

## The Theological Implications of a Woman's Role in Church Leadership: Why an Accurate Teaching is Important

We live in a schizophrenic society. On one hand, it is alleged that we have evolved socially to the extent that women are equal with men in every social area of life. Women can lead the home. They can oversee the church. They can govern the nation. They own themselves instead of being owned by a man. Therefore, they have a government-sanctioned right to do with their physical bodies what they want, including the abortion or murder of unwanted children which might somehow keep a woman in bondage. On the other hand, right across the hall from where an abortion might occur, in the same hospital tens of thousands of dollars or more is spent with hi-tech equipment, high-priced drugs, and expensive health expertise to keep a premature female baby alive.<sup>1</sup> The contrast is striking.

From the vantage point of such a conflicted mindset, our culture is struggling with the identity of manhood and womanhood. What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman? What do men and women have in common and what is different about them? Do any differences go beyond mere biology and impact the social realm? The schizophrenia continues. There is simultaneously the drive on the part of many modern feminists to mold men to be more sensitive and caring in a perceived feminine way and the often asked question, "Where have the real men gone?" One cannot have it both ways. Both concerns can not radically co-exist in present dialog about social issues. It is not possible (at least for the same promoters) to seek to feminize men and then reasonably complain about the fact that true masculinity has declined.

This paper is designed to look at how the feminist impulse brought on by the modern feminist movement has affected the theology and practice of the Church. To be sure the placing of a woman in the role of pastor has consequences that must be covered in such a study. However, the presentation here swings a larger orbit to analyze the impact that the feminist impulse, which is usually behind the idea of female pastors, has upon theology in general and church practice in particular. Hopefully, the result will be a more complete theological mosaic showing many potential points of damage to life, ministry, and theology which must be avoided.

This study is the first in a series of articles given on this issue by numerous authors. Many of the other articles will deal with specific biblical texts in the debate so it is not necessary to do so here. As such, this article assumes that the exegesis of the many significant passages has already been done (Gen 2, Eph 5, 1 Tim 2, 1 Cor. 11 & 14, etc.). A second supposition is that the complementarian view is the correct understanding of these passages following a grammatical-historical interpretation. The word *complementarian* here carries its normal meaning within the modern debate over evangelical feminism. It is the view that men and women have been designed by God differently, even relative to social roles, so that men are to be the leaders of the home and the church and women are to complement them in supportive, yet meaningfully significant ways of ministry unto God. It is also the view of this author that God's ways are always best.

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<sup>1</sup> I first saw this illustration of cultural schizophrenia years ago in C. Everett Koop, *The Right to Live, the Right to Die* (Weaton: Tyndale, 1976).

## Bibliology, Hermeneutics, and Theological Method

The first area to investigate involves the core area of bibliology. In particular, there will be a brief exploration of possible feminist inroads into bibliology by means of gender-neutral translations. In conjunction with this, a pertinent evaluation of theological method in recent arguments for female pastors will be given which highlights the lack of biblical authority for such approaches at a methodological level. One key area to be discussed is the recent ethical system called the redemptive movement hermeneutic.

### Gender-Neutral Translations

One modern controversy that lends itself to questions about the contemporary feminist or egalitarian agenda, while also impacting church life at a basic level, is the debate over gender-neutral translations. A so-called gender-neutral or gender-inclusive translation is one that is advertized to tone down patriarchal elements in a translation of the Bible. This could be something minor and innocuous like the use of the term “children of God” in English for the phrase “sons of God” when the context is talking about both men and women as sons of God. The masculine-oriented term (sons) is replaced with a more generic term (children) that better jives with the fact that both genders are included in the expression (e.g., Ex. 19:6—“These are the words you shall speak to the children [sons] of Israel”).<sup>2</sup>

However, there are more grievous problems on the other side of the spectrum. In liberal circles, radical feminist versions of the Bible have been presented, many of them coming out in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> One of the first such examples published by and for the National Council of Churches is *An Inclusive Language Lectionary* (1983-85).<sup>4</sup> In this translation of the Scriptures intended for liturgical readings, several gender-neutral changes can be observed. In John 3:16, God gives “His only Child” rather than “His only Son.” The extent to which the translation attempts to remove as many masculine pronoun’s as possible can be illustrated by the translation of John 1:12: “The Word was in the world, and the world was made through the Word, yet the world did not know the Word. The Word came to the Word’s own, but those to whom the Word came did not receive the Word.”<sup>5</sup> The New Century Hymnal published by the United Church of Christ a few years later begins the Lord’s Prayer “Our Father-Mother in heaven.” In the same hymnal the liturgical reading of the Nicene Creed states, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Sovereign, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father-Mother and from the Child.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a summary discussion of this kind of permissible gender-inclusive translation, see Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 98-99).

