

Women and Church Leadership
Feminist Approach Hermeneutical issues

by

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It is a fact of history that there has been great discrimination against women in almost every society and Church around the world. Through the ages, women have been regarded as second-class citizens. They have always been stereotyped into roles of dependency, submission, and passivity. They have been viewed as inferior to men. They have been exploited as objects rather than treated as free subjects. They have been defined in male terms and relationships. They have been excluded from the centres of power and decision-making processes in society and Church. However, within the past two decades or so, feminist theologians have brought a revolutionary change in biblical scholarship. Using a critical hermeneutical lens, feminist theologians have succeeded, in critiquing many traditional claims regarding the Bible and its commentaries. In order to prove their point of view about the subject of women and church leadership, they have experienced an acrimonious battle during their discussions with those theologians and biblical scholars who are reluctant or not willing to accept their movement. Now, my task in this essay is to identify the biblical texts that are significant to the topic and describe the hermeneutical issues that are raised by those attempting to interpret the texts for application in the context of the debate. The essay will be divided into three segments. The first will provide a brief definition of the “Feminist approach.” The second will be devoted to examining the topic of “Women and church leadership and the biblical texts that are significant to it.” In the last segment, I will be dealing with the biblical texts that are used in order to support the feminist approach to leadership. However, as person belongs to a traditional church, I must admit that my way of approaching this topic of (Women and church leadership) is going to be an androcentric way not based on assumptions of multiple culture.

The Feminist approach

Feminist criticism recognises that biblical texts in general and the letters of Paul in particular, are androcentric texts; that is, they are written from the perspective of men, with women being seen as "other," as derivative or marginal. Many are written by men, but women also can write androcentric texts.¹ The first wave of the feminist approach was in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It has been significantly influenced by other women’s movements such as the “women’s liberation movement” of the 1960s. Women who were fighting for their rights in a male dominated society began to question their inferiority within the church. According to Mark, “feminist approaches remain a transcendent category that overlaps all the other approaches: there are feminist scholars who use the historical-critical method; there are feminist scholars who use literary and/or social-scientific approaches, and there are feminist scholars who pursue historical Jesus studies and postcolonial criticism.”²

Through this ideological perspective, the feminist approach has challenged the authenticity of some biblical translations, and the androcentric bias of some biblical verses as well as its

¹ Cynthia Briggs, “Feminist Approaches: Rethinking History and Resisting Ideologies,” In *Studying Paul’s Letters*, edited by Joseph A Marchal, (Fortress Press 2012), 117–33, 118.

² Mark Allan Powell, *Methods for Matthew*, *Methods in Biblical Interpretation*, (Cambridge University Press 2009), Kindle Edition, 7.

patristic interpretation. Seeking to construct a feminist approach to hermeneutics, they have carefully examined the ideological conception of the Bible, created a feminist frame of reference, and finally developed different norms and standards of hermeneutics. Cynthia stated that “A feminist approach to the study of the Bible seeks to critique patterns of thought that define women as inferior to men and to find resources within it to construct a vision of equality and flourishing for all.” It is a “movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and oppression.”³ It is a kind of apologetic response that seeks to diminish the patriarchy of the Bible.⁴ One of the biblical examples that Cynthia cited to illustrate the androcentric text of the Bible is the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour" (Exod. 20:17). As obvious for the biblical reader, the text does not include "husband" - "you shall not covet your neighbour's husband", and therefore, feminist theologians agree that the commandments are written from the perspective of males speaking to other males, who have wives, not husbands, and who would wish to steal or take for themselves another man's property, his "wife." The best suggestion(?) she offers for modern readers to avoid the androcentricity of this commandment, is giving a new translation for it and thus read, "you shall not covet your neighbour's wife or husband."⁵

In order to reconstruct the role of the women in the early church, feminist theologians examined their everyday lives in the church and the marginalization of women in the androcentricity of the church. They have succeeded in shifting the debates about the 'original' context of the New Testament from a myopic focus on historical 'facts' and what the text 'means' to an opening of the conversation with and about the text to multiple readers and meanings. Reading the New Testament is no longer considered a neutral or innocent act; issues of power and domination are being revealed.⁶

