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Are Feminist Concerns and Biblical Authority Mutually Exclusive?

Introduction

Much of feminist theology has been motivated by the belief that Christianity was distorted by patriarchal and even misogynistic influences and traditions across the centuries of its development. This usually includes aspects of the church's structure and doctrine, but may also extend to scripture itself. Whether or not a theologian believes the Bible to be inherently flawed or simply misrepresented by church tradition and teaching hugely influences the direction and nature of their work. Some, such as Mary Daly and Daphne Hampson, have come to the conclusion that the Bible is so completely the product of the male dominated cultures and interests that produced it, that it must be abandoned altogether. This has resulted in the rise of a "post Christian" theology, where feminist theologians who have reached these conclusions seek to establish doctrine and spiritual teaching that is free from the perceived androcentrism, and may even construct a theology that is intentionally an extreme feminine counter-religion where any male elements are absent altogether. On the other hand, there are scholars, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who seek to reform Christian tradition rather than abandon it. For them, it is the male dominated Church and the resultant structures and traditions that are at fault. For this reason, they seek to bypass these elements and appeal to the biblical text directly, in much the same way as the protestant reformers of the 16th century.

Thus, the views and approaches of feminist interpreters form a wide spectrum ranging from the radical post Christian to the church reformist, depending on whether they seek to work with or discard the Bible and Christian tradition. Since this essay

concerns feminism's relationship to biblical authority, we will focus on the reformist end of this spectrum, considering what is meant by biblical authority and how this relates to the views and techniques of these scholars.

Biblical Authority

If we are to determine whether or not biblical authority is compatible with feminist concerns, we must first consider what it means for the Bible to be authoritative.

Whether a theologian views the Bible as authoritative within their work may not be as straightforward to determine as it first appears. This can be shown through an example. In 1 Timothy 2:12 the author¹ says that he does not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man. Within this discussion, how this statement is viewed from an instructive point of view may be categorised in four ways:

- A) The statement represented the appropriate model for gender roles regarding teaching and authority: It still applies today.
- B) The statement represents a male dominated bias that was never appropriate: Things should not have been like that then, and still should not be now.
- C) The statement may have represented the appropriate model for the time, however historical and cultural developments mean that it is no longer relevant: The verse should now be disregarded.
- D) The statement may have represented the appropriate model for the time, however historical and cultural developments mean that it should be

¹ Some feminist scholars have called into question the Pauline authorship of the pastoral epistles; thus, the author is left unspecified here to reflect that.

reinterpreted and reapplied: It is still relevant but needs contemporary explanation and application.

It should be immediately apparent that the Bible is viewed as authoritative in example A. This was the traditional line taken by the church and it was a reaction against this kind of interpretation that led to the establishment of feminist approaches. It is equally obvious that the Bible is not authoritative in example B, which is the approach adopted by some of the more radical feminist writers, such as Mary Daly. Option C allows for historical validity, but by refusing to acknowledge any contemporary significance, it removes the text's authority by viewing scripture subjectively to the point where parts that do not fulfil contemporary expectations can be legitimately ignored altogether. The question we must ask then is whether option D can be carried out whilst maintaining scriptural authority. Do instructive passages like this have to be applied exactly as they were originally in order to maintain an authoritative view of the text?

Contemporary application of biblical teaching is something that has always been exercised in the church and must continue to be if the Bible is to speak to all people in all cultures throughout history. Yet there is potential danger in relegating certain aspects of the Bible's witness to ancient cultural influences. As Carl F. H. Henry rightly points out, "Once the principle of 'culture dependency' is introduced into the content of scriptural teaching, it is difficult to establish objective criteria for distinguishing between what is supposedly authoritative and unauthoritative in apostolic doctrine."² Option D in the list above may, in practice, turn out to be a

² Carl F. H. Henry, "Bible, Authority of The," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), p. 299.

veiled version of option C, where scripture's true intention is sidestepped or glossed over by an elaborate reworking that is based on speculative assumptions about cultural influence. This technique may, in turn, be motivated by the scholar's desire to follow their interpretive agenda, rather than seek to properly understand the text on its own terms.

The Source of Biblical Authority

Because of this potential ambiguity regarding what constitutes legitimate grounds for reinterpreting a passage, it may be more profitable to consider the question of biblical authority in a less practical and more theoretical sense. It is important to recognise that if the Bible is to be viewed as authoritative, it is because of its status as the Word of God. Thus, scripture's authority is an acquired authority – it is, as N. T. Wright puts it, “the authority of God *exercised through* scripture.”³ The Bible's authority can therefore only be seen through an understanding of God, his intentions, expectations, and agendas. No one passage or topic can be removed from the context of God's character and actions, and texts lose their authority as God's Word if they are removed from God's intended purpose.

