

## FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS AND EVANGELICAL BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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Hermeneutics is at the forefront of discussion today and is recognized as one of the most important and significant subjects about which we can talk together. Hermeneutics is intriguing and fascinating. Think of the fact that conservative evangelical Susan Foh can say that Jesus treated women with the utmost respect and that what Jesus did with and for women ought to change once and for all how we look at women. On the other hand Mary Daly, a "left-wing" post-Christian feminist, says that Jesus did a lot with and for women and that what Jesus did ought to change forever how we look at women. How is it that Foh and Daly can say the same things about Jesus and women but after that be so different?<sup>1</sup> Or consider the new book recently published by John Robbins—a book that attacks the "liberalism" of George McKnight, James Hurley and Susan Foh! Even within the hallowed circles of evangelicalism the hermeneutical issues are at the very foundation of our mutual concerns.<sup>2</sup>

My intent in this paper is to attempt to do two things. (1) I would like to give a relatively brief analysis of contemporary feminist hermeneutics and attempt fairly, I trust, to categorize feminist hermeneutics into seven typologies. (2) I hope to engage in some genuine and serious dialogue between the strengths and challenges of feminist hermeneutics and traditional evangelical Biblical interpretation with respect to our own hermeneutical struggles and disputes with specific references to numerous NT texts and the issues involved in their interpretation.

### I. ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

There have already been significant discussions analyzing feminist hermeneutics carried out by feminist women scholars. I would particularly like to celebrate Carolyn Osiek, Phyllis Trible, Mary Ann Tolbert, Bernadette Broton and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as some of the scholars who have written at length with insight, perception and persuasion and with disturbing questions

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<sup>1</sup>S. T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1980) esp. 90-94; M. Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (2d ed.; New York: Harper, 1975) esp. 79-80.

<sup>2</sup>J. W. Robbins, *Scripture Twisting in the Seminaries, Part I: Feminism* (Jefferson: Trinity Foundation, 1985).

on the whole issue of feminist hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup> If one has not read these persons, I commend them for the expansion of one's hermeneutical horizon.

Within evangelicalism there has been very little written on the question of feminist hermeneutics. Willard Swartley, F. F. Bruce, Alan Padgett<sup>4</sup> and a few others<sup>5</sup> have made forays into the area of feminist hermeneutics. Most evangelical writers in this area are men,<sup>6</sup> and most of them have directed what they have had to say, for the most part, against the evangelical "anti-feminists." The literature here is growing and searching. It is important and deserves our attention.

I would define feminist hermeneutics, like all liberationist hermeneutics, as a hermeneutic from the "underside," the neglected and the oppressed. Thus, in agreement with Tolbert, feminist hermeneutics can be defined as a reading of the Biblical text in the light of the oppressive structures of patriarchal society.

I would like to divide feminist hermeneutics into seven typologies. One should understand that these are not exclusive typologies. In fact, most practitioners of feminist hermeneutics engage in many of these typologies at the same time. For analysis, however, I think it is helpful to understand some of the dynamics and the issues that are raised in these different typologies.

1. *Jewish feminist Biblical hermeneutics.* I will not treat this in any depth, nor will I attempt to nuance the differences among Jewish feminist hermeneutical positions. But I think it is very important for those of us who are Christian scholars to realize that the question of Biblical feminist hermeneutics is discussed outside of the Christian Church within Judaism. Although there are many similarities between Jewish and Christian feminist hermeneu-

<sup>3</sup>C. Osiek, *Beyond Anger: On Being a Feminist in the Church* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1986) esp. 25-43; "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (ed. A. Y. Collins; SBL Biblical Scholarship in North America 10; Chico: Scholars, 1985) 93-105; P. Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Overtures to Biblical Theology 13; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) esp. 1-7; M. A. Tolbert, "Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 28 (1983) 113-126; B. J. Brooten, "Early Christian Women and Their Cultural Context: Issues of Method in Historical Reconstruction," in *Feminist Perspectives* (ed. Collins) 65-91; E. S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) esp. 3-95; *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984); see also L. M. Russell, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>W. M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale/Kitchener: Herald, 1983); F. F. Bruce, "Women in the Church: A Biblical Survey," *Christian Brethren Review* 33 (1982) 7-14; A. Padgett, "Feminism in First Corinthians: A Dialogue with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza," *EvQ* 58 (1986) 121-132.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. e.g. *Women, Authority and the Bible* (ed. A. Mickelsen; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986).