To begin their ideological feminist approach, feminist theologians believed that some Bible translations could be misleading for a study of the issue of women's roles in church leadership. One of the reasons that led them to that supposition is that in the past, Bible translation has been carried out almost exclusively by men only. Accordingly, there is a possibility that the androcentric approach of a translator could have led to a mistranslation of some biblical words that reveal and support the role of women in the church. A consequence of this biblical criticism made some Bible translations, e.g. NRSV; give a feminist definition of some Greek terms with resultant double meanings. A further result of that was that feminists started to give new interpretations to particular texts.

In the middle of the 20th century, the movement expanded through Christian missionaries establishing girl's schools, catechism classes and Bible study for women. In more recent

³ Cynthia Briggs, “*Feminist Approaches: Rethinking History and Resisting Ideologies*,” In *Studying Paul's Letters*, edited by Joseph A Marchal, (Fortress Press 2012), 117–33, 117.

⁴ BIBS225_325_S2DNIE_2016: Special Topic: “*Approaches to Hermeneutics*”, lecture10 PowerPoint, Responses of Feminist Interpretation, (Otago University 2016) slide 4.

⁵ Cynthia Briggs, “*Feminist Approaches: Rethinking History and Resisting Ideologies*,” In *Studying Paul's Letters*, edited by Joseph A Marchal, (Fortress Press 2012), 117–33, 119.

⁶ Tina Pippin, “*Ideological Criticisms, Liberation Criticisms, and Womanist and Feminist Criticisms*” In *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament*, edited by Stanley E Porter, (Brill 1997) 267–75, 267.

times, we see many famous women missionaries preaching the Gospel around the world, something which was impossible of achievement before the 18th century. There are a significant number of biblical scholars and clergymen who embrace this movement. For instance, in their recent pastoral letter, *Love is for Life*, Irish bishops in a few carefully-chosen paragraphs acknowledge the value and importance of the feminist movement. They see feminism as one of the most significant movements in our time. They describe it as a real challenge and opportunity for the church. In 1981 the German bishops issued a pastoral letter entitled, 'Questions relating to the place of women in Church and Society'; "among other things, they pointed out that discrimination against women in the Church must be overcome."⁷ The issue is clearly an established reality in both Church and society. Indeed, some would argue that Christian feminism is one of the most promising and effective movements taking place in the life of the Church and society in the present day. At the same time, others, particularly those who hold to a patriarchal and androcentric church, would hold an opposite notion to a feminist; they believe that the movement in the Church today is causing great hurt and alienation in the lives of women of all ages. Among the Churches which have maintained a strong opposition to this practical recognition of women's ecclesiastical leadership are the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. In fact, statements made by Pope John Paul II appear to exclude the possibility of women being ordained at all. Women, however, are allowed to have limited participation in some ministries in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but it is not related to leadership.

So, to conclude this section, Christian feminism came into existence as result of men's domination in both sacred and secular realities. The history of humanity has been written mainly from a male point of view. Feminist theologians believe that history is the story of the male of the species, as is indicated by the use of the possessive pronoun 'his-story,' with little or no account taken of women's interests, or 'her-story.' The issue of power was a further reason that motivated women to stand against discrimination and inferiority in relation to men. A Feminist understanding of history indicates that men have been in positions of power in both the organization and administration of society and Church in the past. Women have always been kept away from the centres of political power and control in both society and Church. Therefore, the needs and interests of women have not been represented adequately by the male perspective throughout history.

Women and church leadership

Church leadership is one of the main concerns that feminists wanted to achieve during their battle with opposed groups. Some Christian denominations permitted and encouraged the unrestricted use of women's gifts in all the offices of the church, while others, based on some biblical passages, consider it unbiblical for women to preach or exercise authority over the church.

⁷ Dermot A. Lane, *Christian Feminism*, (The Furrow, Nov., 1985), Vol. 36, No. 11, pp. 663-675, JSTOR, 663.

