

# What Is The Feminist Hermeneutic?

## An Analysis Of Feminist Interpretation Of The Bible

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*Thomas J. Fricke*

Feminist interpretation of the Bible has challenged many of the long-standing traditional interpretations of the church. In 1988 the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood issued *The Danvers Statement*, which expressed its concern about what it called "the increasing prevalence and acceptance of hermeneutical oddities devised to reinterpret apparently plain meanings of biblical texts."<sup>1</sup> According to *The Danvers Statement*, not only is there "widespread uncertainty and confusion in our culture regarding the complementary differences between masculinity and femininity,"<sup>2</sup> but there is also a resultant confusion regarding the proper treatment and interpretation of biblical texts.

Are these concerns legitimate? Are feminists guilty of "hermeneutical oddities" which confuse the interpretation of scripture? How are we to view the new approaches to reading God's Word feminist interpreters are bringing into our world today?

Let's start with some general observations.

*Biblical feminists* are those who claim the Bible as their authority in one way or another. They are to be distinguished from the secular feminists, who do not accept the Bible as authoritative.

Biblical feminists may be classified as either *liberal* or *evangelical*. *Liberal feminists* accept the authority of Scripture in a limited way. In liberal theology the authority of Scripture is subordinated to the judgment of the interpreter. By questioning the authorship of a particular passage or by employing form criticism or other tools of the historical-critical method liberal feminists undermine, bypass, and often flatly deny the authority of the Scriptures. This turns the Bible into a plastic text, to be turned and twisted in whatever direction the interpreter chooses.

*Evangelical feminists* accept the full authority of Scripture. Evangelicals regard God's Word as inspired, even verbally inspired and inerrant. They agree in principle with the basic hermeneutical principles to which we also would subscribe. Nevertheless, evangelical feminists disagree with the traditional interpretations of those passages which speak about men and women and their relationships. They do not reject the Scriptures as authoritative; they reject the traditional interpretation of the *sedes doctrinae*. How this is done will be the subject of the last portion of this article.

### I. Liberal feminist interpretation

*Liberal feminists espouse a theology of liberation*. They make "the Exodus experience" (not the cross of Christ) their model for understanding the Scriptures. They see Galatians 3:28 ("There is neither male nor female") as an application of a principle of liberation which runs throughout the Old and New Testaments. Freedom for the oppressed is seen as the main message of the Bible. The Bible is written from the perspective of the powerless, they maintain, and women are to be included among the powerless. According to this understanding, Christ's work has significance primarily (or even exclusively) for this life. The "gospel" of Jesus Christ is made into a message of social "redemption," and Jesus is portrayed as a Messiah who was sent not to give sinners deliverance from hell, but to deliver a message of freedom for those who have been oppressed and repressed by society.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Danvers Statement*. Wheaton, Illinois: Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 1988.

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

What is the central theme of the Bible? For liberal feminists it is a message of social liberation and psychological "wholeness." One liberal feminist proposes a test for determining what in the Bible is "truth" and what is not:

The biblical witness...claims to present a truth that will heal us, make us whole; it will free us, not enslave us to what violates our very sense of truth and justice....*In its own terms, then, it cannot be believed unless it rings true to our deepest capacity for truth and goodness. If it contradicts this, it is not to be believed. If it falsifies this, it cannot be accepted* (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

This interpretation is not so much concerned with letting Scripture interpret Scripture as it is intent upon letting our modern sense of equality and justice determine what's right and what's wrong. Furthermore, in this view, the "love commandment" negates any portion of Scripture which contradicts the "principle of equality":

On the basis of feminist conviction, then, some interpretations are ruled out (just as an overall acceptance of the love commandment as central to Christian life and to the teaching of scripture rules out final interpretations that contradict it).<sup>4</sup>

The goal of liberal feminist theology, then, appears not to be the salvation of souls from hell, but rather the liberation of society from "lovelessness" and "patriarchal bias." Rosemary Radford Ruether candidly proclaims:

The task of feminist hermeneutics today is not only to develop and solidify the principles by which women appropriate *the good news of liberation from patriarchy* and develop the stories and texts to proclaim this good news. The task of feminist hermeneutics is also to establish this theory of interpretation *as normative and indispensable to the understanding of the faith* (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup>

*Liberal feminists make use of the historical-critical method to determine which Scripture texts are acceptable and which are not.* To many of them "it has become abundantly clear that the scriptures need liberation, not only from existing interpretations but also from the patriarchal bias of the texts themselves."<sup>6</sup>

"The Word of God is not identical with the biblical texts," according to Letty M. Russell.<sup>7</sup> "The whole canon is to be taken seriously," she says, "but it is not considered to function as the Word of God, evoking consent or faith, if it contributes to the continuation of racism, sexism, and classism."<sup>8</sup> And so liberal feminist interpretation takes a low view of the Bible, allowing the *Zeitgeist* to sit in judgment over God's Word.