For this reason, contemporary approaches to biblical interpretation, such as feminist theology, have a lot to offer current scholarship if they are conducted within this framework. The interpretation and application of scripture is a perpetually incomplete task. As archaeologists continue to uncover historical evidence, linguists continue to

³ N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2005), p. 18.

refine our understanding of ancient languages, and anthropologists continue to deepen our knowledge of biblical cultures and civilisations, theologians must continue to seek the most faithful interpretation of the biblical text in light of the techniques and evidence that is available to them. To be open to the idea that a passage is saying something different to the traditional understanding is not to question or remove its authority, but to affirm it. A feminist scholar may approach the text in a way that is very different to that of the predominantly male hermeneutics that has been conducted throughout church history. This change of perspective may then yield fresh results and new interpretations that more accurately reflect the Bible's overall message and God's intentions through it.

Indeed, the work of many feminist scholars is motivated by their understanding of God. The basis for their hermeneutics is the belief that God does not discriminate between genders. Men and women were created equal and the male domination that can be seen throughout secular, religious and biblical history is therefore a distortion of God's intention. This is a belief that has been formulated through a combination of social, cultural, and experiential factors, as well as an understanding of God's intentions and character that is drawn from the text of scripture. Therefore, many feminist scholars' conclusions are grounded in sound logical and theological research that constitutes an important contribution to contemporary biblical hermeneutics.

The Dangers of Overarching Assumptions

Whilst the belief that God does not promote oppression of genders or people groups may be valid, there is a danger that it can become an overarching assumption. Some

see it as legitimate grounds for disregarding the parts of the Bible that do not meet the expectations of this assumption. Yet, if our view of God that is formed by scripture becomes the basis for discrediting the parts of scripture that fail to fit into this framework, then the inevitable paradox should be immediately apparent. Since scripture is where we draw our understanding of what God is like, how can we then discredit scripture on the basis of that understanding?

For some, this has resulted in the formation of a canon within the canon. The passages that affirm the preconceptions of the feminist interpreter's agenda are accepted and held in high esteem, but those that seem to come into conflict with them are discounted on the basis that they are distorted by the misogynistic bias of the author and his historical/cultural setting.⁴ As R. Letham puts it, "Who is to judge whether a statement in the Bible does or does not promote the full humanity of women? The feminist community, of course! Who is to judge whether the feminist community has departed from truth? Why, the feminist community, of course!"⁵ Thus, in this instance, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the feminist objective overtakes scripture as having the ultimate authority.

This can be seen in the introduction to Mary Ann Tolbert's article, where she openly states some of the biases she holds. She freely admits that she is biased towards feminist/liberation concerns (religious and non-religious), a desire to remain within the Christian tradition and the ongoing study and use of the Bible. However, she seems to subordinate both the second and third bias to the first. She acknowledges

⁴ Sharon H. Ringe, "When Women Interpret the Bible," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Carol A. Newsom and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. 3.

⁵ R. Letham, "The Hermeneutics of Feminism," *Themelios*, Vol. 17, No. 3, April/May, 1992, p. 6.

the possibility that her feminist moral demands may lead to a place where she sees her Christian devotion as no longer viable. In relation to the Bible, she then writes, “Again, as with my second bias, this favorable inclination toward the Bible must be open to judgment and, if necessary, dismissal.”⁶ We see then, that for Tolbert, the Bible is of value and worth studying, but it cannot be viewed as authoritative, since it must operate within her perceived framework of feminist/liberation concerns or face dismissal. Indeed, it seems that for many feminist scholars, the issue is less about the authority or even validity of the Bible, and more about its usefulness. Alison Jasper seeks to answer the question of whether women can continue to “profit from reading the Bible.”⁷ This is a very telling question that betrays many of Jasper’s preconceptions. The Bible is something to be profited from, and if there is nothing to be gained for the reader, then it should be discarded.

As a critical line of study, feminist interpretation often treats the text of the Bible, as it would any other text. It is deconstructed, analysed, reflected upon, but ultimately, if it fails to live up to expectations, or to affirm the preconceptions of the interpreter, then it is discarded on the grounds of insurmountable misogyny. Where a scholar is approaching the text on purely literary grounds, this is not surprising, since any divine influence or activity within, and transmitted through, the text is not the focus of consideration. Thus, whether intentionally or unintentionally, scripture is stripped of the grounds on which its authority would be based. This is not a trend that is unique to feminist criticism; it can be prevalent in all critical lines of study. In this way, it

⁶ Mary Ann Tolbert, “Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics,” *Semeia*, No. 28, 1983, pp. 114–15.