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of radical feminist versions of the Bible, see Mark Strauss, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 60-73.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Roland Gold, et al., *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983, 1984, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> I have obtained the examples from this translation from Michael D. Marlowe, Bible Research available from <http://www.bible-researcher.com/ill.html>; Internet; accessed 29 December 2007.

Such examples clearly go out of their way to remove the original, historical context of patriarchal language with which the Bible was written. This is done for the contemporary purpose of satisfying the feminist impulse. Relative to evangelical circles, the controversy has centered mostly on the TNIV published by Zondervan. To be sure this translation is not radical like the previously mentioned ones. Gender inclusive terms are only used for human beings, not for divine persons like Father, Son, and Spirit. Yet, debate continues over the appropriateness for such changes.<sup>7</sup> One of the most disconcerting issues in the current debate is the extent to which evangelical Christians have succumbed to the world spirit of the feminist impulse in such translation approaches:

The elimination of any significant role difference between males and females represents the essence of evangelical egalitarianism. No one in the evangelical camp would deny that the Bible is all-inclusive. However, the Bible, since its inception, in spite of male-generic language, has successfully managed to include all—men and women, boys and girls. It is this biblical notion of inclusion through differentiation, enshrined in male-generic biblical language everywhere, that the TNIV eliminates. Though claiming that the removal is “gender accurate,” there is reason to wonder whether the TNIV committee has imposed onto the inspired text, wittingly or unwittingly, an essential egalitarian principle, without debate or discussion. Future readers of this Bible will never be faced with the issue, because the Bible—that is, this Bible—by its omission, tells me so. In this subtle way, a theological opinion about the inappropriateness of male representation in language (or at least the theological conviction of its unimportance) is given the status of “biblical” authority.<sup>8</sup>

The possibility that gender-inclusive language is being driven by the feminist impulse in this way is highlighted by the fact that the ideological trail often runs from the liberal side of the spectrum to the evangelical side at a later time. In this case, the rise of evangelical discussions about gender-neutral language follows behind by about a decade. Thus, one must be cautious when approaching the issue of allowing gender-neutral translation philosophy since one may even inadvertently be succumbing to the feminist impulse. Practically speaking, if a woman serves as a pastor, it might be easy to pick out which translation she might be prone to use in the pulpit.

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<sup>6</sup> I have not seen this hymnal directly. It is published by Pilgrim in 1995. I am citing it from John Cooper, *Theological Forums* 26 (December 1998) available from <http://rec.gospelcom.net/TF-Dec98cooper.html>; Internet; accessed 29 November 2007. This is a theological journal for the Reformed Ecumenical Council. Cooper does not approve of the translation changes.

<sup>7</sup> This author has addressed the TNIV debate in an earlier article to which the reader can turn for a more complete discussion. See Mike Stallard, “Gender-Neutral Translations: The Controversy Over the TNIV,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 7 (Spring 2003):5-26. See also Rodney J. Decker, “The English Standard Version: A Review Article,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 8 (Fall 2004): 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Jones, “The TNIV: Gender Accurate or Ideologically Egalitarian,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 7 (Fall 2002): 16.

## Hermeneutics and Theological Method

An interesting development in the interpretation of the U. S. Constitution parallels similar deliberations concerning the biblical text. Joseph Story, an early U. S. Supreme Court Justice (1811-1845), described the preferred approach to interpreting the text of the Constitution with these words:

In construing the Constitution of the United States, we are in the first instance to consider, what are its nature and objects, its scope and design, as apparent from the structure of the instrument, viewed as a whole and also viewed in its component parts. Where its words are plain, clear and determinate, they require no interpretation. . . . Where the words admit of two senses, each of which is conformable to general usage, that sense is to be adopted, which without departing from the literal import of the words, best harmonizes with the nature and objects, the scope and design of the instrument.<sup>9</sup>

Story's hermeneutics for understanding the written Constitution are a far cry from contemporary judicial activists—and those who support them—who want to read *into* the text (as a living breathing document) some contemporary ideological or values-driven view of what *should be* as opposed to what actually *is* in the text.

In a similar way, the world of biblical studies is inundated by a plethora of theological readings. By this is meant that the starting point for such readings and interpretations is not the text itself but some concern external to the text. From that vantage point, literal interpretation as grammatical-historical interpretation has no place at the hermeneutical table. Hence, we see on the theological landscape forms of theology such as liberation theology, ecological theology, black theology, gay male theology, and, what is pertinent to our study, feminist or womanist theology. Often some particular class of alleged victims is used as a starting point around which to craft a system of theological insight into righting the ethical behavior of oppressors.