Liberal theology would maintain that there is a human element in the Scriptures which must be taken into account when reading them. Barbara J. MacHaffie, in *Her Story*, comments:

In studying these books [the Gospels], it is important to remember that the Gospel writers are not trying to give us a completely objective, accurate, and detailed account of Jesus' work on earth. Rather, they are using stories and teachings in a selective way to make a statement of themselves and the prejudices of their culture in their writing.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986, p. 14.

Of Paul's epistles she says:

It must be pointed out that *Paul is probably not the author of certain passages often cited in support of the view that he degraded women*. It is likely that these passages (Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:21-33; Titus 2:3-5; 1 Tim. 2:8-15; 5:3-16; 1 Cor. 14:33b-36) originated at a later time and reflect changes in the environment of the early Christian community as well as in its organizational structure (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup>

*Liberal feminist theology is experientially-based*. The appeal is made to "women's experience" as a starting point for theology. Liberal feminists complain that "it is precisely women's experience that has been shut out of hermeneutics and theological reflection in the past," and so the traditional interpretations of biblical texts are given little or no weight.<sup>11</sup> To some, any theology which appears to downgrade or ignore women's needs and/or feelings cannot be valid. Pamela Dickey Young argues in favor of a feminist theology of liberation because the experience of so many women seems the same:

The question of women's experience is raised because women do not find much of contemporary theology *credible*. Rather than finding Christian theology liberating, many women have experienced only or mainly oppression from it.<sup>12</sup>

The bitter feelings and experiences of many women may, in some cases, be legitimate. There may be good reasons for some women to feel angry with the church for ignoring their needs and concerns. There may be instances in which women's needs have not been addressed as they might. We cannot say that the experience of women is not important. But at the same time, we must recognize that to base a theology upon experience is to elevate subjective feelings and/or reason above the objective truth of God's Word. This runs counter to sound Lutheran biblical interpretation. It is Young's thesis that

any theology that expects to win adherents must be credible, it must be able to sustain questions and objections that might be raised. For theology to claim, as Christian theology has sometimes done, that it has its own standards and does not need to be reasonable by the world's standards is really to evade the difficult question of why then anybody outside the tradition should be expected to believe that it contains any truth whatsoever.<sup>13</sup>

*It seems clear that liberal feminist theology is telic in nature—it has a goal in mind*. The goal calls for a predetermined outcome when Scripture is reinterpreted. In the process, what the Bible is really saying becomes obscured or lost. One of the liberal feminists has remarked:

Some biblical material that appears not to address women, or even appears hostile to them, can be reworked to bring out liberating themes for abused women....Consciousness-raising for these women has provided the essential catalyst: the insight that women are included in the category of the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast. Moving from that critical standpoint, women can begin to examine and reinterpret, imagining new relationships between the texts and their experience.<sup>14</sup>

Such an approach to the Scriptures pays less respect to the sacred text than it does to the sense of fairness and justice residing in unregenerate hearts and minds. It also puts feminist Bible interpreters in an

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>12</sup> Pamela Dickey Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990, p. 62.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> Russell. *op. cit.*, p. 102.

awkward position. Letty M. Russell feels a tension between being faithful to the Scriptures and being faithful to herself. She observes:

Feminists of the Jewish and Christian faiths are faced with a basic dilemma. Are they to be faithful to the teachings of the Hebrew scriptures, or are they to be faithful to their own integrity as whole human beings?<sup>15</sup>

One has to wonder why fidelity to the Scriptures and fidelity to one's own integrity as a "whole human being" must be viewed as mutually exclusive. Certainly if the Scriptures are viewed as God's message of deliverance from sin, death, and the devil, any conflict between the Word and my own sense of well-being is due to the fallenness of my own sinful nature.