<sup>6</sup>Note, however, the emerging work of R. H. Finger, "The Bible and Christian Feminism," *Daughters of Sarah* 13/3 (May/June 1987) 5-12; "Is the Word of God a Word for Women?," *Update* 11/3 (Fall 1987) 1-4, 15 (the first article in a series on "Models of Biblical Interpretation"); *Understanding Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's Feminist Theology* (thesis; Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987).

tics, the differences are rather significant: the canon, the varying concepts or definitions of what constitutes a structured theology, the alternate exegetical traditions that shape the way texts are read, and the significance of the rabbinic tradition (which in Jewish feminist hermeneutics is as important as the Bible) or the discussion of how to put together the tradition. Jewish feminist Biblical interpretation also raises for Christians the fundamental issue often located in the Christian observation that Jesus had a liberated or redemptive view of women. Jewish feminist thinkers want to ask: "Is Christian feminism simply a new form of anti-Semitism? Is it a way for Christians to triumph on the question of women at the expense of Judaism? Can Christians blame Jews for the evils of patriarchy, androcentrism and misogyny?" These are not comfortable questions but are questions that need some reflection.

2. *The radical hermeneutic that rejects the Bible as hopelessly oppressive of women, patriarchal and misogynist to the core.* One should note that this hermeneutic did not arise from non-Christians. The strongest proponents of this hermeneutical stance are persons who at one time in their lives were deeply traditional, very conservative Christians. The experience of these women led them to a radicalization of their own stance to reject the Bible as hopelessly oppressive.

3. *The hermeneutic of documenting the case against women in the Biblical tradition.* In other words, it is the exposure of patriarchalism, androcentrism and misogyny in the Biblical tradition. This hermeneutic does not find negative things in all places or on all levels in the Bible. But it does seek to identify those places in the Biblical text where a patriarchal structure or an androcentric point of view, or even a misogynist point of view, has in one way or another shaped the story, shaped the text or influenced the assumptions behind the text.

4. *The hermeneutic of the prophetic, liberating tradition.* This is probably, in some ways, the foundational feminist hermeneutic. It identifies the Biblical call for liberation of the oppressed as the norm by which the rest of the Biblical data is evaluated for its authority. The Biblical data says, for example, that women are persons of value. This is illustrated in how Jesus treats women and by Paul's statement in Gal 3:28. This then becomes the Biblical call for the liberation of the oppressed, and it becomes the norm by which other texts are read. Often this particular typology is called developing a canon within a canon, although I think the issue is far more complex than that simple label would suggest.

5. *The hermeneutic of the remnant or of retrieval.* This is the hermeneutic that attempts to discern critiques of patriarchy from within. It seeks to find and expose the countercultural impulses within the text. These are texts that have been overlooked or distorted and that, when recovered or seen correctly, become texts of hope and of affirmation for women. For example, finding a person like Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia, Mary or Persus, or finding a way to read a text like Gal 3:28 or 1 Cor 11:2-16 to show the participation of women in

ministry, are examples of how the hermeneutic of retrieval has sought to read the Bible and find in it those texts that affirm positively the place of women in the Christian Church.

6. *The hermeneutic of recounting tales of terror in memoriam.* This particular hermeneutic has probably been expressed most clearly by Phyllis Trible.<sup>7</sup> The idea of this hermeneutic is to recount tales of terror from the Bible, such as the unnamed woman in Judges 19—20 who is raped and then cut into pieces and her flesh scattered. To tell such a tale of terror is a way of providing a context in which abused women and their abusers can remember, repent and pray that it never happen again. It is not unlike the hermeneutics of many black people in America who have told the stories of slavery and oppression as a way of building a shared memory, as terrorizing as it is, for group solidarity and of building a concept of the terror and the prayer that it never happen again.

