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A Working Group on Biblical Feminist Theology

During the 1982 Evangelical Women's Caucus national meetings, Dr. Nancy Hardesty called for an EWC Theology Working Group. Sixty men and women responded to the invitation. In correspondence, Hardesty writes,

"My concern is to formulate a biblical feminist theological stance which will appeal to the hearts of those women and men who have been alienated from the Gospel by the distortions of patriarchalism. Many would call this a futile task. They believe that Christianity is inseparable from patriarchy, that any faith in a triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is hopelessly enslaving for women. Many have turned to the goddess; many have simply become secularists."

This initiative is important because a biblical feminist option is needed. Hardesty notes that evangelical women, repelled by patriarchalism, are increasingly attracted to the feminist theologies produced by women in mainline institutions. The new formulations by Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Daly and others are welcomed by some even though they lead toward what is labelled a "post-Christian" theology. At a recent conference convened for "doing theology," many women were attracted to a compassionate, open and gentle woman there named Starhawk and attended the nature ritual which she conducted. Letha Scanzoni, co-author with Hardesty of *All We're Meant to Be*, noted this in a letter and commented that these women had not been able to find such meaning in their own churches, even though many elements of the worship paralleled Christian beliefs.

In her working group, Hardesty wants to avoid the all-too-common conservative approach of "labelling the enemy and then girding ourselves for combat." This will not help women appreciate the wholeness to be found through a biblical faith. Instead, she hopes that "we might find the formula for the salve that will bring healing and hope to the sick and wounded." She continues,

"The theology we formulate may appear to many as radically different from that of our fathers. That can be scary. I would suggest that we keep the Reformation in mind. To those of the medieval church, the theologies of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Menno Simons were as shockingly radical and different from the 'true' church as they were from each other. Theology has always been diverse. This will certainly not be the first time that theology is rethought and recast to speak to the needs of a new age."

Such a working group could study, discuss and write in teams, producing articles or even a book of essays. Many members would be involved in each stage of evaluating, critiquing, encouraging and clarifying. Careful study of radical "post-Christian" feminist theology is needed, as is the insight gained from prayerful, thoughtful study of the Scriptures and of traditional orthodox theology. As a preliminary starting point, Hardesty assembled a brief bibliography for the working group. The bibliography, included with this report, can provide suggested readings in feminist theology for those who may be interested in participating. In addition, a two-cassette series on feminist theology by Kathleen Storrie (listed in the bibliography) can serve as an excellent introduction to the issues.

Hardesty summarizes,

"My vision is that doing theology is only one aspect of a broader mission of outreach by EWC to those women we now call 'secular,' ex-Christian and non-Christian, who have been wounded, turned-off, excluded, alienated by the church, and yet who long for the healing, the forgiveness, the cleansing, the love, and the hope that God offers in Jesus Christ. Pray that together we can find the way."

Those who are interested in such a working group should write to Nancy Hardesty at 2534 Bradford Square, NE, Atlanta, GA 30345. Include any information on your academic background, comments on what issues are of particular interest, and any suggestions concerning how members of such a group could best work together.

—Mark Lau Branson

THEOLOGY WORKING GROUP BIBLIOGRAPHY

Biblical/Evangelical Sources:

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- Gundry, Patricia. *The Complete Woman* (Doubleday, 1981); *Heirs Together* (Zondervan, 1980); *Woman Be Free* (Zondervan, 1977). Helpful, conservative approach to biblical feminism, addressing biblical, historical, and practical issues.
- Howe, E. Margaret. *Women and Church Leadership* (Zondervan, 1982). An evangelical contribution which discusses New Testament material, various historical traditions and modern church practices; and includes surveys about women in seminaries and in ministry.
- Jewett, Paul K. *Man as Male and Female* (Eerdmans, 1975). Formulates a theological approach to biblical material which supports equality in the church.
- _____. *The Ordination of Women* (Eerdmans, 1980). A clear theological approach to the issue, arguing for recognition of women's ministry.
- Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. *Speech, Silence, Action* (Abingdon, 1980). Autobiography of a leading biblical feminist.
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- Palmer, Phoebe. *The Promise of the Father* (1859); reprint by Schmul Publishers, Salem, OH 44460). Nineteenth-century defense of women's ministry based on holiness and pentecostal ideas.
- Russell, Letty, ed. *The Liberating Word* (Westminster, 1976). Offers new approaches for interpreting Scripture from a feminist perspective.
- Scanzoni, Letha, and Nancy Hardesty. *All We're Meant to Be* (Word, 1974). A key volume among evangelicals, covering a number of biblical and practical issues for women today.
- Stendahl, Krister. *The Bible and the Role of Women* (Fortress, 1966). A short exegesis of the issue centered in Galatians 3:28.
- Swindler, Leonard. "Jesus Was a Feminist" (*Catholic World*, Jan. 1971, pp. 177-83). A seminal essay.
- Trible, Phyllis. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress, 1978). An exegetical work from the perspective of rhetorical criticism, with noteworthy essays on Genesis, Ruth, and Song of Solomon.

Feminist Theology

- Collins, Sheila. *A Different Heaven and Earth* (Judson, 1974). Feminist theology from a liberal Marxist perspective.
- Daly, Mary. *The Church and the Second Sex* (Harper & Row, 1968, 1975). Buy the edition "with a new feminist postchristian introduction." This is Daly's critique of church history, particularly the Roman tradition.
- Doely, Sarah Bentley, ed. *Women's Liberation and the Church* (Association, 1970). An early collection of essays from a somewhat liberal perspective.
- Hageman, Alice L. *Sexist Religion and Women in the Church* (Association, 1974). A collection of essays from the women's caucus at Harvard Divinity School.
- Ruether, Rosemary. *Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian* (Abingdon, 1982). Ruether's journey in faith.
- _____. *Liberation Theology* (Paulist, 1972); *New Woman, New Earth* (Seabury, 1975); *To Change the World* (Crossroad, 1981). From a liberal Roman Catholic perspective, an attempt to integrate not only feminism, but also issues of racism, anti-semitism, and ecology.

Russell, Letty M. *The Future of Partnership* (Westminster, 1979); *Growth in Partnership* (Westminster, 1981); *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology* (Westminster, 1974). Reformulates Christian theology from a liberation theology perspective in a concern for egalitarian marriages and working relationships.

Schaefer, Anne Wilson. *Women's Reality* (Winston Press, 1981). Insightful and provocative analysis by a psychologist and lay theologian of how women's reality differs from "white male reality."

Soelle, Dorothee. *Choosing Life* (Fortress, 1981); *Political Theology* (Fortress, 1974). German feminist.

Storrie, Kathleen. "Feminist Doctrines: An Introduction" and "Feminist Doctrines: Advanced Seminar." An excellent overview in two lectures. Cassette tapes available for \$9 from E.W.C., P.O. Box 3192, San Francisco, CA 94119.

Post-Christian Works or Feminist Spirituality

Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father* (Beacon, 1973). A very radical critique of traditional Christian doctrines of God as Father, Jesus as victim and Savior, etc.

_____. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Beacon, 1978). Freewheeling reformulation of spiritual, philosophical, and theological categories, with language created to the point of absurdity.

Goldenberg, Naomi R. *Changing of the Gods* (Beacon, 1979). Jewish feminist recasting the doctrine of sin for women as a lack of self-esteem.

