

# Feminism, Ecclesial Authority, and the Spiritual Integrity of the Church: A Prophetic Reflection on the Church of England's Theological Drift

*by Brendon Naicker*

## Abstract

The appointment of Sarah Mullally as Archbishop of Canterbury in 2025 represents a symbolic moment in the Church of England's long engagement with modernity. Lauded as progress, this event epitomises a deeper spiritual shift: the Church's gradual movement from biblical authority toward cultural accommodation. This paper traces that theological progression—from early Anglican compromise through Enlightenment rationalism, liberal theology, and the rise of feminist ideology—showing how each stage has reshaped the Church's doctrine of ministry and authority. While acknowledging the personal integrity and pastoral gifts of Archbishop Mullally, this study contends that the Church's reinterpretation of ecclesial order reflects a broader spiritual crisis. Drawing upon Scripture, the Anglican formularies, and Reformed–complementarian theology, it argues that the Church's embrace of modern egalitarian ideals risks obscuring the biblical pattern of divine order, thus calling for a prophetic re-orientation toward Scripture, creation, and Christ's headship.

## 1. Introduction

On 3 October 2025 the Church of England announced that Dame Sarah Mullally, then Bishop of London, would become the next Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>1</sup> The decision was received with public celebration: the press hailed it as a triumph of equality, and many within the Church viewed it as a long-awaited realisation of inclusive ecclesiology.<sup>2</sup> To others, however, the moment carried a more sombre symbolism—a culmination of the Church's accommodation to cultural modernity.

This paper does not seek to critique Archbishop Mullally as a person or a minister of the Gospel. Her appointment is instead read as a theological sign, revealing how far the Church

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<sup>1</sup> "Sarah Mullally Named Archbishop of Canterbury," *The New York Times*, 3 October 2025.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

of England's identity has drifted from its scriptural foundations. The argument proceeds historically: tracing the Church's gradual theological concessions to culture and showing how each "progressive" stage—from rationalism to liberal theology to feminist reinterpretation—has subtly reshaped its understanding of authority, order, and vocation.

The essay concludes by proposing that the Church's future health depends not upon aligning itself with modern egalitarian narratives but upon recovering a biblical anthropology and an apostolic sense of order.

## 2. From Reformation Foundations to Early Compromise

The English Reformation grounded its theology of ministry upon Scripture and apostolic order. The Thirty-Nine Articles (1571) affirmed that the Church "hath power to decree rites or ceremonies" only insofar as they do not contradict the Word of God (Article XX).<sup>3</sup> Authority was understood as derivative—Christ's rule mediated through Scripture and Spirit.

Yet even in its earliest centuries, Anglicanism exhibited a tension between revelation and reason. The Elizabethan Settlement preserved episcopal hierarchy partly for political unity, not solely theological conviction. As J. I. Packer observed, the genius of Anglicanism lay in moderation, but its weakness lay in ambiguity.<sup>4</sup> This moderation created the space for later theological pluralism.

By the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment had redefined reason as autonomous. Theologians such as Samuel Clarke and Joseph Butler sought to defend Christianity through rational evidence rather than revelation.<sup>5</sup> While well-intentioned, this apologetic shift subtly displaced the authority of Scripture with the authority of human intellect. The Church's teaching office became increasingly empirical, preparing the ground for later capitulations to cultural norms.

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<sup>3</sup> The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, Article XX.

<sup>4</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 42–44.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion* (London: James, John, and Paul Knapton, 1736).

### 3. Liberal Theology and the Decline of Biblical Authority

The nineteenth century witnessed a new phase of theological modernity. Biblical criticism, evolutionary science, and moral liberalism pressed the Church toward reinterpretation. The Broad Church movement, influenced by F. D. Maurice and Benjamin Jowett, championed moral progress and human perfectibility.<sup>6</sup> The Oxford Movement, though aiming to recover catholic order, also fostered an ecclesial self-consciousness that could become detached from biblical moorings.

By the early twentieth century, liberal Protestantism had recast theology as ethical humanism. Alister McGrath notes that this period marks “the decisive shift from revelation to experience” in Anglican thought.<sup>7</sup> Authority came to reside in the moral sensibility of the age rather than in divine command. The Church of England’s increasing identification with the moral conscience of Britain made it vulnerable to every subsequent cultural revolution.

This intellectual climate set the stage for the later rise of feminist theology. When authority is defined by inclusion rather than revelation, ecclesial order becomes infinitely negotiable.

### 4. Feminist Theology and the Eclipse of Biblical Order

#### 4.1. The Ideological Turn

By the mid-twentieth century, feminist theology emerged as part of a wider liberationist project. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argued that the Church’s patriarchal structures distorted the Gospel’s liberative intent.<sup>8</sup> Ruether called for a theology that is “feminist in principle”, reimagining God beyond gendered categories.<sup>9</sup> Fiorenza envisioned a “discipleship of equals”, replacing hierarchical authority with communal participation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> F. D. Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ* (London: Dent, 1842).

<sup>7</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Renewal of Anglicanism* (London: SPCK, 1993), 18–19.

<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 40–42.

While these theologians sought justice and inclusion, their interpretative method inverted the biblical order: culture became the lens through which Scripture was judged. Karl Barth, writing half a century earlier, had already warned that theology must never allow humanity's self-definition to govern revelation.<sup>11</sup> When experience dictates exegesis, the result is an anthropology of self-assertion rather than divine vocation.

## 4.2. The Church of England's Theological Accommodation

The Church of England's 1994 decision to ordain women to the priesthood, and its 2014 move to consecrate female bishops, formalised this ideological shift. The office of priest, historically representing Christ the Bridegroom, was reinterpreted as a function of inclusive service. In practice, the Church substituted ontological symbolism with sociological representation.