Curiously, liberal feminists still labor to retain the Bible as authoritative—at least to some degree. However, as we have seen, its authority is often subordinated to one's own experience, and as a result the door is opened to extremely subjective interpretation. Russell states:

In spite of the patriarchal nature of biblical texts, I myself have no intention of giving up the biblical basis of my theology....The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Russell apparently sees no inconsistency in accepting the Bible as authoritative, while at the same time making it subject to her own subjective interpretation. At least her confession is honest:

Perhaps it would seem more useful to give up on the Bible as a normative source of my theology, but I don't seem to be able to do that. The biblical witness continues to evoke my consent, even as I reject many of its teachings as well as its patriarchal context. And...I am not alone in this.<sup>17</sup>

*Such a hermeneutic as more than merely paradoxical; it is illogical, unscriptural, and inimical to the gospel.* Salvation is viewed as liberation from the bonds of patriarchy, not freedom from the curse of sin and Satan's tyranny. The "Exodus experience" is interpreted as a model for the kind of social transformation liberal feminists seek. Real spiritual needs are ignored as the Bible's message of sin and grace takes a back seat to the feminist's theme of societal egalitarianism. Souls are lost while liberal feminists reinterpret the Bible in order to set up a social system which has value only for this life, and none for the life to come. Real sinners are on their way to a real hell, while socially-minded feminists maintain that "Jesus is a savior to whom feminists can relate. He offers a salvation that today requires action for social change, he offers a salvation of the whole human being, of body as well as soul, he offers a this-worldly salvation, and he offers it to all."<sup>18</sup>

The May, 1986, *Black and Red* contains an interesting interview with the female minister of an ALC congregation (she is not identified in the article). Her remarks are a good example of the way liberal feminists subjectively apply the historical-critical method to eliminate the authority of biblical texts which are troubling to their way of thinking. She says:

The directive in 1 Corinthians 14 is a directive pointing simply to wives, and it's basically, "Keep your mouth shut in church. Ask your husband at home." I don't think that has anything to do with ordination. I think Paul was disgusted because these women were talking in the meeting, and yet it was a matter of church order, the whole thing with loud talking being a sign of those cults, that

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>18</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

he was thinking of it was a warning against excesses....1 Timothy, I don't think was written by Paul. I think it was written much later, at the turn of the century.<sup>19</sup>

Thus the interpreter, armed with a knowledge of history and ancient culture, takes on the authority of the sacred text. The goal of feminist hermeneutics seems to allow some feminists no other approach to the Bible.

## II. Evangelical feminist interpretation

*In contrast with liberal feminists, evangelical feminists claim to espouse the same principles of interpretation as non-feminist evangelicals.* Evangelical feminists will defend the authority of Scripture, the clarity of Scripture, the inspiration of Scripture, and the principle that Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture. Still, evangelical feminists reach different conclusions regarding the roles of men and women in God's world. How can this happen?

Some have explained it by charging the evangelical feminists with a rejection of the authority of God's Word. This charge seems to have been justified in some instances. For example, one leading evangelical feminist, Virginia Mollenkott, stated in a letter to the *Christian Century*: "I am beginning to wonder whether indeed Christianity is patriarchal to its very core. If so, count me out. Some of us may be forced to leave Christianity in order to participate in Jesus' discipleship of equals."<sup>20</sup> With this comment Mollenkott appears to have been more strongly committed to feminism than to the traditional Christian faith.

Also causing some embarrassment to evangelical feminists is the tension Paul King Jewett claimed to exist between Paul the Christian apostle and Paul the unreformed Jewish rabbi. According to Jewett this tension explains Paul's seemingly contradictory comments—that what he says to the Galatians seems to support a more progressively liberationist point of view toward women, while what he says to Timothy and the Corinthians seems to support a more traditional, rabbinic point of view:

Because these two perspectives—the Jewish and the Christian—are incompatible, there is no satisfying way to harmonize the Pauline argument for female subordination with the larger Christian vision of which the great apostle to the Gentiles was himself the primary architect. It appears from the evidence that Paul himself sensed that his view of the man/woman relationship, inherited from Judaism, was not altogether congruous with the gospel he preached.<sup>21</sup>

With such comments Jewett slips a human element into the inspired Scriptures. He ascribes to Paul "some difficulty in his reasoning concerning the headship of the male."<sup>22</sup> He makes reference to "the historical limitations of his Christian insight"<sup>23</sup> and asserts that Paul "did not see the implications of his own great declaration that in Christ 'there is neither bond nor free' as clearly as he saw the implications of his declaration that in Christ 'there is neither Jew nor Greek.'"<sup>24</sup> It is clear that these comments indicate a less than high regard for the inspiration of the sacred text. Still, Jewett and Mollenkott wish to be included among the "evangelicals."