Sometimes the concerns of theological readings are totally foreign to any biblical text. For example, some liberation theology expressions are essentially Marxist systems of belief that form the main message while biblical language is hijacked as slogans to persuade others (e.g., “let my people go” from the Exodus account).<sup>10</sup> In another example, one female, feminist theologian (considered part of the liberation theology movement) commented about the role of a woman as an academic theologian: “Her involvement in liberation theology is not ‘altruistic,’ but it is based on the acknowledgment and analysis of her own oppression as a women in sexist,

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States; with a Preliminary Review of the Constitutional History of the Colonies and the States, Before the Adoption of the Constitution* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, and Company, 1833), I. 3. 402; Story's three volume work is available from [http://www.constitution.org/js/js\\_000.htm](http://www.constitution.org/js/js_000.htm); Internet; accessed 29 November 2007.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Gustavo Gutierrez, a well-known Latin American theologian argued that one influence upon modern theological reflection was Marxist thought: “...contemporary theology does in fact find itself in direct and fruitful confrontation with Marxism, and it is to a large extent due to Marxism's influence that theological thought, searching for its own sources, has begun to reflect on the meaning of transformation of this world and the action of man in history. Further, this confrontation helps theology to perceive what its efforts at understanding the faith receive from the historical praxis of man in history as well as what its own reflection might mean for the transformation of the world” (*A Theology of Liberation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Boopks, 1973], 9-10).

cultural, and theological institutions. Having acknowledged the dimensions of her own oppression, she can no longer advocate the value-neutral, detached stance of the academician.”<sup>11</sup> To parse this statement, one must begin by noting that the female liberation theologian selfishly begins with an understanding of her victimhood as she begins to map out her theological position and activities. She can not and will not come to the text as it is for what it says, but with a preconceived agenda that is value-driven. What value drives the agenda? The answer is the feminist impulse. Such an approach should be avoided by the biblicist because it obviously ignores the grammatical-historical context and the original meaning of the text.

Other times the theological reading adopts a theme that is truly in the Bible. For example, God is surely interested in how people treat the poor (e.g., Pro. 14:31). This is not an isolated theme in the biblical text but occurs frequently and is transdispensational. However, to move it to the center of one’s entire theological world view may cause one to lose perspective of other areas of biblical truth which have priority such as the gospel of eternal life.<sup>12</sup>

In contemporary evangelical theology, there are many current efforts to ground theological systems in some particular insight or doctrinal theme. The incarnation of Christ, the communitarian trinity, the idea of community<sup>13</sup> itself (usually with the Church in mind), and possible combinations of the above are all found as the starting grid for developing one’s theology.<sup>14</sup> While the doctrines of the incarnation, the trinity, and community are valid biblical thoughts in and of themselves, they are not necessarily God’s intended structures for bringing the whole of theology together. However, in theologies of this stripe they sometimes function as a theological reading of the Bible rather than an exegetically-driven approach to grounding the theological enterprise.

### Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic

Similar to the philosophy of theological readings, one recent evangelical attempt to support the idea of women as pastors does so by using many extra-biblical points of culture as the means for developing an ethical support for the position. William Webb has created a system for determining when the biblical text is trans-cultural or culture-dependent which he calls redemptive movement hermeneutic.<sup>15</sup> The approach has three broad strokes.<sup>16</sup> First, one

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<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology” in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation* edited by Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 358-81.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Sider and the Evangelicals for Social Action represent a wing of professing evangelicalism that wishes to elevate the social dimension of Christian witness (see their website at <http://www.esa-online.org/Display.asp?Page=home>). This is not a bad thing, since many Bible-believing churches do not have any serious social action ministries to demonstrate love for the community. The tension arises when the priority of the gospel of eternal life becomes secondary in light of such social efforts.

<sup>13</sup> See Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> One example which expresses itself in terms of interpretation is Jens Zimmerman, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals* (Downers Grove, IL: 2001). Some surface similarities may exist between Webb and Charles Kraft (see Charles H. Kraft, “Supracultural Meanings Via Cultural Forms:

determines the contrast between the culture of Bible times and the actual teaching of the Bible on a particular issue. In this contrast one learns which way the Bible points relative to its own current culture. For example, the Bible, although it has slavery in it, is more lenient and less cruel in its understanding of slavery than the cultural milieu of the Ancient Near East. Second, the interpreter must find the direction (redemptive movement) that the Bible itself shows along its own historical path. That is, over time does the Bible get stricter or more lenient on a particular issue like slavery? In the case of slavery, the New Testament presentation seems to have moved beyond the Old Testament to a teaching that the slave and master are equals in Christ even though slavery as an institution is not removed. Third, the interpreter can perform an extrapolation of the trajectory of the first two points into modern day culture on a particular ethical point. For example, in our own modern culture we can affirm the need to eliminate slavery altogether. Thus, in the end, we can move to an ethical position for our day that is superior to the ethics of the Bible, but we can only do so because the direction of redemptive movement within the system.

How does such a system work out to support women as pastors in local churches? Similar to the example of slavery, one can argue that (1) the Bible has a higher view of women than the culture of its day, (2) within the Bible the role of women improves with the advent of Jesus and the Church although the role of pastor is forbidden for them in the text, and (3) one can formulate a view favorable to the present day role of women pastors since the direction of the Bible relative to its own culture is opening up in greater ways for women.

