lives of cruciform discipleship, so men and women both are called to serve as icons of Christ in the service of the gospel.”

One would not know from reading Colvin’s review that this was my actual position. He does not refute my position so much as completely ignore it. Further proof that Colvin either ignored or did not care about my actual position is that he simply does not mention the authors who are my crucial interlocutors throughout the book: Karl and Markus Barth, Michael Gorman, Carrie Miles, Kenneth Bailey, David deSilva. These people are crucial for my argument and I interact with and cite them frequently. To not even mention them indicates at the least a very selective reading of my book. Colvin mentions Thomas F. Torrance (another key interlocutor) only once in his review, but with no actual discussion of Torrance’s theological views.

Colvin does recognize the significance of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, but rather oddly dismisses her as “a Jewish feminist who is one of the leading lights of feminist criticism of the Bible.” This description is genuinely strange. Frymer-Kensky is a “feminist” in the sense that the entire purpose of her book *In the Wake of the Goddesses* is to criticize not the Bible but mistaken feminist advocates of “goddess worship” who criticize monotheism, and thus dismiss the Bible as sexist. Frymer-Kensky engages in “feminist criticism of the Bible” in the sense that she argues that biblical monotheism is a good thing, is good for women, and was actually liberating for

women during the time that the Old Testament was written.

## **2) Colvin actually misrepresents my position:**

He wrongly equates my position with mainstream feminist secularism.

Much of Colvin's "review" of my book is really a critique of modern secular feminism instead. In a telling sentence, he writes, "Feminist scholarship as a form of 'grievance studies' determined to reread, problematize, and remake the texts that are the sources of authority in church and society. Witt draws on the fruit of this industry, frequently citing Tikva Frymer-Kensky, a Jewish feminist who is one of the leading lights of feminist criticism of the Bible." In this sentence, Colvin not only gets my position wrong, but also (as mentioned above) Frymer-Kensky's.

Much of what Colvin criticizes about mainstream feminism I could have written myself. On pages 248-251, I make a distinction between the "liberal feminist theology," of women like Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruther, Sallie McFague, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson, and Letty Russel on the one hand, and the "biblical feminism" or Christian "egalitarianism" of people like Kathryn Greene-McCreight, Edward Kilmartin, Kallistos Ware, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Ben Witherington, Alan Padgett, and N.T. Wright. I note a fundamental distinction between the "hermeneutics of suspicion" of "mainstream feminist theologians" and a "hermeneutics of trust" among egalitarians for whom "the Bible is understood to be primarily an 'inspired witness' to the grace of God in Jesus Christ." I write that egalitarians take their clues "from a view of the church as the people of God," and that "the main problem to be addressed is not that of sexist oppression, but of human sinfulness and the need for salvation. Where mainstream feminists focus on gaining equal rights for women in the church, biblical feminists ask for an equal opportunity to serve the church." Such a reading of

Scripture is not a form of “grievance studies,” but its very opposite. On page 248, I write that “it is unfortunate that writers such as [Manfred] Hauke identify advocacy of women’s ordination exclusively with the position of theologically liberal feminist writers such as Rosemary Radford Ruether,” etc. Colvin makes the same mistake.

### **3) Colvin accuses me of uncritically embracing modernity.**

A central theme of Colvin’s review consists of a critique of modernity. He writes: “In the view of traditionalists, modernity has not been beneficial to the sexes. It has not merely pressed the sexes into new extrinsic relations and activities. Rather, it has altered what human persons are. The sexes have been deracinated, stripped of relationship and symbolism.” He lists the following characteristics of modernity:

(a) The “labor-saving devices of modernity,” along with contraception, have “freed human beings from the constraints of biology.”

(b) Modernity leads to “the fragility and attenuation of the family and of the home as the locus of work and vocation for both men and women, and to the replacement of a natural mode of being men and women with a profoundly unnatural and artificial one.”

(c) Modernity leads to a “competition for values and positions that are genderless.”

(d) Modernity leads to “expressive individualism.”