The New Testament, particularly the letters of Paul, contains some passages that restrict the capacity of women with regard to all the offices of the church. Not only are the texts of Paul's letters androcentric, as Cynthia noted, but the tradition of commentary and interpretation is also biased toward erasing the evidence of women's activity and agency in history.⁸ Now, to illustrate the prohibition of the opponent scholars who argue that women must not hold any role of leadership within the church, three significant passages will be examined: 1Timothy 2:11-15; 1 Corinthians 11:3 and I Corinthians 14:34-35. For Cynthia, these passages are typical of the Pauline patriarchal approaches that have been used to silence and to subordinate women. Not-only that, even their interpretation by the early church fathers has supported the ideology of women's inferiority and sinfulness. These texts have given divine legitimation to women's inferiority and necessary subordination to husband and father.⁹

1Timothy 2:11 is one of those biblical passages that contradict and weaken feminist theology. In this passage Paul shows clearly that women have no place in teaching or leadership: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." It is a problematic passage for feminist theologians. They have tried to interpret it in a way that could be compatible with their theology, but their interpretation has not been convincing. For example, some have argued that Paul's prohibition is about those women who were teaching error or false doctrine in the Corinthian church. Thus, "seen in this light, the prohibition was not intended to be universally applied. Paul was simply dealing with a specific local problem in Corinth in which some misled women were leading others astray."¹⁰ The reason this interpretation is not adequate is because Christian history does not mention any heresy taught by women. However, even if that assumption is true, still that can only cover the first command of the verse (do not teach); the other command (not to have authority over a man) cannot be reinterpreted.

1 Corinthians 11:3 In this verse, Paul made it clear that women are subjected to their husband. Feminist theologians see this verse as one of Paul's biased and androcentric verses that lowers women's status. Because Paul gives a dogmatic instruction for the order of worship for both man and woman, women are commanded to do more than men. In the feminist perspective, this is considered to be biased. Even the interpretation of the early church fathers supported Paul's androcentricity. For example, Severian stated that "Just as God has nobody over him in all creation, so man has no one over him in the natural world. However, the woman lives under the protection of man."¹¹ There is no way to deny the fact that women are called to prophesy, but not to possess any office of ecclesiastical leadership.

I Corinthians 14:34-35 is another harsh Pauline command that forbids women from teaching and having authority over men. The feminist theologians attempt to interpret this passage by

⁸ Cynthia Briggs, "Feminist Approaches: Rethinking History and Resisting Ideologies," In *Studying Paul's Letters*, edited by Joseph A Marchal, (Fortress Press 2012), 117-33, 119.

⁹ *Ibid*, 118.

¹⁰ Ron Rhodes, "The Debate over Feminist Theology:" Which view is Biblical?, Part Three in a Three-Part Series on Liberation Theology, (Christian research journal 1999), 5.

¹¹ Bray Gerald Lewis, "Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 7" 1-2 Corinthians, Downers Grove, Ill: (InterVarsity Press, 1999), 106. Digital version.

suggesting that 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 was not originally written by Paul but in fact was inserted by a copyist or scribe. According to Ehrman, this passage was made by a scribe who was concerned to emphasize that women must have no public role in the church, and that they should be silent and subservient to their husbands.¹² Another interpretation suggests that Paul is referring to ‘speaking in tongues’ because in 1 Corinthians 14:4 Paul tells those who speak in tongues that they are not better than those who prophesy. However, one thing that is not compatible with this interpretation is that 1 Corinthians 14:4 speaks about the whole congregation, not just women.

Women and church leadership in biblical verses

Feminist theologians believe that the New Testament itself throws considerable light on women leadership in the context of the church. For the purpose of illustration, three significant Pauline passages will be examined: Romans 16:1; Romans 16:7; and 1 Timothy 3:11.