Along with Webb's general approach here is an exegetically indefensible view that the role of submission for women to their husbands is the result of the fall in Genesis 3 and not part of creation design in Genesis 2. In this way, just as illnesses are a consequence of the Fall but we seek to heal people with modern medicine to diminish its impact, the submissiveness of women, which is likewise a result of the Fall, can be diminished by our more enlightened understandings allowing them to be equal to men in leadership roles in the home and in the church.

What can be said of such an approach? Apart from questionable exegesis at times, the redemptive movement hermeneutic assumes a kind of universal culture in both the Ancient Near East and in modern times.<sup>17</sup> Which culture from among many cultures in the Ancient Near East will serve as the starting point of initial comparison? In addition, it assumes that this information can be clearly known which is doubtful in many cases. Second, it models the idea of progression in the Bible rather than the content of the Bible. Third, it assumes we can know and evaluate today's culture clearly. Related to this, one must also ask which culture among many choices is appropriate for our modern day extrapolation. It is quite clear that the redemptive movement hermeneutic will not work in modern day Saudi Arabia even though that particular culture

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Anthropologically Informed Theology" in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation* edited by Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 309-43.

<sup>16</sup> Within these three broad strokes, Webb has developed sub-points giving various steps to develop. These steps number over fifty thus producing a rather large, unwieldy system that will not be deemed practical if pushed on all particulars.

<sup>17</sup> For a more complete presentation of a refutation of the redemptive movement hermeneutic, see Mike Stallard, "The Implications of the Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 9 (Spring 2005): 5-29 and Wayne Grudem, "Should We Move beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 (June 2004): 299-346.

considers itself to have developed quite a bit further than the Christian Bible. Fourth, it denies the sufficiency of Scripture since ethical decisions require a rather large amount of extra-biblical information. Finally, it is not all clear that the view actually embraces inerrancy. Thus, it will not function well as a method to obtain an evangelical approach to ethics.

In the end, Webb has crafted a method that incorporates both Scripture and culture as authoritative. In the presentation, culture seems to have the upper hand. This is illustrated by another article written by Webb entitled “Balancing Paul’s Original-Creation and Pro-Creation Arguments.”<sup>18</sup> The need for such balancing is obvious for the evangelical egalitarian when confronted with the clear creation and design arguments of 1 Timothy 2 based upon Genesis 2. However, what is telling is the subtitle of the article: “1 Corinthians 11:11-12 in Light of Modern Embryology.” What is the basis for understanding the text of Scripture? It is not the actual text. Modern scientific discoveries and understandings never even considered by the original authors reign over biblical understanding. Methodologically, this is not a biblically-based approach to integration of text and extra-biblical issues. The cart is leading the horse. The feminist impulse from culture is leading interpreters to a (wrong) theological conclusion.<sup>19</sup> House comments that influential feminists within evangelicalism have “developed an obviously inadequate view of inspiration and an unacceptable hermeneutic. In seeking to cause the biblical text to speak their language, rather than learning its language, these feminists have often eisegeted the Scriptures and fabricated inconsistencies and tensions in Paul of which he was unaware.”<sup>20</sup>

What is the real issue at stake here? Ultimately, the Bible has lost its full authority. Obedience to its clear outlines has been dismissed in favor of a present day, politically correct notion of how things ought to be. Thus, disobedience is one of the consequences of the feminist pulpit.

### The Doctrine of the Trinity

Another area which is damaged by the feminist impulse can be found in theology proper. In particular, the orthodox understanding of the Trinity must be distorted to coincide with feminist understandings. This comes to the forefront in even trying to use the traditional words to describe the persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit. Two of the three terms are masculine thus inviting patriarchal notions of God. Feminist egalitarians prefer to use other terms like Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer instead. However, such words do not yield the same information. They could deny the eternal nature of the relationships involved and lead to modalistic perceptions. In addition, both the Father and the Son are clearly referred to as

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<sup>18</sup> This article was given to the present author by personal email from William Webb, 8 April 2004. It is not known if the article has been published.

<sup>19</sup> One interesting Catholic and detailed study of the integration of Scripture and extra-biblical sources comes to opposite conclusions to Webb. See Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> H. Wayne House, “Paul, Women, and Contemporary Evangelical Feminism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (Jan 1979): 53.