Sarah Mullally's 2025 appointment therefore stands as the culminating sign of this trajectory: the point at which ecclesial order is fully redefined by cultural ideology. What began as a cautious accommodation to Enlightenment reason has become a wholesale adoption of secular egalitarianism. As Francis Schaeffer warned, the loss of absolute truth inevitably leads to moral and spiritual fragmentation.<sup>12</sup>

## 5. The Biblical Stance on Authority and Order

Scripture affirms the equal worth of men and women in creation and redemption (Gen. 1:27; Gal. 3:28) while also establishing an ordered pattern of representation within the covenant community. The apostolic writings articulate this not as cultural patriarchy but as theological typology: male headship symbolises Christ's sacrificial leadership, and the Church's submission symbolises redeemed obedience (1 Cor. 11:3–12; Eph. 5:22–33).

As Wayne Grudem and John Piper have demonstrated, the biblical model of leadership is grounded in creation, not cultural hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> It is a stewardship of love, not dominance. This pattern is mirrored in the Church's ministry, where the ordained leader acts *in persona*

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 36.

<sup>12</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1984), 37–38.

<sup>13</sup> John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 72–85.

*Christi*—a sign of the Bridegroom’s self-giving authority. Richard Hooker saw this order as sacramental: the visible form of divine wisdom.<sup>14</sup>

The Church’s reinterpretation of this order as interchangeable function rather than symbolic vocation thus represents not equality but ontological confusion. When the office ceases to image Christ’s headship, it no longer mediates the mystery of the Gospel.

## 6. The Spiritual Consequences of Progress Without Revelation

### 6.1. Doctrinal Fragmentation

The theological liberalism that paved the way for feminist reinterpretation also produced an ecclesial relativism. Once Scripture is treated as a historical witness rather than the Word of God written, doctrine becomes provisional. Oliver O’Donovan observes that detaching moral reasoning from revelation results in a kind of Christian Gnosticism—a denial of the created order as the medium of divine truth.<sup>15</sup>

This is evident in the Church’s experimentation with gender-neutral liturgy, inclusive language for God, and revisionist sexual ethics. Each innovation, justified by appeals to compassion and justice, further loosens the Church’s grasp on biblical ontology. “Progress” becomes a euphemism for theological drift.

### 6.2. Sacramental Confusion

Anglican theology regards ministry as a visible sign of grace. Rowan Williams reminds us that sacramental signs depend on correspondence between symbol and reality.<sup>16</sup> When the Church alters the sign—the embodied representation of Christ’s headship—the sacramental coherence of its worship is weakened.

This is not a rejection of women’s gifts in ministry; it is a recognition that symbolic inversion carries theological cost. As Joseph Ratzinger noted, when liturgy loses its ontological

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book V (London: John Windet, 1597).

<sup>15</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: Apollos, 1986), 92–93.

<sup>16</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (London: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 105–7.

grounding, it becomes anthropocentric—centred on human expression rather than divine encounter.<sup>17</sup>

### 6.3. The Loss of Unity and Authority

The ordination of women to the episcopate fractured Anglican unity. Provinces in the Global South—Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya—have voiced concern that the Church of England’s theological innovations reflect Western cultural priorities rather than biblical fidelity. Mullally’s appointment intensifies this tension, symbolising the triumph of local progressivism over catholic order.

Ecumenically, the Church’s divergence widens the distance between Canterbury and both Rome and Constantinople. John Paul II’s *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* reiterated that the Church “has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women”.<sup>18</sup> By disregarding such consensus, Anglicanism risks isolation. As John Milbank argues, when ecclesial order ceases to mirror divine order, the Church forfeits its participation in the Kingdom’s analogical reality.<sup>19</sup>

## 7. A Prophetic Call to Renewal

The Church’s crisis is not finally about gender but about authority and revelation. The progressive narrative that culminates in 2025 has re-centred theology upon human aspiration rather than divine command. The prophetic task is to recall the Church to the Word that judges all human culture—including its own.

True renewal will require repentance: a willingness to acknowledge that cultural applause cannot substitute for holiness. The Church must rediscover the scandal of particularity—that God’s revelation orders creation according to divine wisdom, not social utility. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison that “the Church is her true self only when she exists for others, but never for the world’s approval”.<sup>20</sup>

This does not entail withdrawal from society but faithful difference within it. The Church must once again see order, hierarchy, and vocation not as relics of patriarchy but as

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 35–37.

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), §4.

<sup>19</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 226–27.

<sup>20</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 382.

sacraments of divine love. To do so is to recover the theological imagination: to perceive in creation's complementarity the reflection of the Creator's beauty.

Only a Church re-anchored in Scripture and sacrament can bear prophetic witness to a culture adrift in self-definition. The appointment of a new archbishop may appear as progress, but progress without revelation leads only to spiritual exhaustion. The call of the hour is not innovation but fidelity—the courage to stand again under the Word of God.

## Conclusion

The Church of England's journey from Reformation clarity to twenty-first-century inclusivity reveals a consistent pattern: the substitution of revelation with reason, of vocation with self-expression. Sarah Mullally's appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury stands as a poignant emblem of this long theological drift. It invites neither condemnation nor celebration but discernment—a recognition that the Church's embrace of cultural progress has come at the expense of doctrinal coherence.

To recover her spiritual integrity, the Church must return to her first love: the authority of Scripture, the sanctity of order, and the Headship of Christ. Only by reclaiming these foundations can the Church once again serve as a prophetic sign to the world rather than a reflection of it.

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