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Biblical Authority and Interpretation

by Randy Maddox

The affirmation of biblical authority has been a central theme of the evangelical tradition.[1] At the same time, the precise understanding of the nature of biblical authority has been one of the major sources of conflict within evangelicalism. It has been my experience, as one who was nurtured by and has come to identify with this tradition, that the question of the nature of biblical authority can most helpfully be answered only after one has gained an understanding of the necessity of biblical interpretation.

I. The Necessity of Biblical Interpretation

The necessity of interpreting Scripture was far from obvious to me as a beginning religious studies major. I assumed if a person wanted to determine what the Bible taught about a particular matter, all that was necessary was to read it. Behind this assumption were the implicit assumptions that the Bible always says what it means in obvious and literal ways, that biblical teachings are homogeneous, and that everyone who reads the Bible with a sincere heart will find the same message in it.[2]

A. Shattering Assumptions: *The "Literalness" of Scripture?*

The first of these implicit assumptions was shattered by the experience of trying to read and understand the whole of Scripture. For example, how "literal" was I to take Jesus' command that every man who casts a lustful glance on a woman should pluck out his eye (Matt. 5:29)? I noticed that the majority of commentators understood Jesus to be using this saying as a graphic illustration of the seriousness of lusting and not as a literal command. While this seemed reasonable, it meant that my former assumption about the "literalness" of biblical material had to be nuanced.

Even deeper questions were raised by material like the Book of Revelation, the ponderings of Ecclesiastes, and those Psalms that rejoice over the battering of Babylonian babies' heads against the ground (e.g., Ps. 137:9). As an evangelical I was committed to the belief that even these passages had some authoritative meaning for Christians today.

And yet, my alarm over arriving at this meaning illustrated that the meaning was not immediately obvious. It was becoming clear that some type of interpretation was necessary to determine the authoritative meaning of any scripture.

Disagreements in Interpretation. This was driven home further when a second of my implicit assumptions—that everyone who reads the Bible with a sincere heart will find the same message in it—was unmasked as false.

I can still recall my alarm when I discovered that during the Civil War there were committed conservative clergy and laypersons in both the North and the South who argued fervently that their position was the biblical position.[3] How was this possible? As I studied defenses of their positions, it became obvious that each side focused attention on the verses that reinforced their positions and avoided or "explained away" the verses that called their position into question. It was not a case of one side using the Bible as an authority and the other drawing on another authority. Rather, both groups were populated by conservative Christians who believed they were using Scripture as their authority and reading it correctly.

Homogeneity of Scripture? The encounter with the different positions on slavery supported by appeals to Scripture also served to call into question the assumption that homogeneity or total agreement through the breadth of biblical teachings.[4] This question was deepened as I continued to deal with Scripture. On one level, there were significant differences between Old and New Testament perspectives and teachings on issues such as war. At an even deeper level, I noticed different perspectives on the significance of Jesus and the nature of the Christian life in the New Testament itself. This posed the question of whether there was any unity among these various perspectives.[5]

B. The Dilemma

Many who have gone through similar experiences conclude that the interpretation of Scripture is arbitrary and, therefore, that Scripture cannot be the final authority in Christian thought. At the opposite extreme there are those who dogmatically declare that *their* interpretation is the authoritative one and that all others are false. The problem, of course, is showing how either of these claims this absolute can be objectively defended. On the one hand, to surrender Scripture as the authoritative norm for Christian faith meant that "Christian faith" then became whatever a particular group of people who called themselves Christians happened to believe at a particular time.[6] On the other hand, the retreat to dogmatic claims about a particular interpretation seemed to ignore or belittle the fact of rival interpretations by equally committed Christians and failed to do justice to the biblical command to be ready to give a defense of one's faith. However, if neither of these alternatives are acceptable, where do we turn?