Creator. Thus, the proposed terms have the wrong range of meanings to substitute for the traditional terminology.<sup>21</sup>

Another key doctrine to be investigated in this respect is the subordination of the Son to the Father. Traditionally, it has been asserted that Christ was submissive to the Father functionally, while still being equal in essence with the Father. In the feminist understanding of male and female roles, it is claimed that a submissive role functionally and socially (in the family or in the church) automatically means that the woman does not have equal status with a man. Thus, in the egalitarian approach, subordination and equality can not be true simultaneously. However, this contradicts the classic expression of the Trinity. Orthodoxy affirms that one can have functional subordination and at the same time possess ontological equality.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently, for the feminist impulse to hold sway, the doctrine of the Trinity must be altered to fit the desired scheme. This is usually done by a simple denial of subordination in the Trinity. For the last fifteen years or so it has been common to see feminist egalitarians quote the early church fathers to that effect. For example, Gilbert Bilezikian, a leading egalitarian, has written a rather confusing statement:

Because there was no order of subordination within the Trinity prior to the Second Person's incarnation, there will remain no such thing after its completion. If we must talk of subordination it is only a functional or economic subordination that pertains exclusively to Christ's role in relation to human history. Christ's *kenosis* affected neither his essence nor his status in eternity.

Except for occasional and predictable deviations, this is the historical Biblical trinitarian doctrine that has been defined in the creeds and generally defended by the Church, at least the western Church, throughout the centuries... Thus it is impossible within the confines of orthodoxy to derive a model for an order of hierarchy among humans from the ontological structure of the Trinity, since all three persons are equal in essence. Moreover, because Christ's functional subjection is not an eternal condition but a task-driven, temporary phase of ministry, it is presented in Scripture as a model of servanthood and mutual submission for all believers (Phil 2:5–11). Because of its temporary character, Christ's subjection does not lend itself as a model for a permanent, generically-defined male/female hierarchy.<sup>23</sup>

In his zeal Bilezikian has said too much. While it is true that the church fathers and the orthodox view claims there is no ontological hierarchy or subordination within the Godhead, neither do complementarians suggest such a thing. Bilezikian allows for functional subjection of Christ, but that is exactly what complementarians do as well. So what is going on? The egalitarian here

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<sup>21</sup> For this discussion, I have followed the excellent work of Bruce A. Ware, "Tampering with the Trinity: Does the Son Submit to the Father?" *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 6 (Spring 2001):6-7.

<sup>22</sup> It is impossible to read the Gospel of John and not see both an idea of subordination on the part of Jesus to the Father and equality with Him. In John 1:1 and throughout, Jesus is God. In John 14:28, the Father is greater than the Son. Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 demonstrates this tension in God who has become flesh.

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, "Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/1 (March 1997): 60-61.



has not understood church history well, since it can easily be proved that the church fathers argued clearly for both an eternal ontological trinitarian scheme and an eternal functional or economic trinity.<sup>24</sup> After all, the incarnation of Christ is certainly a fact that will be forever true which illustrates that hierarchy will continue at some level. However, Bilezikian seems to be making a second mistake here by *assuming* that complementarians are making ontological statements about men and women in asserting diverse and hierarchical roles. The submission of the female in matters of home and church is not an ontological matter, but one of functional design. The complementarians correctly suggest that the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity provides the perfect model for understanding how women are still equal to men within the complementarian framework. In the end, the egalitarian simply assumes the notion, contrary to sound doctrine, that equality of essence necessarily means the absence of any functional hierarchy. Consequently, the doctrine of the Trinity is at best misunderstood and at worst distorted by those advancing the feminist impulse.

### Christology

The feminist impulse has also impacted the doctrine of Christ. Two particular avenues of influence cover both the person and the work of Christ. As to Christ's person, we are all familiar with the modern controversy which has swirled around Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.<sup>25</sup> There are many angles to this story that are well known, including its claim to be based upon historical facts that upon investigation are a bit shadowy.<sup>26</sup> However, for our purposes here, we want to highlight the introduction of the Sacred Feminine into discussions about Jesus Christ. One of the themes of the book is that the Church hid the fact that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene because this would have proven He was not God, contrary to the decisions of the church councils. But beyond this, this fanciful theory promotes the idea that the Church put down women and protected their male monopoly as they forced Mary Magdalene into historical exile. In the book, the character Robert Langdon asserts that "Powerful men in the early church 'conned' the world by propagating lies that devalued the female and tipped the scales in favor of the masculine."<sup>27</sup> What the world needs now, according to this storyline, is the rediscovery of the Sacred Feminine to restore truth and balance to history.

Of course, Dan Brown's work is fictional. Nonetheless, its claim to be rooted in some measure of historical accuracy forces a response. From the biblical point of view, Jesus is God (John 1:1, Rom. 9:5, Heb. 1:8, 1 Cor. 8:5-6, Phil. 2:9-11, etc.). There is the assumption in Dan Brown's presentation that if Jesus were married, he could not be God. Bock responds forcefully to this claim from another angle: "The novel claims that a married Jesus

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<sup>24</sup> Peter R. Schemm, "Trinitarian Perspectives on Gender Roles," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 6 (Spring 2001): 14; See also Ware, "Tampering with the Trinity," 8-10; Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship" in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 103; Thomas R. Schreiner, "Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16" in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 124-39.