⁷ Alison Jasper, “Reflections on Reading the Bible,” in *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, ed. by Yvonne Sherwood (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 95.

seems that the establishment of critical methods would always have led inevitably to this end. If divine influence can be legitimately sidestepped and the text can be critiqued and questioned, then the context, culture and motivations of the authors becomes key. The question of what God is saying through the text is replaced by the human, fallible and primarily masculine concerns of the ancient Near East. Under these circumstances, the question of how profitable it is for women to continue to study it seems to be a justifiable one.

Thus, whilst there is undoubtedly benefits to the fresh perspective of feminist scholars, there is also cause for great caution when conducting theology from the point of view of a specific agenda. The Bible must be allowed to speak for itself if it is to be authoritative, and approaching it from a new perspective may allow it to do this in ways that have not previously been possible. However, if the text is read with a stated predetermined interpretive end – whether that be feminist concerns or any other concerns – then the interpretive process is biased from the start.

Biased Hermeneutics

Tolbert addresses this issue by arguing that no hermeneutic is ever truly objective. All interpretive work is inevitably influenced by the individual's underlying motivations, biases, and preconceptions. Thus, she believes that whilst pursuits such as "*feminist* theology" and "*liberation* theology" have an adjective attached to openly demonstrate their bias, non-specified "theology" is just as biased. She considers hermeneutics in general to be dominated by white, western, male concerns and therefore does not consider feminist hermeneutics to be a biased subgroup of the objective mainstream, but the openly stated female counterpart of "patriarchal

hermeneutics” – the term that she gives to conventional, non-specified theological interpretation. She writes, “Feminist hermeneutics stands over against *patriarchal* hermeneutics, an advocacy position for the male-oriented, hierarchically established present cultural power system.”⁸ She then goes on to say, “Whereas patriarchal hermeneutics grounds its perceptions in the ideological assurance of ‘reality’ or ‘the way things are,’ feminist hermeneutics self-consciously attempts to ground its analyses in the experience of women’s oppression.”⁹

Her criticism of what she terms “patriarchal hermeneutics” seems valid if her assessment is correct. If mainstream hermeneutics is justifying its ideology on an appeal to universal human experience, but that experience is actually heavily masculine, then it is likely to yield androcentric results. That said, Tolbert’s alternative does not represent a solution, but an equally biased counterpoint. There is, as she says, no such thing as purely objective interpretation. This needs to be recognised and acknowledged by those engaged in hermeneutics in order to minimise its impact on their work. Instead, what Tolbert suggests, is that, having identified the problem, feminist scholars have intentionally made the same mistake. They seek to counterbalance biased patriarchal hermeneutics with equally biased feminist hermeneutics. This is not a solution. Whilst mainstream hermeneutics may have got it wrong, the interpreter’s response to this realisation should be to become as objective as possible by recognising and acknowledging their own biases in order to *minimise* the impact upon their work. Instead, feminist scholars acknowledge their own biases in order to justify a position where their interpretive work is *intentionally*

⁸ Tolbert, p. 118.

⁹ Ibid., p. 119.

dictated by that particular interest. By consciously and intentionally using their biases as the basis for their hermeneutics, they are, on the one hand, more aware of the subjective nature of their work, but on the other hand failing to even attempt to find an objective interpretation that would constitute an authoritative reading. It seems, then, that feminist concerns have identified a valid criticism, but failed to offer a legitimate solution. As a fresh voice within conventional theology they could offer a new perspective on interpretive issues that would give a fuller and more varied understanding than either viewpoint has by themselves. However, if they remain outsiders who are driven by their theological agenda, they are in danger of forming a rival faction that stands in opposition to established theology.

Feminist Theology as Liberation Theology

The reason for this is made clear by another element of feminist theology that is highlighted by Tolbert's statement. She says that the grounding for feminist hermeneutics is the "experience of women's oppression."¹⁰ Feminism and, subsequently, feminist theology has its roots in women's liberation movements, which were a reaction to male domination. In this way, feminist theology has a lot in common with the liberation theology that emerged in Latin American in the 1960s and 70s. Liberation theologies seek to enact political and cultural reform and even revolution. They see in scripture God's work to bring liberation to the poor and believe it is an act of obedience to join him in this endeavour. Thus, Christians take action in these areas whether they consider themselves to be the victims of this

¹⁰ Ibid.