7. *The hermeneutic of the reconstruction of Biblical history.* This hermeneutic intends to take the hints that are found in the Bible, through the hermeneutic of retrieval, for example, and in the socio-historical analysis of women's history in the ancient Near East and in the Greco-Roman culture, to reconstruct a view of Christian history in which women are seen to have a place. It is within this seventh perspective, the reconstruction of women's history, that the most prominent of the feminist hermeneutical thinkers has come onto the scene and into prominence: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, especially through her book *In Memory of Her* (the title of which is so beautifully and powerfully based on Mark 14:9, one of Jesus' statements not often observed). In this book and in her subsequent work Fiorenza has developed her hermeneutic of reconstruction in great detail.<sup>8</sup>

Fiorenza makes it very clear that the point of departure is not the Bible as normative authority. Rather, women's experience and their struggle for liberation becomes the locus of authority. The canon is not the Bible but the struggle. The Bible becomes a prototype, or what she calls a formative root model, from which examples and insights are taken that explain one's struggle to find one's place and to find solidarity with those women that are recounted in the Biblical religion. Fiorenza stresses with power and pointedness the fact that all interpretation of the Bible has been skewed and that all interpretation of the Bible has come from an advocacy point of view, whether that advocacy happens to be patriarchal or feminist or, I might add, black, Asian, Reformed, Wesleyan, liberal or evangelical. Fiorenza wants to argue in reconstructing her feminist hermeneutic that everyone has an advocacy position in the interpretation of the Bible. She wants to make clear what hers is and challenges all others to do the same.

<sup>7</sup>See note 3.

<sup>8</sup>See note 3 for *In Memory of Her*, "Emerging Issues in Feminist Biblical Interpretation," in *Christian Feminism: Visions of a New Humanity* (ed. J. L. Weidman; San Francisco: Harper, 1984) 33-54, reprinted as "Women-Church: The Hermeneutical Center of Feminist Biblical Interpretation," in *Bread Not Stone* 1-22.

In presenting her position, Fiorenza develops what she calls a four-stage hermeneutic: (1) the hermeneutic of suspicion, which questions all androcentric and patriarchal texts; (2) the hermeneutic of proclamation, which takes the texts that are supportive of women and proclaims them; (3) the hermeneutic of remembrance, the retrieval or recalling of those things that will be a word of hope to women; (4) the hermeneutic of creative actualization, by which she means to take what one can learn from the Bible as a feminist thinker and then recreate or reenvision what it means to be a woman in the Christian tradition today.

Fiorenza's position is a fairly radical approach to feminist hermeneutics from an evangelical perspective. It challenges many things that are true of the evangelical commitment to Biblical interpretation, not the least of which is the question of Biblical authority itself, but also the entire received and often unquestioned understanding of hermeneutical process and hermeneutical stance.

## II. DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS AND EVANGELICAL BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

I would like now to focus on the strengths and challenges, with recognition of the weaknesses, of feminist hermeneutics in confrontation or dialogue with and in relationship to traditional evangelical Biblical interpretation and its own internal hermeneutical struggles and disputes. I would like also to elaborate the dialogue with reference to some specific NT texts.

Allow me to begin with a few personal or autobiographical remarks. I grew up in a church in which I believed that the only true believers were the people that belonged to my denomination. I knew that all others (or nearly so) were damned. I also learned that women should never teach or preach. When I went to Wheaton College, reputed to be a bastion of evangelical strength, my pastor knew that I had already started to leave the faith. Wheaton College was a wonderful experience for me because it was a place that taught me to reexamine what I believed without destroying my faith. In that context, first on the question of dispensationalism and second on the interrelationship of the synoptic gospels, my professors said things that were different from things that I had ever heard before. Out of that process I became passionate about hermeneutics and knew that my own personal quest would have to be how to read the NT. Sometime after college, in seminary, a little over twenty years ago, I realized that probably no question was more pressing to me as a reader of the Bible committed to its authority than the question of what the Bible said about women. I knew that somehow something was a problem. Thus for the last twenty-two years I have devoted myself to the exegesis and study of the question of women and ministry in the NT. I have taught courses, I have lectured all over about this subject, and I have tried to involve myself with integrity in learning what I can from the lexica and the grammars and all the other things that we celebrate. And it has been a wonderful feast and a very enriching and growing experience for me, and I think—if I may be permitted to say it—even a beneficial experience for others.