C. A Clue: The "Hermeneutic Circle"

The most important help I received in answering this question came from the philosophical and psychological study of human understanding and interpretation, that is—hermeneutics.[7] Hermeneutical investigation, at its basic level, deals with the question of how people understand any phenomena such as written text and traditions. An important focus of this investigation has been the analysis of the "hermeneutic circle" or "circle of understanding."[8] This "circle" refers to how we tend to interpret new data by what we already understand and believe. This helps explain some of the problems previously mentioned. The reason, for example, that Southern Christians tend to focus on passages in the Bible that confirmed or condoned their practice of slavery was the conscious and unconscious influence of their prior commitments to slavery. Moreover, the analogous situation was true of the antislavery proponets in the North! That is why each side was blind to the biblical bases (such as they were) of the opposing side.

The natural response at this point is to declare that the problem is the interference of preunderstandings and that the solution is to remove preunderstandings altogether in interpretations. However, this is where one of the crucial characteristics of the hermeneutic circle comes into play. We have come to realize that such a removal is impossible. The essence of understanding is relating some new data to already existing ideas and notions and seeing what changes this new data necessitates or how it fits. This would be impossible if the first step in understanding was to do away with all previous ideas and notions.

Moreover, the ideal of presuppositionless understanding is also problematic from a theological standpoint. As Paul reminds us, the wisdom of God appears as foolishness to non-Christian human understanding. Why? Because they do not understand the word of the cross (I Cor. 1:18–20). That is, prior understanding is necessary to understand the range of Christian truth. In understanding theology, the idea of presuppositionless interpretation must be rejected.

What then? Have we left each interpreter stuck in their own preunderstandings? Have we become mired in total relativism, in which everyone's opinion is equal? Not necessarily! Another important contribution of the analysis of the hermeneutic circle is the methodology it brings to deal with preunderstandings. While we cannot escape the influence of our preunderstandings in the process of interpretation, we can bring these preunderstandings to a level of self-consciousness and evaluate their appropriateness to the subject-matter being interpreted. To accomplish this, we need to cultivate an understanding of the socio-historical context and its influences. The means to developing this understanding is dialogue: dialogue with the text and dialogue with other interpreters and interpretations of the text. Often in such dialogue it becomes clear that some aspect of our preunderstanding is inappropriate to or

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judged by the matter being investigated and can be reformulated.[9] The Copernican Revolution would be a classic example of such a reformulation, showing its possibility and its likely attendent difficulties and repercussions.

D. The Clue Applied

All of this has extreme importance when we return to the issue of biblical interpretation. Our goal should not be to deny or get rid of our preunderstandings and presuppositions and just see "what the Bible says."[10] This is an impossible ideal and soon becomes a cover from which we confuse "what we understand the Bible to say" with "what the Bible says;" we become the final authority rather than the Bible. On the other hand, we need not surrender to a relativism that sees everything as merely someone's opinion. In dialogue with Scripture and each other, those sensitive to biblical authority will seek awareness of their preunderstandings and how they affect their interpretation of Scripture and will test these preunderstandings for their adequacy and legitimacy.

The Role of Biblical Exegesis. It is here that the methods of modern biblical exegesis come into play.[11] The essential goal of these methods is to provide clarity about the original setting (historical and linguistic) and meaning of Scripture. To the degree they are successful, they provide a stimulus to counteract the interpreter's preunderstandings and let Scripture speak in its own voice. As Donald Hagner has recently argued, the distinctive element of evangelical biblical scholarship should not be that we avoid the modern methods of exegesis, but rather that we use them in a positive manner aimed at locating the authoritative teaching of Scripture and obeying it.[12]

The Role of Dialogue. Another important way in which we can test our interpretation of Scripture is through dialogue with other interpreters. If we find significant disagreements between various interpretations, we are obliged to find where either we or the other interpreter, or both, have been misled. To be sure, we will not always achieve a final agreement on an interpretation. Some passages seem to defy clearcut meaning and there is the problem of some diversity in Scripture. However, the dialogue can help eliminate false alternatives.

