

A Hermeneutical-Ethical Approach to Women's Role in the Church¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

Rarely perhaps has any generation shown so little interest as ours does in any kind of theoretical and systematic ethics . . . The reason for this is not to be sought in any supposed ethical indifference on the part of our period. On the contrary it arises from the fact that our period, more than any earlier period in the history of the west, is oppressed by a superabounding reality of concrete ethical problems.²

So wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the early 1940s. Ethical problems have, if anything, become more complex and confusing in the more than fifty years since he authored those words. No one who has reflected on the problem of ethics can fail to perceive that fact.

This study is an excursion into the hermeneutical aspect of ethical construction. I have devoted only the final few pages to application and even there my primary concern is to clear the way for ethical construction rather than to do it. I think it is far more critical to ascertain (1) how and with what resources and methods one can forge a Christian ethic and (2) what makes an ethic specifically *Christian*. Although women's role in the Church is the central issue of this study, my goal is more comprehensive.

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² Dietrich Bonhoeffer quoted in John De Gruchy, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*, San Francisco: Collins Publishers, 1987, 222.

My objective is to work toward an adaptable hermeneutical model, one that is applicable to an array of ethical questions. That is another reason I felt it was necessary to push the hermeneutical issue as far as possible.³

II. THE BIBLE, ETHICAL CONSTRUCTION, AND WOMEN

In developing a hermeneutical-ethical model for ascertaining women's role in the Church, one is immediately confronted with a multitude of questions, problems, and options.

Should the Church employ Scripture in ethical construction or is Scripture wholly irrelevant to modern ethical questions? If the Church chooses to use Scripture, which texts deserve the status of theological "control" texts? To express that last question differently: Which texts summarize the central thrust of biblical theology on women's role in the Church? Are texts that describe the order of creation or texts that describe the new creation order paramount? Once these decisions are made, difficulties nonetheless persist: Even if we can reduce the relevant texts to comparatively few, thorny exegetical problems remain.

The Church also must address questions of theological-ethical construction at the canonical level. Are some problematic texts simply examples of culturally located concerns not applicable to our situation and therefore not very important in the construction of Christian ethics? Can we rightly ignore the troublesome passages in the Pastorals and the NT household codes as post-Pauline perversions of the Apostle's

³ Perhaps some readers will deem this aim to be too ambitious. I certainly do not want to be perceived as underestimating the difficulties involved in ethical construction. But I am also persuaded that despite the obstacles, Christians not only must tackle these problems intellectually but also must act decisively. Christians cannot afford to be perpetually immobilized by the so-called "paralysis of analysis."

By arguing for action in the face of uncertainty, however, I am not endorsing intellectual, confessional, and ethical rigidity. Praxis must always be tensively combined with rigorous intellectual work and our beliefs and practices must be tentative and open to change if additional evidence requires it. The finite nature of human knowledge means that absolute certainty will always be beyond our grasp. The danger exists, therefore, that the quest for knowledge and certainty can lead to inaction and quietism. However, the Church, as the kingdom community, cannot abdicate its vocation as the "light of the world" while its scholars endlessly debate theological and ethical issues (Mt. 5:13-16; Phil. 2:14-16; Eph. 5:8-11).

For a thorough discussion of the relationship between critical exegesis and the Church's exegesis and use of the Bible as Scripture see Charles Cosgrove's forthcoming work, *The Right to Be Israel* (unpublished manuscript, 1995).

egalitarian gospel?⁴ Can we disregard them as texts governed by a situation wherein the Church was becoming increasingly institutionalized and was seeking to acclimate itself to its Greco-Roman milieu? Indeed, should we press the question and critique the canon as the product of patriarchal ecclesiastics who marginalized as heretical the voices of egalitarian Christian communities? Should we therefore take ancient “heretical” writings with equal seriousness in our theological-ethical construction?

Other complex socio-historical questions arise. Since the Bible evolved in largely patriarchal societies and is, as far as is discernible, principally the work of men, how can it be appropriated by women who seek liberation from precisely such male-dominated structures and histories? Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza⁵ contends that it is only after the application of a rigorous gynocentric methodology that feminist scholars can salvage portions of Scripture from its thoroughgoing patriarchal origin and content. Indeed, Fiorenza considers the Bible to be another artifact of antiquity wherein patriarchy has effectively erased women’s contribution to the formation of that history. Accordingly, Fiorenza rejects, for instance, attempts by Pauline scholars to extirpate from the biblical text Paul’s contribution to the oppression of women through a critical apologetical method. Furthermore, Fiorenza opposes the neo-orthodox “essence-accident” model of theological construction. One cannot abstract a transcendent liberating essence from a written medium permeated with patriarchy. The *medium is the essence*; it is codified in the thought-forms of patriarchy and buttresses a patriarchal social construction of reality destructive to women. Fiorenza maintains, therefore, that

⁴ See 1 Tim. 2:11–15; 5:11–16; Titus 2:3–5; Eph. 5:21–6:9; 1 Pet. 2:18–3:7. Many NT scholars believe the Pastorals (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus), Ephesians, and the Petrine epistles were written not by the authors claimed for these works, but by their later disciples. According to this view, these epistles represent not the actual theology of Peter and Paul but only a possible trajectory of their theology. For a critical survey that denies the apostolic authorship of the Pastorals, Ephesians, and the Petrine letters see Werner Georg Kümmel’s discussion of these works in his *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. by Howard Clark Kee, rev. ed., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975). For a critical analysis that affirms the apostolic authorship of these works see the relevant portions of Donald Guthrie’s *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990). Guthrie’s volume also contains a helpful discussion of epistolary pseudepigrapha (*Ibid.*, 1011ff.).

