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THE FEMINIST USE OF INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE
FOR THE TRINITY: A CASE STUDY
IN HERMENEUTICAL METHOD

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Theology

by
Jedidiah Kwame Rydell Blake
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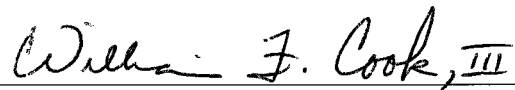
APPROVAL SHEET
THE FEMINIST USE OF INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE
FOR THE TRINITY: A CASE STUDY
IN HERMENEUTICAL METHOD

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William F. Cook III



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Date November 29, 2005

THESES Th.M. .B581f
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To
Jedidiah II,
fervent in the Spirit,
and
Tabitha,
full of good works

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PREFACE

I praise God for granting me grace to deliver this thesis after a long and difficult gestation. Conception of this study occurred – after miscarriages involving two other topics – in a doctoral seminar on the Trinity, taught by the venerable Dr. Bruce Ware. I am grateful for Dr. Ware’s perspicacious insights regarding the theological implications of the feminist use of inclusive language for the Trinity.

Dr. Stephen Wellum helped fertilize my ideas concerning theological method and, in the embryonic stages of the thesis, suggested helpful delimitations for the topic. His perceptive essay (“Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis”) which appears in the book *Reclaiming the Center* introduced me to Michael Horton’s “redemptive-historical-eschatological” theological method and Richard Lints’s view of reading Scripture according to three horizons: textual, epochal, and canonical. These fundamental concepts informed my evaluation of the feminist hermeneutical method. For Dr. Wellum’s pastoral concerns and his scholarly supervision, I am thankful.

Twelve years ago, studying New Testament under Dr. William F. Cook III at the Baptist College of Florida, I was introduced to the clearest exposition of the Word of God that I had ever experienced. Currently, as my pastor and as a member of my thesis committee, Dr. Cook demonstrates the same commitment to communicating the Word of God with enviable clarity and scholarly acumen. This model served me well in my evaluation of the biblical-theological data, though I fear that I have fallen short of Dr. Cook’s high standards.

I thank God too for Dr. Russell Moore. Robert Whittinton’s description of Sir

Thomas More in *Man for All Seasons* is a fitting tribute to the indefatigable dean, Dr. Moore: “A man of an angel’s wit and singular learning; I know not his fellow.”¹

I have embalmed the months I spent in Dr. Mark Seifrid’s doctoral seminar on Romans. This premier scholar on Romans has stimulated me to pursue further studies on Paul’s use of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17. Generally, Dr. Seifrid constantly exhorted us to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:5).

Apart from this cadre of scholars, I would also like to thank friends and churches that supported me in various ways. The church I pastored in Cincinnati, Gospel Harvest Baptist Church, patiently endured my weekly migrations from Louisville to Cincinnati and sustained us with their prayers, love, and resources. George and Alice Green were particularly kind to us. Also, Trinity Baptist Church graciously allowed us to live in their parsonage and blessed us with their friendship and resources. Their former pastor, Dr. Hugh Roberts, and his wife, Dr. Alene Roberts, ministered consistently to us. Additionally, Dr. O. S. Hawkins, my former pastor, often refreshed my spirit with his timely encouragement.

Here in Louisville, Ninth and O Baptist Church loved us, prayed for us, and supported us constantly. Also, Randy and Dana Stinson along with Rob Lister encouraged me in many ways. During difficult days, Brian and Heather Payne along with Mark and Ginger Hales showed me no small kindness and have continued to stimulate me to good works. I thank God also for Linda Arnold and Scott Holman of Village Manor who, at a critical juncture, provided a study for me to complete this thesis. Finally, Dr. Jim Orrick, professor of literature and culture at Boyce College, has been my true companion. From the time we first met in Turkey until today, we have been like iron sharpening iron. I have treasured the time we spent praying together, memorizing the Scriptures together, and arguing about metaphorical theology, West Indian and African

¹Cited in Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), v.

literature, Calvin's theology of prayer, Luther's doctrine of the will, and a thousand other subjects.

And how can I thank God enough for my lovely family? My wife, Verna, like the virtuous woman in Proverbs, is *alef* to *tav*. Her industry, godly wisdom, and devotion to the Lord and to me, Jedidiah, and Tabitha have blessed us. Further, her interminable typing and editing helped deliver this project. We love her. "Houses and riches are an inheritance from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the Lord" (Prov 19:14).

What a joy to be father to Jedidiah and Tabitha, children who love the Lord, love his Word, and love his Church. Their love for us sustains us and their joy refreshes us. I thank them for their prayers and patience.

I trust that this short work, despite its imperfections, will bring honor and glory to our Lord. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

Jedidiah Kwame Rydell Blake

Louisville, Kentucky

December 2005

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The historic affirmation of the one true God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is foundational to Christian faith and piety:

At the beginning of Christian worship, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are invoked. In collects, they are prayed to. In Christian praise, as in the words of the Gloria Patri, they are extolled. In the words of the ecumenical creeds, they are confessed. On their authority, Baptism is administered. In Eucharistic prayers, the salvation they have accomplished is solemnly rehearsed; and at the close of Christian worship, benedictions are pronounced that either name or allude to them.¹

Since the 1970s,² however, the use of predominantly masculine language to name³ God has been undergoing significant revision. Many feminist theologians claim that the

¹“Editorial,” *Interpretation* 45 (April 1991): 115. The classical statement of belief in the Trinity was formulated at the Council of Nicaea (325) and reaffirmed at the Council of Constantinople (381).

²Although the theological debate over the use of inclusive language for the Trinity has intensified in recent years, the problem is not really new. In the face of opposition, Christian theologians have long maintained that the use of traditional masculine language for God is sacrosanct. During the fourth-century Christological and Trinitarian controversies, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa defended the traditional Trinitarian names against the Arians and Eunomians. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, lampooned his detractors who claimed that God is male because God is called Father, or that Deity is feminine owing to the gender of the word, or that Spirit is neuter because it “has nothing to do with generation.” The Cappadocian Father insisted that God’s fatherhood is not related to sexuality. See Gregory Nazianzen, *The Fifth Theological Oration*, 7, in *Select Orations*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, reprint edition, 1994), 7:320. See also Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 197.

³Throughout this thesis, I shall distinguish language to name God from language to describe God, a distinction that is seldom observed by feminist theologians. Peter Toon, noting this distinction, affirms that the Bible does not “contain any examples of God being addressed (in contrast to being described) through feminine images. Though God is likened to a mother or to a mother bird several times in the Bible, God is never called ‘Mother.’” Peter Toon, “Inclusive Language: Right or Wrong?” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 15 (October-December 1991): 297. Bruce Ware makes the same point in his article on the Trinity. Bruce A. Ware, “How Shall We Think about the Trinity?” in *God under Fire*, ed. Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 266.

biblical and traditional Trinitarian name – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – implies a God who is patriarchal, male, and sexist, a view taken by patriarchal Christianity to legitimate male domination of women in the church and in society at large.⁴ As Anthony Thiselton notes:

[Feminists believe] that biblical texts have been interpreted in such a way as to promote and to legitimate secondary or oppressive social roles to women. Certain biblical texts, as mediated through many Christian traditions, are perceived in most strands of feminism to have been transposed into instruments of power, domination, and social control.⁵

To effect their emancipation and to purge the Scriptures of patriarchal images, these feminist scholars have proposed eliminating masculine gender terminology for the Lord and replacing the biblical language with extra-biblical appellations and with gender-neutral or female images gleaned from the Scriptures (but used out of context): among other appellations, Mother, Lover, Friend,⁶ She,⁷ God/ess,⁸ Sophia,⁹ Child of God,¹⁰ and

⁴Aída Besançon Spencer et al., *The Goddess Revival* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 104. Feminist theology, notwithstanding differing emphases by various feminist theologians, is less divergent than is usually believed. One point of convergence germane to this study is the feminist acceptance of a re-symbolization of God based on extra-biblical norms. In this paper, therefore, I shall engage feminist theology in general, noting differences where relevant. Linda Woodhead adopts a similar approach. Linda Woodhead, "Spiritualizing the Sacred: A Critique of Feminist Theology," *Modern Theology* 13 (April 1997): 192.

⁵The ideological and hermeneutical suspicion that undergirds this view can be traced to the teaching of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud – the "three masters of suspicion." Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), chap. 10; idem, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 3-17.

⁶Sallie McFague has suggested mother, lover, and friend as substitutes for traditional Trinitarian language, adding that these metaphors for God reflect fundamental human relations. Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); idem, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992). Paul Jewett explores some options for Trinitarian nomenclature and posits use of mother in a "hypothetical way of speaking [since] God the Savior assumed humanity as a male." Paul Jewett, *God, Creation, and Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 325.

⁷Elizabeth Johnson argues that, in light of the patriarchal imagining of God which has helped perpetuate a patriarchal society and Church, we need to envision God "from the perspective of women's dignity" as "she who is." Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Rita M. Gross prefers God-She as a substitute for the Trinitarian name. Rita M. Gross, "Female Language in a Jewish Context," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 173.

Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.¹¹ Many evangelical theologians, however, denounce this libertine hermeneutic employed by feminist theologians, this “transgressing of canonical boundaries,”¹² and this re-imagining of God from the perspective of women’s experience. “Proposed alterations in the direction of a neuter God or of a masculine-feminine God [these evangelical theologians contend] involve not only semantic changes but a revisionist theology as well.”¹³

Thesis

This thesis will explore the relationship between feminists’ use of inclusive language for God and their hermeneutical method¹⁴ in order to determine the viability of

⁸Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 67-71 in particular.

⁹Feminists proclaimed Sophia (whom they hailed the embodiment of wisdom recorded in Proverbs 8) their new goddess whom they adored at the 1993 Re-Imagining Conference in Minneapolis. Elizabeth Johnson employs the theme of the divine Sophia to re-conceptualize the Trinity as Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, and Mother-Sophia. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, chaps. 7-9, passim.

¹⁰*An Inclusive Language Lectionary: Readings for Year A* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), 273. Robert W. Bertram argues that we should call the Son “Child” because Child is the “primal filial reference – filial not male – in the Trinitarian identification of Jesus. God on whom everything depends is simultaneously as we are, one who depends – a child!” Robert W. Bertram, “Putting the Nature of God into Language: Naming the Trinity,” in *Our Naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-Talk Today*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 92.

¹¹Donald Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1985), 50-55.

¹²Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s more recent publications are marked by what she calls a “transgressive approach” to Scripture. Elizabeth Fiorenza, “Introduction: Transgressing Canonical Boundaries,” in *Searching the Scriptures II: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 1-14.

¹³Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 5, *God Who Stands and Stays* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999), 157.

¹⁴Hermeneutical method emphasizes a special form of procedure for “the practice of interpretation – its aims, conditions, and criteria.” Charles Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay in Theological Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 9. Emphasis is also placed on “the unique roles and relationships between the author, the text and the readers.” Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 59.

their method for theological construction. Proposals for depatriarchalizing the canonical Scriptures, this study maintains, represent a radical departure from the traditional understanding of hermeneutics as a grammatical-historical search for authorial intention to “an ontological displacement of original meaning by the reader’s encounter with the text”¹⁵ – clearly a socio-pragmatic hermeneutic whose critical stance derives from philosophical and literary views formulated primarily in the twentieth century.¹⁶

The philosophical heritage includes the “death of the author” notion espoused by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, a heritage which represents the disavowal of any objective meaning in texts. With the repudiation of authorial intention and consequent “turn to the subject”¹⁷ that this philosophy entails, feminist interpreters can readily claim the text as speaking on their behalf.

The literary forebear, reader-response criticism, represents a radical shift in interpretive direction from the author-text horizon (which stresses authorial intention and immanent textual meaning) to the text-reader horizon (which emphasizes “locatedness” of the interpreter and textual indeterminacy). This new hermeneutic has resulted in

¹⁵Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 385-86.

¹⁶Francis Martin, “Feminist Hermeneutics: Some Epistemological Reflections,” in *This is My Name Forever: The Trinity and Gender Language for God*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 108. Anthony Thiselton defines a socio-pragmatic hermeneutic as “the hermeneutical systems constructed or utilized by feminists which function pragmatically to filter out from the biblical text any signal which does anything other than affirm the hopes and aspirations of the feminist community. They merely reflect back the horizons of the community of protest in self-affirmation. [Further] feminist hermeneutics begins with women’s experience . . . this category of women’s experience becomes a critical principle [and] biblical texts [then] speak in new ways, once hermeneutical pre-understanding has been informed by the first two steps of the process.” Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 410, 438-39.

¹⁷The “turn to the subject” has a long pedigree. “A philosophical reversal in philosophy, represented by Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel, produced yet another theological method – the subjective. Experience replaced knowledge as the foundation of theology, which was itself separated from science and metaphysics. Taking the starting point in Christian consciousness, attempts were made to ground theology in morality, the feeling of absolute dependence, or the unfolding of the universal Spirit.” Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 59. We shall, shortly, evaluate the claim by feminists to ground their theology in women’s experience and feminist consciousness.

meaning being “subsumed within the prior horizons” of the feminist interpreter.¹⁸

The “transgressive method of interpretation” utilized by feminist theologians, this study further argues, effectively undermines the concept of an objective criterion which might serve as the rule of faith and the foundation of theology. Women’s experience cannot serve as an epistemic source of theological truth-claims.¹⁹

Rather, the study adds, “the significance of biblical nomenclature is to be derived from scriptural teaching and the meaning of literary details as they are illumined by the verbal and logical context.”²⁰ Scripture, in short, produces its own domain of meaning, and we arrive at the basic meaning of these books by an intratextual approach (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*).²¹

The intratextual approach, invariably, yields a truly biblical understanding of the Trinitarian name and presupposes the normativity of the canonical Scriptures. The extratextual approach of feminist interpreters, on the other hand, clearly produces a polyvalent, unbiblical view of the Trinitarian name (as adduced from their theological articulations). This study concludes that the socio-pragmatic hermeneutic employed by

¹⁸Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 515-16.

¹⁹William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 16 in particular. Richard Lints refers to this hermeneutical subjectivity as “epistemic pragmatism.” Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 218. See also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 59.

²⁰Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 162.

²¹As Luther put it, “Das ist der beste Lehrer, der seine Meinung nicht in die sondern aus der Schrift bringt” (The best teacher is the one who does not bring his meaning into the Scripture but gets his meaning from the Scripture). Quoted in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 115. For an explication of the intratextual approach, see George A. Lindbeck, “The Nature of Doctrine: Toward a Postliberal Theology,” in *Readings in Modern Theology*, ed. Robin Gill (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 188-97. Stephen Wellum presents a lucid evangelical appraisal of the intratextual approach. Stephen J. Wellum, “Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 184-97. Generally, E. D. Hirsch affirms the intratextual approach. See his *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

feminists in their critique of the Trinitarian name represents an untenable option for the doing of theology.

Extratextual and Intratextual Approaches Distinguished

In our investigation of the role of the author, the text, and the reader in biblical interpretation, we discern two distinct approaches to the doing of theology – the extratextual approach and the intratextual approach. In the following pages, I shall briefly describe each approach, noting underlying philosophical and biblical-theological assumptions. On the basis of this evaluation, I shall conclude that the intratextual approach is the only faithful method for the doing of theology.

What characterizes the extratextual approach to the doing of theology? In the extratextual approach, Scripture is read through the aperture of ideological, cultural, or philosophical constructs that are inimical to biblical revelation.²² To illustrate, the Jamaican cultural anthropologist Edith Clark, in her book *My Mother Who Fathered Me*, reveals that a matrifocal family structure predominates in most Caribbean societies – fathers, after coitus with their concubines, abandon their families for virgin pastures.²³ In these societies, in attempting to fathom the meaning of the fatherhood of God, if one extrapolated from one's experience of the absentee father or the mother who fathers, one would posit a promiscuous father, an absentee father, an androgynous father, a mother god. As Carl Henry explains, Father "does not mean that [God] is assertedly like human males in some respect, as feminists often imply; rather, it affirms that God is in these respects intrinsically what creatures reflect only in secondary and often imperfect ways."²⁴

²²Wellum, "Re-Doing Evangelical Theology," 184.

²³Edith Clark, *My Mother Who Fathered Me* (Kingston, Jamaica: University Press, 1957).

²⁴Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 162.