Particularly for Protestants, it is important to emphasize that this dialogue is not just among contemporary interpreters. Tradition is equally important. The Protestant principle that "Scripture Alone" is our authority does not reject interaction with tradition. It merely rejects an improper elevation of tradition over Scripture. With tradition, as with individual preunderstandings, Scripture must be the ultimate norm, not vice versa. When evangelical Christians turn to tradition, it is not to use tradition to correct Scripture. Rather it is to dialogue with tradition to test our interpretation of Scripture.[13] If we find our interpretation is at odds with the majority of interpreters past and present, then we are obliged to provide significant warrant for our interpretation.

E. Summary

We have seen that the "meaning of Scripture" is not a self-evident commodity that can be appropriated effortlessly by anyone who desires. Rather, adequate understandings of the authoritative teachings of Scripture can be obtained only by a careful process of exegesis and comparative dialogue.

II. The Nature and Scope of Biblical Authority

As suggested earlier, it was only after I gained some understanding of the necessity and role of interpretation in dealing with Scripture that I was able to work through the issues about the biblical authority.[14] For me, these issues did not deal so much with whether Scripture was an authority, but rather with redefining the nature and scope of biblical authority.[15]

A. The Right Approach to the Question

One thing that became increasingly obvious to me as I read the various materials on the authority of Scripture was the way the problem of preunderstanding, discussed above, once again manifested itself. In case after case, it was clear that the authors had first developed a model of authority and then conceived the Bible as that kind of authority. One of the major clues this was happening was that the most crucial arguments in their discussions of biblical authority were drawn from philosophy or tradition—not Scripture. This was particularly true at both extremes of the theological spectrum.

On one hand, there were those who believed modern people could no longer accept some extraneous authority as an ultimate norm for life and thought. For them the Bible became just a collection of exemplary religious literature that was to be accepted or rejected based on its reasonableness.[16] On the opposite extreme, there were the strict inerrantists who were convinced that any document claiming divine authority had to be accurate down to the very dots on the "i's" and in relation to every topic treated. For them, any view that did not see the Bible as this type of authority did not see it as an authority at all.[17]

What was most problematic about these extremes was not their philosophical bases—though these are not above question. Neither was it the extreme differences between the two positions. Rather, it was the unexpected point of agreement between the two—in practice if not in concept. Both positions argued deductively, developing an argument for a type of authority and then imposing this understanding of authority upon Scripture. In light of the potential distorting effect of preunderstandings, this procedure is highly suspect. Ultimately, both these positions made their understanding the ultimate authority over Scripture! It seemed clear to me that *if Scripture is the ultimate authority, then it is an authority on the issue of the scope and nature of its authority.* Therefore, it became crucial for me to proceed inductively, turning to Scripture and seeing what claims about its own authority it warranted.[18] As I did so, three major points became clear.

B. Scripture—A Guide to Living

The first deals with the purpose of Scripture. The clearest teaching on this issue is the familiar passage in II Timothy 3:15–17. There we are told that Scripture is able to make us "wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ," that it is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness," and that the study of Scripture will equip us thoroughly for every good work. The important point here is that the purpose of Scripture is focused in its instruction in salvation and its training in righteousness. What is not claimed is that Scripture should be treated as a textbook for the sciences, etc.[19]

This is not to say that Scripture is full of false scientific statements, but rather that many of the statements treated as scientific claims by defenders and critics alike were really not intended that way in Scripture itself. A good example is the Genesis prologue. In its Hebrew form this chapter is an artfully crafted and highly stylistic literary piece. This fact, in conjunction with an analysis of its sevenfold structure and symbolic use of names (Adam=humanity, Eve=giver of life, etc.), makes it clear that the prologue is much more a theological account of the source and purpose of creation that a narrowly scientific or historical account of the details of creation.[20] When this realization is related to the growing sensitivity to the differences between such theological reflection and modern scientific explanation, the basis is provided for a constructive integration of the authoritative teachings of the Genesis prologue and the findings of modern science.[21]

