

The Issue of Biblical Authority for Women: A Personal Study

Judith Bledsoe Bailey
Baptist Campus Minister
University of Richmond, Virginia

Increasingly, my ministry is among students, women and men, for whom the relegation of women to prescribed roles within the church is a problem. One female student described her feeling this way: "I feel that God must hate me when I read the Bible and go to church and all of the language is male. Then I realize deep inside I don't feel that God hates me at all, but that God created me and loves me." Another student, a male, said, "I find that the negative view of women adopted by our denomination is a barrier for me in my spiritual growth."

Listening to these students I identify with their struggle. Two years after my ordination in 1982, the SBC passed a resolution which stated on the basis of selected Scripture that women should not be allowed to assume roles of pastoral leadership. To accept this resolution would be a denial of myself, and the reality I have experienced. On the other hand, to reject this portion of the Bible is to reject that which I have always regarded as authoritative for my faith and my beliefs. This dilemma has a deep emotional and intellectual impact because the fundamental question is that of the authority of the Bible. Embedded within the question of the authority of the Bible is that of Biblical interpretation. In other words, what hermeneutic does one use to understand and accept the Biblical teachings for our lives today?

Regardless of what some may say, everyone interprets the Bible, because everyone comes to any subject with his/her own life experiences and world view. It is impossible to be completely objective, and it is extremely important for each of us to recognize this simple truth. Whoever we are, no matter how open-minded we try to be, we still bring to each situation and interpretation our own unique selves and our own unique experiences. The men who selected the Biblical canon are no exception. The influence of a patriarchal society is found in Biblical texts and an androcentric world view is evidenced in others.

How, then, does one interpret the Bible so that it can be authoritative in our faith and practice?

In a very helpful article entitled "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials" printed in *Feminist Interpretations of the Bible*, Katherine Sakenfeld identifies three major emphases that theologians use in approaching the Biblical text:

1. "Looking to texts about women to counteract famous texts against

women.

2. Looking to the Bible generally (not particularly to texts about women) for a theological perspective offering a critique of patriarchy (some may call this a "liberation perspective").
3. Looking to texts about women to learn from the intersection of history and stories of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures.¹¹

The theologians Sakenfeld places in the three areas are not confined to that particular emphasis, but their work tends to fall in the category in which they are discussed. Her definition of the various emphases has been very helpful to me in understanding the reading I have done.

The first method of interpretation is a way of underlining the inclusiveness of the Scriptures, an inclusiveness which can be contradictory. The interpretation of *Genesis 2* to "prove" that woman was created from man, can be countered with an interpretation of *Genesis 1*, which describes creation of "humankind" - male and female. That women should be silent in the church, found in *1 Corinthians 14:34* and *1 Timothy 2:12*, can be countered with other passages, such as *Galatians 3:28* and *1 Corinthians 11:5*. Furthermore, in this approach it is pointed out that all of the Biblical records of Jesus' interaction with women indicates that He treated them as full human beings, capable and responsible. The references to the women who were His disciples and their central role in proclaiming the resurrection indicate that women were integrally involved in the early Christian movement.

The second option makes use of a theological perspective found within the Bible to interpret the rest of the Bible. It is an attempt to look at the Bible as a whole to determine what the Gospel is all about and then apply the results specifically to women. In this interpretation some parts of Scripture are more authoritative than others.

Rosemary Radford Reuther identifies the prophetic principle in both Testaments which serves to imply a rejection of every elevation of one social group against others as image and agent of God, every use of God to justify social domination and subjugation. By use of this norm, Hebrew ritual law and the texts justifying slavery and hostility to all who are different are set aside.²

Another use of the prophetic principle is to point out the ways in which Jesus overturned the popular notions of power in relationships. Not only did He come as "Suffering Servant," He described a kingdom in which the "last shall be first" and prostitutes and tax collectors would enter before the religious leaders. In the new kingdom, power will not be exercised by domination over other people, but in service.

In *Household of Freedom*, Letty Russell shows that in His use of authority, Jesus rejected the patriarchal tradition of authority as domination and used his authority to heal, to forgive sins, cast out unclean spirits and preach the good news of release of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Jesus, in His teachings and life style, directly challenged the religious authorities who, expecting a different kind of messiah, realized that Jesus was Himself the will

of God, was Himself the basis of the Scriptures.³ True to the ancient prophets, He brought the prophetic age to bear against the distorted religion of His day.