In the extratextual approach, as Stephen Wellum indicates, sometimes “complete priority is given to some modern or postmodern secular worldview, and Christianity is valid only insofar as it fits in with that worldview. Christian faith and practice is acceptable only when it conforms to [alien norms].”²⁵ For example, modern liberalism – in attempting to reconcile Christianity and science – dismissed the doctrines of the person of Christ and substitutionary atonement and, instead, posited vague religious principles as fundamental to the faith. The result of this compromise was a hazy, natural religion that was totally opposed to the Gospel. The danger of this acquiescence by liberals, as J. Gresham Machen noted, was that liberals continued to use the language of classical theology while abandoning everything distinctly Christian.²⁶

Feminist theologians, in their critique of the biblical Trinitarian name, pursue the extratextual approach in their doing of theology. David Scholer affirms that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, among others, acknowledges that her point of departure in her doing of theology is women’s experience, not the canonical Scriptures. Scholer observes:

Fiorenza makes it very clear that the point of departure is not the Bible as normative authority. Rather, women’s experience and their struggle for liberation becomes the locus of authority. The Bible becomes a formative root model, from which examples and insights are taken that explain one’s struggle to find one’s place and to find solidarity with those women that are recounted in the biblical religion.²⁷

As Margaret Miles says, however, this “socially-constructed gender ideology . . . this historicism” endangers “Truth” itself.²⁸

Is there no viable option for the doing of theology? To answer this question, let us consider the intratextual approach. This approach presupposes the normativity of the

²⁵Wellum “Re-Doing Evangelical Theology,” 184.

²⁶J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923).

²⁷David M. Scholer, “Feminist Hermeneutics and Evangelical Biblical Interpretation,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (December 1987): 309.

²⁸Margaret Miles, “Hermeneutics of Generosity and Suspicion: Pluralism and Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 23, supp. (1987): 35.

canonical Scriptures, evinces an interpretive direction from an author-text horizon to a text-reader horizon, gives priority to scripture's diverse literary forms "as redemptive-historical revelation, progressively disclosed," and accentuates an interpretive "matrix or metanarrative by which we view everything."²⁹

The "importance of [canonical] texts and of intratextuality for theological faithfulness" is undeniable. Indeed, the canonical writings are a condition, not only for the survival of Christianity, but also for the very possibility of normative theological truth-claims.³⁰ This canon "demands a perspective on the unity of Scripture that allows neither community nor scholar to predominate over the canonical text itself."³¹

It is also helpful to note the interpretive direction evinced in the intratextual approach. Whereas in the extratextual approach Scripture is read through an alien "ideological or philosophical grid that we bring to the text," in the intratextual approach

²⁹Wellum, "Re-Doing Evangelical Theology," 185.

³⁰Lindbeck, "Nature of Doctrine," 188. Lindbeck's intratextual approach, though commendable in some measure, fails to affirm the cognitive-propositional view of the Scriptures, and hence the full authority of the Scriptures. As Albert Mohler reveals, "With links to the anthropology of Clifford Geertz and the Wittgensteinian notion of 'language game,' the main thrust of this movement [that is, the New Yale School of which Lindbeck is a leading proponent] is to shift the basis of Christian theology away from a propositional claim, based upon an objective and universal revelation, to a self-consciously local and particular narrative claim rooted in a specific cultural-linguistic system. Thus, the universal truth claim of Christianity is reduced to a cultural-specific system of shared meaning." R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "The Integrity of the Evangelical Tradition and the Challenge of the Postmodern Paradigm," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1995), 77. In his critique of Lindbeck's intratextual approach, Geoffrey Wainwright protests, "For propositions Lindbeck wants to substitute story – the story told normatively in the Bible. We may readily admit the crucial importance of the biblical story, but we have not thereby made the question of epistemological status any easier. Lindbeck writes: 'The rendering of God's character is not in every instance logically dependent on the facticity of the story' (p. 122). But if the story does not in some instances at least narrate real events, then the connection between God and the life of humanity becomes very tenuous indeed and the 'point' of the story is correspondingly weakened. But if God 'acts in history' at all, the grounds for advancing true propositions about God are there. Any talk of 'rendering God's character,' in however 'non-propositional' a form, in fact raises the ontological question of correspondence to the divine reality." Geoffrey Wainwright, "Ecumenical Dimensions of Lindbeck's 'Nature of Doctrine,'" in *Reading in Modern Theology*, ed. Robin Gill (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 215.

³¹Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 273. A fuller treatment of canon as norm is reserved for subsequent discussion.

“our doing of theology and whole understanding of the world is, as Calvin stated, viewed through the ‘spectacles’ of Scriptures.”³² Lindbeck emphasizes this interpretive movement from the author-text horizon to the text-reader horizon: “Intratextual theology,” he states, “re-describes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extra-scriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text. The interpretive direction [is] from the Bible to the world rather than vice versa.”³³

Lindbeck adds that “traditional exegetical procedures assume that Scripture creates its own domain of meaning and that the task of interpretation is to extend this over the whole of reality.”³⁴ To illustrate this view, let us reconsider the denuded family structure typical of many Caribbean societies – in many homes there is no father. Whereas many of these followers of Christ do not understand personally the notion of fatherhood, they, nonetheless, understand experientially the fatherhood of God – a truth revealed by the Spirit and appropriated by faith to the life of the believers. From the domain of meaning created by the Scripture, these believers perceive the Father’s electing love (stimulating them to faith and piety), his loving discipline (prompting them to filial obedience), and his wonderful benevolence (inspiring them to ceaseless praise). As Carl Henry writes, “The conclusion to be drawn is that the significance of biblical nomenclature is not to be projected from human analogy or philosophical conjecture but is to be derived rather from scriptural teaching and the meaning of literary details as they are illumined by the verbal and logical context.”³⁵ The fatherhood of God, however, is not interpreted merely as a kind of moral influence theory but rather as a soteriological

³²Wellum, “Re-Doing Evangelical Theology,” 184-85.

³³Lindbeck, “Nature of Doctrine,” 190-91.

³⁴Ibid., 189.

³⁵Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 162.

concept and Trinitarian truth.³⁶

The intratextual approach, in short, gives priority to Scripture's diverse literary forms "as redemptive-historical revelation, progressively disclosed," and accentuates an "interpretative matrix or metanarrative by which we view everything."³⁷ What is this fundamental story that permeates Scripture? It is the gospel of our Lord.³⁸ Alvin Kimel best encapsulates the Trinitarian dimension to the gospel narrative. As he elaborates, the Church proclaims the story of the God of Israel who binds a people to himself in covenant love, forming them into faithful witnesses. In the fullness of time, this God (whom the Son called Father) sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Following his resurrection from the dead and ascension to heaven, the exalted Christ poured out the Spirit on the community of faith. The faithful Church proclaims "the narrative of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and [promises] it as good news to its hearers." This narrative, informing our liturgy, preaching, and theology, "provides the foundational content and vocabulary" for our faith and piety. "Through it the people of God envision their mission and ministry. In it all believers find forgiveness for their [sins] and hope for their future. It is this story which is summarized in the triune name."³⁹

³⁶This understanding of the fatherhood of God, notwithstanding the cultural reality, is a product of exegetical theology – "a faithful listening to the Word of God through Scripture." Norman R. Gulley, "Reader-Response Theories in Postmodern Hermeneutics: A Challenge to Evangelical Theology," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1995), 225. To be biblical in our doing of theology, we must give priority to the exegetical task. As Russell Moore points out, "Evangelical theology claims, by definition, to be an exegetical theology grounded in the authoritative witness of the Old and New Testament Scriptures." Russell D. Moore, "Kingdom Theology and the American Evangelical Consensus: Emerging Implications for Sociopolitical Engagement" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002), 6.

³⁷Wellum, "Re-Doing Evangelical Theology," 185.

³⁸This gospel or metanarrative includes the doctrines of creation, fall, promise, fulfillment, the already-not-yet, and the consummation. For a development of this theme, see D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 193-314 passim.

³⁹ Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., "The God Who Likes His Name: Holy Trinity, Feminism, and the Language of Faith," *Interpretation* 45 (April 1991): 149. William H. K. Narum provides the following summary of the metanarrative: "The Christian 'story' may be spoken of in many different ways, but essential in it are moments like these: in the beginning God created the world; but in the actual created

In summary, the intratextual approach here outlined preserves the authority of the canonical Scriptures and maintains its redemptive-historical-eschatological purview, while extolling the centrality of Jesus Christ in the redemptive plan. This approach acknowledges that God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – addresses human beings through the medium of the text for the purpose of bringing them to faith in Jesus Christ. In this regard, men and women should “listen in reverent expectancy.”⁴⁰

Background to the Study

In 1992, Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., lamenting “the paucity of critical response” from evangelical theologians to the feminist use of inclusive language for God, wrote:

Despite the radicality of the feminist reconstructions of the doctrine of God in a rapidly increasing volume of theological work, and despite the dramatic changes both proposed and enacted in the church’s liturgy, piety, and discourse, most theologians have simply either ignored the feminist arguments or accepted them with various degrees of enthusiasm and assent.⁴¹

world things are not true to their essential nature – there has been a fall; God therefore undertook the redemption of humanity, first by sending his servants the prophets, but in these last days his Son, who wrought this redemption through his life, death and resurrection; the church, the new redeemed humanity, came into being by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There are three ‘mighty acts’ of God: the Creation, the Incarnation, and the giving of the Holy Spirit. . . . That is why the whole Christian ‘story’ can be epitomized in the triumphant declaration of the Christian church that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together are worshipped and glorified, one God blessed forever. No one can accept the ‘story’ and deny the confession.” William H. K. Narum, “The Trinity, The Gospel, and Human Experience,” *Word & World* 2 (Winter 1982): 44.

⁴⁰ With reference to the intratextual approach, Wellum concludes, “When we approach the Bible in its own categories and structure, we observe that God’s self-revelation, in word and act, also involves historical progression, along a redemptive-historical storyline, ultimately centered in Jesus Christ (cf. Heb 1:1-2), and thus we must read Scripture accordingly. This is precisely what Horton has recently proposed when he asserts that a proper theological method must be ‘redemptive-historical-eschatological,’ so that we are reading Scripture according to its own intrasystematic categories. In this sense, then, the content of Scripture must define our methodology so that our reading of Scripture will reflect what Scripture actually is. . . . In the final analysis, [we] ‘think God’s thoughts after him.’” Wellum, “Re-Doing Evangelical Theology,” 195-96.

⁴¹ Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), ix. The following works are indispensable for understanding the feminist proposals for depatriarchalizing the Scriptures: McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*; Ruether, *Sexism*; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988); Johnson, *She Who Is*; K. E. Børreson, *The Image of God: Gender Models in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Virginia Ramey

Among those who have critiqued the feminist reformulations of biblical Trinitarian language, Donald Bloesch was the first to offer a sustained critical evaluation.⁴² The theologian examined the feminist challenge in terms of a theory of language and biblical authority. For Bloesch, the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not metaphors derived from cultural experience (and thus “tentative and exploratory”) but rather analogies *sui generis* drawn from God’s self-revelation in the canonical Scriptures (and therefore binding on the Church).⁴³

With broad strokes, the eighteen largely conservative Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox essayists in *Speaking the Christian God* address the feminist proposals for inclusive language for the Trinity in terms of the pluralistic worldview that influences the feminist critique (variously Kantian dualism, monism, Gnosticism, polytheism, and heathenism), in terms of the need to preserve the authority of the Scriptures, in terms of the inadequacy of metaphorical theology, and in terms of the inadequacy of the role of women’s experience as both source and norm for theological reflection. Fundamentally, these writers purport that the feminist critique of traditional God-talk is symptomatic of the humanization of theology, what Ludwig Feuerbach termed “projection” of our ideals upon a deity of our own making, an opinion later

Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Ruth C. Duck, *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula* (New York: The Pilgrim’s Press, 1991); and Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

⁴² Bloesch, *Battle for the Trinity*. Perhaps the most helpful critiques of the feminist reappropriation of the doctrine of God are Kimel, *Speaking the Christian God*; idem, *This is My Name Forever*; Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); John W. Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven: Christian Faith and Inclusive Language for God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

⁴³ Bloesch, *Battle for the Trinity*, 22-23, 35-36. In positing analogical language for the Trinity, Bloesch (in the tradition of Aquinas) holds that the Trinitarian terms are neither univocal nor equivocal but rather “there is a partial resemblance between our words and the transcendent reality to which they point.” *Ibid.*, 14. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 13, aa. 5-6.

buttressed by Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud.⁴⁴

Other scholars who object to the feminist re-imagining of the Trinity generally raise three fundamental questions related to theological method: (1) “What are the sources from which theological reflection is drawn? (2) Against what norm or standard are biblical texts to be interpreted and theological ideas judged? and (3) How [is] the central norm of the Christian faith, namely the Bible, to be read and understood?”⁴⁵ By these broad and essential queries, evangelical theologians critically evaluate the feminist theological perspectives.

Some shortcomings in the evangelical response, however, may be noted. First, inadequate attention has been paid to the correlation between the use of inclusive language for God and hermeneutical method.⁴⁶ Second, the “evangelical focus on Scripture as an epistemic foundation for theological inquiry”⁴⁷ does not adequately address the seismic shift in the very concept of canon that is developing as a result of the feminist critique. As William Abraham reminds us, we are witnessing “the formation of a new canonical heritage In this case the canonical reformation has become so radical that it may best be seen as the emergence of a new religion.”⁴⁸ Finally, in emphasizing the re-imagining of God undertaken by feminists, evangelical theologians have skirted

⁴⁴For an elaboration of the idea of the humanization of theology, see Thiselton’s *Interpreting God*.

⁴⁵Cynthia Campbell, *Theologies Written from Feminist Perspectives: An Introductory Study* (New York: Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church, 1987), 17, 21.

⁴⁶Francis Martin has attempted this evaluation. Martin, *Feminist Question*, chap. 7; idem, “Feminist Hermeneutics,” 108-35. See also Thiselton’s work in *New Horizons*, chaps. 11-14. Kevin Vanhoozer has also done careful reflection on this issue. As Chauncey Everett Berry notes, “Vanhoozer has been able to show the metaphysical and the theological correlations that exist between views of hermeneutical theory and theistic convictions.” Chauncey Everett Berry, “Revising Evangelical Theological Method in the Postmodern Context: Stanley J. Grenz and Kevin J. Vanhoozer as Test Cases” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), 218.

⁴⁷Berry, “Revising Evangelical Theological Method,” 220.

⁴⁸Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 436, 461.

the crux of the matter: the death of God. Regarding the philosophical heritage of feminist hermeneutics, R. Albert Mohler, Jr. writes, “Foucault’s notion of the death of the author sets the challenge clearly, for according to the Christian doctrine of revelation, the ultimate author is God himself.”⁴⁹ In a similar vein, Kevin Vanhoozer has written:

Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault have each written epitaphs – words on the tomb – for the author What is striking about Barthes’s announcement of the death of the author is its connection to the death of God The fates of the author and of the God of traditional theism stand or fall together.⁵⁰

Methodology

As delineated in the thesis, the feminist use of inclusive language for the Trinity, which represents a revisionist theology, has been the product of a libertine hermeneutic and a transgressive method of interpretation. I propose to establish the correlation between feminist hermeneutical method and feminist theological construction.

First, I will describe the theological tradition out of which the feminist critique emerges, thus contextualizing the debate and noting the divergent nature of the feminist theological enterprise (chapter one). In the following chapter, I will elucidate the search

⁴⁹Mohler, “Challenge of the Postmodern Paradigm,” 73.

⁵⁰Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 69-71. Kevin J. Vanhoozer explains the connection between the death of the author and the death of God in the following manner: “The so-called death of the author is actually a form of the worst sort of reductionism, where communicative acts and intentions are stripped away from the text, leaving an autonomous linguistic object. . . . Deconstruction, it has been said, is the ‘death of God’ put into writing. Texts, bereft of human authors, would be radically indeterminate for the simple reason that we could not identify what illocutionary act has been performed. Texts without authors would be mere entities, as devoid of meaning as the marks the waves leave upon the sand. Why? Because meaning is the result of intentional (illocutionary) action, not a natural event. There is verbal meaning only where someone means, or has meant, something by using particular words in a special context in a certain way. The death of the author thus leads to hermeneutical non-realism and to the suspicion that meaning, like God, is merely a projection on the part of the reader/believer. Neither hermeneutics nor theology can afford to follow Feuerbach’s suggestion that what we find – God, meaning – is actually only a projection of ourselves.” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of Covenant,” in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Scripture and Hermeneutics Series*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 12, 18.

for authorial intention – noting the role of the author, the text, the reader, and the Holy Spirit in the hermeneutical task – and thus provide a criterion by which to evaluate the feminist hermeneutic. Thereafter, I will – in chapter three – analyze the feminist hermeneutical method against the background of a hermeneutics of communication and the normativity of the Scriptures for theological reflection. In the fourth chapter, I will demonstrate that the epistemic pragmatism of the feminist method along with its transgressive approach to Scripture invariably yields an unbiblical view of the Trinitarian name, thus rendering the hermeneutical method inutile for theological construction.

Finally, I will assess the biblical – theological implications of the feminist ideological critique, paying particular attention to the revisionist understanding of God that the critique adduces. I conclude that feminists, by rejecting the Scriptural names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for inclusive language, posit another God.

CHAPTER 2

THE SEARCH FOR AUTHORIAL INTENTION

This chapter, which has four parts, deals with the search for authorial intention and provides a criterion by which to evaluate the feminist hermeneutic. The first part emphasizes the primacy of authorial intention, whereas the second and third parts stress the text as locus of meaning and the reader as listener. The final section – the Holy Spirit as interpreter – explains that the meaning of the Scriptures is spiritually discerned rather than merely discovered, hence the need to “listen in reverent expectancy.”