There appears, however, to be a new development in the approach of evangelical feminists. In the 70s feminists like Jewett, Mollenkott, Letha Scanzoni, and Nancy Hardesty took a less strictly biblical route. Evangelical feminists in the 80s and 90s seem to have recognized this tendency as a weakness and have attempted to make their argument more respectful of biblical authority.

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<sup>19</sup> Jon D. Buchholz, "Doctrinal Positions of the NLC," *The Black and Red*, May, 1986, pp. 34-37.

<sup>20</sup> Alvera Mickelsen, *Women, Authority and the Bible*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1987, p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> Paul King Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975, p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

So what are the evangelical feminists saying *today*? This will be the subject of the remainder of this paper.

*Evangelical feminists, like the liberal feminists, fail to properly distinguish law and gospel when they speak of redemption in social, not spiritual, terms.* Important for evangelical feminists are the questions: "Are women fully human?" and "Are women fully redeemed?" In this context, "redemption" cannot be understood as the payment Christ made for sin, for it should be obvious to anybody who accepts the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures that in that sense all people are "fully redeemed." "Redemption" in this sense means a kind of social liberation, a freedom from a supposed "patriarchal" church authority structure. When evangelical feminists treat Galatians 3:28 as "the most socially explosive text in the New Testament,"<sup>25</sup> "Christ's redemptive act" is given more social than spiritual significance.

Alvera Mickelsen feels that "the concept of keeping women in a restricted place" runs counter to the "freedom in Christ" that Jesus demonstrated and that Paul preached.<sup>26</sup> She insists that when we are interpreting the Scriptures, we must ask what are the "highest ideals" and interpret the rest of Scripture according to these norms. Examples of the "highest ideals" for Mickelsen are the Golden Rule ("Do to others what you would have them do to you"), Jesus' teaching on new wine and old wineskins in Matthew 9:17, and Peter's quotation of Joel's prophecy at Jerusalem on Pentecost ("Your sons and your daughters will prophesy").<sup>27</sup>

Mickelsen asserts that "Christ came to give us a whole new set of values—values so different from his world and our world as to be almost incomprehensible."<sup>28</sup> And so she concludes, "To make 1 Timothy 2:11,12 a universal principle for all women for all time is clearly contrary to the principles taught by our Lord ('Treat others the way you want to be treated')."<sup>29</sup>

But we have to ask, "What kind of freedom did Christ bring?" The freedom Jesus gives is a spiritual, not a social freedom. It is a freedom that comes to those who by faith have been made sons of Abraham. "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin," but Christ Jesus has freed the world from sin's tyranny. This is the message Jesus taught, and it is the point of Galatians 3 and of Paul's entire letter to the Galatians. This is the message of the gospel. 1 Timothy 2:11,12 does not run counter to it. To make the "highest ideals" of the Scriptures something other than this message, as Alvera Mickelsen does, is to turn the gospel of Christ into a new law.

*Some evangelical feminists advocate a "reader sensitive hermeneutic."* The question for many is: What is the role of the interpreter in the hermeneutical process? We would agree that Scripture must not be used simply to confirm our own long-held and cherished ideas, whether right or wrong. The concern that we not be governed by our own personal "canon within the canon" is a good concern. We are attracted to the parts of the Bible which express what we already believe. Can anyone approach the Scriptures in an unbiased fashion? Someone has pointed out that "all biblical interpreters...have been deeply influenced by both the sexism and misogyny of our culture and also the currents of nineteenth-century women's rights and twentieth-century feminist movements."<sup>30</sup> So how do we allow God's Word to challenge wrong assumptions without giving up the truth? The answer evangelical feminists are giving is "a reader-sensitive hermeneutic." The idea is that there be a "circulation between text and reader"—that is, an understanding that not only the text, but also the reader, must be "read" as products of a particular culture.

It is felt that a reader-sensitive hermeneutic is a more adequate and more realistic way to read the Bible. The problem, however, is that a reader-sensitive hermeneutic lacks any solid base for arriving at the truth and can only open the door to even greater subjectivity. It is difficult to see how this method of reading the Bible provides any solution at all, for it questions whether anyone can be certain of any conclusion he bases on the Bible. No, Scripture interprets Scripture. Interpretation must still be based on the simple, clear words of the text.

