

IN SEARCH OF A TRADITION

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In each of the major western religious traditions under discussion today, there is a segment which has resisted rethinking gender issues. None has been totally successful in avoiding change, though God knows all of them have tried. In other words, what we have already seen in the Catholic and Jewish traditions is also true among Protestants. It is my assignment to describe the current situation among more conservative American Protestants, the so-called fundamentalists and evangelicals.

The Bible as the Starting Point

Conservative Protestants consider themselves to be people of one book. For them the Bible is the word of God, divine revelation through and through, which contains all the truth required for salvation in this age and the next. Since it is the only book that inerrantly relates what God thinks about the human condition and its remedy, they receive the Bible as the ultimate authority on all theological, ethical, and personal matters. Conservative Protestants think that this unwavering loyalty to the Scriptures makes them unique among Christians today, because only they are willing to place the Bible above the church, tradition, social and scientific trends, and even personal inclinations. For them the old slogan still rings true: "God said it; I believe it; and that settles it."

Despite these convictions, conservative Protestants do not agree on what the Bible teaches about gender. In fact, today there is a fierce debate raging in conservative Protestant circles over gender and what the Scriptures really teach about it. As in all "we're-truer-than-you" debates, the battle is being fought over the meaning of what all combatants agree are inspired and authoritative texts, or--in some cases--inspired and authoritative *words* in the text.

The Debate: Traditionalists vs. Non-Traditionalists

Traditionalists, as they like to call themselves, believe that the Bible clearly teaches sexual hierarchy. The differences between men and women go far beyond those required for procreation. They extend to distinctive roles in society, family, and the church.

Traditionalists believe that they have the Bible on their side. They claim to stick very closely to the text of Scripture and to understand it in a natural and

literal way. They cite the creation narratives, ancient Israel's all-male priesthood, Jesus' twelve male Apostles, and Paul's prohibition of female leadership in the church and his teachings on wifely submission to prove that female subordination is part of God's sexual ordering of humanity. Traditionalist theologians do not teach that the Godhead is masculine in any real sense; but they do point out that since God has been revealed as Father and Son, God's rule in the world is somehow tied to keeping men in charge. Thus patriarchy is a biblical given and must be maintained as part of God's ultimate plan for the human family. Because they are based on divine revelation, such teachings apply in all times and places, regardless of changing cultural or social contexts. In short, while traditionalists are happy to admit that men and women are "spiritually equal" in the eyes of God, they insist that they are "functionally different" in the roles God has ordained for them.

Traditionalists also believe that they have history on their side. Until recently, they allege, all Bible-believers understood the Scriptures in this way. In general, contemporary conservatives find this argument convincing because most of them cannot remember hearing anything different before the 1970s. Thus they easily conclude that non-traditional views come from some outside and recent source. Dissenters must be taking their cues from the highly suspect women's movement or else are simply twisting the Scriptures because they no longer want to live under their authority.

But dissenters there are in conservative Protestantism who lean on both the Bible and history for support. Like traditionalists, they affirm the Bible's full inspiration and authority, but find egalitarianism, not hierarchy, in the Scriptures. This is not always an easy thing to do; but there is a growing number of conservatives who are willing to swim against the strong tide of traditional exegesis.

These "Biblical" or "Christian" or "Evangelical" feminists, while taking the Bible just as seriously as their counterparts, do read it quite differently. They argue that there was no female subordination before the Fall and that the patriarchy in the Hebrew Scriptures was nothing more than the effects of sin being worked out in personal and social relationships. They find in the examples of women prophets and judges (Miriam and Deborah) that hierarchy is not God's first or last word.

Naturally, traditionalists want to know what biblical feminists do with the New Testament, where sexual hierarchy still seems well attested. In response, biblical feminists argue that despite all apparent evidence to the contrary, Jesus and Paul were really the best friends women ever had. Jesus always treated women with respect and actually revealed some of his most important teachings to them; and Paul supported the full exercise of spiritual gifts by women, though occasionally he had

to restrain them because of local customs or particular crisis situations. Despite these pragmatic prohibitions, Paul never wavered from his conviction that in Christ there is no distinction between male and female (Galatians 3:28). In the redemption brought by Jesus Christ, they claim, God has reestablished the original equality of the sexes, though most Christians have been unwilling to live out the full implications of the gospel.

In short, biblical feminists claim that sometimes the "natural" or "literal" reading of texts can be seriously misleading. In order to get at what the Bible is actually teaching, one must read it against its cultural background and distinguish between the transcultural principles (which are binding at all times and in all places) and their particular applications (which may have only temporary or localized authority). Ironically, they claim, conservatives who advocate mutual submission in marriage and the full inclusion of women in ecclesiastical leadership are actually more in line with the spirit of the Bible than those who maintain female subordination based on the letter of the Bible.