The approach here outlined – reflecting the intratextual approach – presupposes the normativity of the canonical Scriptures, evinces an interpretive direction from an author-text horizon to a text-reader horizon, and accentuates an “interpretive metanarrative by which we view everything.”

Hermeneutics of Communication

How should one read the Scriptures so as to discern its meaning? The problem of interpretation is as pertinent today as it was in the Scriptures. In Acts 8:26-40, Luke relates the account of the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion. During his encounter with the eunuch, Philip the evangelist – hearing the official read the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa 53:7, 8) – asked him if he understood what he was reading, whereupon the eunuch responded, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31).

How can we discover meaning in a text? Generally, the process of discovering the meaning of a text has three foci: the author, the text, and the reader. Fundamentally, authors create texts in order to communicate meaning. E. D. Hirsch makes the same observation in *Philosophy of Composition*: “To write is to project meaning as understood meaning. The author imagines the kind of people who will read the text. He considers the

conventions and codes of communication which are operative at the time in order to succeed in conveying meaning.”¹

Who or what, however, takes precedence in determining meaning?

Historically, the pendulum has swung from author to text to reader as various pundits have espoused different theories of meaning. These theories have, in turn, engendered many questions. For example, is a text autonomous from its author? Do readers create the meaning of texts *de novo*?²

In an attempt to answer these questions, and in the process elucidate a hermeneutics of communication, we shall examine the role of the author, the text, and the reader in ascertaining meaning. In the tradition of E. D. Hirsch,³ we shall posit that the meaning of a text is that pattern of meaning the author “willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs.”⁴

Author here includes both the human author, who may not have always

¹E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Philosophy of Composition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 27-29.

²Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 366.

³In taking Hirsch as my point of departure, I am following the lead of Kevin Vanhoozer. As Vanhoozer writes, “Though he is a literary critic by profession, Hirsch has come to be regarded by many biblical exegetes as the preeminent champion of the author and of objectivity in interpretation. Second, he is one of the chief proponents of hermeneutical realism and valid interpretation on the contemporary scene; he believes that textual meaning is unchanging and determinate and that interpretation can be valid and correct.” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 74.

⁴E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 31. Kevin Vanhoozer, likewise, emphasizes this idea of shareable symbols. “Meaning,” he says, “is the result of communicative action, of what an author has done in tending to certain words at a particular time in a specific manner.” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of Covenant,” in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2, The Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 16. See also Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 38.

understood the full import of his writings (Dan 8:27; 12:8-9), and the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21). The divine intent, communicated through the human author, was made clearer through progressive revelation that culminated in the revelation of Jesus Christ. The meaning of a biblical text, therefore, includes that pattern of meaning the human author – under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16a) – “willed to convey,” meaning discernible to the human author and other truth embedded in the text by the Holy Spirit. And we arrive at the basic meaning of the text by an intratextual approach.

The Primacy of Authorial Intention

Does the Bible have a single determinate meaning⁵ – namely, the author’s intended meaning – or do meanings proliferate without any authorial intention? If we affirm a superfluity of meanings in the biblical text, then what criterion can we employ “for judging the validity of an interpretation?”⁶

Since the Enlightenment, the general consensus has been that a neutral and objective interpretation of the biblical text is possible – a view largely undergirded by “epistemological foundationalism and the concomitant notion that the result of exegesis”⁷ is “truth as verification according to the scientific model of understanding.”⁸ Recently,

⁵Single determinate meaning does not preclude the view that “authors may intend to communicate complex, multilayered intentions What is determinate is the whole communicative act. ‘Single’ and ‘determinate’ [are] intended to shore up the notion that what fixes the meaning of a text is what the author said, and this does not change at the behest of the reader.” Vanhoozer, “From Speech Acts,” 6 n. 12, 21.

⁶Hirsch, *Validity*, 3.

⁷Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity and Diversity of Scripture*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 54.

⁸Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 271. Carl Henry elucidates this idea. He writes, “Enlightenment prejudices, particularly philosophical rationalism, infiltrated philological methodology. Pre-suppositionless interpretation became an Enlightenment ideal; simultaneously, the relevance of the Bible was sheared to retain only what commends itself to the ‘enlightened’ rational reader. This prejudicial approach to hermeneutics generated a historical understanding of Scripture that purged it of whatever seemed to offend the so-called scientifically informed mind; as a consequence, the Bible was

however, these epistemological assumptions have come under increasing attack as the focus has shifted from “the author to the text and then to the reader as the locus of meaning.”⁹

Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, disavowed the notion of objectivity, arguing that all interpretation is influenced by the reader’s frame of reference. As Linell Cady observes, Heidegger and Gadamer held that:

All understanding is necessarily perspectival, an interpretation of the other which is influenced by the assumptions, needs, and interests of the interpreter. The Enlightenment model of objectivity fails to acknowledge the historicity of the knowing subject which inevitably colors all interpretations.¹⁰

However, as Margaret Miles contends, the interment of objectivity renders meaning vacuous and may well lead to nihilism. Miles maintains:

Relinquishing objectivism, we fear, will throw open the doors of the academy to skepticism, historicism, dogmatism, fanaticism, and ultimately, nihilism. In the demise of objectivism, relativism looms – the fear that ultimately no statement, no description, no belief is universally normative, doubt that there is any value in even talking together if all positions and perspectives are to enjoy equal validity, fear that our judgments cannot be grounded on universal values.¹¹

With reference to the Scriptures, the loss of objectivism leads to biblical pluralism – a pluralism which effectively undermines the concept of an objective criterion which might serve as the rule of faith and the foundation of theology.

In the midst of this hermeneutical obfuscation, is there any conservative, evangelical consensus regarding the hermeneutical task? Currently, there is a growing

allowed to convey only such truths as man might eventually attain by his own mental reflections. In brief, the revelatory element in Scripture was made synonymous with universal moral truths.” Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 4, *God Who Speaks and Shows* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 296-97.

⁹Grant R. Osborne, “Hermeneutics/Interpreting Paul,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 388.

¹⁰Linell E. Cady, “Hermeneutics and Tradition: The Role of the Past in Jurisprudence and Theology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (October 1986): 441-42.

¹¹Margaret Miles, “Hermeneutics of Generosity and Suspicion: Pluralism and Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 23, supp. (1987): 38.

number of scholars who emphasize authorial intention for generating meaning. E. D. Hirsch and Elliott E. Johnson are representatives of this school of thought. For an explication of the intentionality approach, we turn to Hirsch's hermeneutics as developed in his two magisterial works, *Validity in Interpretation* and *The Aims of Interpretation*.¹²

In 1967, Hirsch, with the publication of *Validity*, cast the gauntlet down against the psychologism of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey, the abstract formalism of the New Criticism launched by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and associates, the radical historicism of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Rudolf Bultmann, and the new hermeneutics of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs. Hirsch insisted that an author's meaning is "objective, reproducible, sharable, and unchanging."¹³

Harold Bloom, summarizing Hirsch's views, writes, "Understanding an authorial worldview, or *Weltanschauung*,¹⁴ as expressed in any work, is a necessary component of textual interpretation and reader comprehension."¹⁵ But why did Hirsch

¹²E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

¹³David Eung-Yul Ryoo, "E. D. Hirsch's Hermeneutics and Its Theological Implication," (paper presented at the Southeast Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Louisville, Kentucky, 19 March 2005), 3.

¹⁴Applied to the Scriptures, *Weltanschauung* does not suggest an authorial perspective that is inconsistent with divine revelation. "God superintended the human authors of the Bible so that they composed and recorded, without error, His message to mankind in the words of their original writings." Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), 71. Hence, *Weltanschauung* as expressed in the Scriptures is that of the divine author, though communicated by the human author (2 Pet 1:20-21).

¹⁵Harold Bloom, ed., *The Art of the Critic: Literary Theory and Criticism from the Greeks to the Present* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990), 10:485. We are not to infer from Hirsch's theory the psychologism associated with Friedrich E. D. Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher believed that the theme of an author's composition was a product of the author's unique individuality. The essential aim of interpretation, therefore, was psychological – an understanding of the author's nature. As David Dockery makes clear, "Understanding required intuition through empathy with and imagination of the author's experience. The goal was for the author and interpreter to share a life-relationship." David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 163. See also F. E. D. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. H. Kimmmerle, trans. James Duke and H. J. Forstman (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977). Hirsch, on the other hand, held that the interpreter should not seek to get behind the text by attempting to divine the author's mind. *Weltanschauung*, as expressed in the text, is accessible because meaning is objective and sharable. Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation*, 17-18.

posit the locus of textual meaning with the author? He insisted that the banishment of the author would lead to textual indeterminacy, since there would be no norm by which to measure interpretation. Hirsch writes:

To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning was to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation. If the meaning of a text is not the author's, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to the meaning of the text, since the text can have no determinate or determinable meaning. If a theorist wants to save the ideal of validity he has to save the author as well . . . the only compelling normative principle that has ever been brought forward is the old-fashioned ideal of rightly understanding what the author meant. . . . Validity requires a norm – a meaning that is stable and determinate no matter how broad its range of implication and application. All valid interpretation of every sort is founded on the re-cognition of what an author meant.¹⁶

In order to avoid what Kevin Vanhoozer calls “interpretational violence,” the primacy of authorial intention has to be maintained.

Hirsch's intentionalism, however, is not without its detractors. Frank Lentricchia notes that “E. D. Hirsch stands pretty much by himself in the landscape of contemporary critical theory.”¹⁷ Why the rejection of Hirsch's views? Regarding Hirsch's postulations, theological and literary pundits have stressed three main objections: (1) the notion of semantic autonomy, (2) the notion of authorial ignorance, and (3) the notion of authorial intention.

Let us examine first the concept of semantic autonomy. Hirsch's critics

¹⁶Hirsch, *Validity*, 5-6, 26, 126. The demise of the author that we are witnessing is not peculiar to theology. Robert Bork notes a similar trend in constitutional law – a denial of authorial intention by pundits who are undertaking a seduction of the law. Bork writes, “What was once the dominant view of constitutional law – that a judge is to apply the Constitution according to the principles intended by those who ratified the document – is now very much out of favor among the theorists of the field. In the legal academies in particular, the philosophy of original understanding is usually viewed as thoroughly passé. . . . The search for the intent of the lawmaker [however] is the everyday procedure of lawyers and judges when they must apply a statute, a contract, a will, or the opinion of a court . . . the judge is to interpret what is in the text and not something else . . . lawyers should and judges should seek in the Constitution what they seek in other legal texts: the original meaning of the words. If the Constitution is law, then presumably its meaning, like that of all other law, is the meaning the lawmakers were understood to have intended.” Robert H. Bork, *Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 143-45.

¹⁷Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 257.

contend that a text stands “as an autonomous world of meaning, to which its author and situation relate only in the most minimal way”¹⁸ – a view associated with the New Criticism of the 1940s and 1950s. In response to his critics, Hirsch asserted:

The metaphorical doctrine that a text leads a life of its own is used by modern theorists to express the idea that textual meaning changes in the course of time. If it were correct, there could be no objective knowledge about texts. Any statement about textual meaning could be valid only for the moment, and even this temporary validity could not be tested, since there would be no permanent norms on which validating judgments could be based. The “life” theory really masks the idea that the reader construes his own, new meaning instead of that represented by the text.¹⁹

Hirsch was adamant that textual meaning should never be regulated by *a priori* concerns. He insisted that the meaning of the author is inviolate and unchanging, but the significance of a passage changes according to personal, cultural, and historical circumstances. Various authors distinguish meaning from significance by stressing authorial intention and contemporary relevance, meaning and application, the author’s horizon and the reader’s horizon, propositional meaning and illocutionary acts, or proposition, purpose, presence (the data in the text, the reason communicated, the form or genre of the message) and power (the illocutionary force of the message).²⁰ Hirsch himself clarified the concepts of “meaning” and “significance” in the following manner:

¹⁸Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 49.

¹⁹Hirsch, *Validity*, 212-13. Here Hirsch is repudiating the theories espoused by Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1956). Clark H. Pinnock, in his earlier conservative convictions, concurred with Hirsch. Pinnock wrote, “Even to appear to deny the ideal of an objective reading of the text is to open interpretation up to radical subjectivism. If the text cannot speak its own mind, the interpreter of it has the golden opportunity to speak its mind for it, and the result will almost inevitably be more of the same theological revision we have been seeing in the liberal camp. We ought to be saying that, even though total objectivity and presuppositionless exegesis are impossible, an objective reading of the text is what we should always strive for. Otherwise what will happen is that interpreters will impose upon it notions they derive from their culture and opinions and the task of true hermeneutics is doomed from the start.” Clark H. Pinnock, “A Response to James H. Olthuis’ Paper Entitled, ‘On Interpreting an Authoritative Scripture: A Proposal for a Certitudinal Hermeneutic,’” (paper presented at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, Canada, 22-26 June 1981), 9.

²⁰Ryoo, “Hirsch’s Hermeneutics,” 5 n. 14; Osborne, “Hermeneutics,” 390; Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 597-619; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture’s Diverse Literary Forms,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 53-104.

Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represented. Significance, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.²¹

With reference to “authorial ignorance,” Hirsch’s critics purport that a reader’s understanding of an author’s meaning may supersede that of the author. Kant, for example, claimed that he understood some of Plato’s writings better than did Plato himself. To support his contention, Kant wrote:

It is by no means natural, upon comparing the thoughts which an author has expressed in regard to his subject, whether in private conversation or in writing, to find that we understand him even better than he understood himself. As he has not sufficiently determined his concept, he has sometimes spoken, or even thought, in opposition to his own intention.²²

In reply to Kant’s assertion, Hirsch observed that we have no criterion for ascertaining that Kant’s understanding of the Ideas – a Platonic concept – is better than Plato’s. As Hirsch pointed out, “By claiming to perceive implications of which the author was not conscious, we may sometimes distort and falsify the meaning of which he was conscious.”²³

Is appeal to authorial intention a tenable view? The idea that authorial intention is the definitive norm for interpretation raises three fundamental questions: “(1) the metaphysical question: What is the author’s intention, and where is it located? (2) the epistemological question: Can we gain knowledge of an author’s intention, and can we know when we have done so? (3) the ethical question: Why should we strive to recover the author’s intention?”²⁴

In *Theory of Literature*, René Wellek and Austin Warren argue that the notion of authorial intention as a criterion of meaning in texts “seems quite mistaken.” They

²¹Hirsch, *Validity*, 8.

²²Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Religion*, B 370, cited by Ryoo, “Hirsch’s Hermeneutics,” 8.

²³Hirsch, *Validity*, 19-21.

²⁴Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 77.

insist that the entire meaning of a text cannot be defined simply in terms of its meaning for the writer and his original readers. The text has a life of its own; it is autonomous. This view was buttressed by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in their essay entitled “The Intentional Fallacy” which was published in 1956. These authors believed that attempts to measure the “success” of a work of art by discovering authorial intention were misguided. They held that authorial intention represented the author’s state of mind, which was inaccessible apart from the text itself. There was no need, therefore, for the reader to go “behind” the text.²⁵

Wimsatt and Beardsley, however, misconstrue the concept of authorial intention. They espoused a “pre-Wittgensteinian notion of intention as inner mental processes.”²⁶ Many writers, however, have demonstrated that authorial intention can be deduced from the text. H. P. Grice and John Searle, for example, maintain that the meaning of an utterance “is explicable in terms of what a person [an author] means by his or her utterance. There are ways of expressing intention which identify the directness of a speech-act without presupposing some psychological notion of ‘inner mental states.’”²⁷

Vanhoozer, in synthesizing Hirsch’s teaching regarding intentions, explains that “an intention is the act by which consciousness aims at something. . . . By author’s intention, Hirsch would have us understand the object (e.g., message) of which the author was conscious.”²⁸ And this intention is linguistically mediated, that is, communicated linguistically in the author’s writings.

Hirsch’s theory concerning authorial intention evinces a “Platonism of meaning,” that is, meaning is endowed “with all the properties of the classical notion of

²⁵Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 58-59.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 59.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 75-76.

substantial reality (*res*).”²⁹ In short, authorial meaning is not subject to the caprice of the reader. As Hirsch inveighed:

Now when even a few of the norms which determine a text’s meanings are allotted to readers and made dependent on their attitudes and concerns, it is evident that textual meaning must change. But is it proper to make textual meaning dependent upon the reader’s own cultural givens? It may be granted that these givens change in the course of time, but does this imply that textual meaning itself changes? As soon as the reader’s outlook is permitted to determine what a text means, we have not simply a changing meaning but quite possibly as many meanings as readers. Against such a *reductio ad absurdum*, [Hirsch maintains that] the significance of textual meaning has no foundation and no objectivity unless meaning itself is unchanging.³⁰

Another objection to Hirsch’s theory of intentionality concerns the principle of verification. Can the author’s intentions be recovered? In answer to that question, Hirsch concedes that “no one can establish another’s meaning with certainty. The interpreter’s goal is simply this – to show that a given reading is more probable than others. In hermeneutics, verification is a process of establishing relative probabilities.”³¹

From Hirsch’s admission, we are not to infer that recovery of the author’s intentions is impossible. Rather, Hirsch’s acknowledgement provides a safeguard against personal and institutional hubris. Our interpretation is not infallible. Are we, therefore, doomed to “hermeneutical nihilism”?