⁵ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York: Crossroad, 1989.

the Bible historically has legitimized the oppression of women and continues to foster women's subjugation in the Church and residually in Western society.

I could enumerate more questions, yet these are certainly enough to clarify the depth and complexity of the issues involved. My goal herein is to interact critically with some of these questions in order to provide a possible direction for Christian ethical construction.

III. THE FEMINIST CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE BIBLE

I have already reviewed some of the critical questions and concerns Fiorenza articulates in her development of a feminist hermeneutical model for biblical interpretation. I now will delineate her model more completely and summarize what seems to me to be its key elements, insights, and problems.

Fiorenza's critique of biblical interpretive methodology cuts across the Christian interpretive enterprise in both its descriptive and constructive phases. An implicit maxim still obtains among many biblical scholars that their work is neutral and objective whereas the work of theologians is partial and subjective. Fiorenza rejects such a dichotomy as an illusion: historical-critical biblical interpretation has in fact figured prominently in the "legitimization of societal and ecclesiastical patriarchy."⁶ Historical reconstruction is a selective philosophical process that produces a theoretical model of how existing socio-cultural reality developed. Since the prevailing paradigm for understanding and constructing history is androcentric, such historical reconstruction has nearly eradicated women's contribution to human history.⁷ Therefore, through its "linguistic reality constructions"⁸ — what I might call its "narrative history" — patriarchy has obstructed women's empowerment. Feminist scholars therefore contend that no value-free historical analysis is possible; rather, they self-consciously affirm a feminist model of historical reconstruction, one rooted in women's experience of oppression, and attempt to retrieve and reclaim women's history, a history obscured by patriarchy.

As shown, Fiorenza insists that feminist scholarship, in its theological task, cannot adopt an approach to Scripture that tries to distill a

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xvi–xvii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

transhistorical theological center from the “accident” of Scripture’s patriarchal historical formation. To do so is not to grasp fully or is to blur the thoroughgoing patriarchal nature of the Bible: “The Bible is not just interpreted from a male perspective, as some feminists [argue]. Rather, it is manmade because it is written by men and is the expression of a patriarchal culture.”⁹ In Fiorenza’s view, the essence-accident approach also tends to minimize and dehistoricize the sufferings of Christian women of the past. Feminist scholars must instead recover as a “subversive memory” the struggles of Christian women concealed by the patriarchal biblical text to enliven hope of women’s restoration to the center of Church life and theology.¹⁰ A feminist critical hermeneutic must move behind the patriarchal “reality” the Bible portrays to reconstruct women’s place in the Bible’s socio-cultural history. According to Fiorenza, feminist critics must also avoid exegetically debating biblical texts about women (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:2–16, etc.) because these texts are androcentric texts of patriarchy that were composed in harmony with its skewed vision of women and the world.¹¹

Given such an understanding of Scripture as the product of oppressive patriarchy, the question arises of how Christian feminist theologians are to employ Scripture in their theological construction. For Fiorenza, a feminist hermeneutic must reject any doctrine of biblical inspiration or any construal of the Bible that connects revelation materially with the text of Scripture. Feminist theologians must develop a feminist critical consciousness that accepts as revelatory only biblical impulses that cohere “with women’s struggle for liberation from all patriarchal oppression.”¹² Again, this is not biblically located revelation. Rather, the locus of revelation is “the life and ministry of Jesus as well as in the discipleship community of equals called forth by him.” Fiorenza’s revelatory model, therefore, “locates revelation not in texts but in Christian experience and community.”¹³ Christian feminist scholars must apply a “hermeneutic of

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13. It is of course not surprising that many Christian feminists logically have concluded that such an understanding of Scripture requires that they altogether reject the Bible and become post-biblical Christian feminists, or even reject Christianity completely and become post-Christian feminists.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 34, 41. See also *Ibid.*, 35: “[N]ot only women’s oppression but also women’s power [is] the locus of revelation.”

suspicion” to all biblical texts and to the “history of [the Bible’s] exegesis and [its] contemporary interpretation.”¹⁴

An important responsibility of Christian feminist analysis is the task of critically deciphering the warrants patriarchal biblical texts provide for women’s subjugation. This is done as part of a total program to liberate women politically, culturally, and religiously, because the Bible has contributed to women’s oppression. Feminist scholarship must not therefore try to rescue Scripture from feminist criticism, but must instead delineate and oppose everything in the Bible and biblical interpretation that oppresses and dehumanizes women. At the same time, however, it must affirm those few liberating revelatory moments in Scripture that break through the constraints of the patriarchal text.

In Fiorenza’s model, therefore, Scripture does not function as an “archetype” — “a timeless form that establishes an unchanging timeless pattern” — but instead it is a “prototype.”¹⁵ As this term suggests, the scriptural traditions are therefore open to change and can only become usable through the process of their “feminist transformation.”