<sup>25</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> See Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Da Vinci Code*, 124.

would need to be covered up by the church because it would expose the fact that Jesus was not divine. However, it is not a given that had Jesus been married, this would have resulted in a question about his divinity, because the church has always confessed the full humanity of Jesus and the status of marriage would fit in nicely with such a claim. Thus, even the premise of the theological problem the novel sees for a married Jesus is false.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, it is not clear why Brown takes this approach. However, in Brown’s worldview Jesus was married and merely human rather than the God-man of Scripture. This is a distortion of the biblical portrait of Christ that has been wrought by the pursuit of the Sacred Feminine.

In addition to the person of Christ, the view of the work of Christ has been impacted by feminist leanings. In particular, the notion of a nonviolent atonement has emerged in recent times, a view which constitutes a version of the Christus Victor atonement theory of Gustaf Aulen from the earlier twentieth century. Aulen’s view is itself an adaptation of the older ransom-to-Satan view of the atonement.<sup>29</sup> In feminist influenced pictures of the atonement, there is a tendency to believe that the penal substitutionary and moral influence theories encourage female submission while the ransom theory points women to liberation.<sup>30</sup> McKnight summarizes: “Some feminists have repudiated the cross as an instrument of powerful violence against the oppressed and powerless, and have therefore sought out a theory of atonement that is virtually cross-less... The cross, so they are arguing, justifies violence against the weak.”<sup>31</sup>

In addition, the idea of male harshness is mirrored according to this view in the penal substitutionary view of Jesus on the cross. It is modern feminist and womanist understandings that can rescue the atonement from its harsh punishment angle. Jesus did not and could not die to satisfy the vengeful wrath of a harsh Father. In fact, such a view according to the nonviolent understanding would be “divine child abuse.”<sup>32</sup> Weaver words it this way:

The image of narrative Christus Victor avoids all the problematic elements in classic atonement images, particularly those of satisfaction atonement. It reflects the ecclesiological world view of the early rather than the medieval church. It is grounded in assumptions of nonviolence -- the nonviolence of Jesus -- rather than violence. In particular, it does not assume retribution, or the assumption that injustice is balanced by the violence of punishment. It does not put God in the role of chief avenger, nor picture God as a child abuser. And it is abundantly obvious that God did not kill Jesus nor need the death of Jesus in any way. Jesus does suffer, but it is not as an act of passive submission to undeserved suffering. Jesus carries out a mission to make the rule of God present and visible, a mission to bring and to give life. To depict the reign of God as made visible by Jesus, it is necessary to make use of the entire life and teaching of Jesus,

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<sup>28</sup> Darrell L. Bock, “Christian Analysis of Da Vinci Code: What Dan Brown Did Not Tell You – Three Errors Plus a Few More,” available from <http://www.thetruthaboutdavinci.com/christian-analysis-of-da-vinci-code.html>; Internet; accessed 1 December 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor* (Reprint ed., New York: Macmillan, 1969).

<sup>30</sup> This is discussed on Scot McKnight’s post February 16, 2006 on his blog *Jesus Creed*; Internet; accessed 30 November 2007.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Christopher D. Marshall, “Atonement, Violence, and the Will of God,” available from <http://www.goshen.edu/mqr/pastissues/jan03marshall.html>; Internet; accessed 16 July 2005.

rather than focus only on his death. When this mission threatens the forces of evil, they retaliate with violence, killing Jesus. This suffering is not something willed by nor needed by God and it is not directed Godward. To the contrary, the killing of Jesus is the ultimate contrast between the nonviolent reign of God and the rule of evil.<sup>33</sup>

In short Weaver argues that the “death of Jesus is not needed to satisfy God’s honor.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Weaver’s book *The Nonviolent Atonement*<sup>35</sup> is advertised on amazon.com as a work involved with “sharp debates about the death of Jesus sparked by feminist and womanist theologians.”<sup>36</sup>

What can be made of such feminist-induced theories of the atonement? First and foremost, they must be rejected in favor of the biblical teaching on the matter.

The biblical evidence lines up with the penal satisfaction view. It is hard to take passages like Isaiah 53, 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 2:21-24, and Hebrews 9-10 in any other way. However, Christians must be honest about the harshness contained in the view, at least harshness as some would view the term. In the penal substitutionary view, violence is done to Jesus. Although the spiritual aspects of the atonement are not as obvious, Mel Gibson’s *The Passion* shows with horrifying details the physical violence involved. That Jesus experienced such violence can not be doubted. It is recorded in all the Gospels. However, the idea that Jesus did this as a substitution and that even in His soul he experienced judgment (as Isaiah 53 notes) for the sins of others shows that the intent of the Atonement is *punishment*, a harsh word to many in our culture.<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, the conclusion can be drawn quite easily that the feminist impulse is impacting current discussions of the work of Christ on the cross in a direction away from the biblical teaching of penal satisfaction. Such wrong views have distorted the atonement by abandoning the doctrine of propitiation. A pastor with such leanings, male or female, may indeed have a crossless gospel to preach.