Hirsch proposes several ideas to counter that notion. He believes that the dynamics of the narrative, the typological concept of genre, and the rhetorical situation all help determine meaning. Additionally, Hirsch extols the communal aspect of hermeneutics. Joseph Spay writes, “Hirsch states that a more lucid knowledge of a text’s meaning and significance is possible when scholars assume the responsibility of weighing alternative interpretations in light of all that has been learned in previous and current hermeneutical studies.”³²

²⁹Ibid., 75-76, 78.

³⁰Hirsch, *Validity*, 213-14.

³¹Ibid., 236.

³²Joseph Stephen Spay, Jr., “Theological Implications of the Theory of Literature of E. D.

The third objection to Hirsch's theory of intentionality concerns the ethical question: Why should we strive to recover the author's intention? Hirsch emphasizes that meaning is the prerogative of the author and provides the "only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation."³³

In summary, Hirsch argues that authorial intention, as it is communicated linguistically in the text, is the definitive norm for interpretation. Further, interpretation applies to only those meanings which the text represents. Significance, on the other hand, establishes a relationship between textual meaning and the reader. It deals with application of meaning. Further, the author's meaning is objective, reproducible, sharable, and unchanging.³⁴

If Hirsch's theory of intentionality is jettisoned, "interpretational anarchy" would ensue. Vanhoozer, with penetrating insight, delineates the consequences for biblical-theological hermeneutics if authorial intention is denied. Basically, the death of the author eventuates in interpretational anarchy. Vanhoozer elucidates:

There seems to be a connection of sorts between the breakup of the author's monopoly on meaning, on the one hand, and the proliferation of approaches to interpretation on the other. If there is no stable ground of meaning (no

Hirsch: A Hermeneutical Model Based on the Concepts of Meaning and Significance" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989), 150, 153. For an explication of Hirsch's ideas, see Hirsch, *Validity*, 236-44; idem, *Aims of Interpretation*, 152-53, 170-71. The use of tradition in adjudicating hermeneutical queries has been applied to jurisprudence and theology with great benefit. The doing of theology within the context of the church is a theme that we shall explore further. With reference to the law, Linell Cady notes that, generally, judicial interpretation is based upon appropriate uses of the past: "Conventionalism separates moral assessment and prior decisions, insisting that the latter are authoritative and should take precedence. [Generally] judicial decisions are constrained by requiring some 'fit with the past.'" Cady, "Hermeneutics and Tradition," 448.

³³Hirsch, *Validity*, 5.

³⁴In summarizing Hirsch's theory of authorial intention, Vanhoozer stresses the need for the reader to recover a single determinate meaning from the text. Vanhoozer writes, "*An interpreter grasps the meaning of a text when he or she experiences sameness of content despite differentness of context.* On Hirschian terms, therefore, the meaning of the text can never simply be 'what the text means to me.' The goal of interpretation is to reconstruct the single correct meaning of the text. Hirsch [says] that unless [one makes] the author's intended meaning the norm for interpretation, [one] will have no reliable means for discriminating between valid and invalid interpretations – between exegesis (what one gets out of texts) and eisegesis (what one puts into texts)." Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 76-77 (italics Vanhoozer's).

hermeneutical realism), then there is ultimately nothing that stands over against our interpretations to challenge and correct them. If the distinction between text and commentary is undone, then the image in the mirror of the text becomes blurry indeed. In that case, it is impossible to say whether we are seeing an author's intended message, an objective meaning, or merely our own reflections.³⁵

The Text as Locus of Meaning

Having discussed the primacy of authorial intention, let us now examine the view that the text is the locus of meaning. What is a text? Is a text, as it is considered in modern hermeneutics from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Emilio Betti, fundamentally the expression of an author's thought and experience, with the implication that the objective of interpretation is to understand the author's mind and experience? Or is a text, as posited by the New Criticism of the 1940s and 1950s, "an autonomous world of meaning, to which its author and situation relate only in the most minimal way?" Or are texts to be seen essentially as "invitations to readers to contribute to or 'complete' textual meaning, as reader-response theory in some of its versions suggests?" Or perhaps, according to the postmodern perspective, "texts are primarily open-ended processes, which set going an infinite chain of significations rather than conveying some specific 'content' which is bounded by closure?"³⁶

³⁵Ibid., 85.

³⁶Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 49. The role of texts in hermeneutic theory is pivotal. As Thiselton explains, "What is controversial is not simply a matter of definition: differences between theories of the nature of texts and textuality carry with them fundamentally different conceptions of what it is for a text to convey meaning. In particular, different theories of textuality either link the text's author and context of situation inseparably with its meaning, or view meaning as a more pluralistic range of possibilities generated either by the sign-system of the text itself and its relation to other texts, or by the relation between a text and successive readers or reading communities, or by both." Ibid., 55. On this note, Thiselton reminds us that "from Aristotle until the end of the eighteenth century texts were seen as vehicles which conveyed the thoughts and ideas of their authors, and by this means also referred to the external world. Interpretation or intelligent reading entailed searching out leading concepts. The process, as it was borrowed by Cicero from Aristotle, was known as *inventio*. Aristotle called these leading concepts *topoi*; Cicero called them *loci*. Melancthon and Erasmus wrote *loci* on biblical texts at the time of the Reformation. Calvin and Chladenius came to see that the selection and identification of *topoi* by the interpreter might arbitrarily disrupt the contextual flow of the text, and Calvin therefore used the method of running commentary. Calvin's work effectively represented the beginnings of the modern commentary. In his work on the epistles he saw it as his task to come to understand and to expound 'the mind of Paul.'" Ibid., 62.

According to the classical-humanist paradigm of textuality, a text is an extended piece of authorial discourse fixed by writing. Literary texts are thus best described as “communicative actions performed on a variety of levels for the reader’s contemplation. To understand a text, one needs to know what an author is doing.”³⁷

Werner Jeanrond comments on this communicative dimension of texts:

Text composition and text reception stand to each other in a correlative relationship of communication. Text composition is the procedure which realizes a written text as a form of sense. Text composition and reading – in other words, text production and text reception – are both guided by communicative intentions, in other words by that which the text has to say.³⁸

Traditionally, texts have been “seen as linguistically mediating inter-personal communication.”³⁹

Vis-à-vis biblical texts, the idea that God speaks through and in the Word is considered integral to the doctrine of Scripture. A natural entailment to this statement is that revelation is given in the Scriptures. And we “do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place” (2 Pet 1:19a).

The Reader as Listener

What is the role of the reader in interpretation? The traditional response is that one reads in order to discover the author’s meaning. Since the 1960s, however, increasing attention has been paid to the reader as creator of meaning. As Robert Crosman writes, “Meaning is made precisely as we want it made . . . Readers make meaning.”⁴⁰ Walter

³⁷Vanhoozer, “Exegesis,” 58.

³⁸Cited by Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 199-200. See Werner Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 83.

³⁹Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 56.

⁴⁰Cited by Ryoo, “Hirsch’s Hermeneutics,” 2. See Robert Crosman, “Do Readers Make Meaning?” in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 164.

Vogels adds that the “written text in itself . . . is dead or in hibernation. The text only comes to life through the reader. He revives the text, he gives meaning to it.”⁴¹ Robert Morgan and John Barton claim that the text has neither rights nor aims. They purport:

Texts, like dead men and women, have no rights, no aims, no interests. They can be used in whatever way readers or interpreters choose. If interpreters choose to respect an author’s intentions, that is because it is in their interests to do so But the present point is that it is the interests or aims of the interpreters that are decisive, not the claims of the text as such. Any suggestion that a text has rights is a deception concealing someone else’s interests.⁴²

Vanhoozer, noting this trend toward a “reader’s liberation movement,” comments, “Reading is not merely a matter of perception but also of production; the reader does not discover so much as create meaning. Meaning is actualized not by the author at the point of the text’s conception but by the reader at the point of the text’s reception.”⁴³

The emancipation of the reader has been precipitated by the death of the author. With the author dead, a “plethora of interpretive schools (feminist, Marxist, Freudian, liberation, etc.), each derived from a dominant interest, [has appeared]. The place where the reader stands, far from being considered an obstacle to interpretation, has today become holy ground.”⁴⁴

Given the multiplicity of contexts in which the Scriptures are being read, how should readers respond? They should read responsibly, seeking to “ascertain the nature of the text’s communicative intent (its genre and sense) before seeking to use or evaluate it. To treat a text justly is to respect it for the kind of thing it is, that is, to entertain its perspective and to heed its voice.”⁴⁵

⁴¹Cited by Ryoo, “Hirsch’s Hermeneutics,” 2. See Walter Vogels, “Inspiration in a Linguistic Mode,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15 (1985): 87.

⁴²Cited by Ryoo, “Hirsch’s Hermeneutics,” 2. See Robert Morgan and John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7.

⁴³Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Reader in New Testament Interpretation,” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 301.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 305.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 307, 315.

The ethical reader places himself or herself under the authority of the author. Regarding this matter of authority, Michael Bauman writes, “I, for one, ardently oppose this arrogant intrusion into the texts of others. I oppose the shameless hijacking of someone else’s words for our own self-seeking ends. The time has come to put both the text and the modern interpreter back under authority.”⁴⁶ In support of this submission to authority, Anthony Thiselton adds:

Before I ever seek to know how a text relates to me, it is not good enough simply to approach that text with supposedly value-neutral observation. For then, as Hume and Kant perceived, we shall at once begin to impose upon what we seek to understand prior categories of thought and stereotypification. The first requirement is *respect for the otherness of the Other as Other*. This invites *not observation but listening*. [We need the] *ability to listen, before rushing in*. In Christian theology we often describe approaching the biblical text as *listening in reverent expectancy* (italics Thiselton’s).⁴⁷

The ethical reader should “let the text have its say, that is, to heed and hearken to the text with attention, humility, and respect.”⁴⁸

The Holy Spirit as Interpreter

The meaning of the Scriptures, however, is spiritually discerned rather than merely discovered. With reference to the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation, Kevin Vanhoozer notes, “The idea that biblical meaning is something that can be recovered by understanding simply by reading relegates the doctrine of the Holy Spirit to the theological margins.”⁴⁹ What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the hermeneutical process?

⁴⁶Michael Bauman, “The Ethics of Meaning: The Case for a Conservative Hermeneutic,” in *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, ed. Michael Bauman and David Hall (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1995), 7.

⁴⁷Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 50-51.

⁴⁸Vanhoozer, “The Reader,” 318. Vanhoozer, quoting Michael LaFargue, remarks, “The role of the biblical scholar is to be a servant of the biblical text.” *Ibid.*, 317. See Michael LaFargue, “Are Texts Determinate? Derrida, Barth and the Role of the Biblical Scholars,” *Harvard Theological Review* 81 (1988): 355.

⁴⁹Kevin Vanhoozer’s note was informed by Francis Watson’s observation. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Spirit of Understanding: Special Revelation and General Hermeneutics,” in *Discipling Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective*, ed. Roger Lundin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997),

John Owen stresses the “double act of the Holy Ghost” by which the believer is liberated from repulsion by the text and also submits to it as authoritative. Related to the former, the Holy Spirit “gives wisdom – understanding – a spiritual judgment,” whereby the interpreter is empowered to “compare spiritual things with spiritual, in a spiritual manner, and to come thereby to a clear and full light of the heavenly excellency of the Word.” In this regard, the believer is enabled “to know of the doctrine whether it be of God.”⁵⁰ In current theory, the reader overcomes his suspicion of the text and acquiesces to the divine horizon. This transformation affects the reader’s stance toward the text so that he adopts a hermeneutics of trust instead of a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Owen believes that without the help of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures will seem disjointed and its precepts will appear less authoritative. However, through the Spirit’s illumination, “all the parts of the Scripture in their harmony and correspondency, all the truths of it in their power and necessity, come together to give evidence one to another, and all of the whole.” The *sola scriptura* notion is, therefore, seen to be the product of the Holy Spirit’s illumination.⁵¹

The latter part of the Holy Spirit’s “double act” is to give the believer “a spiritual taste of the things themselves upon the mind, heart, and conscience.” Owen brands this assurance as the “testimony of the Spirit,” which so powerfully impresses the reader that he or she “infallibly” submits to the trustworthiness and the authority of the Scriptures. As Zimmermann explains, “Owen uses the term ‘infallibility’ not so much in the sense of objective, empirically verifiable truth but in the sense of existential

132 n. 3. Cf. Francis Watson, *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 295 n. 5. In feminist literature, there is a loud silence concerning the Holy Spirit’s role in biblical interpretation.

⁵⁰Cited in Zimmermann, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 100.

⁵¹Ibid.

verification in the reader's mind and heart."⁵² Through the illumination of the Spirit, then, the reader is assured of the truth of the Scriptures and is prompted to apply the truth to his or her life.

This interpretive assurance, however, is not rampant subjectivism. Owen argues that the personal work of the exegete provides a bulwark against traditionalism, inspirationalism, and rationalism, which undermine the interpretive freedom granted by the Holy Spirit's illuminating work in the believer. Traditionalism, Owen argues, makes its adherents indolent through their dependency on authorities to solve all their interpretational problems. This parasitic relationship is counterproductive to the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer. The Spirit stimulates the believer to "humility, continual prayer, meditation," and energetic study of the Scriptures.⁵³

With reference to inspirationalism, Owen deplores the interpretive subjectivism promoted by inspirationalists, who claim new divine revelations on par with the inspiration granted to the authors of Scripture. But as Owen counters, "We stand not in need of any new divine afflations, or immediate prophetic inspirations, to enable us to understand the Scripture, or the mind and will of God as revealed therein."⁵⁴ The Quakers' reliance on an Inner Light, Owen believes, leads to total subjectivism and an abandonment of the Scriptures as the normative criterion for theological reflection. Feminists, likewise, by insisting on women's experience as an interpretive grid, subvert the Scriptures and ultimately create their own canon.⁵⁵

Zimmermann writes that "rationalism, the third interpretative extreme, usurps

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., 101.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid. We shall explore the idea of canonical reformation in a subsequent section of this study.

interpretative liberty under the guidance of the Spirit by relying on reason alone.”⁵⁶ Owen believes that the most glaring problem with rationalism is its rejection of the spiritual dimension of the Scriptures. In response to critics who claim that many rationalists produce more substantive work on the Scriptures than do believers who depend on the Spirit’s illumination, Owen elucidates what one means by “know a biblical text.” The Scriptures, he points out, uses two terms for knowledge, *gnosis* and *epignosis*. The first, Owen says, denotes simply propositional, informational, or theoretical knowledge, which, if not personally appropriated by faith, has no saving efficacy for the reader.⁵⁷

Epignosis, however, “gives the mind an experience of the power and efficacy of the truth known or discovered, so as to transform the soul and all its affections into it, and thereby to give a full assurance of understanding unto the mind itself.”⁵⁸ The Scriptures, clearly, is a *summa pietas*, not a patriarchal relic.

Owen maintains that God, the divine author of Scripture, must enlighten the believer’s mind to the spiritual dimension of the Word. This “true meaning” is not, as is often assumed, an esoteric sense, but it is the dimension of faithful appropriation of the Word by the believer.⁵⁹

As Zimmermann concludes, the reader – by virtue of the Spirit’s work in biblical interpretation – must “listen in reverent expectancy.” Zimmermann remarks:

The reader must remain open to the text, eager to hear what the divine other has to say. More than that, since one is listening to the divine word, once the doctrine has become clear, the reader must be ready to be “impressed” by it, that is, to be cast

⁵⁶Ibid., 102.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid. John Calvin says that “the gist of true piety does not consist in a fear which would gladly flee the judgment of God . . . but rather in a pure and true zeal which *loves God altogether as Father*, and reveres him truly as Lord, embraces his justice and dreads to offend him more than to die.” This sense of awe is foreign to feminist writings (emphasis mine). John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1. 2. 1. n. 1.

⁵⁹Zimmermann, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 102.

into the mold of the teaching.⁶⁰

⁶⁰Ibid., 104.

CHAPTER 3

NEW HORIZONS IN HERMENEUTICS

Feminist hermeneutical method is a complex and diverse undertaking. With reference to how feminists critique the Trinitarian name, however, they largely employ a socio-pragmatic hermeneutic that is marked by a loss of authorial intention and an elevation of reader-determined meaning. This interpretive approach to the biblical text grants to the interpreter's interests an epistemological ultimacy and, by transgressing canonical boundaries, produces new canonical material for theological construction.

The socio-pragmatic hermeneutic here summarized clearly reflects the extratextual approach. In the extratextual approach, as we have noted, Scripture is read through the aperture of ideological, cultural, or philosophical constructs that are inimical to biblical revelation.