To sum up, in the Christian feminist enterprise, Scripture must be subjected to what I would term a “re-traditioning” process in which only texts that promote liberation are useable in feminist theological construction.¹⁶ The feminist critical hermeneutic is consequently a hermeneutical process that maintains contact with biblical traditions, but reaches *behind and beyond the biblical text to women’s history and experience and there discovers the revelatory data for its theological and ethical construction.*

IV. RESOURCES FOR CHRISTIAN ETHICAL CONSTRUCTION

Fiorenza’s hermeneutical model and the program she elaborates based upon it evoke numerous questions. Because of the constraints of space and the need to focus specifically on the hermeneutical aspect of Christian ethical construction, I cannot do full justice to her many provocative proposals. However, I have chosen her as my primary dialogue partner because her approach differs sharply from mine.

¹⁴ Fiorenza in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Letty M. Russell, ed., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985, 130.

¹⁵ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 33–35.

¹⁶ Of course, such texts are not confined to the ecclesiastically defined canon of Scripture. All ancient Judeo-Christian texts can and must be probed in Christian feminism’s “reconstruction of scriptural theology and history” (*Ibid.*, 35).

First, Fiorenza reminds us that wholly value-free, objective analysis of the Bible, indeed of history as a whole, is impossible. Despite the advent of more sophisticated methods of historiography and interpretation, we can never distance ourselves enough from the objects of our investigation to become simply detached observers.

As interpreters — and all Christians, whether professional scholars, students, or churchgoers, are in the broadest sense interpreters — we ought to admit our prejudices and tendencies as part of the overall interpretive process. We need to maintain a critical stance toward the object of our investigation *and* toward our own theological, ideological, and cultural suppositions.¹⁷

Fiorenza's reflections also heighten our awareness of the biblical text's function in the historical process. That is, an important element of *historical* analysis is to ask how the Scriptures have functioned to legitimate a particular view of reality, and how the Scriptures, as an influential tradition, have affected and will affect the unfolding of history. Thus Fiorenza's insight that critical biblical study cannot be reduced to a quest to understand what the text *meant* is a necessary corrective to historicist leanings among biblical critics. If the individual biblical books were only ancient literary remnants of a forgotten civilization such a dispassionate approach might be possible.¹⁸ Scripture, however, has profoundly shaped the course of Western history and continues to affect Western civilization through the Christian churches.

Since most scholars would agree that ancient culture was predominantly patriarchal, Fiorenza's sociological perception that Scripture represents an androcentric linguistic reality construction must be taken

¹⁷ These suppositions involve a whole cluster of relationships that interpenetrate one another: our gender, political orientation, geographical location, religious upbringing, present beliefs, and life experiences. Discourse within the framework of a community, or through constant intellectual interaction by studying a wide variety of material, mitigates some of our inherent limitations. We must recognize, however, that our immediate communities and the larger society in which we live are also subject to the same kind of conditioning. Furthermore, as human beings who have no choice but to participate in this dialogical-cultural process, we are trapped in something of a "catch-22" situation: Without the conceptual frameworks provided by our religious and societal acculturation we would be unable to make any discerning judgments at all.

¹⁸ For a brief discussion of the objectives of and impediments to historical description, see Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa, eds., *A Companion to Epistemology*, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy series (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, Ltd, 1992), 176–79.

seriously by those engaging in Christian historiography. The task of uncovering women's role (as well as their oppression) in Judeo-Christian history should not therefore be relegated to a "women's issue," but should be an integral part of the study of Christian origins.

While acknowledging the validity of Fiorenza's insight that purely objective interpretation is impossible, I am more ambivalent about her consequent insistence that feminists must therefore embrace their tendencies and consciously deploy them in the articulation of a *feminist* hermeneutic, method, and historiography. Certainly, although pure interpretive objectivity is impossible, that does not obviate the need to develop methods with that as the ultimate, if unreachable, goal. It is precisely my training in critical objectivity that enables me to learn from Fiorenza, although her proposals clash at points with my theological and methodological tendencies. Of course, one could argue that I too develop my hermeneutical method based upon my experience and theological orientation. That is true; and there is certainly nothing objectionable about pursuing theological work from within one's confessional stance. Interpreters, however, must hold their confessional assumptions tentatively and *suspiciously* when constructing paradigms for their work. A long-held mandate among critical interpreters is that presuppositions must be open to revision or rejection with continued study. Fiorenza, on the contrary, posits a specifically feminist approach as the indispensable axiom of her hermeneutical, theological, and historiographical method.¹⁹ Moreover, she endows the feminist hermeneutical model with a theological normativeness that subverts the possibility of critiquing it apart from the model's intrinsic dialogical structures (i.e., the women's *ekklesia*). Thus women's experience becomes not just a hermeneutical method or paradigm but in fact the locus of divine revelation.

¹⁹ As we shall see, an inherent methodological implication of theologies of liberation is that only the oppressors, not the oppressed, need to question the presuppositions of their approach. That assumption, though problematic, is not baseless. Certainly if the Church's polity, dogmatics, and theological methods sustain an oppressive status quo, it would be the height of hubris for its interpreters to critique communities seeking freedom from oppression before first looking inwardly to correct the sources of oppression. As will be shown, however, I am not convinced that this insight warrants a revelatory model that locates revelation solely in the experience of oppressed communities.