C. Divine Word and Human Setting

A second aspect of biblical authority that becomes evident as one deals with the whole of Scripture is the tension between the Divine Word and its human setting. Because the Bible is God's Word,[22] it has eternal relevance and speaks to all cultures. Yet because this Word has been spoken through human words (Cf. Jer. 1:9, Acts 4:25) and in human settings, it is conditioned by a historical particularity. As a result, it is sometimes crucial, in deciding the authoritative teaching of Scripture, to distinguish between the essential Divine Word and its particular historical expression.[23]

Jesus himself provides a model for the necessity of making this distinction in the way he dealt with Old Testament scriptures (Cf. Matt. 5:38–9, Mark 7, and Mark 10:2–12). As James Dunn suggests, when one studies Jesus's use of the Old Testament, it becomes obvious he understood these texts in relation to the historical situation in which they were originally given. Jesus did not deny these scriptures were the Word of God to their original situation. He did say or imply that many of them were no longer God's word to the situation he had brought.[24] A similar analysis could be made of the

way the New Testament authors used the Old Testament.[24] Moreover, the realization that the authors of the New Testament were attempting to apply the same Word of God to different situations helps explain many phenomena such as the presence of four accounts of the Gospel story.

Occasionally, it is said that such an understanding of Scripture lessens its authority and value for Christian life. I have found the opposite to be true. Let me cite one example. In I Corinthians 8, Paul offers guidance to the first century Christians at Corinth on the problem of eating food offered to idols. Since most twentieth century Christians never confront this problem, this passage is often judged to have no contemporary relevance or authority. This verdict can be overturned, however, if we are sensitive to the distinction between the human setting of the particular problem and the authoritative principle that guided Paul's response. In brief, this principle is that those who are stronger in the faith and can see through false moralism must be willing at times to submit to the weaker members of the community in order to protect the latter's faith. This principle can be applied as an authoritative guide to numerous situations in our contemporary setting. Thus, far from being a fatal error, an awareness of the divine/human nature of Scripture can serve to broaden our commitment to and understanding of the authority of the Bible.

D. Christ–The Center of Scripture

The final point that should be noted about biblical authority is the recognition of a certain gradation in this authority. There are clear claims that the authority of Scripture lies in the Bible as a whole, nor just in certain parts of it. We are not free to treat as authoritative only those verses with which we agree (Cf. Pro. 30:5–6). However, this should not be constructed as meaning every part of Scripture possesses equal authority in and of itself. On the contrary, the Christian canon teaches that there is a central focal point for biblical authority—the revelation of Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–3). Indeed, the very authority of Scripture itself is derivative of the authority of this revelation. More importantly, the authoritative meaning of any particular verse is a function of the way in which it prepares for, testifies to, or clarifies and applies this revelation.

The recognition that the revelation of Jesus Christ is the focal point of biblical authority provides a helpful perspective on the diversity present in Scripture. As expressions of the gospel in different settings with different agendas, the diversity in Scripture should be seen as a help rather than a hindrance. It presents us with several models of how we can apply the Gospel to our situation. At the same time, the demonstration of an essential unity between these various expressions provides a set of criteria for judging the appropriateness of our application.[26]

Another implication of recognizing that the authority of Scripture is focused in the revelation of Jesus Christ is that it allows us to handle the development or progression of revelation apparent in Scripture, particularly between the Old and New Testament. A good illustration would be the biblical teachings on life after death, which are very unclear in the Old Testament, was still debated among the Jews in Jesus' day (Acts 23:6), and only settled for Christians by the experience of the resurrected Lord (I Cor. 15:20). In light of Christ, there is no more room for debate.

E. Summary

To summarize this section, we have seen that: (1) The authority of Scripture is centered on matters of instruction in salvation and training in righteousness; (2) In interpreting Scripture it is often necessary to distinguish between the Divine Word and the human situation; and (3) We must be sensitive to the very important role of the focus of biblical authority in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

III. An Evangelical Agenda

The necessity of interpretation and the nature of biblical authority provide a helpful perspective to the on-going evangelical debates on inerrancy and biblical authority.[27] Simply to defend the authority of Scripture is not enough. Indeed, it is at most the presupposition for the crucial task, which is to develop a responsible contemporary interpretation of authoritative biblical teachings. It is precisely in matters of interpretation that the most significant differences in theological systems can be found.