Socio-pragmatic Hermeneutics

In our examination of a hermeneutics of communication, we noted that, in the hermeneutical task, the primacy of authorial intention has to be maintained if we are to elicit a single determinate meaning from the text. Vanhoozer reminds us:

The text stands between author and reader as an embodied intention that, through various textual strategies, extends the matter and mode of the author's attention to the world into the world of the reader, enabling the reader to respond to the same matter in an appropriate fashion. The text itself constitutes the most appropriate context for interpretation, provided that readers attend to the text on the level of the literary and canonical act.¹

With reference to the role of the reader, it is important to understand that reading is "essentially an obedient activity. Its aim is to let the author and the text manipulate the reader so that he or she gradually comes to experience and adopt the

¹Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 282.

worldview of the text.”²

Applied to the Scriptures, the roles of author, text, and reader may be delineated as follows: (1) the activity of “God [the Author] who manifests and communicates both himself and a knowledge of his plan of salvation; (2) the active communicative action on the part of the one who, after having received revelation, transposes it to a word dimension; (3) the active communicative receptivity, that is the faith, of the reader who, by means of the text, appropriates what is communicated, namely the act through which God manifests and communicates himself.”³

Feminists, in their critique of the Trinitarian name repudiate a traditional hermeneutics of communication (characterized by trust) for a socio-pragmatic hermeneutic (characterized by suspicion). Anthony Thiselton supports this conclusion. He notes that “feminist hermeneutics embodies a deep hermeneutic of suspicion that the conventional constructions of the history of biblical interpretation do not represent value-neutral descriptions of biblical . . . texts.”⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, argues that “all biblical texts are articulated in grammatically masculine language – a language which is embedded in a patriarchal culture, religion, and society, and which is canonized, interpreted, and proclaimed by a long line of men.”⁵

Fiorenza holds that only nonpatriarchal biblical traditions and texts are considered authoritative. “Texts which reinscribe patriarchal relations of domination and exploitation,” she insists, “must not be affirmed and appropriated . . . not be proclaimed

²Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Reader in New Testament Interpretation,” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 307.

³Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 201.

⁴Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 431.

⁵Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 53.

as the word of G-d but must be exposed as the words of men.”⁶ As Elizabeth Achtemeier observes, however, “it is clear that the basis for deciding what is or what is not [the] Word of God has been shifted from the givenness of the canonical whole to the subjective position of the reader.”⁷

Experience as Source and Norm

In the following pages, we shall examine the role of women’s experience in the hermeneutical task. In particular, we shall explore the viability of experience as source and norm for theological construction.

In an introductory section on methodology in his *Theological Ethics*, Helmut Thielicke begins his study with the distinction between the philosophical and theological disciplines. “For all the weight of tradition,” the author writes, “[the philosopher] begins fundamentally with himself, whereas the theologian as a matter of principle relates himself to the believing community within which he has his theological existence.”⁸

In this regard, “the theologian refers back to the historical realities which determine the path of that community, namely, Scripture and the fathers.”⁹ Although the reformers did not assign equal rank to these historical realities, yet “it is to them that theological thinking refers ‘back’.”¹⁰ As Thielicke adds, “Both chronologically and in terms of substance these are the realities from which theology derives. They stand behind

⁶Ibid., 54.

⁷Elizabeth Achtemeier, “The Impossible Possibility: Evaluating the Feminist Approach to Bible and Theology,” *Interpretation* 42 (January 1988): 49.

⁸Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, vol. 2, *Politics*, ed. William H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 3.

⁹Ibid. The reformers practiced this movement *ad fontes*. Augustine also stressed this “thinking with assent,” (*cum assensione cogitare*).

¹⁰Thielicke, *Ethics*, 3. Scripture is an original authority (*norma normans*) whereas the Fathers are a derived authority (*norma normata*).

it. Theology's task is to carry on."¹¹

The point of departure for feminist hermeneutics, on the other hand, is women's experience. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in her critique of "the androcentric character of biblical language," affirms the pivotal, authoritative role of women's experience for feminist hermeneutics. She states:

What leads us to perceive biblical texts as oppressive or as providing resources in the struggle for liberation from patriarchal oppression or as models for the transformation of the patriarchal church into women-church is not a revealed principle or a special canon of texts that can claim divine authority. Rather it is the experience of women struggling for liberation and wholeness. . . . A feminist critical interpretation of the Bible cannot take as its point of departure the normative authority of the biblical archetype, but must begin with women's experience in their struggle for liberation. . . . [the feminist hermeneutic] places the biblical texts under the authority of feminist experience. . . . the Bible no longer functions as authoritative source but as a *resource* for women's struggle for liberation.¹²

Fiorenza clearly conceives women's experience as source and norm for feminist theology. But how are we to interpret "source" and "norm"? Pamela Dickey Young provides the following definition:

Source means, basically, any element that enters into the formulation of one's theology, anything that informs one's theology. Such elements might be textual material or other sorts of data from within a given religious tradition; material peripheral to or outside a particular religious tradition, but that is still deemed relevant for one reason or another; the experience of particular groups of people; and human experience in general or specific types of human experiences. Norms mean a specific criterion or set of criteria by which any given theological sources or

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), xvi, 13-14. Davaney describes women's experience as the struggle "for wholeness, freedom, and liberation from oppressive structures and alienating relationships." Sheila Greeve Davaney, "The Limits of the Appeal to Women's Experience," in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture*, ed. Clarissa Atkinson, Constance Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987), 31. Feminist literature is replete with this stress on experience as point of departure. Marjorie Suchoki, for example, believes that "theology is relative to experience Deep in the heart of every theology is a perspective rooted concretely in a very particular human experience. Even and especially our thoughts of God are woven not only from our texts, but from ourselves. . . . Feminist theology in particular notes that the hearing of women's voices shows the perspectival masculinity which has colored and determined the garment called theology. Assumptions drawn from male privilege and pride have been projected onto God and society, and declared to be absolute." Marjorie Suchoki, "Weaving the World," *Process Studies* 14 (Spring 1984): 78, 83-84. Experience, however, is not an appropriate starting point for theology. Barth discusses this view, beginning with Schleiermacher and ending with Feuerbach. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1.1. 6. 3: 226-60.

formulations are judged to be adequate or inadequate for theology in general or for the type of theology being done, and which is used as the structuring principle for a theologian's own theology.¹³

Anne E. Carr supports this idea of women's experience as source and norm for theological reflection. She postulates:

While women can make no claim to a unique knowledge of God, they can trust that their experience and understanding of God provide an important and necessary corrective to an imagery and understanding derived from an over-masculinized church and culture. And in the Christian context, the experience and insights of women allow for a genuinely critical retrieval of traditional and contemporary ways of understanding God.¹⁴

Rosemary Radford Ruether states plainly that feminist theology "draws on women's experience as a basic source of content as well as a criterion of truth."¹⁵

Regarding this reversal in interpretive direction, Monika Hellwig contends that the radical shift engendered by the movement is causing havoc in the churches. Hellwig indicates that this "shift in theology seems to be more radical than that envisaged by Lonergan in *Method in Theology*."¹⁶ In explaining the shift, the author adds that the "movement [is] from present experience to reflection and evaluation first in existential terms and then by correlation with the tradition and its established formulations."¹⁷ The impact of the movement is related to the fact that the "movement claims to be theology properly speaking on an equal footing with the theology that proceeds from the tradition

¹³Pamela Dickey Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 19. Here, source has been stretched to include extra-biblical materials. As the Reformers maintained, however, "Scripture [is] the sole foundation of theology and, hence, the source of the exegetically elicited truths from which theological conclusions and soteriological goals [are] to be drawn." Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 154.

¹⁴Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 146.

¹⁵Cited in Anne Louise Eriksson, *The Meaning of Gender in Theology: Problems and Possibilities* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1995), 14.

¹⁶Monika Hellwig, *Whose Experience Counts in Theological Reflection?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982), 8.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 9

in order to explain it in present categories.”¹⁸

With reference to “theoretical approaches to Scriptural study,” Margaret Miles complained about the new discourse that was developing at Harvard Divinity School in the 1980s. The “textual harassment” engendered by a pluralistic student body threatened to reduce “one’s interpretation to sociological analysis, Marxist analysis, feminist analysis.”¹⁹ As Miles explained, “The way that the newcomers to theological discussion often dealt with the problem of relativism [was] to privilege a certain social experience.”²⁰ Feminist theologians, for example, took women’s experience as their point of departure. But as Miles observed, this privileging of a certain social experience was “a dangerous movement. For one thing, all women do not have the same experience, as black women were quick to point out to white feminists.”²¹

The appeal to women’s experience as source and norm for theological reflection is rather tenuous. First, feminist theologians do not agree on a definition for women’s experience, nor do they agree on the centrality of women’s experience for theological reflection. Pamela Dickey Young, for example, delineates five dimensions of women’s experience that differ from men’s: (1) “Women experience their bodies differently,” (2) women socialize differently, (3) women experience gender-oppression, (4) “women have a different historical experience,” and (5) women have different personal experiences. Anne Carr identified the definitive characteristic of women’s experience as being more “transformative and person-centered.” Other theologians have stressed women’s experience as communality, intuitiveness, nondualism, and

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Margaret Miles, “Hermeneutics of Generosity and Suspicion: Pluralism and Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 23, supp. (1987): 39, 43.

²⁰Ibid., 45.

²¹Ibid.

relationality.²²

Second, “while claiming the privilege of particularity of experience, we all need to acknowledge and specify also the limitedness of our experience, the partialness of our sensibilities.”²³ Third, as Davaney intimates, “White feminist theologians have [hardly] been cognizant of the problematic status of the appeal to experience, especially when such an appeal assumes that experience provides a unique access to ‘reality’ or a normative perspective having universal validity.”²⁴

Fourth, the grounding of the hermeneutical task in women’s experience may well be described as what Hans Frei calls “the great reversal.” We make sense of our lives by interpreting our experiences within the historical-redemptive metanarrative. Feminist hermeneutics, however, fits the biblical story into the world of women, leading to a rejection of biblical teaching on the basis of “the absolute right of women to develop theological understanding rooted in their own realities and experiences.”²⁵

Fifth, as Reformed theologians have argued, the task of theology is reflection on divine revelation. From this point of view, the work of the believer is talking and thinking about “the implications of God’s self-disclosure.” A truly biblical theology is

²²Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 229-30. The myth of women’s experience is described by Rebecca S. Chopp: “Within feminist theology the questions of a hegemonic approach to . . . ‘women’s’ experience soon exploded. Are all women’s experiences the same? What about African-American women who bear the triple jeopardy of race, class, and sex? What about Spanish-speaking women who do not share the heritage of Western, Enlightenment Christianity? . . . Feminist theology as reflecting the experiences of white, middle-class women was called to question by the ‘experiences’ of African-American women . . . of Hispanic-American women and of Asian-American women. . . . This rich diversity of voices forces the recognition there is no ‘woman’s experience.’” Rebecca S. Chopp, “Feminist and Womanist Theologies,” in *The Modern Theologians*, 2nd ed., ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 392.

²³Miles, “Hermeneutics of Generosity,” 47.

²⁴Davaney, “Women’s Experience,” 32.

²⁵The words are from a declaration issued by Church Women United, a feminist ecumenical group.

reflection on the canonical Scriptures and specifically on the Lord Jesus Christ as the Word bears witness to his person and work. Theology, in short, is not fundamentally reflection on humanity's experience. "Religious experience is the medium but not the norm or source of theology."²⁶ Human experience, along with reason and tradition, is to be interpreted by the Scriptures and not the Scriptures by experience.

Sixth, a syncretic religion is the natural consequence of standpoint feminism. Anne Louis Eriksson affirms this conclusion. She states, "When women's experiences are maintained as the ultimate norm, women's spirituality cannot only be elaborated within the framework of the Christian tradition, but other traditions can also be used as long as these are liberating for women. The eclecticism of Radford Ruether is an example of this."²⁷

In conclusion, "It is not clear why experience should be construed as the fundamental warrant for all theological claims. [The feminist] position does not do justice to the long debate on the place of revelation and natural theology in the justification of religious belief." The appeal to women's experience as source and norm for theological reflection appears to be purely pragmatic. As William Abraham concludes, "What promotes the full humanity of women does not *prima facie* appear to count as an appeal to experience at all. It suggests, on the contrary, a thoroughly pragmatic criterion which looks to what works to bring about certain ends as the criterion of truth."²⁸

²⁶Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 51. Cynthia Campbell, *Theologies Written from Feminist Perspectives: An Introductory Study* (New York: Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, 1987), 43.

²⁷Eriksson, *Meaning of Gender*, 14.

²⁸William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 443.

Transgressing Canonical Boundaries

Having examined the role of experience in feminist theology, we will now analyze feminists' transgressive approach to the Scriptures which has led to a theological revision of the Trinity.

In her *Bread Not Stone*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza emphasizes, "A feminist critical interpretation of the Bible cannot take as its point of departure the normative authority of the biblical archetype but must begin with women's experience in their struggle for liberation."²⁹ This transgressive approach to biblical interpretation is clearly illustrated in the feminist critique of the Trinitarian name. For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether consistently refers to God as God/ess and Primal Matrix whereas Rita Gross employs the appellation God-She – clearly a reference to a "bisexual androgynous deity." For Naomi Janowitz and Maggie Wening, God is the "Mother of the Womb." For Virginia Mollenkott, he is "the God with Breasts."³⁰

As Roland M. Frye argues, "Such 'recasting' is in effect a rewriting of the biblical literature. It violates the integrity of the text. Even in secular literature, such violations are regarded by responsible students as the cardinal sin of literary criticism, interpretation, and translation."³¹

Frye is correct in his assessment concerning the transgressing of canonical boundaries that characterizes the feminist critique of the Trinitarian name. But how do feminists conceptualize the canon? Essentially, they believe that "any relevant canon must be a means of liberation."³² Rebecca Chopp intimates, "Only if the Word can reveal

²⁹Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 13.

³⁰Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt It?," in *The Hermeneutical Quest*, ed. Donald G. Miller (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 99-100.

³¹Roland M. Frye, "Language for God and Feminist Language: Problems and Principles," in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 23-24.

³²Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 434.

itself in woman's marginality . . . as something other than master identity, primal referent, and governor of the governed, will feminist theology find a new Word and new words." With reference to the reading of this Word, Chopp adds that feminists selectively appropriate for their benefit only those portions that promote "emancipatory transformation." She writes:

The formal answer is that feminist theology uses the Scriptures as collections of proclamations, as models of Christian discourses of emancipatory transformation. The Bible speaks authoritatively within the Word . . . in regard to its credible claims of freedom: its stories, its visions, its images, its hopes, its failures, its history, and its future. All feminist discourse must approach the Bible with suspicion for its contents are not "pure" discourses: the Scriptures themselves demonstrate the tragic distortion of speaking of freedom through the very configuration of woman as less than and "other" than man.³³

Rosemary Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk* exemplifies this transgressive approach to Scripture. She begins this work in systematic theology, not with a prolegomenon – that is, methodological questions dealing with the nature of theology or revelation – but with a discourse on "The Kenosis of the Father: a Feminist Midrash on the Gospel in Three Acts." What appears to be an odd foray into systematic theology turns out to be "a carefully crafted narrative which subverts the traditional rendering of the basic Christian narrative of creation and redemption." Ruether relates how God the Father "acknowledges a Queen of Heaven and repents of his hierarchical ways." Jesus proclaims an egalitarian message, emphasizing a life of service – a message that leads to his crucifixion at the hands of the authorities. Mary Magdalene, commissioned with the proclamation of an egalitarian gospel, is rejected by the male disciples who subvert the gospel of Jesus by substituting their own gospel which legitimizes their positions of authority.³⁴

Ruether's theological revision of the Trinity is clear. But to effect this re-

³³Cited by Blanche A. Jenson, "The Movement and the Story: Whatever Happened to 'Her'?", in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 281.

³⁴Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 436.

imagining, she engages “in the formation of a new canonical heritage.” Though she retains the biblical themes of the self-emptying of God, the announcement of God’s reign by Jesus, the authorities’ rejection of Jesus, and the testimony of Mary Magdalene, Ruether now employs these themes to promote a message of redemption from patriarchy – a message prompted by the Queen of Heaven, the “Creatrix of all things,” and authorized by the humbled Father and by Jesus, the iconoclastic prophet.³⁵

Undeniably, the feminist critique has contributed to canonical reformation. Ruether has set out to provide initial resources for an alternative canon to that of the Christian Scriptures. This material is codified in *Womanguides: Readings toward a Feminist Theology*. Her goals for this volume are clearly stated:

Feminist theology must create a new textual base, a new canon. This work is a handbook from which such a new canon might emerge, much as early Christians collected stories about their experience, from which they preached the “good news” and from which, eventually, fuller texts were developed and ratified as the interpretive base for the new community.³⁶

Why the need for canonical reformation? Ruether insists that patriarchal Christianity created a patriarchal text, a text that needs serious revision. She maintains that “Feminist theology cannot be done from the existing base of the Christian Bible. The Old and New Testaments have been shaped in their formation, their transmission, and, finally, their

³⁵Ibid., 436-37.