V. THE WOMEN'S *Ekklesia* AND THE DYNAMICS OF SECTARIANISM

The dynamics of Fiorenza's revelatory and communitarian model resemble in significant ways the sectarian dynamics of the fundamentalist doctrine of biblical inspiration as explicated by James Barr.²⁰ As with the fundamentalist doctrine of inspiration, Fiorenza draws a "tight circle" about her revelatory and communitarian model (i.e., revelation only in the oppressed community) to shield it from criticism. Fiorenza rebuffs those who criticize her model of the women's *ekklesia* because it does not encourage "mutuality with men" but who claim that it instead produces "reverse sexism." Such a critique, Fiorenza counters, does not fully grasp, but rather excuses through craven compromise, the depth of male sexism. Male sexism in fact demands the formation of the radical women's *ekklesia* for women's "spiritual survival" as individuals and as a class.²¹

The logic of the argument, of course, is that only the oppressors can be sexist, not the oppressed. The argument is also somewhat circular. The premise is that male sexism requires the formation of the women's *ekklesia*. Fiorenza contravenes the assertion that her model of the women's *ekklesia* produces "reverse sexism" — and that women and men should instead strive for "mutuality" — by the conclusion that "male sexism" does not make this possible.²²

I am not particularly concerned with the cogency of Fiorenza's logic. What I find interesting are the similarities between the dynamics of Fiorenza's articulation of the women's *ekklesia* (in which her revelatory model plays an important role) and the sectarian dynamics expressed in the fundamentalist doctrine of inspiration. Barr comments that the fundamentalist doctrine of inspiration is an:

argument designed for and produced by, those within the conservative position and for their benefit only. The argument is not only logically circular; it is circular because it is meant to be. It forms a tight circle into which the outsider can break only by totally abandoning his objections and accepting in entirety the world-view of those within . . .²³

²⁰ James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 2nd ed., London: SCM Press, 1981, 261–70.

²¹ *In Memory of Her*, 347.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Barr, 266.

Similarly, Fiorenza's revelatory model locates revelation solely within the confines of a given community, the women's *ekklesia*; and Fiorenza envisions the women's *ekklesia* as an exclusively feminist discursive world. Entrance into that world becomes possible only when one accepts "in entirety the world-view of those within." Fiorenza's paradigm also intentionally operates to resist outside criticism by making such criticism almost impossible. Unless critics adopt the monological discourse of the women's *ekklesia*, their critique is disregarded as illegitimate.

These observations are related to another analogy between the dynamics of sectarianism and Fiorenza's model. Like sectarianism, Fiorenza's paradigm is rooted in a conceptual dualism. Since the women's *ekklesia* is the locus of God's revelatory activity, those outside are by implication dominated by the forces of evil, that is, patriarchy. It is precisely this overarching dualistic structure of the feminist hermeneutic that makes the circular nature of Fiorenza's paradigm both permissible and indispensable.²⁴

One can therefore justifiably describe Fiorenza's theology of the women's *ekklesia* and her corollary doctrine of revelation as a quasi-sectarian construct, for it is marked by sectarianism both conceptually and ecclesiologicaly. It must be emphasized, however, that Fiorenza's model is only quasi-sectarian, because she insists on maintaining contact with the wider Church and world in the ultimate hope of transforming patriarchal structures.

Finally, an additional overlap between fundamentalism's sectarian dynamic and Fiorenza's *ekklesia* of women is sociological. Fundamentalists developed their doctrine of biblical inerrancy in part to preserve their identity and existence in a world increasingly dominated by the forces of secularism. As shown, Fiorenza makes an analogous concern explicit when she argues that patriarchy makes the women's *ekklesia* necessary for women's social and spiritual survival.

I consider making "experience" alone the locus of God's revelatory activity — particularly the experiences of only one segment of the

²⁴ To illustrate the parallel between Fiorenza's construct and the sectarian dynamic: Sectarians claim that their community and witness must exist because of Christendom's apostasy. If a critic were to suggest that, rather than isolating themselves from the wider Church, sectarians ought to be working toward mutual understanding with it, sectarians would reply that the Church's apostasy makes this impossible. Additionally, sectarians usually believe that their group alone interprets the Bible properly and that God reveals His truths only to them. Sectarians thus believe that their community and its experiences are the "locus of revelation."

Church — to be an extremely precarious proposition.²⁵ Many Christian interpreters would hasten to condemn Fiorenza's model on this basis. Yet we must be cautious here. Christians often appeal uncritically to their personal or community experience in the interpretive process. In that sense, Fiorenza merely posits explicitly as part of her hermeneutical model what other Christians employ naively. To argue that God is not revealed in Christian personal and corporate experience, moreover, is to argue that God no longer "speaks" to the community. God would then be a silent God, one who was revealed only in antiquity. I want to clarify, therefore, that I am not arguing that God is not revealed in contemporary Christian experience. What I am disputing is the notion that God's revelation *is confined to experience alone — especially the experience of a single segment of the Christian community.*

Experience is a difficult thing to critique. It is equally difficult to weigh its significance when making normative judgments. Certainly some beliefs based on mutually exclusive appeals to experience can be settled by recourse to critical reflection or study. But it is often not that simple. Fiorenza's experientially based revelatory model is problematic precisely because it cannot be substantiated critically or reflectively. One can point to women whose experience of revelation completely contradicts her model.