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<sup>25</sup> Mickelsen, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>26</sup> Bonnidell Clouse and Robert G. Clouse, *Women in Ministry: Four Views*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1989, p. 123.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.179-180.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>30</sup> Mickelsen, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

If the Bible passages on the role of women appear to be unclear, evangelical feminists seek to clarify them by attempting to reconstruct the historical context of the Bible passages in question. The cultural context of Paul's day was different from that in our own time. The people to whom Jesus spoke may have thought differently from the way we do today. The cultural context must be understood if we are to interpret the Scriptures correctly. But how accurate can we be when we look to the past? How heavily can we rely on extra-biblical historical sources to guide us in our interpretation? Some say:

The danger for the church in Paul's day lay in the exact opposite direction from the church in our day: that is, there was the danger that it might press the principle of Christian/freedom too far. Rather than defending the status quo (as is often the case with the church in our day), the first-century church called into question many of the fundamental structures of contemporary society. First-century Christians might—and many did—push their new-found freedom to extremes. Liberty could easily degenerate into license.<sup>31</sup>

We are obliged to ask, "But where does the text say that?"

We have reason to be skeptical of many of the historical conclusions drawn by evangelical feminists. When evangelical feminists assert that "Paul is selective in his use of Genesis material,"<sup>32</sup> it is clear that the historical-critical method is alive and well even among those who call themselves "evangelicals":

In the 1 Corinthians text, Paul is even more selective in asserting that the man "is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man" (11:7). Although Paul does not deny that woman also was created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1-2), he deliberately chooses to mention only that the man is in God's image in order to more clearly buttress his argument for head coverings for women.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, 1 Timothy 2:13-14 should be understood as an explanatory rationale for verses 11-12 that uses data from Genesis 2-3 selectively to suit the needs of the argument at hand.<sup>34</sup>

The implication is that Paul was not above selectively using one portion of the Scriptures against another. In other words, Paul's method of interpreting the Old Testament can be a method of using one portion of the sacred writings to *nullify* rather than to *clarify* another. If this is what Paul is doing, he is promoting his own views and not conveying the inspired truth of the Holy Spirit.

According to this scenario, Paul's authority as an apostle overrides the authority of the sacred Scriptures, for he is free to apply God's Word in whichever way he chooses for the sake of his argument. Once again feminist interpreters inject a human element into the inspired Scriptures—not as blatantly as the liberal feminists, but it's there all the same.

*Evangelical feminists follow the notion of a kind of progressive revelation, an evolutionary development of doctrine in the Christian church.* The liberal feminists explain the difference between what Paul says in Galatians 3:28 and what he says elsewhere by simply rejecting the authoritative content of whatever they cannot accept. Evangelical feminists seek to explain the alleged contradiction in Paul by postulating a kind of progression in doctrine and practice for the early Christian church.

The notion of a "progressive revelation" enables evangelical feminists "to give priority to those biblical teachings that are said by Scripture to be the fruit of Christ's redemptive work (e.g. Gal 3:28)."<sup>35</sup> According to

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 209-210.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

this way of thinking, it is up to us today to continue challenging accepted Christian teaching as Christ challenged the teachers of his day, in order to arrive at an appropriate doctrine for today's culture.

A developmental hermeneutic calls us to distinguish between (1) what the New Testament proclaims about new life in Christ and (2) its description of how that proclamation was practiced in the first century—realizing that the implementation of that proclamation is portrayed in the New Testament as having been only begun and is described as being then worked out in progressive fashion....The way or ways in which the gospel was practiced in the first century...should be understood as signposts at the beginning of a journey—signposts that point out the path to be followed if we are to reapply that same gospel in our day.<sup>36</sup>

It is said that "Paul had a basic principle that required the temporary subordination of other principles."<sup>37</sup> This is applied in this way: In Galatians Paul established the principle that the believer is dead to the law. But in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 Paul says that he, the apostle of freedom from the law, is willing to become "like one under the law" to win those who are under the law. Evangelical feminists argue that Paul in his ministry in Corinth temporarily subordinated the principle of freedom to that of letting nothing hinder his missionary work. They claim that Paul gave his instructions concerning women "so that no one will malign the word of God" (Titus 2:5). And so they say that Paul meant for his instructions on women to the Corinthian congregation and others to be only temporary. Eventually the social norms of the day would no longer be in vogue, and the principle Paul is said to have established in Galatians would remain for us to live by today.

But we must ask: If Paul meant for his commands to be temporary, why did he not explicitly say so? And why, then, should Paul have supported changeable customs with references to the unchangeable events of the Creation and the Fall? Is this notion even in character for Paul, who was not afraid to do and say what was right, regardless of the consequences? And if it is morally wrong for the church to teach the differing roles of men and women today, wouldn't it also have been morally wrong for Paul to practice the differing roles simply for the sake of his mission work—a clear accommodation to the culture of the day?