³⁶Cited by Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 438. Abraham adds, “It should come as no surprise . . . that Ruether also engages in a fundamental reworking of the biblical canon by drawing on those biblical materials which are amenable to her interests and adding to them tracts of other material which cohere with her conception of canon. Her primary concern is to find usable material which will liberate. She finds such material in: (1) Scripture; (2) marginalized or ‘heretical’ Christian traditions, such as Gnosticism, Montanism, Quakerism, Shakerism; (3) the primary theological themes of the dominant stream of classical Christian theology – Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant; (4) non-Christian Near Eastern and Greco-Roman religion and philosophy; and (5) critical post-Christian views such as liberalism, romanticism, and Marxism.” Ibid., 437. Betty Talbert-Wettler concludes, “Feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza import biased secular definitions and ideologies into Biblical interpretation. Biblical material may be combined with Gnostic sources resulting in a redefinition of basic Christian terminology. These interpreters of Scripture are relativists redefining Christianity with a goal of a women-centered theology.” Betty Talbert-Wettler, “Can Use of Proper Hermeneutical Methods Transcend Gender Bias in Interpretations?,” *Journal of Evangelical Theology* 43 (March 2000): 56.

canonization to sacralize patriarchy.”³⁷

The canonical reformation being undertaken by feminists seriously undermines the evangelical doctrine of canon as source and norm for theological reflection.

According to William Abraham, “To reject the prevailing canons, or to rework them – or to reconstrue the nature of the canonical heritage – any or all of these will in themselves lead initially to turmoil within the Christian tradition, and then to division or to the creation of new communities.”³⁸

In order to understand the gravity of the assault, let us examine the idea of canon as source and norm. Stephen Wellum clarifies the issue. In appealing to the canonical Scriptures to adjudicate our claims, he writes, we confess that “God’s Word of necessity must be our ultimate criterion and authority for justifying any theological doctrine.”³⁹ But what does Wellum mean by “of necessity”? He explains that “biblical authority is of epistemological necessity if we affirm that Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) is ultimately the necessary and sufficient condition to warrant and justify any theological proposal.”⁴⁰ To shed further light on the issue, Wellum adds, “Another way of stating this, in more philosophical language, is to say that the authority and reliability of Scripture is the transcendental condition for the very possibility of doing Christian theology.”⁴¹

The Bible itself affirms its own authority (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21). Paul describes the Scriptures as “the very words of God” (Rom 3:2). Jesus and the authors of

³⁷Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 438 n.11.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 440.

³⁹Stephen Wellum, “The Inerrancy of Scripture: What is at Stake in the Openness Debate?” in *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, Paul Kjos Helseth (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 241.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*

the New Testament affirm this teaching. For example, they quoted the Old Testament – not merely as the writings of the psalmist, the patriarchs, or the prophets, but rather as the authoritative revelation of God communicated to the human authors: “Lord . . . you spoke by the mouth of your servant David” (Acts 4:24-25). Other passages affirm this view. For instance, “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: I raised you up for this very purpose that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (Rom 9:17; cf. Exod 9:16). These interchangeable instances of the Scriptures being referred to as God and God being referred to as the Scriptures, could only result from “a habitual identification, in the mind of the writer, of the text of Scripture with God as speaking that it became natural to use the term ‘Scripture says,’ when what was really intended was ‘God, as recorded in Scripture, said.’”⁴²

As we read the Scriptures on its own terms, we discover that there is, to use Sinclair Ferguson’s apt description, a “canonical self-consciousness” from Genesis to Revelation. “From what we witness of God’s activity in redemptive history, it is evident that God intends to rule his people, whether in the Old Testament or New Testament era, through a book, a written constitution that is nothing less than his Word.”⁴³

With reference to the feminist critique of the Trinitarian name, Bruce Ware insists that we must submit to the scriptural teaching. Ware comments, “While it is true that the Bible uses masculine metaphorical language for naming God (while never teaching that God is literally male), it is also true that the Bible never employs feminine metaphorical language to name God.”⁴⁴ Ware points out that God is sometimes described

⁴²A quotation by Benjamin Warfield, cited by Roger Nicole, “The New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Text: Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 15.

⁴³Wellum, “Inerrancy of Scripture,” 242-43. See Deut 5:22, 32; 29:9; 30:9-10, 15-16; 31:24-29; Josh 1:7-8; 8:34.

⁴⁴Bruce A. Ware, “How Shall We Think about the Trinity?” in *God under Fire*, ed. Douglas S. Huffmann and Eric L. Johnson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 266.

as a mother, but he is never addressed as mother. “Respect for God’s self-portrayal in Scripture requires that we respect this distinction. While we have every right to employ feminine images of God, as is done often in Scripture itself, no biblical precedence would lead us to go further and to name God in ways he has not named himself.”⁴⁵ We believe that the Holy Bible is the supreme standard by which all creeds should be adjudicated. To this end, we concur with Ware: “Divine self-revelation, then, requires the glad retention of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵Ibid., 266-67.

⁴⁶Ibid., 268.

CHAPTER 4

OUR NAMING OF GOD

By synthesizing the biblical-theological teaching related to the naming of God, I demonstrate how the intratextual approach, invariably, yields a truly biblical understanding of the Trinitarian name and presupposes the normativity of the canonical Scriptures. On the other hand, by exploring the theological inadequacy of inclusive language for the Trinity, I show how the extratextual approach of feminist interpreters clearly produces a polyvalent, unbiblical view of the Trinitarian name.

Beyond God the Father

What's in a name? Shakespeare once observed that "that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."¹ Perhaps we are nominalists at heart. For us, a name is "an empty sound, quite an arbitrary convention. Names do not really matter that much; we can exchange one set of labels for another, and the underlying reality remains the same."² In this regard, "we may choose any number of new metaphors, epithets, and appellations for God and substitute them for the traditional names of God."³ At any rate, mystics claim that God is the ineffable Other, "beyond all names, beyond all naming, something like the Kantian *Ding an sich* that in reality eludes all our predications."⁴

¹Cited by Carl E. Braaten, "Introduction: Naming the Name," in *Our Naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-Talk Today*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 1.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

In contradistinction to this view, Scripture teaches that names are associated with revelation and personality. The Old Testament reveals that names were “somehow mystically united with the innermost essence of personal being, divine or human. The reality of the divine power seems bound up with the sacred mystery of the name.”⁵ Yahweh, God’s proper name, was considered so holy that Jews were averse to uttering the name. In the New Testament, a new name for God was revealed, that is, the name of Jesus (Phil 2:9). In due time, the Son revealed God’s name as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁶ In explaining why the Trinitarian name does not appear in the Old Testament, Carl Henry writes, “The progressive nature of New Testament revelation required a gradual articulation of trinitarian faith, even as the historical revelation of God in Old Testament times.”⁷

The Jews taught that God names himself. His name reveals his person, and this name is to be kept holy. “Today we seem to think we can project onto God any name we feel to be a true extension of our self-understanding, thus confirming Ludwig Feuerbach’s projection theory of religion.”⁸

But as Martin Luther indicates, revelation, not reason, should guide us in our naming of God. Luther writes:

Who or what [God] is who is rightly called God, [reason] does not know. . . .

⁵Ibid., 1-2.

⁶Implicit to the Judaeo heritage was the fundamental assertion of the unity of God and his transcendence. Concurrently, Christianity held to the Incarnation and the Resurrection with all their Trinitarian implications. Christie-Murray reminds us that the economy of salvation provided the context for Trinitarian reflection. He writes, “The conception of the Trinity arose out of the Church’s experiences of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, and the problems which believers had to face of the relationship of these two beings to the Father. Convinced that God was one, they had to reconcile to their conception of him the distinct functions of the creatorship of the Father, the redeeming and saving power of the Son, and the advocacy of the Spirit.” David Christie-Murray, *A History of Heresy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 38.

⁷Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 5, *God Who Stands and Stays* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 188.

⁸Braaten, “Naming the Name,” 2.

Therefore, reason plays blind man's bluff with God; it always misses him and strikes wrong by calling God what is not God, and then again by not calling God what is God. . . . It therefore flops so terribly and gives the name and divine honor and calls God what it thinks God is, and never hits upon the right God, but always upon the devil, or its own pride, which is ruled by the devil.⁹

Carl Braaten adds that “when the radical feminists such as Mary Daly describe God the Father and his attributes, we see a close family resemblance to the devil. Apart from the gospel, it is hard to tell the difference.”¹⁰

To illustrate this gross misrepresentation of the triune God, let us refer to some descriptions proffered by feminists. Rita Gross proposes a “bisexual androgynous deity.” Virginia Mollenkott describes the God of Naomi, in the book of Ruth, as “the God with Breasts . . . the undivided One God who births and breast-feeds the universe.” This description resonates with Artemis Ephesia, the patroness deity of Ephesus, not with the triune God revealed in Holy Writ. Additionally, Rosemary Radford Ruether speaks of “the root human image of the divine as the Primal Matrix, the great womb within which all things, Gods and humans, sky and earth, human and nonhumans beings, are generated,” – an image reminiscent of Paul Tillich's metaphor of the deity as Ground of Being. In a similar view, Carol P. Christ contends that the woman who says, “I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely” believes “that the divine principle, the saving and sustaining power, is in herself, that she will no longer look to men or male figures as saviors.”¹¹

Regarding the feminist caricature of the Father, Isabel Carter Heyward writes, “God the ‘Father’ had remained the ‘Almighty’: impassive, remote and unknowable,

⁹Cited by Carl E. Braaten, “The Problem of God-Language Today,” in *Our Naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-Talk Today*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 22.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹Cited by Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt It?,” in *The Hermeneutical Quest*, ed. Donald G. Miller (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 99-101.

dominating his ‘creation.’”¹² Likewise, Mary Daly, accentuating this purportedly tyrannical image of the Father, claims:

The biblical and popular image of God as a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will, has dominated the imagination of millions over thousands of years. The symbol of the Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has [contributed to] the oppression of women. The divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination.¹³

Employing the concept of metaphor, Sallie McFague proposes mother, lover, and friend as appropriate substitutes for the biblical Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, adding that her metaphors for the Trinity reflect fundamental human relations.¹⁴ McFague believes that traditional, systematic theology with its abstract concepts fails to communicate the gospel in a meaningful way to contemporary human beings. Metaphorical theology, on the other hand, communicates easily because “metaphors are the way we think and know; they are cognitive as well as emotional.”¹⁵

Repudiating the fatherhood of God as “an example of a good model gone astray,” McFague suggests replacing fatherhood as the root-metaphor for Christians with a divine-human relationship as the appropriate root-metaphor. The latter commends itself

¹²Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), 116.

¹³Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 13, 19. Here Daly’s view of the patriarchal God reflects the punitive father that Luther associated with the *mysterium tremendum*.

¹⁴Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); idem, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). Leslie Zeigler notes McFague’s argument for rejecting the Trinitarian name. She writes, “[McFague] admits that her proposal of the three models of mother, lover, and friend was a ‘deliberate attempt to unseat’ the Trinitarian names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as descriptions of God which will allow no supplements or alternatives – To require the important admission that ‘*God has many names*’ to be made. She also states that she sees nothing sacred about a trinity – ‘a trinity is not a necessity nor should the divine nature be in any way circumscribed by it.’ But this ‘important admission’ is a denial of the Christian faith, in which God is the one identified by the Trinitarian formula.” Leslie Zeigler, “Christianity or Feminism,” in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 333.

¹⁵Warren McWilliams, “God the Friend: A Test Case in Metaphorical Theology,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 16 (Summer 1989): 109-10.

to McFague since no one metaphor can adequately describe God.¹⁶

McFague finds the masculinist conception of God as counter-productive to human liberation. God the father is thought to be imperialistic, patriarchal, and triumphalistic. These ideas, in turn, encourage “a hierarchical, domineering attitude toward the physical world.”¹⁷

God as mother, on the other hand, suggests the mutuality and interconnectedness of all creation, a creation given in birth by God the mother. As McFague writes, the creation is “God’s body, bodied forth from God, expressive of [her] very being . . . [she gives] birth to her body.”¹⁸

The Scriptures, of course, provide no record of a male God impregnating a female deity to give birth to the world. But as Elizabeth Achtemeier intimates, “It is typical of feminist theology that it speaks of a female deity giving birth to the world. *Indeed, when female terminology is used for God, the birthing image becomes inevitable*”¹⁹ (italics Achtemeier’s).

What is the danger of McFague’s reconceptualization of God as mother? Achtemeier argues that such teaching promotes the divinization of the creation. She writes, “If a female deity gives birth to the universe, it follows that all things participate in the life or in the substance and divinity of that deity – in short, that *the creator is indissolubly bound up with creation*”²⁰ (italics Achtemeier’s). A teaching similar to McFague’s is found in Rosemary Ruether’s writings. Ruether describes God as “the

¹⁶Ibid., 111.

¹⁷Ibid., 112.

¹⁸McFague, *Models of God*, 110-11.

¹⁹ Achtemeier, “Female Language for God,” 100.

²⁰Ibid.

Primal Matrix, the great womb within which all things, are generated.”²¹

Zsuzsanna E. Budapest echoes similar sentiments. She states, “This is what the Goddess symbolizes – the divine within women and all that is female in the universe.” Hence, in a “self-blessing ritual,” she exclaims, “Bless my genitals that bring forth life as you have brought forth the universe . . . we give birth, we issue forth people, just as the Goddess issues forth the universe. That is a biological connection and manifestation of the Goddess . . . And the responsibility you accept is that you are divine, and that you have power.”²²

Achtemeier concludes, “All these feminist errors – indeed all this feminist rejection of God and its resulting idolatry – are built on the theological misstep of identifying God with his creation.” And the model of God as mother makes precisely this misstep. Achtemeier argues that such a misstep is inevitable when “feminists reject any notion of the inspiration of the canonical witness to God, make their own experience their authority, and use female language for God.” Once God is described or addressed as female, “the images of birth, of suckling, of carrying in the womb, and, most importantly, the identification of the deity with the life in all things become inevitable, and the Bible’s careful and consistent distinction between Creator and creation is blurred and lost.”²³ The correlation between the feminist hermeneutical method and the feminist proposal for depatriarchalizing the Scriptures is clear.

Is God as lover or friend²⁴ an appropriate substitute for Trinitarian language?

²¹Cited by Achtemeier in *ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*, 101.

²³*Ibid.*, 108-09.

²⁴McFague, in *Models of God*, identifies three issues related to God as friend: (1) God’s love as friend, (2) God’s activity as friend, and (3) the ethic of God’s friendship. Related to the first, McFague highlights “trustful bonding.” For the second, the author underscores sustaining activity; and for the third, McFague stresses a sense of mutuality. *Ibid.*, 159-79.

Undeniably, the Scriptures affirm God's work as lover or friend in the lives of human beings. In the midst of great suffering, Job reminisced, "The friendship of God was upon my tent" (Job 29:4). Jesus' statement to his disciples encapsulates this theme: "No longer do I call you servants," the Master said, "but I have called you friends" (John 15:15). Indeed, God's covenant with Israel and the incarnation of his Son to atone for the sins of humankind exemplify God's love and friendship (Ezek 16; Hosea 11 and 14; Phil 2:5-8; Heb 2:17; 1 John 3:2).

When Thomas Aquinas enquired whether God's love for human beings could be characterized as friendship, he answered in the affirmative, basing his response on John 15:9 and 1 Corinthians 1:9. A comparison between Aquinas and McFague is revealing.²⁵

Aquinas asserts that "*caritas* is friendship" because it springs from the personal relationship between our Lord and his disciples recorded in John 15:9 and from the intervention of God "who calls [us] into communion with his Son" (1 Cor 1:9). McFague, on the other hand, emphasizes "the significance of the image for our time." Further, "God for McFague is the God of the theists: God for Aquinas is the Father of Jesus Christ."²⁶

Whereas Aquinas stresses God as friend as an analogy, McFague emphasizes God as friend as a metaphor. Martin explains:

The aptitude of the term *friend* is determined by McFague according to the resonances it strikes in relating to the Transcendent. Its aptitude for Aquinas derives from the fact that an analysis of friendship can supply, analogically, some content for the New Testament authoritative assertions. For Aquinas, analogy is a way of articulating how he knows what he already knows. For McFague, metaphor is a way of expressing to herself and others what her mind imposes upon experience. The first mediates reality, even if imperfectly, the second represents it according to structures and norms established *a priori*.²⁷

²⁵Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 260.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 260-61.