Spretnak, Charlene, ed. *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* (Doubleday, 1981). A large collection of essays of radical spirituality, with reformulations of theological concepts.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

(Probing questions, suggestions, and encouragement in areas of personal and spiritual growth)

The Dangerous Life of the Spirit

by Richard J. Foster

In *The Imitation of Christ* Thomas à Kempis says, "The life of a good man must be mighty in virtues, that he should be inwardly what he appears outwardly to others." We need God's life and light to transform our inner spirit so that righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit begin to pervade all we are and think. But such purity of heart does not just fall on our heads. We need to go through a process of sowing to the Spirit, through the exercise of the classical Disciplines of the spiritual life. As Elizabeth O'Connor has said, "no person or group or movement has vigor and power unless it is disciplined." We must take up a consciously chosen course of action which places us before God in such a way that he can work the righteousness of the Kingdom into us.

These Spiritual Disciplines concern both group and individual life. They include both inward and outward experiences. Through *meditation* we come to hear God's voice and obey his word. *Prayer* is the life of perpetual communion. *Fasting* is one means through which we open our spirits to the Kingdom of God and concentrate upon the work of God. Through the spiritual experience of *study* the mind takes on the order and rhythm of whatever it concentrates upon. These inward disciplines are joined by outward disciplines. *Simplicity*, the life characterized by singleness of purpose, sets us free from the tyranny of ourselves, the tyranny of other people and the tyranny of material possessions. *Solitude* invites us to enter the recreating silences and let go of our inner compulsions. Through the liberating discipline of *submission* we can lay aside the burden of always needing to get our own way. In *service* we can experience the many little deaths of going beyond ourselves which in the end bring resurrection and life. Finally, disciplined living also includes important corporate experiences. *Confession* is that gracious provision of God through which the wounds of sin may be healed. *Worship* ushers us into the Holy of Holies where we can see the Lord high and lifted up. Through the corporate discipline of *guidance* we can know in our own experience the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. *Celebration* offers the wonderful, hilarious, exuberant experience of walking and leaping and praising God.

These Disciplines of the spiritual life can be for us a means of receiving God's grace. They put us in a place where we can experience inner transformation as a gift. But there are pitfalls that can

hinder our way. That is why I often speak of the Disciplines as the dangerous life of the Spirit. We must be diligent to avoid these pitfalls. Perhaps some advance warning will help. I would like to mention seven for you, although there are no doubt many more.

I.

The first pitfall is the temptation to make a law of the Disciplines. There is nothing that can choke the heart and soul out of walking with God like legalism. The rigid person is not the disciplined person. Rigidity is the most certain sign that the Disciplines have spoiled. The disciplined person is the person who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. The disciplined person is the person who can live appropriately in life. Jean-Pierre de Caussade put it so well: "the soul light as a feather, fluid as water, responds to the initiative of divine grace like a floating balloon."

Consider the story of Hans the tailor. Because of his reputation, an influential entrepreneur visiting the city ordered a tailor-made suit. But when he came to pick up this suit, the customer found that one sleeve twisted that way and the other this way; one shoulder bulged out and the other caved in. He pulled and struggled and finally, wrenched and contorted, he managed to make his body fit. As he returned home on the bus, another passenger noticed his odd appearance and asked if Hans the tailor had made the suit. Receiving an

We can in relative safety discuss the Disciplines in the abstract. But to step out into experience threatens us at the core of our being.

affirmative reply, the man remarked, "Amazing! I knew that Hans was a good tailor, but I had no idea he could make a suit fit so perfectly someone as deformed as you." Often that is just what we do in the church. We get some idea of what the Christian faith should look like: then we push and shove people into the most grotesque configurations until they fit wonderfully! That is death. It is a wooden legalism which destroys the soul.

Often my students who are working on the Spiritual Disciplines will keep a journal. When I read those journals I frequently must counsel the students to quit trying so hard to be religious. Let go a little bit! The Disciplines are a grace as well as a Discipline. There is an ease, a naturalness that flows as we walk with God. Some people are not ready for certain Disciplines, and so should be kept from doing them. We should never encourage each other to embrace the Disciplines

Richard J. Foster is Associate Professor of Theology and Writer in Residence at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. This material, adapted from a recent lecture, will also be included in his Study Guide for Celebration of Discipline, forthcoming from Harper & Row.