In contrast to the first option of looking to texts about women, the third option looks to the texts about women to "address the condition of women as persons oppressed because of their sex and as persons yearning to be free."⁴ The concern is to look to the stories of women to bring to light the ways in which oppressed women believed in a better future in spite of their situations. Honestly addressing their situation, these women testify to the ability of women, of all ages, to survive. Phyllis Trible writes in detail about women, like Jephthah's daughter, who are victims. In spite of the cruelty and the horror of some of these Biblical stories, they are retold "in memoriam to offer sympathetic readings of abused women."⁵

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza maintains that the texts which perpetuate violence and oppression towards women should not be granted their claim to truth and authority today.⁶ She agrees with the assessment of Cady Stanton that the Bible has been used to keep women in subjection and to hinder their emancipation; that women are the most faithful believers in the Bible as the Word of God, and therefore it has great authority; and that one cannot ignore the political importance of the Scripture.⁷

Fiorenza's method for interpreting the Scriptures is that the canon and norm for evaluating Biblical traditions is to be formulated within the struggle for the liberation of women and all oppressed people. Through the historical-critical method of interpretation, Fiorenza locates the place of divine revelation and grace within the *ekklesia* of women, and the experience of women and all those oppressed who are struggling for liberation from patriarchal oppression.

In her method of interpretation, Fiorenza identifies with other liberation theologians whose hermeneutic is circular. The liberation theology hermeneutic is described in terms of first becoming suspicious of theology because of one's experience of reality; of then realizing that this new way of experiencing theological reality leads to the "exegetical" suspicion that the prevailing interpretations of the Scripture have not done justice to all Biblical texts and to the reality about which they speak or are silent; and finally to interpreting Scripture according to our new theological perspective which sheds fresh light on all previous readings of the text.

Similarly, self-identified, conscious women will experience a tension between their own self-understanding and the position of women in society and church, which then leads women to

"scrutinize prevailing androcentric theological systems. Next, this new insight that theology was formulated by men in the interest of patriarchal structures will lead us to question the prevailing androcentric interpretation of Scriptures. Finally, the reading of Scripture from a feminist theological perspective will result in a new interpretation of Scripture that takes into account both the androcentric language and patriarchal

tendencies of the Biblical writers."⁸

The interpretative key is located within the experience of women whose stories are remembered in the text rather than the text itself. This method coincides with the understanding that "the true believer is a believer in God and in Christ, not in the first place a believer in the Bible."⁹ The Biblical canon becomes the prototype of Christian faith and practice, rather than the unchangeable archetype. In this view, the Scriptures are not primarily the source of rules for faith and practice, but an open-ended "salvation history" of God's people.¹⁰

These three major emphases in Biblical interpretation provide a richness in Biblical study which can be confusing and at times difficult to understand. There are strengths and weaknesses in each approach. The work is on-going, as theologians attempt to interpret the Bible in view of changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal.¹¹ Most of all however, the varieties of interpretation offer a "third option," a way to understand the Bible which helps mediate the choice between a literal reading of the Scriptures and that of ignoring the Bible completely as authoritative in our lives. Somehow we have to get beyond this dualism in order to include people of faith who have difficulty with the Biblical text at certain points.

From my teen years I have found strength in *John 8:31-32*: "If you abide in my word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." This "truth," memorized out of context, has become for me a theological perspective with which to read the painful passages about women in the Bible. My tendency has been to ignore them, hoping that others would not use them against us. I have realized, though, that it is only in facing the truth, however unpleasant, that one can be free to move beyond it. Being free to move, one still needs a bridge from the reality of experience and new insight to new paradigms for belief and action. This "bridge" is provided by creative theologians who from their own struggles with life's experiences and the dissonance of an inadequate theology, search for God's word, envisioning a community which includes, not excludes, which serves, not dominates. Through their loving and faithful scholarship I am reminded that we do not just depend upon ourselves, but upon the God in whom we believe, even when we have every reason not to believe.

Endnotes

- 1 Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," in *Feminist Interpretations of the Bible*, ed., Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 56.
- 2 Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 116-119
- 3 Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 24.
- 4 Sakenfeld, 62.
- 5 Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 3.
- 6 Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 65.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 138.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 11 Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), 12.