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<sup>33</sup> J. Denny Weaver, “Violence in Christian Theology,” *Cross Currents* 51 (Summer 2001); Internet; accessed 30 November 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). For an excellent critical review of Weaver’s work, see Telford Work, “Review of J. Denny Weaver’s *The Nonviolent Atonement*,” *Theology Today* 59 (October 2002): 510-513; available at <http://www.westmont.edu/~work/articles/nonviolent.html>; Internet; accessed 30 November 2007. Also see Mike Stallard, “The Tendency to Softness in Postmodern Attitudes about God, War, and Man,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 10 (Spring 2006): 105-12.

<sup>36</sup> Accessed 30 November 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Mike Stallard, “Tendency to Softness,” 107.

## Biblical Anthropology

The modern issue raised by the feminist impulse is at its core the nature of men and women. In this pursuit there is a focus on continuity between the genders more than discontinuity. Later articles in this series will deal with exegetical matters and implications in key verses such as Genesis 2. Without entering into the details, there are a few theological implications that can be mentioned that help to frame the impact of the modern feminist impulse upon a view of men and women.

First, according to the Genesis creation account there is a balanced treatment between continuity and discontinuity between men and women. In Genesis 1:27, both men and women are considered made in God's image. In fact, the relational aspect between men and women, far more than the biological and instinctive relationships of God's other creatures, is related to the fact that men and women are image-bearers or the "living statues" of God in culture. In this respect, men and women are absolutely the same. However, in the next chapter, the role assignments that God gives are different. The calling and commands are given to Adam. Then, Eve is made to be a "helper" to him (2:18). This supportive role of the woman does not make her less in the world. God's design is clear. There is both continuity and discontinuity between men and women. There is a continuity of essence demonstrated by the fact that both are made in the image of God. However, there is a functional discontinuity with various roles for each in God's economy. The feminist neither recognizes this clear, biblical teaching nor does justice to its content.

Second, the feminist impulse of our culture intensifies an imbalance in the male-female relationship. If the feminine is to be elevated and emphasized, there is not the desired effect of just bringing the woman up to the level of the man. Instead, what is happening in our culture is a conscious attempt to bring man down. By this is meant the feminization of men and the designation of "maleness" as bad. We saw this in the earlier discussion of the nonviolent atonement as male-driven views demonstrating male harshness (like penal satisfaction) were to be rejected. Why? They are rejected largely because they have masculine overtones which are defined as *harshness*. Marshall, in a negative assessment of belief in a penal substitutionary death of Christ, comments that satisfaction theology "reflects the 'law and order' priorities of those thoroughly identified with the prevailing system-ruling-class, white, *male* clerics (emphasis added)."<sup>38</sup> The conservative, anti-feminist political activist Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum complained: "The feminist battalions are even on the warpath against the right to be a boy. In elementary schools across America, recess is rapidly being eliminated, shocking numbers of little boys are drugged with psychosomatic drugs to force them to behave like little girls, and zero-tolerance idiocies are punishing boys for indulging in games of normal boyhood such as cops and robbers."<sup>39</sup> If such an anti-male environment actually exists in our culture, it must not be allowed into the Church. To those who would argue from the feminist side that the snuffing out of masculinity will cause the decline of murder, rape, and war, Schlafly points out the irony: "Of course, when you wipe out masculine men, you also eliminate gentlemen, the kind of men who would defend and protect a lady—like gentlemen who stepped aside so that, of the people who

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<sup>38</sup> Marshall, "Atonement, Violence and the Will of God."

<sup>39</sup> Phyllis Schlafly, "Feminism Meets Terrorism," Eagle Forum, January 23, 2002; available at <http://www.eagleforum.org/column/2002/jan02/02-01-23.shtml>; Internet; accessed 1 December 2007.

survived the sinking of the Titanic, 94 percent of those in first-class and 81 percent of those in second-class were women.”<sup>40</sup> Would it ever be possible that elevating women (in the way that feminists desire) could be done so that the good side of masculinity remains? It is unlikely. To tamper with God’s design always has unintended consequences in culture.

However, the question goes deeper. John Piper, speaking of the true, biblical vision of manhood and womanhood, noted that “we must commend the beauty as well as the truth of the vision. We must show that something is not only right but also good. It is not only valid but also valuable, not only accurate but also admirable.”<sup>41</sup> With that in mind, he offers two helpful definitions:

At the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and protect women in ways appropriate to a man’s differing relationships.<sup>42</sup>

At the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman’s differing relationships.<sup>43</sup>

In God’s design, the man offers strength and stability; the woman offers depth of beauty with relational and nurturing power that a man could never muster. It is a good trade. It is a marriage made in heaven. The specific design for men finds expression for some in the role of pastor as God leads them in the life of His Church.