I think I have come to realize, however, that some of the traditional exegetical questions, whether it be the meaning of *kephalē* or the precise background of 1 Cor 11:2–16 or whether 14:34–35 is an interpolation, are not the deepest questions that actually confront me as a believer. Rather, it is the hermeneutical questions with which I had begun to struggle even in college that seem to me to be the deeper questions of faith. In particular, I have found feminist hermeneutics to be the most stunning challenge—more stunning than black theology or than liberation theology from Latin America—to the evangelical myth of objective hermeneutics and interpretation. The quest on which most of us have been impelled, grounded very deeply in the fact that we believe that the Bible is in fact the Word of God sufficient for faith and practice, is that it is possible for believers to understand what God wants us to understand. Further, most of us are heirs of the North Atlantic intellectual tradition. We have come to believe the myth of interpretive objectivity. Of course we know that there are disagreements, but the quest is clear and our individual convictions are clear.

Now, however, I feel that I have come to understand for myself, along with many others, that in fact objective interpretation and objective hermeneutic is a myth. I would therefore like to try to identify five observations that for me are rooted in my own struggle with feminist hermeneutics and the impact I think it has upon me and upon others when it comes to struggling with the question of evangelical Biblical interpretation.

1. *The locus-of-authority issue.* The Fiorenza hermeneutic is different than and a rejection of the classic locus-of-authority view included in the evangelical tradition. And yet a very prominent evangelical woman recently said to me, “Fiorenza is correcting something. I can feel it.” I think that is right. What Fiorenza is correcting, probing, distorting or questioning is the fact that we have too often denied that our own experience is tied deeply to how we interpret the text. We have too often assumed that because the locus of authority is stated theologically and historically as belonging to the text in the Bible itself somehow our experience never gets in the way.

Consider the questions of charismatic experience, or footwashing, or baptism, or church polity, or whether we are Reformed or Wesleyan, or how we feel about the questions of evangelism and social justice, ordination or no ordination, Church and state, pacifism or just war. These are questions on which all of us are heirs as evangelicals of differing viewpoints that are believed to be deeply Biblical and exegetically defensible. We have just agreed to live with the differences and not to face the fact that all such interpretation is related very much to the reality that, although the locus of authority may be in the text, it is never experienced anywhere but in actual individuals and communities. Individuals, or communities and traditions made up of individuals, are the only interpreters.

It might be useful to distinguish between authority and normativeness. Authoritative texts, I would posit, can have degrees of normativeness, which can be related to situational differences in which the authority functions, to different parts of a text, or to the way the text can be read in different settings at different times. The text can be authoritative but not necessarily normative

in the same way in all times and places. I think this is an important recognition for us to make. "Greet one another with a holy kiss" is enjoined on us five times in the NT (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Pet 5:14), but we do not take it as a Biblical injunction that actually controls our liturgical life. We say it is an authoritative text that is not normative for us because we believe the ground of application has shifted.

Authoritative texts do require interpretation. That admission alone is a significant one for evangelical Biblical understanding to make. The texts are not automatically clear. In practice, then, I would conclude that, although I continue to believe it is theologically, philosophically and methodologically important and historically valid to affirm that the locus of authority is in the text, such a position is an abstraction that has no significance apart from the reality that the locus of meaning for all of us as actually experienced or practiced is found in individual interpreters, communities of faith, or ecclesiastical and theological traditions.

2. *The recognition of the conditioned character of interpreters and the text to be interpreted.* I once wrote that all interpretation is socially located, individually skewed and ecclesiastically and theologically conditioned,<sup>9</sup> and I would still affirm that, as the previous observation illustrates. Once one realizes this—and all of us really do; it is just difficult to admit it sentence after sentence in our interpretation—the realization also comes that the persons who wrote the Biblical texts, the human authors, were also persons who were socially located, individually skewed and theologically conditioned. One reason why Biblical authors wrote with different levels of vocabulary and different turns of phrase, to mention the simpler things, is due to their different cultural conditioning.

The Christian Bible was actually produced in cultural, historical and social settings, and every document in the Bible is shaped and touched by the setting in which it was produced. That is the reality of divine revelation. It is the constant difficulty of our evangelical tradition that we have usually eliminated docetism from our Christology but we never have quite succeeded in eliminating it from our view of the Bible. There is always the fond hope that somehow the Bible has not been touched by the culture in which it was produced. Cultural factors do not minimize Biblical authority. Their recognition is simply the way that it is. The cultural realities are there both in us and in the texts we interpret.