oppression or not. It is therefore possible to be neither the oppressed nor the oppressor and there is a clear pathway for liberation – it is possible for poor people to become not poor without becoming rich oppressors. However, feminist theologians cast a much more binary picture, where women are universally oppressed, and men are universally oppressive. Therefore, everyone, regardless of their historical, cultural, or geographical setting, is either one or the other. This means that feminist perspective is so firmly rooted in their perceived oppression that it becomes an essential part of their identity. As Dianna Newman writes, “The presence or absence of oppression is not core to what it is to *be* a woman. Feminist theology seems to suggest otherwise by making the bold claim that part and parcel of what it means to *be* a woman is to *be* oppressed.”¹¹ Whilst on the surface, feminist theology seems to be working towards the liberation of women, it paints a picture where oppression is such a fundamental part of what it means to *be* a woman that it is not clear what this liberation would look like. Whilst it is possible for a poor person to become not poor, feminist theologians are not seeking to make women not women, they are seeking to become something that they imply doesn’t currently exist; unoppressed women. Yet oppression has become so much a part of the feminist agenda that if a woman were able to become completely unoppressed, it would seem that feminist theology would cease to have anything relevant to say to her.

¹¹ Dianna Newman, “Feminist Criticism of the Bible,” in *Biblical Criticism: Beyond the Basics*, by Andrews, Edward D., F. David Farnell, Thomas Howe, Thomas Marshall, and Dianna Newman (Digital edition) (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2017).

Thus, this universalised view of women's experience of oppression becomes the lens through which Christian tradition and scripture is critiqued to the degree that it is the overarching concern. This then forms the justified basis for discarding or reinterpreting any text that seems to be at odds with this stated agenda. The problem when relating this to the issue of biblical authority then is clear; if the text can be sacrificed or conformed to the agenda, then it is the agenda and not the text that has authority.

Biblical Authority in Practice

At this point we must return to our previous conclusion, that if the Bible is to be viewed as authoritative, it is only because of its status as the Word of God. Our interpretation of it is therefore inextricably linked to our understanding of God, his character, and his intentions. This has the tendency to be a cyclical process where our understanding of God is informed by our interpretation of scripture and our interpretation of scripture is informed by our understanding of God. There is, then, the danger that one side can unduly distort the other. We could form a distorted picture of God because our view of scripture is too rigid or biased, or we could mute scripture's true message because it seems to contradict our inaccurate picture of God. There is then the danger that this can spiral out of control where each side continues to push the other further and further out of line as they themselves become more and more distorted. Thus, if we are to regard scripture as authoritative, our understanding must be subordinate to it. If things do not add up, it is either because we misunderstand it, or because God never intended it to add up. As previously stated, the interpretation and application of scripture is a perpetually

incomplete task and all Christians in all generations must continue to refine our understanding to the best of our ability. In practice, what this means is that we must always be open to our opinions being changed. An interpreter must always approach the Bible open to the possibility that they may not like what they find. We can, and should, employ all the techniques and evidence at our disposal to determine the most faithful interpretation, but after we have done all of that, we must still be open to the idea that it might say something we do not want it to. Only then is the text truly authoritative.

This is where feminist theology as a discipline seems to fall down. Its fresh perspective on passages that concern the suppression of women or domination of men have yielded valuable and legitimate insights, but as a theological discipline it seems ultimately more concerned with upholding the feminist agenda than submitting to scriptural authority. Whilst feminist concerns can certainly be studied and discussed in light of the Bible's teaching and even influence our understanding of it, they should not be the standard by which it is judged.

Conclusion

The establishment of feminist theology has been a major development in recent hermeneutics. It has highlighted some of the entrenched biases and undue preconceptions in established interpretive methods and has subsequently produced some valuable contributions to Christian scholarship. It is certainly possible to explore the ideas and concepts of feminist concerns whilst also maintaining biblical authority, but this can only be done if those concerns are subordinate to the text. If the Bible is to be given authority, then an interpreter must always approach it open to

the possibility that they may not like what they find. Not only that, but if, after all appropriate interpretive work has been carried out, they still do not like what they find, then it is their views that must change, not the text. This is the only way to maintain true biblical authority and it is where most feminist scholars deviate from this model. No interpreter is completely unbiased or objective and so this endeavour is never a perfectly executed one. Yet it is the job of the interpreter to find the most faithful interpretation that they can. Openly acknowledge their own biases in order to justify a position where their interpretive work is intentionally dictated by feminist concerns demonstrates a level of self-awareness that may have been lacking in conventional hermeneutics. However, it is ultimately an approach that permits and consciously pursues subjectivity and is therefore incompatible with submission to biblical authority.

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