For example, Fiorenza insists that a feminist critical hermeneutic is necessary "so that the gospel can become again a 'power for the salvation' of women as well as men."²⁶ Feminist critics engage in this hermeneutical filtering process to revitalize Scripture because they hold that the biblical text is androcentric and articulates a patriarchal world view. But what of those women who have experienced through Scripture the gospel's salvific power without first superimposing a feminist critical

²⁵ Here Fiorenza's position is somewhat puzzling. On the one hand she takes Elizabeth Cady Stanton's statement that "no man ever saw or talked with God" to be central in her hermeneutical construction (*In Memory of Her*, 12, 27). Fiorenza believes that feminists must adopt this insight over against a neo-orthodox essence-accident model because the Bible is fundamentally patriarchal. On the other hand she in one instance observes that Scripture is problematic since it contains only men's experience of revelation, an experience that is androcentrically determined because of the biblical authors' patriarchal world view (*Ibid.*, 34). This view raises the question of why one can be more confident of women's experience of revelation. Are women less sinful or less prone to corrupt God's revelation than men? Fiorenza would probably here resort to the principle of liberation theology that only the oppressed can grasp the Word of God (i.e., revelation).

²⁶ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 31.

consciousness upon the text? What of those women who precisely because of this experience have been empowered to strive for women's full participation in all levels of Church and society? Must one repudiate their experience as the product of an androcentrically indoctrinated consciousness? With what critical hermeneutical axioms can one determine which one of these experiences is revelatory? How can Fiorenza's critical feminist hermeneutic escape the charge of thoroughgoing subjectivism? The logical extent of any argument from experience — even the experience of an entire community — can only be that a thing is true because *we (or I) take it to be true*. It is true or it is revelatory *to me (or to us)*.

If one adopts Fiorenza's model, one is compelled to affirm either a quasi-sectarian ecclesiology or one must speak of *loci of revelations*. God's revelation thus fragments into hundreds of diverse communal experiences.²⁷ Additionally, the feminist "re-traditioning process" devastates the Church's common deposit of tradition and thus obstructs or potentially destroys both intra-denominational and ecumenical dialogue. By locating revelation solely in community experience and rejecting any idea of its material connection to the biblical text, the Church would lose its shared conceptual frames. Furthermore, as Elizabeth Achtemeier observes:

When our experience is the criterion, what overcomes our tendencies to self-interest, to pride, to rationalization, and to sin? What becomes the measure of what is just and unjust? What determines what is true and untrue? What keeps us from avoiding the demand to love our enemy in the form of some domineering, patronizing male, for example?²⁸

²⁷ Fiorenza could argue for the unity of revelation on the grounds that revelation is a gift to oppressed communities. By her model Fiorenza implicitly asserts that only a minority of those who confess to be Christians can receive and correctly interpret the Word of God. The understanding of those outside this minority is invalid. A theological motif of this kind is common to nearly all sectarian movements.

There is also an irony in liberation theology's belief that only the oppressed can rightly interpret the Word of God. If the oppressed alone can "hear" God, does that not make oppression an ontologically superior status before God? If empowerment connotes exclusion from God's "inner circle," would it not be preferable to remain oppressed? Would not the quest for liberation be an apostasy from God?

²⁸ Elizabeth Achtemeier, "The Impossible Possibility: Evaluating the Feminist Approach to Bible and Authority," *Interpretation*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 1988, 51.

No doubt some feminist critics would dismiss my comments as indicative of a narrow consequentialist ethic or a lack of sensitivity to women's plight in the Church. Neither assessment would be correct. Rather, I would contend that over against paradigms that locate revelation in experience alone, the Church must develop revelatory models that take full account of Scripture, community, tradition, and experience. The overwhelming consensus of two millennia of Christian tradition and experience has been the indispensability of the Church's sacred Scriptures to the formation of the Church's identity, theology, and ethics. The Church cannot hope to maintain its identity and chart its path without continual recourse to its sacred traditions — and here I use tradition broadly to encompass the various resources of the Christian faith. Shared traditions are especially important since the Church is a fragmented communion.

The Church's historical experience argues that Christian discourse must be based on the centrality of the whole community and its Scripture. I would therefore contend that the biblical record of the Judeo-Christian community's foundational events and the prophetic-apostolic witness these evoked should stand over against (1) the temptation to resort to a quasi-sectarian hermeneutic that arrogates revelation solely to one segment of the Church and (2) a model of revelation that makes it the possession of Church authorities. Instead, the entire Church must work out of its traditions to discover what warrants, warnings, and trajectories they provide on specific issues. This approach would demand that the most disenfranchised persons in the Church be given first place in the community's dialogue. Indeed, the principle that those at the margins of the Christian community ought to be brought to the center in its theological and ethical construction is a principle at the heart of Jesus' kingdom proclamation. For Jesus, the only real authority in the kingdom is the authority to serve; in God's kingdom the "first will be last, and the last will be first" (Mark 10:31, NRSV; Matt. 20:25–28; Luke 22:24–27).