3. *The power of patriarchy, androcentrism and misogyny and the questions of God's intention in Biblical texts.* Mary Daly, in the second edition of *The Church and the Second Sex*, did a very clever thing. Ten years after the first edition she pretended, as it were, that she had discovered this book written ten years earlier by someone named Mary Daly and wrote a new introduction to the book wondering what this woman ten years prior had said. She then cri-

<sup>9</sup>D. M. Scholer, "Unseasonable Thoughts on the State of Biblical Hermeneutics: Reflections of a New Testament Exegete," *American Baptist Quarterly* 2 (1983) 134–141 (the specific statement is on p. 140).

tiqued herself and showed her own shifts in opinion. There is one chapter in her book that she can not find anything wrong with: the chapter on the early Church fathers. She says: "This women ten years ago said the Church Fathers were patriarchal, androcentric and misogynist and neither I nor any scholar in the last ten years has been able to come up with one piece of evidence that changes that." I know that the early Church fathers are not the Bible, but they are part of the cultural environment of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean world. They serve as an illustration of something that could be documented all over the Mediterranean world about the patriarchal and androcentric nature of culture and the deeply misogynist strain that touched every aspect of the culture of the Mediterranean.

This bias has affected all of us, both women and men. We are probably prepared to admit the patriarchal and androcentric influences, at least on some occasions. It is very difficult, however, to admit the misogynist. But this patriarchal, androcentric, maybe sometimes even misogynist bias, along with the conditioned character of both texts and interpreters, brings us to some of the deepest and most disturbing questions of Biblical interpretation that our evangelical tradition has too long ignored and that we must confront in order to have any integrity as those concerned for the interpretation of the Word of God. I might note, too, that feminist hermeneutics did not create these deep and disturbing issues and questions. They are in the text inherently. It is simply that hermeneutical sensitivity, often aided by feminist hermeneutics, enables us to see that such issues do in fact exist and need our attention. I would like to focus some of these deeper fundamental issues on four texts.

(1) *Rev 14:1-5*. Revelation 14 begins with a description of 144,000 persons who are in the presence of God, their robes washed white. These persons are identified (in v 4) as those who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are chaste. It is these who follow the lamb and who have been redeemed. I submit that most of us have never really noticed how dramatically androcentric the text is: the redeemed are men, explicitly men. Nor do I think that most of us have noticed the sexual or sexuality assumptions behind the text: men who have not defiled themselves with women. This is a view of sexuality that most of us would like to explain away or ignore. It is a view rooted in the reality in the ancient world that women were always understood to be the ones primarily to blame for sexual sin. This view has haunted the question of rape even to this day. I can illustrate from one of my classes when one day I said that the view that women are responsible for all sexual sin has even led some people today to think that every time a woman is raped it is her fault. A man in my class stood up and said: "That's true; it is always a woman's fault." The handling of this text illustrates one of the most common forms of Biblical interpretation: Ignore a text. That is how many difficult texts are actually faced. In many commentaries the 144,000 do not represent men who have not defiled themselves with women but are understood to be good Christian people who have successfully arrived in heaven to the glory of God. There is no addressing of the assumptions that are androcentric or even misogynist that lie behind the cultural framework of this text.

(2) *1 Tim 5:3-16*. This passage deals with widows, especially "real" widows. A real widow is one who does not have a family to support her, who has been



a good person doing acts of righteousness, and who is sixty years of age or older. These widows are to pledge not to remarry and are to be cared for by the Church. In contrast, Paul admonishes all young widows, defined as fifty-nine or younger, to remarry. Why? Ultimately it is because these young widows, if they do not remarry, may stray after Satan, as some have already done (5:15).

I submit again that the assumption behind this view is a view of sexuality that probably none of us really share or would admit to sharing. Again, it is rooted in the assumption that women are sexually irresponsible. If a 59-year-old or younger widow does not remarry, the odds are very great that she will follow Satan. This means, according to the text, that she will become wanton against Christ and become a gadabout, a gossip and a busybody, going from house to house—all things that are deemed most inappropriate. Thus, the resolution for Paul for all 59-year-old and younger widows is to get married, stay at home and have children. This is the same resolution given in 1 Tim 2:15, which comes at the conclusion of the often-debated passage: "I do not permit women to teach or have authority over men" (2:12). Such a resolution was virtually the only sexually acceptable option for women in the Greco-Roman culture. It is not accidental that there are not instructions for male widowers, for whom there was not even a special term. The sociology of the Greco-Roman culture did not require it. It was assumed that no man bereft of his spouse had any sexual problems, sexual temptations, or difficulties of significance, because he was in control of his options.