In contrast to this entirely negative evaluation of modernity, Colvin paints an almost idyllic picture of traditional pre-industrial societies: “In contrast to all these trends, the Bible treats the sexes in their integrity, inextricably enmeshed in, and shaped by, the relations of the natural family and the typology of the irreducibly sexed cosmos.”

He concludes: "I believe the church should stand against large parts of this modern anthropology; we should protest against the violence to human nature that modernity has wrought in the name of the expressive individual self. We need to examine the enabling conditions of modernity that have made women's ordination plausible. Modernity has changed human beings, and has promoted a new ontology of the sexes. Witt takes these changes and this ontology as givens."

Much of my book actually agrees with Colvin's assessment of modernity. One of the areas where we fundamentally agree is that the primary differences between modernity and pre-modernity are located in socio-economic changes. For example, Colvin acknowledges that outside of industrial societies, unisex work is the exception: "But in modernity, the opposite is the case: not only are we told that men and women can both do most things, but they are also more alike in the things that they can avoid doing: neither men nor women need to bear and nurse children, thanks to the marvels of contraception – or at least, that is the lie our society has long been telling." In the information age, "men's greater bodily strength is mostly of no advantage in the modern workplace, being replaced with engines and hydraulics, so that women can do nearly all the same jobs that men do. The way is then cleared for women and men to become mostly fungible." Colvin also states that the "primarily domestic calling of women, so despised and rejected by modern feminism, is assumed as fundamental throughout the Scriptures."

Of course, all of this is true, as I discuss in my book (p. 69-70). I also acknowledge that these changes have been accompanied by "some negative consequences." Marriage is no longer a necessity, and the modern world experiences more divorce. Sexual liberation leads to disconnection between marriage and children; the rise of contraception leads to "freedom of sexual expression" (70).

I have no basic disagreement with Colvin here. But I also

point out (following Frymer-Kensky and Miles) that it is not the so-called "collapse of family values" that has led to these changes, but the "disappearance of the economic factors that lay behind the social structures of the traditional preindustrial family." I also write: "It is unlikely that even those who are most nostalgic for a time when men exercised authority over women, and women willingly accepted such subordination, would wish to return to the kind of preindustrial society that produced a necessary subordination of women to men" (70). Colvin himself presumably wrote his criticism of my book using word processing software and distributed it on a website; he did not write it on a quill with parchment, have multiple copies made by hand, and then distributed physically one by one. Presumably Colvin is not living in something like an Amish community without the benefits of electricity or "engines and hydraulics."

Here is where I find the books of Carrie Miles (central for my argument but not so much as mentioned by Colvin), Tikva Frymer-Kensky (whom he mentions but rather dismisses than engages), and other authors such as David DeSilva, Kenneth Bailey (whom Colvin does not mention at all) to provide a helpful alternative to modernity's disconnected individualism.

Frymer-Kensky and Miles point out that the gendered structure of the relationships between the sexes in the Bible is not something "revealed" or particularly biblical; they rather reflect the pre-industrial socioeconomic setting of the ancient Mediterranean world. Of course, Colvin is correct that the "domestic calling of women" is presupposed in all pre-industrial agricultural societies – because the biological necessity of women being near children in order to nurse and care for them means that women's work is necessarily confined to the home. Moreover, the gender and socio-economic structures of pre-industrial cultures are not unproblematic for either men or women. Such cultures are not "patriarchal" in the sense that men rule women, but rather that some

powerful men rule over every one else; such cultures have very few “patriarchs,” but a great many slaves and servants. Children are not valued simply in themselves, but as economic assets. People have more children not because they do not have access to contraception but because children are less expensive and more reliable than slaves. In a world without modern medicine, high infant mortality as well as death in childbirth are endemic, putting women in the double-bind of needing to have more children, but also in danger of dying in child-birth – which happened frequently. At the same time, as children grow older, unmarried oldest sons compete to control family property while youngest sons are often dispossessed (as illustrated in the “birthright” swindling of Jacob from Esau). Unmarried adult daughters are not so much an asset as a burden; they do not have the physical strength to do masculine work, but neither do they provide children themselves until they get married. Being an “old maid” or a “barren” wife are two of the worst disgraces a woman can endure in traditional cultures. Becoming pregnant outside of wedlock leads to complete ostracization for women. Widows, divorced women, and orphans are always in danger of falling through the cracks. There is also great illiteracy in pre-industrial cultures and many men (and certainly the majority of women) cannot read (Bailey). Pre-industrial cultures are also “honor/shame” cultures in which one’s identity is submerged into the identity of one’s family and ethnic identities, and disgracing the family leads inevitably to disgrace for oneself (deSilva).