The elaboration of such an interpretation of Scripture is a major on-going project for evangelical theologians. However, based on the foregoing discussion there are some guidelines for this project I would suggest.

1. We should focus our attention on the issues Scripture claims as authoritative rather than waste time dealing with false confrontations.

2. We must develop an appreciation of the appropriate diversity in Scripture and in contemporary Christian understanding. At the same time, we must develop a more precise understanding of the criteria or boundaries that determine legitimate diversity. In light of the biblical teachings about the Holy Spirit guiding the Church into truth, we should be willing to use the central teachings of the historic Christian Church as a guide in this process.

3. We must continue to develop criteria for distinguishing between the Divine Word and the human situation in biblical teachings.[28]

4. Above all, we must always remember the limitations of our human understanding of these issues when either recommending our own conclusions or judging others'. Scripture is the final authority, not any one person's understanding of Scripture.

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[1] For a perceptive analysis of the various meanings of "evangelical," and an argument for a definition which I find amenable, see two articles by Donald Dayton: "The Social and Political Conservatism of Modern American Evangelicalism: A Preliminary Search for Reasons," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 32 (1977): 71–80; and "Whither Evangelicalism?" in *Sanctification and Liberation*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Abingdon, 1981), pp. 142–63.

[2] These assumptions were actually explicit teachings of the Princeton School that contributed to the development of fundamentalism. See George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 110–14.

[3] Examples of arguments from both sides can be found in Edwin Gaustad, ed., *A Documentary History of Religion in America*, Vol. I (Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 477–90. For a helpful analysis of the hermeneutical perspectives of each group, see Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* (Herald, 1983).

[4] For a brief survey of the various positions on the homogeneity of Scripture, see W. Hulitt Gloer, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: Anatomy of an Issue." *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 13 (1983): 53–8.

[5] One of the most thorough expositions of the different perspectives in the New Testament and arguments for an underlying unity is James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Westminster, 1977). The serious student should also consult come critical reviews of this book such as *Themelios* 5 (1979–80): 30–1; *Theology* 81 (1978): 452–5; *Theology Today* 36 (1979): 116–21; and *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1979): 135–7.

[6] This is the position of classical liberalism as illustrated by Friedrich Schleirmacher, *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology* (John Knox, 1966), pp. 71ff.

[7] The best general introductions to this subject are: Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); and Ricard Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Northwestern University Press, 1969). For an application to biblical studies, see Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Eerdmans, 1980).

[8] For a detailed discussion of this concept, see my "Hermeneutic Circle: Vicious or Victorious?" *Philosophy Today* 27 (1983): 66–76.

[9] This methodological prescription is the essential import of Hans–Georg Gadamer's "fusion of horizons." [10] Cf. Grahm Stanton, "Presuppostions in the New Testament Criticism" in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall, (Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 60–71.

[11] Cf. Perry Yoder, *From Word to Life* (Herald, 1982): John Jayes and Carl Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook* (John Knox, 1982); and Walter Kaiser, *Towards an Exegetical Theology* (Baker, 1981).

[12] Donald A. Hagner, What is Distinctive about 'Evangelical' Scholarship?" *TSF Bulletin* 7.3 (January, 1984): 5–7.

[13] Cf. Bernard Ramm, "Is 'Sola Scripture' the Essence of Christianity?" in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers (word, 1977), pp.107–23. An example of a commentary using such a dialogue with tradition in interpreting Scripture is Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Westminster, 1974).

[14] The most helpful treatments of the authority of Scripture that I have found are: Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* Vol I. (Harper, 1978), pp. 51–87; James D.G. Dunn, "Authority of Scripture According to Scripture," *Churchman* 96 (1982): 104–22, 201–25; and Robert Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse* (John Knox, 1979), pp. 15–47.