Romans 16:1 According to the list of people commended by Paul at the end of his letter to the church in Rome, there is a woman named Phoebe. Now, the Greek text describes her as “(diakonos) deacon of the church of Cenchreae.” From a feminist perspective, “the passage is a source for the history of the early congregations and of the missionary movement in general. It is a key passage in understanding the multiple leadership roles in the communities and for putting Paul’s activity in the context of other community activity.”¹³ Feminist theologians are convinced that this woman was holding an ecclesiastical office in Rome. However, feminists argue that some Bible versions e.g. King James (1611) ignore the fact that Phoebe was characterized as holding an ecclesiastical office; she is being described as “a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.” In another place when the word “diakonos” occurs in the Greek text; the KJV usually translate it into English as “minister.” For example, in 1 Timothy 4:6, the word is described as “a good minister”; in Colossians 1:7, Epaphras is commended as “a faithful minister of Christ”; in Ephesians 6:21, Tychicus is called “a faithful minister.” Now, the question feminist theologians ask why is it when a woman’s name appeared in the text the translators did choose to translate the word as “servant”? Is it not a text manipulation and prejudice against women?

Romans 16:7 In the same chapter, feminist theologians provide another interesting insight into the practices of Bible translators. Among the names that Paul mentioned in his greeting are “Andronicus and Junias.” Some of the Bible translations read, “Greet Androni’cus and Ju’nias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.”¹⁴ Now, this gives a clear impression that both were men. Andronicus is certainly a man’s name, but there is some vagueness concerning the name

¹² Leora Tanenbaum, *“Taking Back God:” American Women Rising Up for Religious Equality*, (Farrar: Straus and Giroux 2009), 123.

¹³ Cynthia Briggs, *“Feminist Approaches: Rethinking History and Resisting Ideologies,”* In *Studying Paul’s Letters*, edited by Joseph A Marchal, (Fortress Press 2012), 117–33, 121.

¹⁴ Revised Standard Version, old catholic edition.

Junias. Cynthia believes that “the scribes who copied the manuscripts were part of a tradition that thought it was impossible for a woman's name to be modified by the epithet, "apostle," the name was changed to "Junias," a male name, and passed down in that amended form.”¹⁵ The name Junia is assumed to be a feminine name, which was a common name among Roman women. In the Greek language, both names can appear identical, but contracting the name from Junianus to Junias was the less common phenomenon, if not unknown. Thus, on linguistic grounds, it is more likely that Andronicus and Junias are a man and a woman. Interestingly, in the Peshitta version, the name “Junias“ is a feminine name, “Yunia”; it is a common name that Assyrian people still use. Moreover, the word “men” is not to be found in 16:7b in the Peshitta text.” Thus, the name must be a feminine name.

1Timothy 3:11 This verse is another example of a misleading Bible translation. In the context, the author is outlining the qualifications required of those appointed to the offices of bishop and deacon. The reader who uses KJV will perceive that in 1 Timothy 3:11 certain qualities are needed of the wives of deacons: “Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things.” Now, is this what Paul intended? The other Bible translations, e.g. NRSV, reads, “Women (Virgins in the Peshitta text) likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.” Feminist theologians argue that this verse provides solid evidence for women holding an ecclesiastical office.

On the basis of these three Pauline verses and more, feminist theologians argue that biblical passages which discriminate against, or imply the inferiority of women to men, must be understood as misleading translations and must be corrected.

In conclusion, feminist theologians have been successful in questioning and criticizing the androcentric notion of some Biblical texts. As it can be seen, they have played a significant role in the development and growth of Christian feminism, by securing the rights of women in the Church. The influence of their approach can be noticed in the areas of theological study. Tremendous change has taken place in Christian theology regarding women’s position in the church. The feminist approach was able to overcome patriarchal customs and raised awareness of the use of androcentric language. However, the majority of **traditional churches** Assyrian, Catholic, Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches still maintain a strong opposition to this practical recognition of women's ecclesiastical leadership, and they are not willing to bring about any changes to their theology.

¹⁵ Cynthia Briggs, “*Feminist Approaches: Rethinking History and Resisting Ideologies*,” In *Studying Paul’s Letters*, edited by Joseph A Marchal, (Fortress Press 2012), 117–33, 119.

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