BTW, it is quite odd that Colvin seems to think that modern biblical scholars are ignorant of or do not understand classical culture: Frymer-Kensky was a specialist in Assyriology and Sumerology. Kenneth Bailey wrote extensively on the New Testament in its Mediterranean setting, and spent most of his career living in and ministering in the Middle East. DeSilva’s book is a detailed study of how the NT challenges the “honor/shame” culture of its environment. Witherington has written an entire commentary series on the

“Socio-Rhetorical” context of the New Testament.

Where I and the authors mentioned above disagree with Colvin is not in his negative assessment of modernity, but in his *entirely negative* assessment of modernity combined with an *entirely positive* assessment of pre-modernity. Colvin is simply mistaken when he presumes that I or authors like Frymer-Kensky or Miles simply embrace the consequences of modernity. And it is simply not true, as he writes that “For Witt, sexual differences are not part of the basic nature or identity of human beings.”

Rather, Frymer-Kensky and Miles both point to an alternative to either the asexual individualism of modernity or the hierarchical “patriarchy” of pre-industrial societies. I write: “Both Frymer-Kensky and Miles suggest a third alternative that looks back to Genesis: the biblical concept of an equality and companionship of men and women who genuinely need and are partners of one another.” I conclude by quoting Miles: “Ultimately, this positive message of what God intended us to be to each other when he made us both male and female is the only effective weapon we have in this battle to save marriage and the family.” Far from being asexual and individualist, this is a theology in which sexual identity as male or female is fundamentally oriented toward relationality and community. Far from neither men nor women needing to bear or nurse children, I write that “The task (or rather ‘blessing’) of bringing forth children and of stewardship over the earth that is given to humanity is a common task for both men and women as created in the image of God. . . . Men as well as women are expected to nurture children; women as well as men are expected to exercise stewardship over creation. Neither male nor female exercises power or authority over the other; both are given power, authority, and responsibility” (55).

I again make clear that I do not at all endorse, but rather reject, the autonomy of modern individualism in an excursus

about the different meanings of "freedom" in which I distinguish between "natural freedom," "moral freedom," "autonomous freedom," and "freedom as vocation." I write: "The third notion of freedom is the autonomous freedom of modern secularism that has no relation to the good, and to which Long and others rightly object." I conclude, however, by referring to "the notion of Christian freedom rooted in the Christian doctrine of vocation." I state that it is this notion of "Christian vocation," which has implications for women's ordination: "It is not, however, a demand for 'equal rights' in the church, but rather a request to serve in the church, to fulfill a Christian vocation" (18).

By identifying my position with secular feminism, Colvin accuses me of saying close to the opposite of what I actually say.

#### **4) Darned if you do, Darned if you don't.**

Colvin blames me for not appreciating that the pre-industrial world was a wonderful harmony of the relationship between the sexes, but also shows his irritation because I point out that it wasn't. One of the more unintentionally ironic parts of Colvin's review is his discussion of my account of the traditional argument against women's ordination. He writes: "To demonstrate what he thinks the traditional argument actually was, he parades a series of embarrassingly misogynistic quotations . . ." (BTW, Colvin seriously misattributes one of these quotations to "Spurgeon" rather than Samuel Johnson. A nineteenth-century Baptist preacher and a seventeenth-century "man of letters" have little in common aside from both being English and both being men.) Colvin states: "Witt's lack of sympathy and imagination is severe on this point. Does he really believe that our forebears in the Christian faith were so blind as to suppress a primitive and apostolic institution of egalitarian ministry? That they hated women, and advocated structures of society that were to the detriment of women? Is this a charitable reading of

Christianity past? Ultimately, this caricature of the Christian past represents a failure to understand the sexes in premodern ages.”