Current biblical feminists insist that such views did not originate with them, but have occupied an honored place within the American evangelical tradition. While admitting that some Protestant denominations never taught anything but sexual hierarchalism, they can show that since the eighteenth century "non-traditional" views often were held in groups most affected by revivals and spiritual awakenings, such as Baptists, Congregationalists, and some Wesleyans and Pentecostals. At least until the twentieth century, evangelical conversion experiences often challenged the male establishment in Protestant churches. Getting saved or born again had a way of breaking down barriers which had been built to keep women in their place. Likewise, many historians argue that nineteenth-century feminism actually arose under evangelical auspices and that many of the groups that maintain a strenuous traditional stance today have now-forgotten histories in which women preached, evangelized, taught doctrine, and served as ordained ministers. As Donald Dayton, Janette Hassey, and others have so ably shown, there was a time, not all that long ago, when large numbers of evangelicals used the Scriptures to argue against female subordination in the church and all notions of sexual hierarchies.¹

The Role of Memory in the Current Debate

One of the most fascinating things about this debate among conservatives is how "memory" functions for each side. Though traditionalists and non-traditionalists often use historical arguments against each other, neither side really believes that history is all that important. Both appeal to the Bible as their ultimate authority and use historical arguments as secondary support. Traditionalists use

memory to show that biblical feminist views are novel; and biblical feminists appeal to memory to show that they are not. But neither side believes for a minute that the real argument will be decided on the basis of who used to believe it. Everyone wants to live or die on the text alone.

This means that no Protestant conservative gets to appeal to tradition in the same way that Catholics or Jews do. Since the Reformation, Protestants have not given to tradition enough authority to decide their doctrinal disputes. If theology cannot be established on the clear teachings of the Bible, then no appeal to tradition can save it. So what happens when both sides in a debate base their views on the same inspired Scriptures? Who decides then? The answer is obvious: the individual and the group. Practically speaking, when matters reach an impasse, there is no higher court than public opinion. For a variety of reasons, rank and file conservatives attach themselves to spheres of influence which revolve around certain schools, teachers, or publishing houses. More times than not, the truth is determined by the side that is able to create the largest and most powerful clientele. In religious groups that consciously devalue the role of tradition, there really is no other way to decide. Chronic amnesia comes with the territory; memories are short and selective; and arguments are decided by who shouts the loudest and amasses the most supporters. Notwithstanding all they say about biblical authority, when conservative Protestants cannot agree about what the Bible means, the audience is sovereign.

In the current debate over gender, traditionalists hold the upper hand, but they are losing ground fast. Biblical feminists have been able to score some impressive textual points in the last decade and their opponents are showing signs that the momentum is beginning to shift, at least in more academic circles. Without publicly admitting it--or sometimes even being aware of it--traditionalists are beginning to concede crucial parts of their opponents' argument.

One example will have to suffice. Not long ago, traditionalists knew why sexual hierarchy was established: God created women with inferior abilities for leadership. They did not have the intellectual, emotional, or spiritual wherewithal to study theology, teach doctrine, or lead the church. Their callings were elsewhere, which God had made obvious by making women inferior in certain ways. Needless to say, as opportunities for women in western culture have expanded, such an argument is difficult to sustain. In fact, no traditionalist theologian of whom I am aware would dare say such things today. Experience and observation have demonstrated that women can lead, can think, can preach, can learn and teach doctrine, can do anything in the church that men can do. And growing numbers of traditionalists are willing to admit it. On what grounds, then, do they still teach that

women should be subordinate to men? They have no answer, really, other than God has decided that women should be subordinate. In other words, traditionalists have left themselves without a logical leg to stand on except that an omnipotent God wants it that way. In the good old days, before women were allowed to destroy some stereotypes, the universe really made sense: women were kept from exercising authority in the home and in the church because God made them unable to function in that role. But now the argument is that though God made them fully capable of doing everything, they are nevertheless required to defer to men in certain areas because . . . only God knows.

For some conservatives that answer still suffices; but many others are uneasy with it and have gingerly allowed women to assume roles heretofore denied them. Without compromising their fundamental hierarchical ideology, some traditionalists are now willing to let women teach men--as long as they are under the authority or supervision of some male authority. In fact, in many traditionalist circles about the only thing that women are not allowed to do is serve as a senior pastor in a local congregation. This is as far as traditionalists can go without giving up sexual hierarchy altogether.²

In other words, increasing numbers of traditionalists are trying hard to humanize their hierarchalism. They are willing to admit that women have been victimized in Christian history and that men have often used their God-given leadership roles in harsh and uncaring ways. Such sensitized traditionalists want to rub off the rough edges of male dominance, soften the tone of their rhetoric, and demonstrate sensitivity to women. But because they will not give up their commitment to sexual hierarchy, their humanizing efforts still amount to "yes, . . . but." And in the final analysis, "yes, . . . but" is still "no."

Biblical feminists view such adjustments as ample proof that patriarchalism is entering its final phase; traditionalists believe that as long as they do not concede the principle of male dominance, they can make adjustments as needed. Where will it all end? Only time and shifting constituencies will tell.

NOTES

1. Donald Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Janette Hassey, *No Time for Silence* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).
2. An excellent example of this attempt to find middle ground between traditionalism and biblical feminism is Craig Blomberg, "Not Beyond What is Written: A Review of Aida Spencer's *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry*," *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (1988):403-421.

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