(3) *1 Cor 11:2-16*. Here we meet the issues regarding women's headcovering, in which the *kephalē* debate comes to the fore. Some of us have spent a lot of time on the lexical history of *kephalē*. But the issues in 1 Cor 11:2-16, I submit, are much deeper and much more difficult than *kephalē*.<sup>10</sup>

Why was Paul so exercised in the first place about women having their heads covered? What would lead Paul to bring forth five arguments as to why women ought to cover their heads (the *kephalē* argument, the creation argument, the nature argument, the practice of the churches argument, and the presence of the angels argument)? Why so much energy for women to have their heads covered? These are pressing questions—especially when virtually all of us have decided in practice that it is not relevant advice.

Paul's concern suggests that there is an issue of sexuality here, however defined, that must have been at stake. In this context I find it significant that Paul uses this argument: "For a man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man" (11:7). It seems to me that we have given almost no attention to the fact that Paul here fails to mention that woman was also created in the image of God. We know that Paul knows Gen 1:27, because we can see the grammatical nuance of the LXX in Gal 3:28 in his use of *kai* between "male" and "female." But the argument in 1 Cor 11:7 required stating only that man was in the image of God. This is a selectivity that in first-century Judaism comes very close to a denial of a woman's status and worth. Why does Paul do this? For androcentric cultural

<sup>10</sup>See the news report on the 1986 ETS annual meeting, at which this paper was presented, in *Christianity Today* 31/1 (January 16, 1987) 44-45, in which the extensive *kephalē* debate at that meeting is featured.

reasons it is important that women have their heads covered—important enough to stress that man is made in the image of God and not to mention that woman is too. I think Paul repents a little in 1 Cor 11:11–12. I interpret the strong *plēn* and argument here to be his own attempt to clarify that whatever he had said in support of women's headcovering should not be misconstrued to deny the mutual interdependence, even equality, of women and men.

(4) *Eph 5:24*. The text states: "As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives be subject in everything to their husbands." To what extent are we prepared for the "in everything"? Do we understand what "in everything" meant in first-century Mediterranean society?

One of my parabolic stories relates to the time when I was speaking in a very conservative church in northern Vermont. I had been invited to give my views on women in ministry (to be corrected the next weekend by another speaker!). I shared my views and, when I finished, the first question came from a man seated in the front row. He stood with his enormous Bible and said, "Sir, I am disturbed to hear that you do not believe the Bible." I said, "I am very sorry, I thought I made it very clear that I did believe the Bible." He said, "Let me read the text to you: 'As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject to their husbands.'" And he sat down. Notice that he did not say "in everything" in reading the text. I was a visitor, so I decided to risk all and said, "Sir, it is clear that you respect the Bible." He said, "I certainly do." I said, "I am really shocked and disappointed that with the text in front of you, you left out two words. You left out 'in everything.' And I know why you left them out. You do not really believe it." He jumped to his feet and said, "You know, you are right." We then had for the next hour and a half a most fascinating hermeneutical discussion with a group of lay persons in a very conservative church about their marriages and what that text meant.

I would like now to go back to the first century. In the Mediterranean world of the first century the general overwhelming perception about women was that they were inferior, that they ought to stay at home, that they ought to be submissive, that they ought to be silent, that they ought never to speak in public, and that they should have no role of leadership of any kind. Wives were to be subject to their husbands "in everything."

In general, the ancient Greco-Roman Mediterranean society was structured basically as follows. The average age of a man at marriage was thirty, but the average age of a woman was eighteen or less at marriage. When a man married he was already a man of the world who knew how to live in society. He was a person who could function socially and economically. When a woman married she was still a girl who had never even been allowed to answer a knock at the front door of her home. A typical woman bore a child about every two years or thirty months through her childbearing years. She was always "barefoot and pregnant" and at home. She bore a child as soon as the previous one was weaned. Although many of them died, that was her lot. Further, women generally had no education beyond the domestic arts.