What are these structures and norms? First, McFague believes that the Bible is “a metaphor of the word or ways of God, but as metaphor it is a relative, open-ended, secular, tensive judgment.”²⁸ Second, she admits that “the tradition says that we were created in the image of God,” but she counters that “the obverse is also the case, for we imagine God in our image.”²⁹ Third, McFague adheres to a worldview that is “monist and perhaps most precisely designated as panentheistic.”³⁰

What are we to make of McFague’s positions? First, with the kind of canonical reformation pursued by McFague, she can propose any god she wants. Second, exchanging “the truth of God for a lie, [we ultimately worship and serve] the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever” (Rom 1:24). Indeed, as Harold Bloom observes, the God of America is experiential and so radically within ourselves as to become a “virtual identity” with the real self.³¹ Third, McFague’s monism – which she defines as “the basic oneness of all reality, including the unity of God and the world” – spells the death of the biblical Trinitarian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

In conclusion, is McFague’s model of God as mother, lover, and friend a viable alternative to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Our investigation reveals the total inadequacy of the proposal, informed as it is by philosophical assumptions inimical to the Scriptures; it lacks biblical sanction. McFague’s God as mother, lover, friend neither saves nor inspires worship. To every believer the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

²⁸McFague, *Models of God*, 54.

²⁹McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 10.

³⁰McFague, *Models of God*, 72.

³¹Harold Bloom, *American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). Bloom’s comment is an appropriate commentary on the feminist theological enterprise, involving a re-imagining of God from the perspective of women’s experience. However, the author reserves the comment for “the implicit vagaries of the African-American religionists, the Southern Baptists, the Mormons, the Pentecostals” (16). Most of this work degenerates into vituperation against Southern Baptist. Notwithstanding the author’s animus, I believe that Bloom is correct in his assessment that religion-saturated America is intoxicated with the potential deification of the self.

give grace, love, and communion (2 Cor 13:14). To this God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen (Rom 16:27).

An alternative name for the Trinity, often proposed by feminists, is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Is this substitution a viable option for the traditional Trinitarian name? For three reasons, this proposal for renaming the Trinity ought to be rejected. First by adopting the feminist proposal, one risks a modalistic conception of the Trinity. Second, one risks replacing the ontological Trinity with a functional equivalent.³² Third, one implies an eternal creation and a necessary redemption.

Let us consider the first danger: modalism. The chief proponent of this doctrinal aberration, Sabellius, adhered to a strict monotheism, acknowledging only one divine hypostasis which assumed three successive forms of manifestation in relation to the world. Hence, in the form of the Father, God appears to us as the creator, giving the law; in the form of the Son, he appears to us as the redeemer, accomplishing redemption for humankind; and in the form of the Spirit, he appears as the giver of life, effecting sanctification for the redeemed.³³

The view that God assumes three roles, but he is not in himself Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, undermines the foundational belief in the ontological Trinity. As Donald Bloesch warns, “To replace the foundational symbolism of faith with more inclusive symbolism such as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer is to abandon the ontological or essential Trinity for the economic Trinity, in which the three terms refer only to a threefold activity of God and not also to a threefold relationship within himself.”³⁴

³²Bruce A. Ware, “How Shall We Think about the Trinity?” in *God under Fire*, ed. Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 268.

³³C. A. Blaising, “Monarchianism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 727.

³⁴Donald G. Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publication, 1985), 51.

At any rate, is the Father alone Creator? Is the Son alone Redeemer? Is the Holy Spirit alone Sustainer? The Scriptures reveal that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – working together (*opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*) – create, redeem, and sustain. The Father, chief architect of creation, creates through the agency of the Logos (John 1:3), who implements his “creative design” (Col 1:16; Heb 1:2). The Holy Spirit, as well, “energizes the formation of the creative work of the Father through the Son” (Gen 1:2).³⁵

Redemption, also, is accomplished by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Scriptures teach that the Father sent the Son into the world to atone for the sins of humankind, the Son receiving the Father’s wrath for our sin (Rom 2:25-26; 2 Cor 5:21). And the Son completed his redemptive work by the empowering of the Spirit who fortified him for the cross and resurrected him from the dead (Rom 8:11).³⁶

Likewise, with reference to God’s work in sanctifying and sustaining the believer, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cooperate. “The Father (1 Thess 5:23-24), the Son (Eph 5:25-27; Col 1:17; Heb 1:3), and the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18) preserve believers and move them toward the holiness of life and character designated for them from all eternity (Eph 1:4).”³⁷

Additionally, the substitution of Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “implies that the world is eternal, not temporally finite, and that God’s redemptive work is necessary, not free.”³⁸ As Ware explains, an eternal Creator implies an eternal world, and eternal Savior, implying necessary salvation. Ware writes:

The church’s affirmation of God as “Father, Son, and Spirit” is a claim not merely of his economic manifestation as the Father of the incarnate Son in the power of the

³⁵Ware, “How Shall We Think?,” 268-69.

³⁶Ibid., 269.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 268.

Spirit (though this is true, in part), but also of the immanent Trinity who is eternally Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father, then, is the eternal Father of the Son: the Son is the eternal Son of the Father. Now, if we substitute “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer” as names for these eternal realities, it requires that we see God as eternal Creator, implying an eternal creation, and eternal Redeemer, implying necessary redemption.³⁹

In conclusion, there is no justification for replacing the Trinitarian name that identifies the divine persons for the feminist substitute that identifies the divine works. As Geoffrey Wainwright writes, “Consideration of creation, redemption, and sanctification shows that an account of them that is true to the biblical narrative will also imply and depend on the Trinitarian communion and cooperation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁴⁰

Our Father in Heaven

Notwithstanding feminist protestation regarding the fatherhood of God – a fatherhood conceptualized by feminists as patriarchal and oppressive – the divine name “Father” continues to be pivotal in biblical-theological teaching, Trinitarian and covenant relations being emphasized. In the following pages, we shall examine the biblical-theological teaching related to the fatherhood of God. On the basis of this investigation, we shall posit that the feminist conception of the Father is derived from a blending of extra-biblical sources inimical to the Scriptures and subversive of the Trinitarian naming of God.

God the Father in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, God is designated as Father only eleven times (Deut 32:5; 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Ps 89:26; Jer 3:4-5; 31:9; Isa 63:16; 64:8), “a reticence which may, in the early texts, reflect a desire to dissociate the God of Israel from those gods who were held to be ‘fathers’ and ‘mothers’ of their peoples in some

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Geoffrey Wainwright, “The Doctrine of the Trinity: Where the Church Stands or Falls,” *Interpretation* 45 (1991): 123.

biologically generative way.”⁴¹ Generally, the fatherhood of God is a metaphor for God’s covenant relationship to Israel, which Moses described as one of election or adoption (Exod 6:6-8).⁴²

When Israel broke covenant with God, the prophets of the eighth century and later employed the symbol of God as Father to urge national repentance (Deut 32:1-18; Jer 3:19-20; Isa 64:8-9; 63:16). “That Israel might one day call God ‘Father’ as a title of intimacy is suggested in the prophetic writings (Jer 3:19-20) and it may be that Jesus, in calling God ‘Father’, was suggesting that this hour had arrived.”⁴³

In summary, the fatherhood of God in the Old Testament denotes God’s covenant love for Israel, demonstrated in their deliverance from Egyptian bondage and their subsequent settlement in the land. Despite the people’s intractable perfidy, God the Father did not forsake his children. As Isaiah cried in the midst of the exile, though the patriarchs might forsake Israel, God the Father would remain constant in his devotion. “For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not recognize us. You, O Lord, are our Father, Our Redeemer from of old is your name” (Isa 63:16). The Father’s covenant fidelity will be displayed in the life and work of Messiah, the Son (Jer 31:29ff.; 32:36-41; Ezek 36:25-27; Mal 3:1).

God the Father in the New Testament

Compared to the eleven times God is referred to as “father” in the Old Testament, the term *πατήρ* appears in the New Testament over four hundred times. Of this number, Jesus designates God as Father about one hundred and seventy times, and he

⁴¹Janet Martin Soskice, “Fatherhood,” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 237.

⁴²Robert Hamerton-Kelly, “God the Father in the Bible and in the Experience of Jesus: The State of the Question,” in *God as Father?*, ed. Johannes-Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 96-97.

⁴³Soskice, “Fatherhood,” 237.

unfailingly calls upon him in prayer, using the name Father.⁴⁴

Emil Brunner emphasizes that God reveals himself as Father and desires to be addressed as “Father.” He writes:

The God who makes His name known, is the God who wills to be called “Father.” This is the Name by which he wills that we should call upon Him: “Our Father, who art in heaven.” Jesus has made this Name known to men; in the knowledge of the *Father* the historical movement of the revelation which culminates in Jesus Christ, reaches its goal. He came in order to show us the Father, and the flowering faith in the heart of man effected by the Holy Spirit, is expressed in the cry: “Abba”, “Father”. That we may know the mystery of the Father, that those who believe in Christ “may have the name of His Father written in their foreheads” – this, and this alone, is the one thing that matters. Jesus Himself says the same thing: “No one knoweth the Son, save the Father; neither doth any know the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal Him.”⁴⁵

Generally, in Semitic terms, father evokes images of the personal king and, simultaneously, the benevolent, merciful God. The New Testament repeatedly emphasizes that “God is seeking out sinners and inviting them to submit themselves to his reign that he might be their father.”⁴⁶

The relationship between God’s sovereign rule and his gracious fatherhood is indisputable; and this correlation is noted frequently in an eschatological milieu. “In the eschatological salvation, the righteous will enter into the Kingdom of their Father (Matt 13:43). It is the Father who has prepared for the blessed this eschatological inheritance of the Kingdom (Matt 25:34). It is the Father who will bestow upon Jesus’ disciples the gift of the Kingdom (Lk 12:32).”⁴⁷ The supreme gift of the Father is participation in his sovereign rule, which is to be exercised over all his creation. In that eschatological day,

⁴⁴Hamerton-Kelly, “God the Father,” 98. See also Samuel Laeuchli, *The Language of Faith: An Introduction to the Semantic Dilemma of the Early Church* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 32. The only exception to Jesus’ use of Father for God is the cry of dereliction from the cross (Mark 15:34). God as Father is clearly the dominant motif in the New Testament, occurring in every book except 3 John.

⁴⁵Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 of *Dogmatics*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.), 207.

⁴⁶George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 82.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 83.

the Son “will enjoy a renewed fellowship with his disciples in the Father’s Kingdom (Matt 26:29).”⁴⁸ Since the chief delight of God’s children is that of participating in the blessings of the Father’s Kingdom, Jesus exhorted his followers to pray, “Our Father who art in heaven . . . thy kingdom come” (Matt 6:9, 10). Undeniably, kingly rule and gracious fatherhood are interrelated concepts.⁴⁹

Jesus sometimes addressed God by using the Aramaic word *abbā*, and he also encouraged his disciples to do so. With the use of this word, Paul stressed the idea that believers are no longer slaves, but sons of God. “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry ‘Abba, Father.’” (Rom 8:14, 15; see also Gal 4:4-6). The word *abbā* was used by children and is equivalent to the English word, “Daddy.” “*Abbā* represents the new relationship of confidence and intimacy imparted to men and women by Jesus.”⁵⁰

Jesus’ own use of *abbā* is an expression of filial obedience to and unique communion and relationship with the Father. As the *μονογενής υἱός*, Jesus interprets the Father for us. As Jürgen Moltmann explains, the fatherhood of God is fully revealed only in the incarnation and is “experienced only in fellowship with the Son through the Spirit. Thus whoever wants to understand the Trinitarian concept of God must forget the ideas of the patriarchal Father-religion.” Rather, Moltmann insists that one must focus one’s “attention on the life and message of Jesus Christ. The name ‘Father’ is a theological and indeed Trinitarian name, not some general religious, political or cosmological notion.”⁵¹

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., 85.

⁵¹Jürgen Moltmann, “The Motherly Father: Is Trinitarian Patripassianism Replacing Theological Patriarchalism?,” in *God as Father?*, ed. Johannes-Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx (Edinburgh : T. & T. Clark, 1981), 53.

Consequently, “if God is our Father through the Son and for his sake, then he can only be called ‘Abba, dear Father’ (Rom 8:15; 2 Cor 3:17) under the inspiration of the Spirit, who is the Spirit of freedom.”⁵² The Spirit illumines the mind of the believer so that he “effectively distinguishes the Father of Jesus Christ from the World-patriarch of the Father-religion. Through the doctrine of the Trinity, God’s name ‘Father’ is indissolubly linked to Jesus the Son.”⁵³

Edgar Krentz provides a fitting conclusion to our study on the fatherhood of God. The author demonstrates that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God of covenant, the one who, in faithfulness to his Word, is gathering a people for himself under the lordship of his Son in the power of the Holy Spirit for the glory of his name.

Krentz writes:

Jesus taught his disciples to pray to God as Father. The term “Father” is familial, that is, relational. Its function is not to stress God’s sex, God’s maleness, but God’s close immediacy to Jesus and his disciples. . . . The Lord’s Prayer, probably closely to its Jesuanic form in Luke 11:2-4, explicates what “Father” means by the content of the petitions. God hallows his name by vindicating himself through the gathering again of his people (cf. Ezek 36). God is called to rule as king, a message of comfort for his people (Isa 40); he will gather the scattered exiles and bring them to the land. The prayer for bread asks that God act in care for his people as he did in the exodus. “Father” is a term that expresses faith in God as one who keeps his covenant promises.⁵⁴

Does the feminist portrayal of God harmonize with the biblical-theological description which we have provided? Are functional substitutes for the Trinity recommended? Our exploration of feminist models of God, including functional

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid. Up to this point, Moltmann is correct in his assertions. The author, though, goes too far in asserting that the Father is a “motherly father . . . no longer single-sexed and male, but bisexual, or transsexual,” by virtue of his “procreation’ and “birth” of the Son. Ibid. As Robert Jenson articulates, however, the fatherhood of God does not involve “a cooperative enterprise between a begetter and a bearer. . . . As for ‘Father and Mother’ [Moltmann’s motherly father], it is most objectionable, since by insisting on both it makes the attribution of sexual roles entirely inescapable and repristinates the deepest fertility myth, that of divine androgyny.” Robert Jenson, *Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 14-16.

⁵⁴Edgar M. Krentz, “God in the New Testament,” in *Our Naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-Talk Today*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 89.

substitutes, reveals the inadequacy of the feminist proposal to rename God. Faithful appropriation of the traditional, Trinitarian language is, therefore, enjoined.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The feminist critique of the Trinitarian name raises many questions for theological method. In the following pages, I shall address a fundamental concern related to the feminist hermeneutical method: the death of God. Additionally, I shall explain the biblical-theological implications for abandoning use of the Father in our Scriptures, liturgy, and preaching. Thereafter, I shall suggest points of convergence and divergence between feminist hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of communication.

Theological Implications

Undoubtedly, the feminist critique is leading to the death of God. How should one understand “death of God”? In the 1960s two atheists, Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, wrote:

The idea of God and the word of God itself are in need of radical reformulation. Perhaps totally new words are needed; perhaps a decent silence about God should be observed; but ultimately, a new treatment of the idea and the word can be expected, however unexpected and surprising it may turn out to be.¹

Shortly thereafter, the American philosopher Mortimer J. Adler clarified that the idea of the death of God referred to (1) a conceptual interpretation and (2) a pistical interpretation. The former stresses that “the old and traditional concept of God . . . must now be replaced by a new and living one, one that has some vitality and viability in the modern world.”² The latter emphasizes that human beings today can get along without

¹Cited in John Cogley, “The Search for Final Meaning,” in *Britannica Perspectives*, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1968), 3:534.

²*Ibid.*, 534-35.

God; he has become redundant. In the conceptual view, Adler tied the use of language to the death of God.

The radical reformulation of the doctrine of God that we are witnessing is tantamount to the death of God in both a conceptual and a pistical sense. Feminists have effected the death of God in two ways: (1) by the death of the author and (2) by the re-imagining of God.

According to Mark Taylor, “The death of God was the disappearance of the Author who had inscribed absolute truth in world history and human experience.”³ For Roland Barthes, the death of the human author and the death of God are correlated. The demise of the author means that there is no standard for stabilizing textual meaning. The interment of the Father-Author “thus liberates an activity we may call counter-theological . . . for to refuse to halt meaning is finally to refuse God.”⁴ George Steiner suggests that “God the Father of meaning, in His authorial guise, is gone from the game.”⁵

Derrida and Barthes, as countertheologians, believe that nothing transcends the play of writing, nothing “guarantees that our words refer to the world. The loss of a transcendent signifier – Logos – thus follows hard upon the death of the author.” As a result, truth claims are disavowed. Hermeneutics has, indeed, become the profligate discipline, “rejecting both the authority of the Father and the rationality of the Logos, squandering its heritage in riotous and rebellious reading.”⁶

Additionally, Elizabeth Achtemeier writes, “Feminism has invaded the realm of God, and in some instances, the God of the Christian faith has been replaced with a

³Cited in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Spirit of Understanding: Special Revelation and General Hermeneutics,” in *Discipling Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective*, ed. Roger Lundin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 139.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

god or goddess of the feminists' making."⁷ Indeed, Manfred Hauke insists that "any redefining of the image of God entails a fundamental alteration not only of its symbolic structure but also of belief in God itself."⁸ Feminists themselves have made a similar claim: "Religion is a coherent totality," Catharina Halkes explains, "amounting to conferment of ultimate meaning in the language of images and symbols, and one cannot arbitrarily remove one of these images and symbols and replace it with another (for example, replacing 'father' by 'mother') without endangering the totality."⁹ Hauke adds that the feminist re-imagining of God involves not merely "cosmetic changes in hymnbooks to bolster female self-confidence, but a new religion."¹⁰ C. S. Lewis predicted that "if all these supposals were ever carried into effect we should be embarked on a different religion." Lewis believed that "a child who [had] been taught to pray to a Mother in Heaven would have [had] a religious life radically different from that of a Christian child."¹¹ In short, the feminist re-imagining of God involves not merely "semantic changes but a revisionist theology as well."¹²

What are the biblical-theological implications for abandoning use of the Father in our Scriptures, liturgy, and preaching? First, we compromise Trinitarian theology. The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms that "in the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the

⁷Cited in Donald Bloesch, *Battle for the Trinity: The Debate over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1985), xii.