*Evangelical feminists generally attack the concept of "hierarchy" as anti-scriptural, if not inherently sinful.* Alvera Mickelsen says:

Rarely do those who espouse hierarchy and male headship in the church and marriage discuss the teachings of Jesus regarding authority that are repeated in each of the four gospels. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. *It shall not be so among you*; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave" (Mt 20:25-27 RSV)...Why do we ignore such teachings? Because they run counter to a power-culture that has been absorbed in many churches. The one kind of leadership that Jesus taught was the leadership of servanthood and self-giving—not a leadership of power and authority over others.<sup>38</sup>

This ignores the realm of the Fourth Commandment and the concept that those in authority have been placed there by God. Hierarchical structure is not inherently sinful, but there are sinful human beings who misuse their God-given positions in hierarchical structures—even in Christian homes and churches. We need to learn the lesson Jesus taught on the essence of loving leadership. The passage from Matthew 20 should be used to clarify what the Scriptures say about authority in Romans 13 and elsewhere—not to nullify it.

Sometimes evangelical feminists have decried the use of individual passages, the *sedes doctrinae*, to formulate biblical doctrines. They have criticized this method as a way of looking for proof passages to back up one's own preconceived notions of what the Bible ought to be saying. It should be pointed out that the idea that

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>37</sup> Clouse, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.



one must look to the whole of Scripture (and not the *sedes doctrinae*) can also cover up a biased use of the Bible. Francis Pieper says it is a rejection of "the Scripture principle," a denial of the *soles scripture*, when the appeal is made to the "whole of Scripture":

The Scripture principle is rejected by the demand that the Christian doctrine must not be taken from the passages that treat of the individual doctrines (*sedes doctrinae*), but from "the whole of Scripture." . . . This phrase, which certainly makes no sense, has been given currency again by "the Reformer of the 19th century." Schleiermacher. He says: "Quoting individual Bible passages in dogmatics is very precarious, yes, in and by itself an unsatisfactory procedure." But this senseless phrase has been adopted by practically all chief representatives of modern theology....In fact, we can obtain the whole body of the Christian doctrine only by taking each doctrine from those passages—considered of course in their context—which treat of that specific doctrine. The "whole of Scripture," or the "whole of Christian doctrine," which is constructed without considering the individual passages that treat of the doctrine, is purely man's own product. This queer talk of the "whole of Scripture" as opposed to the *sedes doctrinae* was invented to block the authority of Scripture entirely, while making a pretense of strict conformity to Scripture, and to make room in the Church for the theology of the "pious self-consciousness" of the theologizing subject.<sup>39</sup>

### Conclusion

Two points especially seem to bear repeating. The first has to do with the use of extra-biblical sources in determining the meaning of Scripture. I can say it no better than Pieper does:

Exegetical theology deals exclusively with the words of Holy Scripture. It is the divinely taught art which binds the teacher and the learner to the sense expressed in the words of Scripture and compels him to expose as false all interpretations contrary to text and context....No extra-biblical material, philological or historical, may determine the exegesis. That holds true particularly with regard to historical circumstances. Interpreting the words of Scripture according to a "historical background" not furnished by Scripture itself but, wholly or in part, by contemporary secular writers, is false exegesis. All the historical background necessary for the correct understanding of Scripture is given by Scripture itself.<sup>40</sup>

Once we concede that extra-biblical scholarship is necessary for the understanding of God's Word we have in effect taken the Bible out of the hands of the parishioner in the pew. We have removed it from the tables and desks and nightstands of ordinary Christians and have marked it OFF LIMITS.

The second point which bears repeating has to do with the nature of the message central to the entire Bible—the justification of sinners before God. We have heard it said often enough that the corruption of this one doctrine leads to many other errors. That is clearly true also in the case of feminist interpretation of the Bible, for Galatians 3:28 is the cornerstone upon which the feminist (both liberal and evangelical) argument is built.

In theology there is no room for speculation. It is important that we base our teaching squarely upon the sure foundation of God's Word. When we do theology, we are not "building railroads," we are "describing mountains."<sup>41</sup> Let us continue to simply repeat God's thoughts after him, letting God speak for himself and allowing his clear Word to stand.

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<sup>39</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950, vol. 1, pp. 201-202.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.