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Patient Response to Find New Meaning in Familiar Language

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ABSTRACT:

This article is a reflection of the ongoing controversy of feminism in a patriarchal society. The reflections in this essay are limited to the conversation of male versus female body but it should be understood this is not intended to overlook or undermine the diverse spectrum of gender expression. While there is much needed to be said, explored, contemplated and shared regarding gender identity in the Body of Christ, this reflection addresses the female narrative in scripture.

Patient Response to Find New Meaning in Familiar Language

by Kelly Olson

The term “feminist” has become a weaponized implement in a fight for power. One party may wield the term as a battle cry against historical injustices with the promise to no longer quietly succumb to ignorant and harmful practices based on physical anatomy. The confronted party may use the word to reduce the opposition to



an image of angry, impatient arguments seeking perceived equality despite cost. One side becomes defensive and aggressive to maintain situated power. The other side seeks due power that has been robbed. Similar to other “battles,” as notoriety of the extreme opinions rise, the semblance of the original just case fades. The term “feminist” has become a distraction stirring emotional reaction rather than calling forward a response to the damaging effects of applying limited perspectives to scriptural interpretation. In this essay I will briefly mention this reality as a reminder to call the reader of this essay to a place of openness. I ask that we recognize internal stirrings when confronted with certain terms to honestly explore what biases or experiences contribute to individual understandings. Personal reflection and awareness of external influences can help open our eyes to reactions so that we may move forward into response. The title “feminist” has certainly been used to harm at times, but this does not mean we no longer have a calling to seek the injury pattern of the oppressed bodies of female creation leading to identification of ways to protect and serve. I aim to reclaim the functional term feminism by exploring imbedded practices of language, behavior, and organized institutions to elicit how all bodies are impacted regardless of gender or biologic sex. To begin, with this essay I call us forward to consider the role of the feminist hermeneutic when reading the New Testament as a tool to aid improved recognition of the inclusive community as the incarnate Jesus intended.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN STORY WORLD

Reading the Gospels as literal story worlds invites the reader into dialogue with the implied author by way of character formation, plot development and setting. A reader encountering the text has the opportunity to experience transformation through the story developed by an author sharing his or her experience of radical change. The story will exist and influence only as long as it is available and shared, delivering the message to populations across boundaries of time and place. The story world is accessible to all who have access read or hear the Word read. While the message is intended for the entire body of diverse humanity, it is important to recognize a reader will always bring a set of presuppositions

conditioned by environmental factors particular to a life experience that will influence an understanding of the story world. Recognizing inherent factors that contribute to an interpretation of the Gospel message is a powerful exercise revealing what is brought before the text from a reader's biases. Identifying biases from the position of the reader helps delineate what is raised up by the text itself.

Identifying a reader's presupposition is a mature, empowering and liberating strategy to explore the story worlds as authentically as possible this far removed from the origin of the narrative. Part of recognizing personal lenses through which the story is received is acknowledging the lens through which authors or editors reveal their experience. As a woman it is disheartening but necessary to recognize the ever-present tone of implicit gender biases. The system of patriarchy is not a product of Christianity, but Christianity is not immune to the devastating consequences of ignorantly propagating discriminatory language and practices through naive participation in structural sin. History, Apostolic Tradition and Scripture all offer evidence of the internalized practice of subjugating, diminishing, quelling, and overlooking women. Some histories are more obviously harmful, violent, and disturbing. Other circumstances are more subtle, passive and with less physical stigmata but still devastating to the population of female bodies. Christianity has a responsibility to remain alert to harm caused by unjust systems. As awareness of the damaging impact of misinformed human expression develops it is crucial to assume accountability thus initiating movement toward reconciliation and healing change. Embracing the experience of female existence when approaching the literal story worlds of the Gospels demands admission of female participation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Acknowledging the dignity of humanity as elevated in the life, death and resurrection of the incarnate Jesus necessitates acceptance of the power of female humanity as equal to that of male humanity.