[15] Some evangelical scholars seem to be trying to provide a foundation for the claim of biblical authority by a rational "demonstration" of the inerrancy of Scripture. I find such an approach both impossible and wrong-headed. As Kierkegaard has shown, the idea of basing Divine authority on human arguments is ludicrous. Moreover, as Dunn has argued, it is theologically and pastorally dangerous (Dunn, "Authority of Scripture," pp. 116–8). We would be wiser to remain with Calvin who ultimately based knowledge of the authority of Scripture on the witness of the Spirit (*Institutes* 1, 3, 9).

[16] Cf. L. Harold DeWolf, *A Theology of the Living Church* (Harper, 1953), who precedes his discussion of biblical authority with a long section on rational criteria of faith and then argues for a very selective ascription of authority to biblical materials on the basis that "A reasonable man concedes authority to the best books he can find on a given subject." (p.83).

[17] The argument of James Boice is typical: "God's character demands inerrancy . . . If every utterance in the Bible is from God and if God is a God of truth . . . then the Bible must be wholly truthful and inerrant." Boice, ed., *Does Inerrancy Matter?* (ICBI Foundation series I, 1979), p. 20. Note the narrow definition of truth that is assumed as obvious.

[18] See Hagner "'Evangelical' Scholarship," pp.6–7, for a similar rejection of the deductive approach to the issue of biblical authority in favor of an inductive investigation of scripture. As Bernard Ramm has argued, it is not enough in such an investigation simply to pick out some individual texts that deal with inspiration. Rather, we must grasp the phenomenon of Scripture in its totality. Ramm, "Scripture as a Theological Concept," *Review and Expositor* 71 (1974): 149–61.

[19] See Stephen Davis, *Debate About the Bible* (Westminster, 1977), p. 78; Dunn, "Authority of Scripture," p.108; and Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, p.53.

[20] A sensitive evangelical analysis of the literary character of the Genesis prologue can be found in William LaSor, et. al., *Old Testament Survey* (Eerdmans, 1982), pp.70–75.

[21] Good treatments of this issue can be found in Langdon Gilkey, "Creationism: The Roots of the Conflict," *Christianity and Crisis* 26 April 1982: 108–15; and Robert Fisher, *God Did It, But How?* (Cal Media, 1982).

[22] Cf. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, p.22, for a discussion of the various senses in which the Bible is God's Word.

[23] There is an interesting analogy between Scripture and Jesus on this issue. The incarnation is not an account of Jesus taking on humanity in the abstract, but rather of Jesus becoming a particular first-century Jewish male of a certain height, weight, etc. And yet the essential meaning of the incarnation is not located in particularities such as height, weight, or (I think) gender.

[24] Dunn, "Authority of Scripture" p.207.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp.207–14.

[26] The precise understanding of this unity is a matter of much present discussion. See notes 4 and 5 above. For a particular application, see my "The New Quest and Christology," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* forthcoming.

[27] An excellent survey of these debates is Robert Price, "Inerrant the Wind: The Troubled House of North American Evangelicals," *Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (1983): 129–44.

[28] The most helpful evangelical treatment of this issue to date is Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Zondervan, 1982), pp. 60–70.

Women's Realities: A Theological View

by Linda Mercadante

(Keynote address: "Women—Psychology and Theology" Conference, Mennonite Mental Health Services Annual Symposium, April 5-6, 1984, Fresno, CA)

Ever since I heard the theme of this conference and was asked to participate, I've been excited by the concept of bringing together Psychology and Theology in a supportive, interactive setting. I've been excited because these two fields—which often operate at such a distance from each other, and whose practitioners often view each other with such suspicion—really belong together. For psychology's main concern is to facilitate the wholeness of the person. Theology affirms that goal, and does so by redirecting our sights back to the One who has made us personal and who intends for us to be whole.

If there's one thing I've learned in my whole Ph.D. pilgrimage, its that theology is too important to be left to the experts. I want to stress this, because for too long women especially, but also many men, have felt there was a radical separation between their own experience in knowing God and the seemingly more abstract work known as theology.

But in fact, anyone who wants to know God, anyone who tries to understand their own religious experience, and anyone who embarks on a spiritual pilgrimage, struggling to discern the meaning of life, is already in some fashion doing theology. For all *good* theology grows out of the experience that people of faith had in receiving and interpreting God's self-revelation.