⁸Manfred Hauke, *God or Goddess? Feminist Theology: What is It? Where Does It Lead?*, trans. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 152.

⁹Ibid., 152-53.

¹⁰Ibid., 153.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 5, *God Who Stands and Stays* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 157.

Holy Ghost.”¹³ Among the religions of the world, the Christian faith is distinguished for its claim that the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a teaching that is supported throughout the Scriptures (Matt 6:26, 30; Acts 5:3-4; 1 Cor 3:16-20; 8:4,6; 2 Cor 13:14; Phil 2:5-11; 1 Tim 2:3-5; James 2:19; 1 Pet 1:2).¹⁴ With reference to the Father, Janet Soskice reminds us, “‘Father’ must be seen as above all a Trinitarian title. The ‘Father’ is father of the ‘Son’. Christians are one with the Father, through the Spirit, in the Son. The Father cannot be within the Trinitarian economy a sole and solitary ruler or an autocratic emperor without collapse into monarchianism.”¹⁵

Second, we compromise the doctrine of prayer. As John Calvin teaches, prayer is essentially Trinitarian – it is business with God (*negotium cum Deo*), a means of giving God his due. For Calvin, this theocentric dimension of prayer is informed by the promises of the Father, the sufficiency of the Son and the efficacious work of the Holy Spirit. With reference to the Father, our Lord himself exhorted us to pray, “Our Father who art in heaven” (Matt 6:9), submitting ourselves to our Father’s sovereign rule and his unfailing chesed. The demise of the Father, therefore, reduces prayer to heathen babble. As Calvin states:

Surely, with good reason the Heavenly Father affirms that the only stronghold of safety is in calling upon his name [Matt 6:6-15]. By so doing we invoke the presence both of his providence, through which he watches over and guards our affairs, and of his power, through which he sustains us, weak as we are and well-nigh overcome, and of his goodness, through which he receives us, miserably burdened with sins, unto grace; and, in short, it is by prayer that we call him to reveal himself as wholly present to us. . . . For having disclosed to the [Father] the necessity that was pressing upon us, we even rest fully in the thought that none of our ill[s] is hid from him who . . . has both the will and the power to take the best care of us.¹⁶

¹³The Westminster Confession of Faith 2.3.

¹⁴Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 321, 324-27.

¹⁵Janet Martin Soskice, “Fatherhood,” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 238.

¹⁶John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles,

In short, the pouring out of our cares unto the Father is another way of saying that we petition the Father for what he has promised.

Third, we compromise the doctrine of salvation. Is the God who saves, the triune God? We contend that salvation *in toto* is the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As Jack Cottrell states, “The doctrine of the Trinity is relevant to Christian faith and life [in that] it makes redemption possible. The very salvation which we have received from God and upon which we rest our hope for eternal life could have been accomplished only by a Triune God.”¹⁷ For example, John associates each person of the Trinity with the work of salvation. The Father’s work in effectual calling (John 6:44; 1Cor 1:18-31) and in designing the redemptive plan (Ps 2:7-9; 40:6-9; Isa 53:10; Matt 12:32; Eph 1:3-6), the Son’s atoning death (John 12:32), and the Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration (John 3:5-8) illustrate the Trinitarian involvement in salvation. Regarding the Father’s work in salvation, Paul urges the Ephesians to extol the Father for his electing love: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Eph 1.3-6).

Fourth, we compromise the doctrine of baptism. The very ordinance of baptism suggests that “from the very beginning of our Christian lives we are in a saving relationship with all three persons of the Trinity.”¹⁸ Matthew 28:19 records, “Go

The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 851.

¹⁷Jack Cottrell, *God the Redeemer*, reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 173.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 172.

therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” In commenting on this passage, Robert Jenson explains that baptism represents the believer’s initiation into a new reality, a Trinitarian reality.

Jenson writes:

Baptism is the church’s chief sacrament, its rite of passage from old reality to new. Within such a rite, the new reality must be identified, for the neophytes must be directed into it. In baptism, [as] in initiation rites of other religions, this is done by naming the God whose reality it is. The name stipulated in the canonical rubric for baptismal liturgy is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹⁹

Fifth, we compromise the doctrine of creation and providence. The Westminster Confession of Faith states, “It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of His eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days; and all very good.”²⁰ Emphasizing the Father, the Scriptures declare that “God hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds” (Heb 1:2). The Father planned all that exist to the praise of his glory and willed that all creation find its fulfillment in the Son (Eph 1:9-11).

Is there any support for an oppressive, sexist portrait of God in the Scriptures?

Janet Soskice explodes the myth of the patriarchal God. She notes:

If it is the case that the “fatherhood” of God has been used as a template for oppressive human relations in Christian churches and societies, then it must also be said that there seems little warrant for this in the use Jesus in the gospels made of the title. This use was above all affective and suggested an intimacy which the Christians were to enjoy as a new family of God.²¹

The feminist proposal to graduate beyond God the Father, therefore, represents no graduation at all, far less graduation with honors. Rather, the feminist re-imagining of

¹⁹Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 12.

²⁰The Westminster Confession of Faith 4.1

²¹Soskice, “Fatherhood,” 238.

the triune God so radically alters the image of the biblical God that the biblical God would be banished from the Scriptures, from preaching, and from the liturgy. As Russell Moore warns, “What is at stake here are not whether the church will accommodate more ‘gender-inclusive’ language, but instead the doctrines of God and revelation – and indeed the gospel itself.”²²

Points of Convergence and Divergence

In naming God, our only recourse is the authoritative canonical Scriptures. God names himself and, in the words of Alvin Kimel, “he likes his name.” Thus, the admonition given by Dionysius the Areopagite is timely:

Let us hold on to the scriptural rule that when we say anything about God, we should set down the truth not in the plausible words of human wisdom but in demonstration of the power granted by the Spirit to the scripture writers, a power by which, in a manner surpassing speech and knowledge, we reach a union superior to anything available to us by way of our own abilities or activities in the realm of discourse or of intellect. This is why we must not dare to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being, apart from what the sacred scriptures have divinely revealed.²³

And what have the Scriptures revealed? The Bible names God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And “these three names constitute the actual content of the New Testament message.”²⁴

Feminist theologians contend, however, that the Scriptures are repressive, serving as instruments of power for patriarchal Christianity. Further, they argue, the Trinitarian name implies a sexist God, a view imbibed by a patriarchal Church to sanction the subjugation of women in the Church and in the society. A critical

²²Russell Moore, “‘Mother God’ Goes to Children’s Church,” *SBC Life* 12 (August 2004): 12. Rosemary Radford Ruether repeatedly states that feminists are not simply restructuring rooms in a house, but “exploding the foundations.”

²³Cited in Emmanuel Clapsis, “Naming God: An Orthodox View,” in *Constructive Christian Theology in the Worldwide Church*, ed. William R. Barr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 116.

²⁴Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 of *Dogmatics*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.), 206.

hermeneutical principle is, therefore, applied to the Scriptures in order to expose institutional self-interest, purge the text of its patriarchal contents, and, in the process, emancipate women.

However, as Deborah Belonick has written, “There is no historical evidence that the terms ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ were products of a patriarchal structure, ‘male’ theology, or a hierarchical Church.” Rather, the theologians involved in the Trinitarian and Christological debates – Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Hilary of Poitiers – had a single mission from God: to help the Church conceptualize God as *de Deo uno, de Deo trino*.²⁵

Further, the feminist undertaking suggests that a chief aim of the text is to emancipate the reader. Here the epistemic pragmatism of the feminist reader is clear. But “is not the fundamental intention of the Scriptures” to reveal the triune God and to lead us “to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ?” Feminists sometimes mention a “redemptive intention” of the Scriptures, but redemption is conceived as freedom from a patriarchal culture, not deliverance from sin through the atoning death of Jesus Christ.²⁶

²⁵Deborah Malacky Belonick, “Revelation and Metaphors: The Significance of the Trinitarian Names, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40.3 (1985): 36. As Belonick explains, “The God of Apostolic tradition was not the God of the Neo-Platonists or Indian Religions which dissolved all personal relationship into Nirvana; neither was the Christian God the totally ‘Unknown God’ of the Athenians (Acts 17:22-32). The Christian God was the God who transcended all human categories and was revealed in the personal names, ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’ It is not convincing to argue that the patristic writers had animosity toward women or femininity, or understood only human fathers to be the source of life, and therefore used masculine terms for the Trinity.... It is clear that the Church, particularly in the centuries during which the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was framed, was interested in preserving the scriptural terms of ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ as revelations from God, rather than preserving patriarchal culture. These terms are precise theological terms, keys to understanding the Trinity. They are not exchangeable with such feminist formulae as ‘Mother, Daughter, Holy Spirit,’ nor even exchangeable with other attributes and activities of God such as ‘Creator, Savior and Sanctifier.’ They have been revealed to humanity to serve as the most adequate language available to describe the three members of the Trinity.” *Ibid.*, 36, 38.

²⁶Donald Bloesch, “Promise and Peril” (paper presented at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, Canada, 22-26 June 1981), 3. Carlson Brown, for example, demands that we relinquish the idea of the atonement because of its association with a patriarchal Father who permits the death of his Son as a payment for the sins of humanity. Brown protests, “We must do away with the atonement, this idea of sin upon the whole human race which can be washed away only by the blood of the lamb. This blood-thirsty God is the God of patriarchy who at the moment controls the whole Christian tradition. We do not need to

In their critique of the Trinitarian name, feminist theologians readily admit that their interpretations are subjective. But in making this admission, they add that all interpretation is subjective. As Mary Ann Tolbert argues, “Hermeneutical theory, through the influence of such recent intellectual movements as the sociology of knowledge, depth psychology, and deconstruction, had become increasingly aware of the importance of the interpreter’s own biases in shaping the resultant interpretation.”²⁷

Are we, therefore, doomed to hermeneutical nihilism? First, we acknowledge that exegesis without presuppositions is impossible.²⁸ “Reflection itself demands mental categories, and these are built upon one’s presupposed world view and by the faith or reading community to which one belongs.” The influence of presuppositions on the interpreter, however, “does not demand polyvalence. Preunderstanding only becomes negative if it degenerates into an *a priori* grid that determines the meaning of a text before the act of reading even begins.”²⁹

At any rate, we should draw a line of demarcation between presupposition and

be saved by Jesus’ death from some original sin. We need to be liberated from this abusive patriarchy.” Joanne Carlson Brown, “Divine Child Abuse?,” *Daughters of Sarah* 18 (Summer 1992): 28. For a helpful review of feminist objections to penal substitution, see William C. Placher, “Christ Takes our Place: Rethinking Atonement,” *Interpretation* 53 (1999): 5-20.

²⁷Mary Ann Tolbert, “Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 28 (1983): 114.

²⁸Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?,” in *Existence and Faith*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (New York: World, 1960), 289 – 96, 314 – 15. The term “‘presuppositions’ conveys the impression of rooted beliefs and doctrines which are not only cognitive and conceptual, but which also can only be changed and revised with pain, or at least with difficulty.” Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 45. For evangelicals, fundamental presuppositions for the doing of theology include (1) revelation as the basic epistemological axiom and (2) Scripture as its verifying principle. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, chap. 13. Feminist theologians, on the other hand, “theorize women’s experience as normative and epistemologically significant.” See Anne Louise Eriksson, *The Meaning of Gender in Theology: Problems and Possibilities* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1995), 4. This methodological inversion clearly indicates a subversion of biblical authority which would lead to a reformulation of biblical doctrines.

²⁹Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 412.

prejudice. As G. C. Berkouwer indicates, we should listen to the text rather than impose alien norms on it.³⁰ This “reverent listening in expectancy” allows the text to challenge and correct our presuppositions – whether philosophical or theological points of departure or cultural givens. The sum of the matter is that presuppositions can be identified. When prejudices are subconscious, the reader does not examine them and “they become the major hermeneutical tool, determining the meaning of the text. While this often happens and does indeed obfuscate the possibility of discovering the original meaning of a text,” this is not an inevitable occurrence.³¹

As Osborne suggests, “We must seek controls that enable us to work with presuppositions (the positive) rather than to be dominated by prejudices (the negative).”³² To begin, interpreters must set out to discover the authorial intention as linguistically mediated in the text. Evangelicals normally emphasize two reasons for this interpretive approach. First, the concept of authorial intention “provides a point of reference for stabilizing all textual engagements so that interpreters as well as texts are protected.”³³ On one hand, “multiple competent readings” are held in check while, on the other, a single determinate meaning becomes the objective of interpretation. “Even more importantly, though, the idea of authorial-intent is crucial because it supports a prior commitment to divine revelation. Evangelicals desire to know what an author meant by what was said because that meaning is equivalent to what God meant.”³⁴

³⁰G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. and ed. Jack Rogers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 105-38.

³¹Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 412.

³²Ibid.

³³Chauncey Everett Berry, “Revising Evangelical Theological Method in the Postmodern Context: Stanley J. Grenz and Kevin J. Vanhoozer as Test Cases” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), 260.

³⁴Ibid.

The intratextual approach, as we have demonstrated, honors authorial intention. The specific hermeneutical principle associated with this approach – a principle that should control our prejudicial interpretation – is grammatico-historical exegesis which stresses the original or intended meaning. Grammatico-historical exegesis builds on critico-historical exegesis and literary criticism. Hence, historical, semantic, and literary dimensions are integrated, but integrated in such a way as to emphasize redemptive-historical revelation, progressively disclosed.³⁵

Finally, another problem in the feminist critique of the Trinitarian name is related to a crisis of authority. As Carl F. H. Henry points out, “The tendency of modern theologians to hold critical views of Scripture deprives them of any consistent epistemological basis for anchoring their representations firmly in Scripture.”³⁶ In their critique of the feminist re-imagining of God, Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson have noted a similar concern. The crux of the matter, they believe, is the feminist understanding of authority, an understanding that “actually amounts to the rejection of any authority except that exercised by feminist consciousness.”³⁷ The authors conclude:

In order for any Christian theology to be truly prophetic, it must have some means of self-criticism. Feminist theology is adept at exposing the evils of patriarchy. But what norm does it recognize for criticizing its own principles and practices? This is a serious problem for any theology that raises a “critical principle” drawn from the consciousness of a particular group of people and uses it to determine what is and what is not normative in Scripture.³⁸

In view of the fact that feminist theology has no trans-contextual norm for criticizing its own principles and practices, we conclude that the feminist proposals for

³⁵Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 413-15.

³⁶Carl F. H. Henry, *Gods of this Age or . . . God of the Ages?*, ed. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 51.

³⁷Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 234.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 234-35.

depatriarchalizing the canonical Scriptures represent a socio-pragmatic hermeneutic which results in meaning being “subsumed within the prior horizons” of the feminist interpreter. Ultimately, feminists’ re-imagined God more accurately reflects feminists than the biblical God.

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ABSTRACT

THE FEMINIST USE OF INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE FOR THE TRINITY: A CASE STUDY IN HERMENEUTICAL METHOD

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This thesis explores the relationship between feminists' use of inclusive language for the Trinity and their hermeneutical method in order to determine the viability of their method for theological construction. Special attention is paid to the intratextual approach that characterizes the hermeneutics of communication and the extratextual approach that distinguishes feminist socio-pragmatic hermeneutics. Chapter 1 describes the theological tradition out of which the feminist critique emerges, thus contextualizing the debate and noting the divergent nature of the feminist theological undertaking.

Chapter 2 elucidates the search for authorial intention and provides a criterion by which to evaluate the feminist hermeneutic. This hermeneutics of communication – reflecting the intratextual approach – presupposes the normativity of the canonical Scriptures, evinces an interpretive direction from an author-text horizon to a text-reader horizon, and accentuates an interpretive metanarrative “by which we view everything.”

Chapter 3 analyzes feminist socio-pragmatic hermeneutics against the background of a hermeneutics of communication and the normativity of the Scriptures for theological reflection. The study highlights the epistemic pragmatism of the feminist method along with its transgressive approach to Scripture.

Chapter 4 demonstrates how the intratextual approach, invariably, yields a

truly biblical understanding of the Trinitarian name. The extratextual approach of feminist interpreters, on the other hand, clearly produces a polyvalent, unbiblical view of the Trinitarian name.

Chapter 5 delineates the biblical-theological implications of the study and explains that feminists, by rejecting the Scriptural names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for inclusive language, posit another God.

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