The Bible as a source for strength, inspiration and courage for the vulnerable and oppressed is not impervious to the condemnation and suppression of women as it is in part authored by humans raised

in patriarchal and misogynistic systems.¹ The balance of achieving respect for divine authority of scriptural revelation and recognizing human expression seems especially nuanced in the setting of a feminist hermeneutic. Particular texts of explicit literal details have not retained authority in today's environment such as forms of currency, prescribed forms of punishments for particular grievances or dietary customs. Yet other literal statements including gendered language and gender roles have not been seen as a symptom of a misguided historical cultural symptom and somehow regarded as "gospel truth," ceaselessly dictating expectations and value based on gender. Identifying oppressive tones of message delivery in scripture, as well as interpretation, does not compromise the authority of the Bible or undermine authenticity of truth as revealed in scripture. Rather, this process frees the truth from the distracting limitations integrated by human expression in authorship and subsequent tradition. Speaking up for the muted voices of the women of the Bible historically draws negative attention but remains necessary work. As Schneider states, "the transformational agenda of feminist hermeneutics involves not only the liberation of the oppressed through the transformation of society but also the liberation of the biblical text itself from its own participation in the oppression of women, and finally the transformation of the church that continues to model, underwrite, and legitimate the oppression of women in family and society on the basis of the biblical text into the discipleship of equals which it is called to be."²

The feminist hermeneutic brings life to the literal story world of the Gospels. Approaching the text with a persistent negligence to the women of the story world introduces violence, slowly killing essential figures that played a role in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. The women were there. Jesus saw them. Jesus embraced them. They committed to Jesus and served their communities. By overlooking their

1 Sandra M. Schnieders, "Feminist Hermeneutics," in *Hearing the New Testament*, ed. Joel Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 349-369.

2 Sandra M. Schnieders, "Feminist Hermeneutics," in *Hearing the New Testament*, ed. Joel Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 350.

roles and not hearing their voices we remove their position in the story world and their impact no longer exists. They fade, dying not even the death of a martyr as a witness to the cause to which they committed their life, but instead silently as a victim of our own ignorance of their participation and possibility. Removing women from the Gospels removes representation that speaks to an incarnated body gifted life by the Creator, loved by the Redeemer, cared for by the Mother and guided by the Father. To not acknowledge the role of women as intended by God in the beginning and called for by Jesus in his lifetime is to determine creation was inadequate by devaluing the female creation. Moving against the momentum sustained for patriarchy is overwhelming, intimidating and at times dangerous but crucial. I appreciate Schneiders' description as a "hermeneutic of retrieval, the effort to face without flinching the real problems in both the text and the history of interpretation and to move through the confrontation to the liberating potential of the text for women and for society."³ (Of note: above the titles Redeemer, Creator, Mother and Father are all capitalized. My designed, automated grammar/spellcheck acknowledges the capitalized titles and relentlessly prompts me to make one grammatical correction – to decapitalize Mother.)

The feminist hermeneutic is not accepted by all and opposed by many. I find this rooted in fear: fear of inadequacy, fear of recognizing belief in what proves to be myth, fear of accountability to one's own enacted injustices, fear of loss of power. When the capacity, the potential, the equality or the authority of women is resisted I am curious what revelation is consulted to supports the devaluation of the female creation made by God in the image of God. History provides evidence of patriarchy's existence, utilization, propagation and defense but this does not suffice as divine revelation. Incorporating a feminist hermeneutic when exploring the Gospel story world restores ordered creation by elevating the humanity of each incarnated individual called, recognized and accepted by Jesus as they are and as we should. Calling attention to the violent impact of overlooking and disintegrating the female's existence

3 Sandra M. Schneiders, "Feminist Hermeneutics," in *Hearing the New Testament*, ed. Joel Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 352.

in the Gospel narrative fortifies the significance of our physical existence in rightly ordered creation and allows access to understanding and realizing the Gospel Truth to more of God's creation.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN FAITH FORMATION