I will not pretend that theology in the past has generally served women well—for we all know it has not.

But I will affirm that whatever *good* theology there has been—and there certainly has been some—has always grown out of the experience of faith, the personal and communal reception of God's self-disclosure.

The problem is, however, that for far too long the woman's experience has not been considered "serious" or important enough to warrant careful theological consideration. For example: it's almost as though a map had been drawn listing just those places that men would likely frequent. Did you ever see one of those tourist maps that list all the places of interest in a certain city? Well, the state of theology now is like a map that lists just those sights that men would likely visit.

Of course some of these places would be very interesting to women, too, but they're not on this map, they have been left off. The map-makers considered them of minor importance, or perhaps didn't even take note of them. So, if you are a woman, this map, like much theology today, is only partially useful to you.

When male ministers, for example, talk about pride being the most deadly sin, they are talking about their own experience. Pride, in their experience, *is* the most serious problem, it is a matter of wanting to be in control, to be like God.

Valerie Saiving Goldstein has pointed out that pride is not women's chief problem—far from it. Instead, if we had to point to the chief failing of women, it would more likely be over-dependence upon things or persons never meant to carry that burden.

So if we want to change theology, if we want to change the map, we must begin to speak out about, write about, teach about and counsel out of our own experience, our own attempts to hear the gospel message, our own experience in knowing God.

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There is one very fundamental change that must be made in order to make this all possible. This change is foundational for all other changes. And that is a change in language, particularly our language and imagery for God.

Our culture is in the habit of using exclusively male language and imagery for God. I'd like to explain how we can introduce a theologically sound way to use feminine language and imagery for God. But before I do that, I want to stress that the way we use language is just as important as the language we use.

Several years ago the Presbyterian Church published a very interesting study on the power of language in liturgy and worship.[1] This study said that language functions like a window through which we see our life and surroundings.

Normally, this window is clear and we don't focus on it, but instead look through it. But when the glass gets dirty or cracked, we do start noticing it because it begins to distort our view of life and reality. And this is now the case with our language about God.

Because of the way we use language and imagery, we get into the bad habit of imagining God to be somehow masculine. The results of this, as we know, are often disastrous—not only in the way women have been made subordinate, but also in the way we have actually limited God.

Almost anyone with a little religious training or Sunday school can tell you God is not really a male, but a spirit. Many people now know that in the Bible there are striking examples of feminine imagery for God. Some people are also aware that in the history of the church, feminine imagery for God has been accepted and taught from time to time. But somehow, the message was distorted and there prevails in the culture and in the church the popular belief that God is somehow masculine.

The problem has come about for two reasons. First, we are stuck on a male image of God because the metaphors for God in the Bible and in the religious experience of Christians over the ages have been used and understood incompletely. There is clear warrant in Scripture for feminine imagery for God, and through the ages Christians have again and again envisioned God in feminine ways.[2] But because the culture was not receptive to these images, they were never used to their full extent.

Second, the problem is another huge example of the everlasting sin of idolatry. Feuerbach was partly right when he said that projection is a function of religion. Rather than letting God's reality correct the dominant culture, all too often the dominant culture has projected what it imagines or wants God to be. Mary Daly put it succinctly when she said, "If God is male, then the male is god."

At this point you might be thinking, "Even if there *is* some feminine imagery for God in the Bible and Christian tradition, hasn't it been—just in sheer volume—predominantly masculine?" I'd like to turn that question around. First, we all know the Scriptures were written and received into a very male-oriented set of cultures. Therefore, as Virginia Mollenkott says, the marvel is that so many feminine images for God actually got through that patriarchal mindset. It testifies loudly to the amazing power of God to self-communicate the divine image, no matter what the culture's particular blindness or sin is.

I don't find it so much a problem that Jesus was male, as much as I find it a challenge to our whole notion of gender stereotypes. For Jesus didn't come to image a supposed maleness in God. Instead, Jesus came to overturn, among other things, the terribly ingrained