Now if the above description is at all typical of the structure of a family of ordinary people in the Roman empire, given also the view of women as inferior, hear again the text in *Eph 5:24*: "Let wives be subject in everything to their husbands." The point I want to make is this: I do not think that most of us have

been honest as evangelical interpreters with the highly patriarchal, androcentric character of such texts. We have not struggled with what it means to read such a text and then live it out with theological integrity in our own lives. I have many evangelical friends who privately will say that they have a marriage of mutual equality but publicly would always say that the wife is subject to the husband in everything. That is what one is supposed to say if one is devoted to the Bible in the evangelical tradition.

My question in this third observation is this: Can we learn to read these texts—Revelation 14, 1 Timothy 5, 1 Corinthians 11, and Ephesians 5—with a kind of integrity that understands what the texts are in their patriarchal and androcentric, even misogynist, contexts and then move with hermeneutical consistency to appropriate these texts for life today? Such hermeneutical integrity is needed over against “interpretations” that pick and choose inconsistently from such texts or ignore them altogether.

4. *Starting points and the balance of texts.*<sup>11</sup> There is a commonly accepted hermeneutical agenda that says clearer texts should interpret less clear texts. I think it is a good principle. The problem is, however, that assumptions have been made as to which are the clearer texts in our tradition.

For example, “everybody” knows that 1 Tim 2:11–12 is the “clear” text through which all other texts on women in the Church are to be read. However, is it “clear” whether one should start with Heb 6:4–6 or Rom 8:28–39 in discussing the security of the believer? Which text is the window through which one views the other texts? Do not our theological traditions tend to select our windows for us? The point that seems important to me is that there is nothing internal to the canon, the authoritative Word, that tells us with which text to begin.

On the issues of women in the Church it is just as plausible to start with Gal 3:28 as a clear text as it is to start with 1 Tim 2:11–12. In fact I would be willing to argue that Gal 3:28 is far more clear when one recognizes (1) that the three pairs are traditional in the Greek philosophical tradition and in Judaism, (2) how they functioned socially within the Roman empire, and (3) how Paul acted out the Jew/Greek dichotomy even as documented in Galatians 2. We have a rather clear idea of what Paul meant that “in Christ there was neither Jew nor Greek” and why he took that theological dictum so seriously at a personal, social, practical, church-membership level. 1 Timothy 2, on the other hand, is replete with difficulties, such as the absolute adornment statements (2:9–10) and the notoriously difficult “salvation by childbearing” at the conclusion of the paragraph (2:15). These difficulties are too often obviated by ignoring them or relativizing them. Rather, they are part of the immediate context and paragraph of 2:11–12. That injunction cannot be considered any clearer than its context. Actually 1 Tim 2:11–12 is a far more difficult, less clear text than Gal 3:28. But my point really is not necessarily to opt for Galatians 3 at this point. What I want to stress is that from a hermeneutical point

<sup>11</sup>My comments here are closely related to my larger treatment of these issues in “1 Timothy 2:9–15 and the Place of Women in the Church’s Ministry,” in *Women, Authority and the Bible* (ed. Mickelsen) 193–219, esp. 212–218.

of view the question of where one enters the discussion is really an open question to which no canonical text speaks with clarity.

There is also the question of the balance of texts. How do we put it all together? Again, a commonly accepted hermeneutical dictum is that any viewpoint that claims to be Biblical should be inclusive of all texts that speak to a question. We want to do that when we are talking about Church polity, baptism, eternal security, or the nature of inspiration. But somehow, on the question of women in the Bible, so often in the history of the evangelical movement only 1 Timothy 2 has been discussed. Jesus and women, women in Romans 16 and Philippians 4 and Gal 3:28 have been dismissed or ignored. My hermeneutical appeal is that we must learn to include all relevant texts in a genuine balance if we are to have integrity in the claim to be Biblical.

The matter of balance also applies to the consistent use of different texts from the same document. For example, considerable attention is given by many to 1 Tim 2:11–12 and its supposed normative character understood as excluding women from authoritative speech or leadership in the Church. Most of these same authors, however, totally neglect 5:3–16, not even mentioning any consideration of its possible normative character. Such inconsistency in use and application of texts from the same NT document is an affront to the hermeneutical principle of balance.