But there is no “caricature” here. Nor were my quotations my attempt to demonstrate what I “think” the traditional argument actually was. I certainly don’t believe that our “forebears in the Christian faith” simply “hated women.” I wrote at the beginning of this chapter: “In making this point, there is no intention to embrace the kind of diatribe that one occasionally encounters in revisionist feminist scholarship that portrays the entire history of the church as nothing but an unmitigated practice of oppressive subjugation and patriarchal abuse of women. Such one-sided readings can find their counterparts in accounts of how Christianity remarkably improved the status of women” (21). In my discussion, I also point to the positive where it exists: “Aquinas could speak in almost glowing terms of the relations between men and women” (23-24) I note that “Luther may be an exception to the patristic and Medieval notion that women are inherently less rational and capable of leadership than men” (26). At the same time I not only “think” that the traditional argument against the ordination of women was that women are irrational, overly emotional, and subject to temptation, but document it through exhaustive citations from primary sources in the history of the church. Even someone like Aquinas, despite positive statements made elsewhere about women, says that women must be in subjection to men because in men, “the discretion of reason dominates.” There is, of course, nothing in these writers’ objections to women’s ordination about “the sexes in their integrity, inextricably enmeshed in, and shaped by, the relations of the natural family and the typology of the irreducibly sexed cosmos.” But that’s not my fault. I’m just the messenger. The church’s historic reason for not ordaining women had nothing to do with “the sexes in their integrity,” but rather with the assumption of a fundamental inequality rooted in women’s intellectual inferiority, emotional

instability, and susceptibility to (especially sexual) temptation. It would be nice if church history coincided with our assumptions and wishes about what must have been the case, but it doesn't.

## 5) Selective misrepresentation

Colvin regularly cites isolated passages from my book, writes as if this single statement were my entire position, and then quibbles about some detail in the isolated passage. On at least two of these occasions, Colvin actually *misrepresents* my position through his selective citation.

### *Missing the point about a syllogism*

Colvin quotes a syllogism I had used at the beginning of the book:

*The argument in favor of ordaining women is the same argument as the argument for ordaining men.*

*Premise: Some human beings should be ordained.*

*Minor premise: Women are human beings.*

*Conclusion: Therefore some women should be ordained. (15-16)*

Colvin then complains:

*[T]he syllogism he presents is a formal fallacy. The middle term, 'human beings,' is distributed in neither the first nor the second premise: that is, neither premise says anything about all human beings, so there is no guarantee that they refer to the same subset of human beings. With an undistributed middle term, the entire syllogism is invalid.*

*Apparently unaware of the fallacy he has committed, Witt throws down the gauntlet to opponents of W0: if they are to show that women cannot be ordained, then they must change the first premise to specify some activity of ordained persons*

*that women cannot do (15-16).*

I was a philosophy major as an undergraduate so of course I knew that the syllogism as stated is not a formally valid syllogism. I make this clear in the *very next* sentence.

*To the contrary, argue the opponents of women's ordination, that is the wrong major premise. The argument rather should be:*

*Counter premise: Some male human beings should be ordained.*

*Minor premise: Women are not males.*

*Conclusion: Therefore no woman should be ordained.*

I could have written that opponents of women's ordination would counter that "the middle term is not distributed"; what I did instead was to *show* this by including a counter major premise which states "Some *male* human beings should be ordained." Note that the counter premise is in fact *narrower* than "all human beings," and so it should be obvious to anyone who actually read what I had written that I clearly knew the problem with the original syllogism as stated.