The exegetical practices of both Sandra Schneiders and Janice Capel Anderson provide rigorous academic examples of feminist biblical scholarship that releases the female role from the background of the story to the forefront. Excavating the identities of women in Scripture with their dialogue and action pertinent to the story reveals substantial material intended for the reader(s) garnering insight and formation from the text. Anderson provides a somewhat introductory framework for an approach to feminist biblical scholarship with four bullet points:

1. *Recovering female images of God and concentrating on stories of women in the text in order to recover images of biblical women, images of agency, and images of victimization.*
2. *Reconstruction of the historical and social background of the text with reference to the category of gender: rewriting the histories of Israel and the early church.*
3. *Recovering the history of women interpreting the Bible and rewriting the history of interpretation.*
4. *Examining readers' responses: asking how gender and other historical and social variables shape the production of meaning.⁴*

For the practice of narrative criticism in the New Testament, I would focus the second category on the experiences and culture of the Early Church. I see this framework, and the references provided, by Anderson as a starting point for an approach to an informed facilitation of feminist hermeneutics with a population in a parish – be it forming youth, converting adults or confirmed members. I have noticed my parish has three opportunities for men to come together (three different titled

4 Janice Capel Anderson, "The Dancing Daughter," in *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 117-120.

groups) to prepare, learn, reflect and grow through retreats, weekly meetings and scripture study. Women do not have an equal or even comparable opportunity. My vision is to lead a monthly group in study through Scripture and reflection with the aim of resuscitating and restoring the female lives and ministry of the New Testament. Through the steps outlined above, (using a more comprehensive understanding of the setting of the story world, a stronger familiarity of the characters and an expanded awareness of the impact of the story on the reader in light of recognized biases), I would hope to enrich the experience of the reader entering the story world. The expanded encounter of the story world should translate to possibilities of engagement in the current world. Recognizing the significance and participation of all humans in the New Testament narrative should direct our attention to the diverse gifts available to serve those surrounding us in this life. Continuing an interpretive practice that does not directly acknowledge, and does not directly condone, patriarchal influences limits the reader's ability to fully receive the truth contained in scripture. Reinvigorating an approach that admits naivete and embodies a willingness to learn from a feminist hermeneutic has a potential to evolve the practice of scriptural interpretation with the ultimate goal of improved awareness and acceptance of all of God's creation. For optimal growth opportunity, including men and women would facilitate more comprehensive dialogue and enhance shared perspectives. I think an opportunity for women to come together to seek better understanding intellectually and rigorously without fear of experiencing dominating behaviors or belittling attitudes is possible in an environment including men. Women can also participate in negative gendered assumptions and biased interpretative practices if not held accountable. Balanced accountability can be achieved in a diverse female community however I think there is value in facilitating a group that engages both men and women in the journey of improved gender relationship and existence as Christians. Sometimes the reputation of a women's only group is already demeaned for the sheer fact no men were present. Not only can each side learn from engagement in dialogue, scriptural interpretation and reflection but significant transformation can

happen in physical presence of those willing to witness and listen in an environment dedicated to growth and equality.

Feminism is a movement that strives to cultivate awareness of injustices resultant to perpetuated language and practices that demean bodies in creation based on their creation. Bodies were created different, not unequal, yet the historical practices of human institutions have contributed to suppression, oppression and destruction of the female creation. Returning to the Gospel with awareness of the maltreatment of girls and women as a result of a patriarchal influence misinforming interpretation, the feminist hermeneutic strives to restore fullness in scriptural interpretation by demonstrating the presence of female integrity within the text itself. By reviving the significance of female participation in the New Testament, feminist biblical scholars inspire transformation in contemporary culture through renewed vision of how external influences have truncated the ability to form the community as Jesus intended through imposed restrictions on particular bodies of creation. Christianity calls us to accept responsibility for participation in this sin. Christian desire begets motivation to do better. Working across gender distinctions to lift barriers and build bridges will contribute to the process of reconciliation and healing. Drawing from the insights and resources provided by feminist scholars assists in the effort to create an informed environment allowing learners to engage in inquiry, growth and development to compassionately participate in integrated community as Jesus intended.



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