Certainly Fiorenza maintains a connection with the biblical tradition when she says the "locus of revelation is . . . the life and ministry of Jesus and the movement of women and men called forth by him."²⁹ But with recent developments in Fiorenza's denominational tradition, the Roman Catholic Church, how much longer can her experience-based revelatory

²⁹ *In Memory of Her*, 41.

model affirm the formulation that Jesus and his earliest followers are the “locus of revelation”?³⁰

VI. CRITICISM, EXPERIENCE, AND ETHICAL CONSTRUCTION

We cannot approach the biblical text simply as critics; we must approach it as Jesus’ disciples, expecting to hear and ready to act upon God’s empowering Word. Hence, we must combine a hermeneutic of suspicion with a hermeneutic of obedience in a critical dialogical process.

Christian ethical discourse should take account of a wide variety of sources. Ethical construction must involve a meticulous exegesis of the biblical text using all the critical tools at the interpreter’s disposal.³¹ The feminist critical insight that value-free interpretation is impossible and that Scripture encodes a particular socio-cultural world view would compel interpreters to account for two things. First, our interpretive method must involve self-criticism. We must know what ideologies and assumptions guide us so that interpretation does not become a circular exercise of self-validation. Second, it is clear that Scripture evolved in a patriarchal culture. Study must proceed to see how that world view has influenced the scriptural traditioning process.

The Church must also consider how its traditions and structures contribute to the oppression of women. It must also desist from silencing the voices and experiences of women — who constitute probably the

³⁰ At the behest of the pope, the Roman Catholic Church in its recently completed catechism maintained the Church’s traditional position that women cannot become priests. The Church hierarchy’s justification for this is Jesus. Jesus selected twelve male Apostles, who in turn selected males as their successors: “‘Only a baptized man (*vir* [man]) validly receives sacred ordination [to the priesthood].’ The Lord Jesus chose men (*vir* [men]) to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when they chose collaborators to succeed them in their ministry . . . The Church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord himself. For this reason the ordination of women is not possible” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994, 394, par. 1577).

³¹ This would include critical historiography, sociological analysis, linguistics, and literary study. Often eschewed from criticism but essential for the Church is theological exegesis at the individual book and canonical level. Despite the obstacles, theologians and biblical critics must distill the findings of this work to make it available to the wider Church and world. This is necessary for the Christian community’s proclamation and its nourishment both spiritually and intellectually.

majority of its membership. To do so is to risk silencing the voice of God. For God's Spirit "allots to each one [a charism] individually just as the Spirit chooses" (1 Cor. 12:11, NRSV). Church authorities must stop usurping the divine prerogative by deciding the limits of God's call to women. Finally, the human factor can never be eradicated from ethical construction. People are not objects upon whom we can impose deontological ethical imperatives abstracted from their concrete human situations. We must consider the effects of our ethics: "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit" (Matt 7:18, NRSV).³²

I would therefore affirm a modified form of the essence-accident model — a model Fiorenza repudiates. I believe ethical construction with the heuristic use of such a hermeneutical model (1) more effectively maintains Christian identity by anchoring Christians in their sacred history, (2) provides the Church with a common tradition for critical dialogue, and (3) restrains the exclusivism produced by making the experience of a single community (or a hierarchy) the locus of revelation and right understanding of the gospel. The implementation of this hermeneutical model involves close exegesis of texts, an

³² By rejecting Fiorenza's paradigm of the women's *ekklesia*, I am not thereby repudiating the goal of a community of equal disciples. What I reject is her insistence that revelation is restricted to a single type of community, that the experience of oppressed communities is the locus of this revelation, and that such communities consequently have carte blanche for determining what is revelatory in Scripture.

Additionally, I do not believe the model Fiorenza proposes will produce the goal she desires. Rather, I believe it will further serve to isolate and divide men and women in the Church. Patriarchy, the adversary of women and the women's *ekklesia*, is closely linked with men; I do not see how her model can avoid producing "reverse sexism" since oppression is virtually ontologically identified with maleness. Thus Fiorenza's model alienates not only men but many Christian women as well. Like all dualistic sectarian models, it is absolutist. The belief that God has never spoken to any man is far too reactionary and is an exaggeration — though understandable as a radical response to the treatment women have received in the Church.

Therefore, I would posit the idea of equalitarian movements of dissent. In view of the Church's intransigent systemic oppression of women, Christian women and men must form prophetic movements to witness against the Church's continued oppression of women. I envision such movements as non-schismatic, functioning within and alongside the wider Church communions. The witness of such movements would include the delineation of new structures of worship and polity that would fully utilize women's charisms. Such movements would identify themselves as expressions of an authentic but muted impulse of Christian discipleship. They would vigorously pursue scholarly work, dogmatic construction, and lay education aimed at reforming the Church and integrating women into the centers of Church life.

uncompromising application of critical historiography, hard reflection on one's presuppositions, and the use of a variety of other resources.

I am advocating a critical, theologically nuanced biblicism. Obviously such an approach, if misunderstood and misappropriated, can involve serious difficulties. I will explore some of these problems in the next section.