5. *The deepest motivating factors in the whole discussion of women and ministry in the NT and in the Church today are not grammatical, lexical, exegetical, historical, or even hermeneutical in the traditional sense. Rather, there are three profound realities underlying the whole issue today. It is time to recognize, to admit and to begin to deal with these realities.*

The first of these realities is the personal issues of sexuality, power and personal identity. It is one thing for a person in power (generally males in evangelicalism) to tell the powerless (generally females in evangelicalism) to be content. It is another for the powerless to begin to speak. Questions of sexuality and personal identity are threatening issues for many. This is especially true when we face the patriarchal and androcentric, even misogynist, character of our own traditions. If women have been viewed—and they have in our traditions—as sex objects, temptations, distractions and those responsible for sin, especially sexual sins, then a man's personal identity is threatened when he must accept and respect a woman as an equal and as a colleague. The male tradition, suppression and unwillingness to talk of incest, rape and abuse of women as it has occurred in the Church only deepens the threat level.

The second reality relates to the issues of partnership between men and women in professional and lay ministries and the personal and institutional management of role reversals and new role expectations. Our inability to engage in partnership in ministry is not an indictment of or argument against women in ministry. Rather, it is an indictment of male dominance and insecurity. Men today too often accept the dictum of Cato's speech against the repeal of Oppian law in 198 B.C.: "The moment women begin to be our equals, they will be our superiors."<sup>12</sup> Not too long ago in a debate in which I was a participant

<sup>12</sup>Livy *History* 34.1–3.

a theologian said to me, "If there is equal access to ministry by both men and women, the world will soon return to barbarism."

The argument that equality of persons can be wholly and absolutely affirmed with distinctions in role differentiation is a sound one. We attempt to observe this in clergy-lay, dean-faculty and other such relationships. However, the argument is called into the deepest question and suspicion when all role differentiation is tied to gender and that especially at the ultimate/highest/final levels of authority.

The third of these realities is those issues that relate to the understanding of the personal nature and imaging of God. God is not a sexual being. He is not a male or a female. Persons created in God's image were created as male and female. God's "maleness" has no more essential or substantive reality than God's "righthandedness." We have not yet seen the level of threat there is to all—but especially to men—in coping with such a God.

### III. CONCLUSION

The five observations detailed in the preceding section lead me to be committed to an evangelical feminist Biblical hermeneutic. Such a commitment involves certain realities and understandings.

First, such a hermeneutic commits one to the Biblical affirmation of the equal partnership of women and men in the ministry of the Church.<sup>13</sup> It is my deepest conviction that the full evidence of Scripture, with all proper hermeneutical awareness of contexts and settings, and an understanding of balance and consistency in interpretation mean that we must rethink some of our traditions and affirm with clarity and conviction the Biblical basis for the full participation of both women and men in the ministries of the Church.

Second, such a hermeneutic identifies patriarchal and sexist texts and assumptions behind texts in the Bible and understands them as limited texts and assumptions. These limitations reflect the historical-cultural realities from and in which Biblical texts arose. These limitations must be understood as fully as possible within the larger intentions of the author(s) and through the canonical balance of texts and the overarching themes of the gospel and the work of God in both men and women.

Third, such limited texts need not be ignored, excluded or polemicized against. Rather, they should be interpreted from a particular vantage point—the dual commitments to the equal dignity and equality of men and women and to Scriptural authority. This dual commitment has a long and honorable history in the Church, as has been carefully argued and presented within our circles.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>See D. M. Scholer, *A Biblical Basis for Equal Partnership: Women and Men in the Ministry of the Church* (Women in Ministry 2; New York: The Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board of American Baptist Churches, 1986).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. e.g. N. A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the 19th Century* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984); J. Hassey, *No Time for Silence: Evangelical Women in Public Ministry Around the Turn of the Century* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); R. A. Tucker and W. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); Scholer, "1 Timothy 2:9-15" 216-218.

Finally, one must recognize that an evangelical feminist Biblical hermeneutic is attacked from two sides. The conservative nonfeminist evangelicals tend to see the position outlined in this paper not only as quite wrong but so wrong as to suggest that it constitutes denial of Scriptural authority. On the other hand, the nonevangelical feminists tend to see the position outlined here as not taking seriously, or seriously enough, the patriarchal and sexist nature of much of Scripture and/or as naively optimistic (or even self-serving) in its interpretation of the difficult texts as limited. In spite of these risks, I believe that the Biblical data and hermeneutical integrity<sup>15</sup> require such an approach as indicated here.

<sup>15</sup>See further D. M. Scholer, "Issues in Biblical Interpretation," *EvQ* 60 (1988), forthcoming.