By pretending to give me a lesson in logic (which I didn't really need), Colvin is able to ignore the entire point of the discussion that immediately follows – that opposition to women's ordination cannot simply be based on "non-theological arguments" such as that "women's ordination will lead to liberal theology," but must be actual *theological* arguments. That was the whole point of distinguishing between "some human beings" and "male human beings," followed by a several page discussion about the reasons why "some" human beings cannot be ordained. Obviously if I agree that certain categories of human beings cannot be ordained, I do not believe that simply being a human being is sufficient grounds for ordination. But the point I make is that there have to be *theological* reasons for such discrimination. As I conclude the chapter: "Any

argument against women's ordination needs to be a properly theological argument, and it needs to make the case that there is something in the very nature of women as a class that makes it inappropriate or inherently impossible to exercise ordained ministry" (17).

A no doubt unintentional irony of Colvin's tripping over the syllogism in this chapter is that Colvin's entire argument in this section of his review consists in a doubling-down on such non-theological arguments as "women's ordination leads to liberal theology." One would never know however from reading his review that the argument against such non-theological arguments was actually the whole point of the chapter. Rather, one would presume (incorrectly) that my entire case for women's ordination is based on nothing more than an invalid syllogism.

#### *Actual misrepresentation of my position*

Referring to my discussion of 1 Cor. 14:34-35, Colvin writes that I repeat the arguments of Gordon Fee and Philip Payne that the passage is an interpolation. Colvin then summarizes some recent criticisms of Payne's argument and concludes: "Payne's proposed notation thus threatens not only the text of Scripture, but the integrity of Biblical textual criticism. Witt, on the other hand, mentions none of the criticisms that have been made of Payne's theory, but represents it as 'likely the strongest textual argument that the passage is an interpolation.'"

The reader would presume from the above that my argument concerning 1 Cor. 14:34-35 is to endorse Payne's position that the passage is an interpolation. Colvin actually claims that it is when he later characterizes my position as holding that verses that stand against it can be "excised from our Bibles as interpolations." An actual reading of my book clearly shows that I am neither endorsing nor not endorsing, but rather summarizing Payne's position as a matter of completion. I

devote a total of two pages to the argument that the passage is an interpolation, but then write (again in the very next paragraph), "The 'interpolation' argument is not accepted universally, however." I gave Payne's argument a *single paragraph*, but then devoted the next *page and a half* to summarizing the arguments of those who claim the passage is *not* an interpolation. I then gave *six pages* to discussing the positions of those who claim the passage is authentic.

So in my actual text, I devote a single paragraph to discussing Payne's argument that the passage is an interpolation, and eight pages to discussing positions of those who hold the contrary view. Colvin complains that my single paragraph mentioned "none of the criticisms" of Payne's theory, yet he did not think it necessary even to mention the following eight pages.

I apologize for the length and no doubt tedium of my above interaction with Colvin's review. I felt it necessary to do so however because Colvin's review of my book is not actually a review of the book I wrote. Colvin has every right to complain about the dangers of modern secular individualism and modern secular feminism. I express similar complaints in my book.

It is rather a case of false witness however to accuse me of endorsing positions I reject, of selectively citing passages to the point of distortion, and then to accuse me of affirming the distortions. It is even more inexcusable to claim to be reviewing my book but not to accurately represent or address my actual position.

It would certainly be appropriate for a reviewer of my book to provide an actual assessment and critique of a Christian communal egalitarianism rooted in Trinitarian personalism and influenced by theologians such as Karl Barth and Thomas Aquinas. By all means provide a criticism of a theology that claims that to be created in the image of God means to be created as either male or female and inherently oriented

toward relationality and community. It might be possible to provide a criticism of a notion of Christian discipleship and community as an imitation of Christ rooted in cruciformity. Do the work of providing accurate accounts of and reasons for disagreeing with the scholarship of authors such as Frymer-Kensky, Miles, Bailey, deSilva, and others who are my main interlocutors.

But unless you do so you are reviewing a different book than the one I wrote.

Note: Colvin also criticizes my exegesis, defending a variation of complementarianism, and offers his own arguments against women's ordination that are a variation on the "argument from symbolism" that I addressed toward the end of my book. If I find time, I will address this later, but for now, I thought it more important to address this more significant issue of misrepresentation.