VII. THE MISUSE OF THE BIBLE IN ETHICAL CONSTRUCTION

It is important to clarify what I intend by a critical and theological biblicism. I am not referring to the quotation of proof-texts. One cannot simply build a list of biblical passages to solve one's ethical dilemmas.³³ We are faithful to Scripture only when we carefully study the relevant passages in their socio-cultural, ecclesial, and literary context as well as in light of broader formal principles enunciated in Scripture. Such study usually produces a far different picture than would result from a simplistic reading.³⁴

One must also avoid a hermeneutic that pits text against text without self-consciously admitting that procedure. One often sees this approach in evangelical discourse on the women's issue. Interpreters who

³³ For example, I recently browsed a fundamentalist journal that boasted of Scripture's ability to provide answers to ethical problems. The extent of this journal's method was something like this: "Divorce and Adultery: Matt. 19:3-9. Fornication: 1 Thess. 4:3-8. Homosexuality: Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10," etc.

³⁴ I would also probably reject a "loose" use of Scripture and Christian categories in ethical construction — depending upon what one means by "loose." We must not treat biblical categories and symbols as if they were ciphers that we can indiscriminately infuse with contemporary ideological constructs. This concern does not mean that Scripture must literally speak to an issue. It is not our questions but our arguments that must relate materially to Scripture. Take for instance nuclear armament. Scripture contains no data on the subject. But we can probe it for larger formal principles, analogies, and even use it to pass negative judgments on erroneous theological conceptions dealing with the issue of nuclear armament. One could argue against those who believe nuclear conflict is inevitable (and that we therefore ought to stockpile weapons) that God, not humans, precipitates the final conflict between good and evil in every biblical apocalyptic scenario. Indeed, one can infer from Scripture that God condemns the accumulation of weapons of mass destruction, for John the Seer warned that God would destroy those who destroy the earth (Rev. 11:18). Instead, God mandated humans to "subdue" the earth by cultivating and nurturing it (Gen. 1:28; 2:15); God did not authorize humans to subjugate and destroy the earth. Biblical images of the Messiah's reign, too, are images of peace and equity, not annihilation (Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-10).

champion women's submission in the Church and society adopt, as their theological control texts, texts that define the orders of creation. Those who advocate women's full equality in Church and society adopt, as their control texts, texts that refer to the new creation order. "Biblical" is the ubiquitous buzzword evangelical scholars use to encapsulate this process of selecting and arranging the scriptural data.

Much of the debate, therefore, centers on several texts or blocks of material. Each party in the debate decides which texts and concepts are theologically central, and all other texts are ordered or reinterpreted to fit within this preconceived framework. Yet there is no forthright admission that specific theological decisions and overarching concepts determine which texts are primary. To do so would open one to the charge of subjectivism; or worse still, to following one's fallen human reasoning instead of Scripture. It is obvious, however, that one cannot regard this process of sifting and organizing the scriptural material as straightforwardly biblical. Indeed, how could this procedure be patently biblical when evangelical scholars interpreting the same scriptural texts produce mutually exclusive results? Despite all the exegetical sophistry this type of approach is only sophisticated proof-texting. Evangelical scholars reduce the debate to whose view is more "biblical"; yet, in reality, their activity is *hermeneutical*, involving many unarticulated intervening steps between interpreted text and modern practice. It is neither honest nor helpful, however, to imply that the movement from ancient biblical text to contemporary application is simple and straightforward. Christian ethical construction must not degenerate into methodological naivety. Scholars must make their hermeneutic explicit and work consistently. If consistency is not possible, it must be admitted.³⁵

One sees something similar, but more sophisticated, among mainline exegetes. For example, many Pauline scholars simply dispense with

³⁵ A full discussion of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this article. For some orientation on the women's debate among evangelicals, see Alvera Mickelsen, ed., *Women, Authority, and the Bible: An Evangelical Breakthrough on the Biblical Debate*, Downers Grove, IL and Basingstoke, Hants, U.K.: InterVarsity and Marshall Pickering, 1986; John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991; and Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984, 1175–84. For historical and hermeneutical analysis of the issue, see Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988; and Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Studies in Biblical Interpretation*, Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983.

troublesome texts in the Pauline corpus by calling them deutero-Pauline or later interpolations into authentic Pauline material (e.g., texts in the Pastorals, the household codes, 1 Cor. 14:33b–36).³⁶ Yet the Church has accepted these texts into the biblical canon; we must ask why and what message they have for us.

The tendency to flatten out the message of Scripture must also be rejected. This phenomenon occurs among both critical and conservative scholars. To illustrate, it is doubtful that one can prove the Apostle Paul to be either completely egalitarian or patriarchal by exegesis. He is more likely, as Elaine Pagels observes, “a man in conflict.”³⁷ I must confess that my predisposition when confronted with problem texts is to want to find some way to vindicate Scripture. But critical objectivity compels me to admit that this is not always possible or it produces artificial exposition. *At times texts are problematic not because we do not know their intent but because we recognize all too well their intent.* It is usually larger formal principles of Scripture, however, that force such an awareness upon us.

We must also avoid total negativity. At times the interpretation of a problematic text can be resolved or there is sound exegetical evidence for believing a text to be culturally conditioned and not applicable to our questions. Therefore we cannot abandon as pointless close exegesis and dialogue based on the biblical text.