### Ecclesiology

The main issue for church life for the evangelical, Bible-believing Christian should always be “what does God’s Word say?”<sup>44</sup> The issue of women being pastors is simpler than many make it out to be. If the Bible teaches that women should not be pastors, then it is disobedience to God on the part of any church and any people who allow for the practice of women pastors. On the other hand, if the Bible teaches that women can be pastors, then those who are preventing them from being pastors are preaching a false message and are disobedient. The problem is not communication skills. Many female speakers using the Bible have done far better at communicating than some men have done. However, the issue is not entirely skill sets. The overall concern is obedience to truth. The complementarian position is true to the Scriptures (as other articles in this series will show). Therefore, it must be practiced in obedience to the God who designed men and women and how the church is to function.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> John Piper, “A Vision of Biblical Complementarity” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 33.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>44</sup> This section will not deal with any implications for church life mentioned in the various passages in the debate about women pastors since these passages will be dealt with in following articles.

However, one often overlooked implication is the need for our churches to champion a positive statement about the role of women in a local church. The debate over whether women can be pastors sometimes leaves the impression that women can do nothing in the church or that all we are interested in is the pastoral role. In our churches, though, it is important to remember that few are actually pastors in any given congregation—that means that few *men* in a congregation function as pastors. What about the other men as well as the women? What can be lost in all of this is the biblical teaching of how the body of Christ functions. Pastors carry out a certain role of praying, teaching, equipping, and overseeing. They do not perform all functions of the ministry and, in fact, should focus on getting others to do ministry (Eph. 4:11-16). In fact, the Scriptural model for ministry yields a picture in which every church member is significant and has a needy role within the body (1 Cor. 12). There are many ministries that can not be done by the pastor (he is not really gifted or qualified to do them!) and there are people who will listen to others—including women—who would not listen to a formal church leader. It is such a doctrinal context out of which we should discuss the positive role of women in a local church.

The specifics of what women can do to support the ministry of a local church have some clear Scriptural warrant. It seems that a woman can let her house (along with the hospitality she would bring to the occasion) serve as a place for missionaries to stay (Paul) even perhaps for Bible study and church planting efforts (Lydia, Acts 16:14-15). Women can be involved in sharing the faith (Priscilla, Acts 18:26; woman at the well; John 4). They can even serve others to the point of risking their lives (Rom. 16:3-4). Women can teach other women, and, in fact, are commanded to do so, although the instruction does not necessarily entail doing a Bible study (Titus 2:4).

However, what appears to be the supreme contribution of a woman to her local church, if she has a family, is to care for and strengthen her family. Local churches do not do well without strong families who are growing spiritually. The often-debated Titus 2 exhortations to the woman with a family show the significance of her role as she is submissive to her husband and preventing anyone from maligning the word of God on her account. What our culture appears not to understand is the importance of motherhood and the management of a home.<sup>45</sup> The feminist impulse looks at the role traditionally carried out as consigning women to be cooks and maids. However, this is a gross cheapening of what the role actually entails. Not only does the woman set the tone of the family, but it takes quite a bit of skill and hard work to manage a home. This is not an insignificant undertaking. The landscape of current culture—its broken families, its wayward children, its malaise of spirit—is proof enough of the significance of a mother and homemaker—manager. Consequently, one of the most valuable things a woman can offer her home and her church is her opposition to the feminist impulse.

## Conclusion

Based upon the previous survey of doctrinal controversies, a mosaic can be constructed that shows why accurate teaching in the matter of women pastors is necessary. If a pastor or church allows for women pastors by capitulating to the feminist impulse in our culture, and if that pastor (male or female) preaches a message based upon the direction of feminist-induced doctrines as presented here, he or she (1) will preach from a gender-neutral translation, (2) start

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<sup>45</sup> For a good corrective, see Dorothy Patterson, “The High Calling of Wife and Mother in Biblical Perspective” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 364-77.

his or her theology from a cultural vantage-point instead of the Bible, (3) teach a distorted view of the Trinity, (4) present a Jesus who is merely human, (5) reject the good news that Jesus died on the cross to satisfy the wrath of God against sin, (6) voice the denigration of maleness, and (7) disobey the clear teaching of Scripture about the need for male leadership in our churches. To be sure, not every “progressive” person affected by the feminist impulse will do all of these since this is a list of both evangelical and nonevangelical ideas relative to feminism and egalitarianism. However, the contrast is quite refreshing when I listen to my bride of twenty-seven years who reads the text at face value and confidently affirms that God’s ways are best, even when the conclusion is that women should not be pastors. For in the end, nothing is taken away from women. They simply remain free to carry out the high and exciting calling that God has devised for their lives in a different arena.