As I stated previously, I hold a modified form of the essence-accident model for theological construction. This model does not impose an egalitarian reading on the biblical text as if the early Christian communities were unaffected by their social and cultural environment. Difficult texts can neither be critically expunged from the Bible nor artificially reinterpreted to make them cohere with an egalitarian ideal. Rather, the model I am delineating focuses on how the eschatological movement of God narrated in Scripture provides the necessary trajectory for theological construction. I will conclude by describing features of this trajectory as it applies to women’s role in the Church. I will not here interact with problematic texts, though as stated that is a crucial part of the constructive

³⁶ See for example Robin Scroggs, “Paul and the Eschatological Woman,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 1972, 283–303; Robin Scroggs, “Paul and the Eschatological Woman: Revisited,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1974, 532–37; and Pheme Perkins, “Women in the Bible and its World,” *Interpretation*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 1988, 33–44.

³⁷ Elaine Pagels, “Paul and Women: A Response to Recent Discussion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1974, 544.

process.³⁸ Instead, I will sketch how a Christological and eschatological schema can be employed to understand women's role in the Church.

VIII. CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN ETHIC FOR WOMEN'S FULL PARTICIPATION IN THE CHURCH

God is "the one who is and who was and is to come" (Rev. 1:8). Biblical narrative history therefore is a history of God's movement to abolish sin's domination of humanity³⁹ and to bring about cosmological reconciliation.⁴⁰

With the coming of Jesus and the creation of God's people as both believing Israelites and Gentiles,⁴¹ God brought into being a new phase of salvation history. The Gospels portray this period as the presence of the kingdom.⁴² Elsewhere in the Scriptures it is pictured as the dawning of the era of the Spirit.⁴³ Consequently, Christ's ministry, cross, resurrection, ascension, and the impartation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost inaugurated in human history a new eschatological order, the new creation. If we hear conflicting voices in Scripture, it is ultimately this voice that compels our attention. For this voice alerts us to an immutable future determined by God, a future grounded in the present by Jesus Christ. Scripture therefore suggests a trajectory that is rooted in but that moves out of the biblical text; it is a trajectory that agitates us to live for the future and to incarnate communities that are signs of the kingdom, signs of God's future on the horizon.

The advent of God's new order meant that the hegemony of the order of domination belonging to the way of Adam ended.⁴⁴ The NT reflects how this irruption of God's new order into the old order effected a radical subversion of the accepted conception of social reality among Christ's

³⁸ How the Church ought to use scandalous biblical texts in its ethical construction is an urgent question. In my biblicistic hermeneutical model, the Bible generates its own internal critique. For a detailed examination of such issues see Charles Cosgrove's suggestive and judicious discussion of canonical exegesis and the use of the Bible's "shadow side" in *The Right to Be Israel*.

³⁹ Gen. 3:15; Rom. 5:12–21.

⁴⁰ Eph. 1:9–10; Rom. 8:18–25.

⁴¹ Rom. 2:28–29; 4:13–16; 9:6–8; 11:25–36; 1 Pet. 2:9–10.

⁴² Matt. 11:28; Luke 11:20; 17:21.

⁴³ Luke 24:49; Acts 2:32–47; 4:23–31; 5:31–32; John 14–16; cf. 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13.

⁴⁴ Gen. 3:16–19.

disciples. One subversion of the social order was God's empowerment of women. Women were prominent among Jesus' disciples; they learned from him and ministered to him.⁴⁵ Only they did not abandon him at the cross.⁴⁶ God thus granted women to be the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection and Jesus privileged women to be the first to proclaim him as resurrected Lord.⁴⁷ At Pentecost women and men prophesied about "God's deeds of power," which was a sign of the ushering in of the new order and the "last days" of the old order.⁴⁸ The new order of the Spirit demolished distinctions based on race, social status, and gender, creating one united people under Christ.⁴⁹ Therefore, Christian men and women do not relate to the world and to one another according to the Adamic order, but conform themselves to the "image" of the Lord and the liberating order of the Spirit.⁵⁰ Rather than domination, the supreme expression of authority is now the way of service, the way of the cross.⁵¹

The NT does not record all the ramifications of this transformation. Its purpose is not to develop an ossified sexual caste system, but to detail the founding events of the new creation community and to record the community's struggle to live and work out the meaning of faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ in its socio-historical milieu. In the pneumatically oriented first century Christian community God used women to convey His Word. Despite the prevailing patriarchal culture, God called women to be prophets, ministers, teachers, and perhaps even Apostles.⁵² This fact is a startling testimony to a dynamic taking place in the early Christian communities. Together, the historical and theological data provide a solid basis for women's full participation in the Church's life and ministry.

⁴⁵ Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42; Mark 15:41.

⁴⁶ Matt. 27:55; Mark 15:40; Luke 23:27, 49; but cf. John 19:25-27.

⁴⁷ Matt. 28:5-10; Mark 16:5-8; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:11-18.

⁴⁸ Acts 2:1-21; 1 Cor. 10:11.

⁴⁹ Gal. 3:28; 2 Cor. 5:16-17; Rom. 8:1-17; Eph. 2:11-22; Acts 10:34-35.

⁵⁰ Rom. 8:1-8; 2 Cor. 3:12-18; Rom. 12:1-3.

⁵¹ Phil. 2:1-11; Matt. 20:25-28; John 13:12-17; 1 Pet. 5:5.

⁵² Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:4-5; Acts 18:24-28; 1 Tim. 3:8-13; Phil. 4:2-3; Rom. 16:1-3, 6-7.